**Fangan Ronpa: Universal Despair Sale**

by sarcasticFreedom

**Summary**

Sixteen All-Star students are trapped in a mall, and the only way out is for them to play a game of Mutual Killing. (Novel/Play Style.)

**Notes**

Welcome to Fangan Ronpa: Universal Despair Sale, the first part in the Fangan Ronpa: The Price of Success series. Updates to the series can be found on my blog: sarcasticfreedom.tumblr.com.
Prologue—The Good and the Bad

Good ideas rarely go unnoticed. As Hope’s Peak Academy in Japan gained more and more notoriety worldwide, several businessmen sought to mimic the unorthodox institution’s approach to fostering excellence in the upcoming generations of students. Most of these private institutions failed miserably in their process, and the schools had to close without graduating future leaders. One institution did garner a reputation for itself, though, and in America no less.

The greed of capitalism allowed Success Summit to prosper. The school’s benefactors, under the guise of self-interest, were able to put a large stake into the venture without anyone questioning their intents. As long as the books were in order, Success Summit was just a fancy name to put on a resume to guarantee whatever the applicant desired.

The school followed the same principle as Hope’s Peak by only inducting a class of sixteen students every year to carry on their specialized education. Fifteen of these students were so chosen because they displayed consummate skill in a certain field of expertise; the sixteenth student was chosen randomly from the country’s students under the basis of possessing “good luck.”

The school loved its students and branded them as High School All-Stars, and there was no limit to what All-Stars could be found in the school. From All-Star Mathematicians to All-Star Figure Skaters to All-Star Puppeteers, Success Summit only accepted the best of the best. By raising the cream of the crop, Success Summit created an elite network of leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators that would have the ability to take over the world—so to speak.

But then the world happened.

It was the night before the freshman orientation of the Success Summit’s forty-fifth class. The students would spend the next four years living together at the boarding school, and they would grow and develop meaningful relationships to last them a lifetime. The students were told nothing about their classmates; the only information they could rely on were unreliable rumors. No Facebooking or Twittering could connect them; they were all strangers. As the sixteen students, awaiting the rest of their lives, lay in their hotel beds, they could not have any idea what the future would hold for them.

Slowly but surely, all sixteen students fell asleep.

But when they wake up, they were not in their hotels. With groggy heads and sleepy eyes, the students peered at each other through the dim lighting. They were in a large, open space. The ceiling expanded high above them, and there was a sound of pulsing water nearby. Confused by the strange atmosphere, no one dared to speak a word. Once all thirty-two eyes were open, lights flashed into existence, and the entire area revealed itself.

The students continued to look around in bemusement at their new surroundings. The light had failed to bring clarity to the situation. By now, some of the students had stood up to get a better perspective. Directly behind them was a large vault door bolted shut. In front of them was a large circular fountain adorned with pictures of dancing animals. There were no set walls or doors anywhere, but to the left and right were what seem to be smaller rooms, except they were not lit
and were gated shut. On either side of the back wall were sets of stairs leading up to a higher floor. The students took in the scenery before one of them finally broke the silence.

“Oy! What’s going on?” asked a girl with curly auburn hair that falls down to her shoulders.

“Where are we?” asked a girl with colored streaks in her hair.

“Does anybody know what’s happening?” asked a skinny boy.

A short boy wearing a floral crown asked, “Or how we got here?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” responded another boy, who, despite being indoors, was wearing sunglasses.

“I do not know either,” replied a girl with cold eyes intently watching her comrades.

“Hey! If anyone knows anything, speak now,” commanded a girl, a no-nonsense attitude resounding in her voice. Silence followed her request, and this quietude caused a number of the students to shiver.

“WAIT!” cried a girl breaking the silence. She looked in a huff, as if she had just witnessed something traumatic. All eyes fell on her. She pushed her blonde hair out of her face and said, “Look around. I think…I think we’re in a mall. Isn’t that awesome!?!?” She suddenly looked very happy, much to the others’ chagrin.

A boy with gray eyes yelled after her, “Why are you so happy? Even if it is a mall, we have no reason to be here!”

“You can’t be sure of that!” replied the blonde. “You don’t know anything more than any of us.”

“And that’s because none of us do know anything,” said a girl with a dark complexion.

“Then we are in a mystery! Who here is the protagonist with the solution, then?” said an awkward looking boy.

A buff boy added, “I’m used to being in foreign places, but this is different somehow.”

“I don’t care where we are, just so long as we can leave soon,” said a girl in a large dress.

“If we pull our heads together, I’m sure we can figure out what’s going on,” said a bald boy softly.

“Yeah, I bet this is just some sort of prank,” said a boy with a sandy mop of hair on his head. “This is probably all for some dumb television show.”

The final girl looked indignant at this idea. “Television! What a waste of my time! I am an All-Star Tutor, not an All-Star Couch Potato!”

At the mention of “All-Star”, a lightbulb of familiarity flashed in every student’s mind.

“Hold on, did you say ‘All-Star Tutor?’” asked the business-like girl.

“I did,” replied the Tutor. “I got accepted into Success Summit as an All-Star Tutor on account of my excellent tutoring skills. And that is where I should be spending my time, not wandering about some forsaken mall.”
“I was also accepted into Success Summit,” said the gray-eyed boy.

“As was I,” said the girl with cold eyes.

“I will admit that I was too,” said the awkward boy.

The business-like girl stepped forward to gather everyone’s attention. “Was everyone here accepted into Success Summit?” The students nodded. “The forty-fifth class, I presume?” Another round of nods. “I think we might all be classmates. And as such, I think introductions are in order. My name is Melissa Davis, and I am an All-Star Politician.”

The blonde looked confused. “Aren’t you a bit young to be a politician? Don’t you have to be like a hundred years old before you can be put on the ballot?”

“Twenty-five to be a Representative,” replied Melissa. “But I’m President of my school’s Republican Club, I’ve led numerous campaigns in support of legislation, and I was the youngest elected mayor of my home time. So, I think that ‘All-Star Politician’ is a fitting title.”

The boy with sunglasses spoke up. “Girl, now that is a story I’d like to hear more about. You and me have got to get together about this.”

“And who are you to say that?” asked the Politician.

He adjusted the sunglasses on his face. “The name’s James Beck, All-Star Movie Producer. You might know me better as the man behind ‘That Summer’s Night’ and ‘Two Little, Two Late.’”

The awkward boy began beaming. “You produced those masterpieces! It is a pleasure to be in the same class as someone like you.”

“You’re right, it is a pleasure.”

“Allow me to introduce myself, sir. I’m Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian. I look forward to working with you.”

The girl with curly hair interjected, “What’s a ‘Thespian?’ Is that some kinda disease?”

Markus was vehemently taken aback. “I say! Why, I never! My dear, a Thespian is a lover of the theatrical arts. I am a delight on the stage. Not only have I written, directed, and starred in major productions, but I have even been nominated for a Tony because of it.”

Melissa spoke up. “Hold up! This is chaos with everyone trying to speak at once. Let’s form a circle and introduce ourselves in an orderly fashion.” The students gave each other questioning looks and then acquiesced to Melissa’s proposal. “Good. Starting with the person on my left, we’ll go around and introduce ourselves. Say your name, title, and maybe something interesting about yourself.”
Melissa had short strawberry-brown hair; it was cut short so that it would not get in her way while she negotiated the vicissitudes of political life. She had piercing green eyes, and she rarely smiled, unless it was in that moment during a debate when she knew she had won the discussion. She wore a clean white suit with sensible shoes; she did not rely on femininity to win over her compatriots. She wore contacts to avoid the annoyance of glasses, but they would occasionally dry her eyes out, thus causing her to keep her eyes unnaturally wide.

All eyes focused on the girl to Melissa’s left, the one with the poofy dress. “Greetings, my friends. My name is Elizabeth Barrington, and they call me an All-Star Historian. Thanks to my family’s financial stability, I have become an expert on the English Renaissance.” She spoke grandly and with an air of aloof affluence.

Elizabeth’s long, light hair fell to the middle of her back in waves. Expensive jewelry adorned her fingers, wrists, ears, and neck. But her most distinguishing feature was the sky-blue hoop-dress she wore to bring out her equally blue eyes. She looked and acted like she had been ripped out of a history textbook. Her textbooks had done a number on her eyesight, though, and so
a fancy pair of glasses rested lightly on the bridge of her nose.

The girl with cold eyes was next. “Hello. My name is Jennifer Zemenovski, but you may call me Jenny. I am an All-Star Sandwich Artist. That is all the more I wish to share.” She was direct and matter-of-fact.

Jenny had dark black hair pulled back behind a red baseball cap, but what little hair did show contrasted highly with her fair complexion. She wore no make-up or jewelry. Her features were cold and menacing, but she kept herself composed and gave nothing away. To match her cap, she wore a red polo, black slacks, and a white apron as her uniform.

The gray-eyed boy paused before introducing himself. “Salvete, amici mei. Mihi nomen Rufus Price est, atque All-Star Latinist sum. Omnes opera Ovidii reddidi.” Half the students looked at him in confusion, and the other half in annoyance. He added, “Hello, my friends. My name is Rufus Price, and I am the All-Star Latinist. I have translated all of Ovid’s works.” He either felt the need to show off, or he was trying too hard to impress everyone with his intelligence.
Rufus’s gray eyes seemed stuck at half-mast, giving him a look of constant disinterest. Dark purple circles hung underneath his eyes from too many sleepless nights. His dark, short hair was cut short for practicality, and it was apparent that he invested little time in his appearance. He wore a black turtleneck with dark blue jeans.

The skinny boy quickly began his introduction with a strangely high-pitched and nasally voice. “Wassup! My name is Rico de Naranjas, and I’m an All-Star Marathon Runner. I’ve done everything from the Boston Marathon to the New York Marathon, and I was the youngest marathon participant in the last Summer Olympics!” Despite the weird atmosphere, he was very full of energy.

Rico took good care of his body, and his high energy level was visible in his face. His intense cardio workouts didn’t give him substantial muscle mass, but he was by no means scrawny. He had an obnoxiously green windbreaker on overtop a used wifebeater, but this did little to detract from his ostensibly yellow running shorts that left little to the imagination.

“I guess I’m next,” said the girl with curly hair. “My name’s Delilah MacDonald, and I am an All-Star Cosmetologist. Back home, I had the honor of doing the hair for Little Miss Georgia, and anyone who dreams of being a Prom or Homecoming Queen has to come to me.” She could be a little rough with her mannerisms, but her Southern drawl made her sound endearing.
Delilah’s auburn hair fell all over her face and down her shoulders. Her morning routine involved the application of copious amounts of foundation, eyeshadow, mascara, lipstick, and blush. While less can be more, Delilah believed that too much was never enough. She had on a rather too-open plaid button-down and tight blue jeans that fell down to her ankle.

“You know who I am already,” said James Beck the All-Star Movie Producer. With a wave of his hand he dismissed his turn to the next person.

James wore glasses to maintain his cool disposition; besides, the lights of the paparazzi can be aggravating to one’s eyes. He fell on the shorter side of the height spectrum, but his large personality made up for that fact. Naturally, he wore high-end designer labels, and he spent far too much time styling his hair to perfection.

“And I do believe I gave away my title earlier,” said the All-Star Tutor. “For you slower learners, I’m the All-Star Tutor, and my name is Francesca Maysworth, but you can just call me Miss Maysworth. I’ve never met a vagabond I couldn’t turn into an A-plus student.” She was very
sure of herself, but she came off as unpleasantly smug instead.

Francesca tied her dark hair into a classy bun on the top of her head, with a strand falling down here or there. The interesting aspect of her hairdo was that her bun was held together by a No. 2 Pencil—it never hurt to be prepared. She wore an austere black blouse and long black skirt. A string of pearls around her neck gave way that she might actually have a bit of a personality. An old pair of granny lenses magnified her intense expression. The wickedly sinister look in her eyes belied that she couldn’t wait to smack someone’s hand with a ruler.

The well-muscled boy was next. “I’m Theo Cook, and I’m an All-Star Cartographer. I’ve done a lot of hiking, and I’ve seen a lot of the world, so there’s not much out there that surprises me.” He could have been intimidating, but he came off as sincere and down-to-earth.

Theo was dressed for an expedition, from the hat hanging from a string around his neck, to his khaki cargo shorts. Indeed he knew the importance of having plenty of pockets. A custom satchel and canteen hung off his left shoulder. Theo tended to keep his blonde hair short, and he
still had the remnants of a recent sunburn on his visage. His journeys into the Himalayas and his safaris into the heart of Africa had left him a physical powerhouse, but he did not boast this fact about himself.

Sandy-mop followed afterward. “Yo! The name’s Cody Cameron. Feel free to be jealous of the All-Star Waterskier! I specialize in barefoot waterskiing, and I haven’t met a lake I couldn’t handle.” He may not have been a surfer from California, but he sure acted like one.

As opposed to Theo’s humility, Cody loved to celebrate the body. His sandy hair nearly covered both his eyes. His pectorals were practically bursting out of his muscle shirt, and his swimming trunks gave the ladies a nice view of his strong calves. He took the surfer look one step further with a shell earring in his left ear and a shark’s tooth hanging on his neck. His sandals made him the only student not to be wearing shoes.

The dark-skinned girl rolled her eyes before speaking. “My name is Jordan Koulibagh, and I am an All-Star Golfer. Please ignore the fact and I’m a woman and that I’m black, and just acknowledge me for the things I have accomplished.” There was an inherent sadness in her voice, and she avoided making eye-contact with the others.
Jordan was as fit as any golfer, and she too did not highlight her outstanding feminine qualities. She kept her beautifully dark hair in silky bangs hanging just above her eyes. She wore a modest, blue blouse and white Capri pants. Though she was far from any club, she had her golfing gloves tied to her delicate fingers.

Baldy bowed his head to his peers before beginning. “I am Randolph Luther, the All-Star Monk. I achieved Nirvana at an exceptionally young age, and I wish to share my enlightenment with the world so that we may all live in peace. If you have any spiritual questions, I would love to sit down and talk to you about them.” He had the genuine sincerity that only the avidly religious could manage to emanate.

Randolph also had gray eyes, but instead of boredom they belied complacency. Often though, he had his eyes closed due to his inner peace putting him at ease. He wore a simple robe that went down to his ankles. He exemplified humility, but his slightly oversized ears and nose kept him from being altogether unnoticeable.
“Eeeee!” cried the girl with streaks in her hair. “It’s finally my turn! Konichiwa! My name is Lily Smith, and I am the All-Star Kawaii, desu. That means I exemplify what it means to be ‘cute’ and to live a ‘cute lifestyle.’ I can already tell that we’re all gonna be the bestest of friends!” She was genuinely endearing—to a fault.

Lily was shorter, but like James she had a big personality to make up for it. Her hair had had so many different treatments done to it that her original hair color was a mystery. A purple streak passed above her left eye, a blue one above her right, and a red one through the middle. She had a bright pink T-shirt on with a presumably Japanese icon on it. A short rainbow skirt wrapped around her waist. She had various piercings scattered about her body, but she did not look off-putting with them. Her skin was lighter than it should have been, probably due to a lack of sunlight from too much Internet.

Markus Aslanius the Thespian proudly smiled. “You know who I am as well, but a second introduction never hurt anyone. I am—”

The final boy cut Markus off with a loud yawn. He adjusted his floral crown and began his introduction. “They call me Austin Fitzpatrick, and they also call me an All-Star Idle. I don’t know if that’s generally a good thing to be called, but I do have a problem with procrastination. But, like, whatever, ya know? YOLO.” Relaxation is an art form, and this kid loves to not work.
Markus wasn’t awkward per se, but he tended not to act naturally. He was too thin and lacked muscles, so to do things he would have to throw his weight around in an unorthodox manner. Nevertheless, he had thick brown hair and sharp blue eyes. He wore an open button-down overtop a tie-dyed T-shirt with baggy jeans. He wore glasses, but he had a tendency to take them off for dramatic purposes.

As had been mentioned, Austin delighted in wearing a floral crown on his head. It brought out his strawberry-blonde hair more. He had dark lines under his eyes from lack of sleep, but it made him look more dignified than tired. His relaxed procrastination was apparent in his attire: he wore an elegant purple shirt underneath an impeccable black suit—even his tie displayed consummate fashion sense—but his bottom half was covered by short gym shorts, as if he had given up halfway. Luckily he managed to look cute so no one would harass him for it. In opposition to James and Lily, Austin was taller, but he came off as much shorter from his nonchalant attitude.

And last but not least, the blonde began her introduction. “It’s about time I got my turn in
the spotlight. Hi, boys! And girls too, I guess. I’m Taylor Erzen, the All-Star Lucky. I might not have some special talent like all of you, but who needs talent when you’re born with good looks and good luck!” This girl was also very sure of herself, but in a completely different way.

Taylor was feminine, and she wanted everyone to know it. Her blonde hair was tied playfully into a ponytail, and her blue eyes said that she wanted to have fun. She wore a simple—yet enticing—blouse, and she wore cut-off jean-shorts. She wasn’t too short to be seen as little, but she wasn’t too tall to be seen as intimidating.

Now that the conversation had come full circle, Melissa took charge once more. “I think I speak for all of us when I say it’s a pleasure to make each of your acquaintances. Now let’s get down to business and figure out what’s going on.”

Chapter End Notes

Art credit to allstarkawaii.tumblr.com
Francesca the Tutor pushed her glasses up and sneered. “First of all, where are we?”

Lucky Taylor responded, “I thought it was obvious; we’re in a mall, duh.”

“The question is what mall, though,” added Theo the Cartographer.

James frowned. “This place lacks any sort of identifying marks. It’s so…bland. It would make a terrible set….”

“Then I guess I retract my television theory from earlier,” said Cody the Waterskier.

Melissa spoke up. “That brings us to our next major issue: why are we here?”

“Man has asked this question since the dawn of time, but only upon close introspection can the answer become clear,” offered All-Star Monk Randolph.

Jordan and Rufus both rolled their eyes, but it was he who muttered, “Yes, let us all listen to what the monk has to say.”

“Who cares?” asked Taylor, hands on her hips. “It’s a mall; malls are fun.”

“Not when you don’t know how you got here!” replied Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian.

Austin yawned. “And no one remembers a thing about getting here? I figured I just sleepwalked again.”

“Nani?” pondered the All-Star Kawaii, Lily. “You can sleepwalk that far?”

Austin winked at her. “You can if you believe in yourself.”

Rufus and Jordan rolled their eyes again, and this time she added, “If anyone actually remembers anything, let them speak now.”

Silence followed.

Politician Melissa felt the need to boost morale. “So we may not know what’s going on, but if we keep our heads held high, I’m sure we’ll figure it out.”

Elizabeth Barrington picked up on the same note. “Perhaps this is our first test as a class! To see how well we can work together under extenuating circumstances.”

“I did hear that the teachers at Success Summit are a bit unorthodox…” said Cosmetologist Delilah.

“Yo-o! This is totally rad! But what exactly are we supposed to be doing for this test?”

Melissa didn’t like the current vein of discussion. “I don’t know how much stock I’d put in that theory…”

“Ecce. Then what do we know?” asked Latinist Rufus.
“Basically, we all woke up here with no recollection of how we got here or why we ended up here,” replied Jordan Koulibagh, All-Star Golfer.

“That about sums it up,” relented Melissa. “But we mustn’t let these unknowns keep us down!”

“The only one panicking is you, girlfriend,” said Taylor.

Randolph raised his hand to interject his opinion. “I am interested in hearing what Miss Zemenovski is thinking. She has been very quiet so far, and I hope that she does not feel excluded from the group.” All eyes shifted to the Sandwich Artist.

If she was nervous or taken aback, Jenny did a good job disguising this fact. “I think…that this is not a test. I do not think we came here of our own free will.”

This idea spread a seed of discomfort among the other students that took its time to germinate. “Whoa-oa, hold up. What’s that supposed to mean?” asked the All-Star Marathon Runner.

Taylor made a face. “Poo, let’s just drag the party down with our negativity, why don’t we.”

Jenny responded quick as a whip, “I am sorry if you have trouble facing reality. I would never agree to spend my free time with a group of strangers when I could be working or developing other talents.”

Taylor stamped her foot. “But that’s just, like, your opinion!”

“Hmm, you’re onto something,” added Rufus. “Honestly, the evidence is right in front of us.”

Melissa became alert. “What are you getting at?”

Without looking at her, Rufus waved his hand to alert Jenny. “I’m afraid, my dear, that you are the one who will have to face reality. Just look at Elizabeth, and, umm, you are…”

“I said my name was Delilah! And what do you mean just look at me?”

“Do I have something on my face?”

“I am not seeing what you are trying to display.”

Rufus chuckled softly to himself. “They’re too dolled up. The amount of time they had to have spent doing their hair and make-up? They were not dragged here; they came here on their own, and that means we all came here of our own volition as well. Quod erat demonstrandum.”

“Uhh, yo, but, uhh, what does that mean?” asked Rico.

James sullenly answered, “It makes it a little more interesting as to why we got here.”

Melissa muttered to herself, “But I don’t remember—”

Suddenly a voice rang throughout the mall as if on a loudspeaker. It sounded like it belonged to a character on a children’s television show. The voice in and of itself was not unsettling, but its strange ubiquity was disconcerting. “Upupupupu.” Good morning, you little brats. It seems you’ve taken care of introducing yourselves already, so stop wasting my time and get your
lazy butts up to the Food Court in the center of the mall. Just take the escalators behind you. And hurry up!"

The students looked around at one another, unsure of the situation. As always, Melissa took charge and urged the others to investigate this breaking development. Besides, what did they have to lose?

"Alas, but where are these accursed escalators of which the mysterious voice speaks?" asked Markus. Taylor quickly replied that they were the stairs in the back, simply unpowered. Without much more delay, the students broke off into two groups and headed up the escalators.

The escalators opened up onto a large open area. There were sets of escalators straight ahead, as well as to the left and right. Directly overhead was a glass ceiling; it was a beautiful, sunny day. Tables and chairs were scattered about the forum, and there appeared to be food vendors lining the outside of the area. They were also closed. In the center of the food court stood another elaborate water fountain, except this one had a raised platform on top of it, and on top of the platform was the source of the mysterious voice.

The students gathered around the fountain. The figure on the platform bade them come forward, but it was too strange a phenomenon to believe. A toy bear hardly a foot tall shouted at the kids. The bear was split down the middle into two halves, one black and sinister, the other white and pure; however, this personal schism made the toy look even more frightening. It moved too quickly, and it spoke too fluently to have been made by the hands of man. In a word, it was unnatural. Nothing about the current situation boded well for any of the students.

Once the class had fully gathered, the bear began its introduction. "It’s about time you brats got up here. I was starting to get bored! Do you know how exciting it is to watch a bunch of half-baked imbeciles ponder how they got here? If I had to pay for such an event, I would sooner rob the owners of the venue than demand my money back!"

"Who are—what’s going on?" demanded Melissa.

"Did I say you could speak?" shouted the bear angrily. "I was in the middle of a story until you so rudely interrupted. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners? You brats are going to be even more annoying than the others."

"Others?" questioned Theo.

"Wh-wh-wh-what? I didn’t say that! Forget I said that! Erase that from your memories!"

Jordan added, "But you did just say—"

"Shutupshutupshutupshutupshutup! All of you! Shut up!"

"Then tell us what is going on!" demanded Melissa once more.

"Upupu…fine. Then you brats better listen well because I don’t plan on repeating myself! You already saved me half the trouble of figuring out that you’re in a mall, even though it took you twice as long to do. I would’ve figured it out in ten—no, NINE seconds flat! You know why? Because I’m just that smart!"

"I guess you’ve all gotten to know each other, so it’s about time you met the really important character here: me! My name is Monobear! It’s a beautiful name, don’t you think? Truly deserving of a tyrant. I’m the head of security here at this mall, so you halfwits have to listen to everything I say. Or else!"
“Now you’re probably wondering: ‘Oh, Great Monobear, why are we here in this mall?’
The answer is simple. Not! You’ll have to figure out for yourselves why you’re here, but while you
are here, know that you’re here for my amusement. When I tell you to jump, you jump. When I tell
you to sing, you sing. Got it?

“Time for the rules. You’re all gonna live here together in peace and harmony for the rest
of your lives. There are tunnels underneath the mall used for the staff, so you each get a room and
bathroom. Your meals will be served here in the food court for free, but the food court is only open
when the mall is open, from 7 to 10. You can roam the mall during off hours, but you cannot sleep
anywhere other than your specified rooms. Boys are forbidden in the girls’ restroom and vice
versa. I shouldn’t have to say things like that, but you dumbbells can’t be given any leeway.

“Let me tell you about the Mall of Monomerica now. I came up with that name. It’s almost
cooler than ‘Monobear,’ but not quite. You’re currently standing in the food court which is smack
dab in the center of the mall. You woke up in the South sector, which is also the entrance, even
though it’s locked and will stay locked. I’ll open up the shops in the South sector so you’re not so
boring to watch, but the shops in the North, West, and East sectors will all remain closed.

“Well there you have it! If you didn’t understand all of that, then you better ask one of the
relatively intelligent members of your group to put it in layman’s terms. Upupupu!”

Melissa: “That can’t be all? You can’t expect us all to live here forever! This is America, land of
the free!”

Monobear: “Upupu! That’s what makes it so ironic! Instead of being free, you get to enjoy the
confinement caused by your materialistic impulses. I can’t imagine a more fitting way for you to
spend the rest of your lives.”

Melissa: “But it’s unnatural. Not to mention against the law!”

Monobear: “You’re really testing my nerves with all your shouting! What makes you think the law
has anything to do with anything?”

Melissa: “Surely someone’s going to come and get us…”

Monobear: “Upupu…I’ll let you in on a secret—but only this one! Nobody’s coming to get you!
There’s nobody out there who cares you’re in here.”

Melissa: “No! You’re lying!”

Monobear: “Upupu…I never lie!”

Melissa: “I…I…”

Jordan: “Then we’re really stuck here…”

Markus: “No! You can’t keep me from the stage! I’ll go through withdrawal from the lime light!”

Theo: “I’ve been in harrier situations…”

Austin: “Sigh. Well this is different.”

Rufus: “Hmph.”

Elizabeth: “Oh dear, this cannot be…”
Lily: “Oy…retasu…”

Monobear: “Hahaha! That’s right! Time to fall into despair. You see how bad your situation is now? I love watching you brats lose all your hope; you do fun things when you’re devoid of hope!”

Jenny: “Could this really be happening?”

Francesca: “This is highly unorthodox.”

Cody: “Pshaw…this is…something else…”

Randolph: “Grant me strength…”

James: “This would make a great story…if I get out of here…”

Delilah: “Shucks! Well if I haven’t found myself in a hot kettle…”

Rico: “C’mon, guys, he can’t be serious, right?”

Monobear: “Yes…yes…keep it up. Give into the sweet oblivion of despair!”

Taylor: “Hold up!”

All eyes shifted to Taylor after her outburst. She was steaming with fists clenched at her sides. She locked eyes with each of her classmates, and they could see how visibly upset she was. After engaging them so, she turned her focus to Monobear.

Taylor: “Stop your prattling about despair. We have no reason to lose ourselves! Look around you; we’re all sixteen bright high schoolers living together in a mall. What better situation could there be?”

Monobear: “Upu…huh?”

Taylor: “It’s like a dream come true! All teens love to spend time at the mall, and now we get to spend all our time in the mall! No parents to tell us to come home, no exams to stress over, no responsibilities to take care of. This isn’t despair; this is its exact opposite!”

Monobear: “You ‘Lucky’ ones always did have a strange sense of ‘hope’…”

Melissa: “When you put it that way, I guess it doesn’t seem that bad.”

Elizabeth: “That does sound rather lovely…”

Markus: “This shall be an experience to draw from!”

Jenny: “I shall try to make the most of this ordeal.”

Randolph: “Since we’ll be spending so much time together, I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you.”

Lily: “Didn’t you say that earlier?”

Cody: “This could be gnarly. Let’s make the most of this, ladies.”

Monobear: “Nonononono! Wrongwrongwrongwrongwrong! Go back to being depressed about
life! Stop trying to be happy and hopeful! Stop it right now!”

Jordan: “And what if we don’t want to live here?”

Jordan spoke quietly, but her solemn tone was enough to rouse everyone from their jubilant reveries.

Monobear: “Huh?”

Rufus: “She has a point. What if we refuse to live here with everyone? What happens then?”

Monobear: “Refusing to utilize the luxurious accommodations I have provided you with is against the rules.”

Melissa: “If there’s no law, then what happens if we break the rules?”

Monobear: “In here, I am the law! There’s only one result from breaking the rules, and that is execution!”

Everyone tensed from the gravity of the proclamation.

Monobear: “Upupupu…that got your attention.”

Lily: “Ex-execution? Isn’t that a little…kowai?”

Theo: “But aren’t you All-Star Kowai?”

Lily: “No! I’m Kawaii, desu! See? There’s a big difference!”

Delilah: “What she’s meaning t’ say is that executin’ is a tad extreme.”

Monobear: “I don’t just make the rules; I enforce ’em too!”

Jordan: “So I really am trapped here forever…”

Monobear: “Well…if you must know…there is one way to leave the Mall of Monomerica.”

Rufus: “Dice.”

Jordan: “What is it? Tell me.”

Monobear: “For a student to leave this wonderful mall, he or she must commit a murder and not get caught! Upupu! How’s that for despair?”

James: “M-murder? Th-that can’t be…”

Francesca: “What?!? You can’t be serious?”

Taylor: “Stop trying to ruin my fun!”

Rico: “This is making me feel light-headed…”

Rufus: “Elaborate. That description is too vague.”

Monobear: “Hmm…you two are very interested in this, aren’t you. Very well, this is how your life of mutual killing will progress: one of you brats is going to kill one of your frie—classmates. After the body is discovered, the remaining imbeciles will be given time to do an investigation for the
victim. After the investigation time ends, we’ll all have a School, well, Mall Trial to figure out the mystery. If you all vote for the correct murderer, then the murderer will be executed. If you fail to pick the right killer, then the killer walks free, and the rest of you will be executed in his or her stead.”

The students needed a moment to process all the information.

Randolph: “That is troublesome…”

Jenny: “So this is what is really happening…”

Francesca: “If you think this is some sort of joke…”

Theo: “I can hardly wrap my mind around that…”

Jordan: “That’s simple enough.”

Rufus: “Necare ac vivere.”

Melissa: “Ha! If you think we’ll be murdering each other, then you’ve got another thing coming! I can guarantee that all sixteen of us will figure a way out of this predicament. Alive! Together!”

Monobear: “Don’t be so sure of yourself. If you think you’ll all get along swimmingly, then know this: one among you is lying about their All-Star Talent. One of your ‘friends’ is being untruthful. There’s a liar amongst you, so be careful who you trust. Upupupupu!”

In a blur of motion, Monobear disappeared and left the students to ponder the situation in which they had been placed. Too many questions were left open. Why were they in this mall? Were they really stuck here? Who was this mysterious Monobear? Who was the liar in the group? And, most importantly, would someone actually murder just to escape?

End of Prologue

Surviving Students: 16

Markus Aslanius—All-Star Thespian
Elizabeth Barrington—All-Star Historian
James Beck—All-Star Movie Producer
Cody Cameron—All-Star Waterskier
Theo Cook—All-Star Cartographer
Melissa Davis—All-Star Politician
Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner
Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky
Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle
Jordan Koulibagh—All-Star Golfer
Randolph Luther—All-Star Monk
Delilah MacDonald—All-Star Cosmetologist
Francesca Maysworth—All-Star Tutor
Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist
Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii
Jenny Zemenovski—All-Star Sandwich Artist
Chapter One—The Beauties and the Beasts

(Ab)Normal Days

Monobear’s sudden and mysterious disappearance left the students uneasy, but they couldn’t just stand around all day. As they tried to collect their thoughts, Elizabeth the Historian’s stomach growled obnoxiously loudly. She broached the idea of everyone getting some breakfast together, and they quickly acquiesced to her suggestion.

Some students pushed tables and chairs together to make one large dining table while the rest gathered food from the food court. Many of the food shops were still closed, so the students had to settle for bagels and juice for their breakfast. They ate in silence for a few minutes, and then Melissa once again got the group down to business.

Melissa: “Okay, friends, let’s go over what just happened. We’re apparently stuck in this mall together, and the only way to get out is to murder one of our fellow classmates. Let me say that for as long as I’m around, no one is going to die!”

Lily: “I can’t even imagine killing another person, desu. It’s so not cute.”

Rico: “Murder is, like, whack, man.”

Rufus: “No, murder is whacking a man.”

Elizabeth: “What if the liar is from the mob?”

Jenny: “Then there will be whacking.”

Melissa: “No one is getting whacked! Don’t let your imaginations run wild!”

Randolph: “Let us remain calm and meditate on this situation.”

Cody: “Yeah, what the monk said.”

Delilah: “Then what are we supposed to do?”

Melissa: “That’s what I was getting at. We need to figure out a way out of here.”

Francesca: “But that Monobear said we’re trapped in here. And just look around! How are we supposed to escape with all these security cameras watching our every move?”

Austin: “Huh? What security cameras?”

Francesca: “How can you not have noticed them? They’re everywhere! On the walls, on the ceiling; even in the food shops! Boy, you need a fine lesson in observation.”

Melissa: “Then that’s one issue which we’ll need to solve.”

Taylor: “And how exactly are we supposed to get out of here anyway? I don’t see any windows anywhere, and that door in the South Sector was heavily bolted shut.”

Markus: “There’s always the skylight. It’s nothing more than an over-embellished ceiling
Taylor: “How are we supposed to climb fifty feet in the air to get up there?”

Theo: “I’ve got supplies in my pack, so I’ll start working on a map of this place. I’ll spend extra attention on trying to root out weak points.”

James: “And I’ve worked with a lot of different types of cameras, so I’ll see what I can find with these security cams.”

Melissa: “Excellent. If we put our heads together, then I’m sure there’s nothing we can’t accomplish. Earlier, Monobear said that he unlocked the shops in the mall’s South Sector, so I propose that we split into teams and investigate.”

Markus: “Personally, I myself would like to check out the sleeping areas. No offense, but I really don’t want to have to share a room with any of you people.”

Francesca: “Then while you check out the boys’ area, I’ll see about the girls’.”

Melissa: “So that’s four of us taken care of. Did anyone see how many shops there were down there?”

Taylor: “I counted four…hopefully they’re all open.”

Melissa: “Perfect. Then we’ll split into four teams of three.”

Rufus: “I call being with Jordan.”


Rufus: “Because you’ve been awfully quiet during breakfast, and I’d like to pick your brain.”

Jordan: “Fine by me.”

Melissa: “Err, and I’ll join you two as well.”

Taylor: “I’d like to be with Cody; it’s a big, scary mall, and I’ll need someone to keep me safe.”

Cody: “Gnarly.”

Rico: “Yo-o! In that case I’ll come too!”

Taylor: “Oh…great.”

Jenny: “I would prefer to investigate alone.”

Lily: “Nonsense! The more the merrier! I’d be more than happy to accompany you!”

Elizabeth: “As would I. There’s no need for you to go off alone when you have all these friends with you.”

Jenny: “N-no, that is alright. I am insisting.”

Lily: “We’re gonna be bestest friends!!!”

Delilah: “Which leaves me with the monk and the flower king.”
Randolph: “It shall be a wonderful bonding moment.”

Austin: “Flower king, huh? I kinda like that. Can I change my All-Star title to that?”

Melissa: “Then it’s settled. We’ll meet back here to discuss our findings over lunch at noon.”

Taylor: “How will we know when that is? I haven’t seen any clocks.”

Markus: “I’ve got a watch on me, and it’s still ticking.”

Melissa: “Then I’m putting you on messenger duty. When the clock strikes twelve, it is your job to gather everybody back to the food court for our lunch discussion. Any questions? No? Then let’s get started.”

The four groups, sans James the Movie Producer, Theo the Cartographer, Markus the Thespian, and Francesca the Tutor, returned to the escalators to explore the opened up South Sector.

Taylor was in the best mood to begin exploring their new surroundings, but her enthusiasm quickly faded when they found out what shops Monobear had opened: a General Store, a Hair Salon, a Laundromat, and a Lounge. Nevertheless, the students had some investigating to do. Taylor’s group headed off to the Lounge, Delilah’s to the Salon, and Jenny’s group went to the Laundromat while Melissa’s searched the General Store.

It seemed strange for there to be a General Store inside a mall, but the Mall of Monomerica wasn’t exactly orthodox. The shelves were neatly and fastidiously arranged, as if someone were trying to run a reputable business. Nothing grandiose or outrageous was stocked in the store, but the shop did house plenty of toothpaste, soap, deodorant, etc.; the students would not have to worry about their trivial toiletry needs. There was a register on the front counter, but no clerk to man it. The ubiquitous security cameras maintained their vigilance here as well.

Melissa wished to engage her friends in jovial conversation, but neither of her compatriots was eager to oblige. The Politician got a sinister vibe from Rufus and Jordan. It was obvious that they were smart and cunning, and that would make them excellent running mates, but in a game of mutual murder, those characteristics made them dangerous. She needed to get on their good sides, but she was wary of imposing herself on them.

Melissa was adept at judging people, for Rufus and Jordan were cautious around her. Rufus also understood the importance of having intelligent allies, but he knew not to mix ingenuity with naiveté; Jordan was realistic in her appraisal of the situation, but Melissa was speciously hopeful. No matter how hard the Politician tried, she would not be able to prevent the number of students from dwindling.

Jordan couldn’t care less what the others thought of her. She just wanted to fly under the radar and avoid suspicion, to live in relative peace. But Rufus obnoxiously intended to drag her into the middle of things, and Melissa wouldn’t be able to keep to herself. How annoying.

As the trio was browsing the shelves, making a mental inventory of the store’s goods, Melissa gave way to her impulsive need to control the situation. “So,” she began, “what do you think of the store? If Monobear can keep it stocked regularly, I think it’ll suit our group just fine.”

“Sure,” was Jordan’s reply.

“Ita,” came Rufus’s response.
“At least in that case we won’t have to fight over who gets shampoo and who doesn’t, ha ha. I was afraid that we’d have to have a sit-down discussion to ration our supplies democratically, but I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“I guess so.”

“Quid ea dixit.”

“Or more importantly, toilet paper. Whole civilizations can come tumbling down if there isn’t enough toilet tissue. You’d be surprised how quickly things can take a turn for the worse when the fundamental items of society are taken away.”

Rufus raised an eyebrow. “Do you know this from experience?”

“In a way, I suppose. You don’t become an All-Star Politician without having to quell some frivolous uprisings. Why, in my first term with the—”

“Please stop,” said Jordan quietly.

“I’m sorry?” Melissa wasn’t so much upset at being interrupted as she was confused.

“You speak so much, but you say so little.”

“Excuse me!”

“Ever since we all woke up, you’ve been talking, but what have you really said?”

“I am trying to keep this group of students under control. This is a scary situation, and I can’t have anyone losing their heads. Sometimes a strong leader has to—”

“When did you become our leader?”

“Well—I just—”

“Politicians are elected democratically; you put yourself in this position. That makes you __”

“A dictator,” finished Rufus. He had been enjoying the exchange, but he had really enjoyed watching Melissa become flustered as her character was attacked. She could handle her policies being challenged, but she’d never had to defend her person before.

“I-I am not a dictator!”

“But couldn’t your interest in keeping everyone together simply be a façade to disguise your ulterior motive? A motive involving the mutual killing of another classmate?” asked Rufus.

Jordan added, “You must admit that your overt interest can be construed as suspicious.”

“Why are you two suddenly ganging up on me?”

Jordan answered first. “We’re not ganging up on you; you’re getting carried away.”

“We’re telling you how things are. In this situation, in this place, every one of your actions will cost you, whether you realize it or not; being nice makes you suspicious.”

“I don’t care if people think I’m suspicious! I’m not going to murder anyone! That’s
“But what happens when someone gets too suspicious and decides to take matters into their own hands?” asked Jordan.

“I—they—no one is going to die!”

“Tace! You’re foolish to think that. You don’t know what’s going on in the heads of the others. How long before one of them snaps? How desperate are they to get out of here, to go back home? All it takes is for one person to consider killing someone else before it all becomes a reality.”

“Talking like that…it makes you sound suspicious too…” replied the frazzled Politician.

The Golfer nodded. “You see how your actions can be seen as questionable?”

“This is…too much…”

Jordan turned to Rufus. “Now why did you want to get alone with me?”

The Latinist quickly peered at Melissa before addressing Jordan. “You and I are on similar wavelengths; we think the same. I want a smart ally I can rely on when things inevitably go crazy.”

“And what makes you think I won’t betray you?”

“That’s the calculated risk I’m willing to take; I’ll watch your back if you watch mine.” He turned slightly toward Melissa. “And I guess there’s no way to exclude you from this proposition now.”

“Hmm?”

“You know that Jordan and I are in cahoots, so we can’t just let you go knowing this clandestine information.”

“What makes you think I’ll accept your proposal?” asked Jordan.

“You’re too smart not to. So, Melissa, are you in?”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt. Do you have anything specific in mind?”

“First off, you’re going to have to join the rest of us down here on Earth. We can’t have you going off on your fanciful whims. You can keep them up for the others, for theatrical sake, but you need to be direct and understanding with us. Deal?”

“…deal.”

Jordan asked, “Where does that leave us?”

“If we want to make it through this, then we need to stay one step ahead of the killers, and that means keeping each other alive. Got it?”

“I understand.” replied Melissa.

“As do I,” followed Jordan.

“Bene. Now let’s finish looking around here. I wonder if they have super-absorbent paper
towels…Oh, and what are your opinions on who the Liar is?”

Taylor wanted to scream. She had envisioned getting to spend some quality alone time with one of the hunkiest males in the class, but instead she wound up getting her ear talked off by a boy with no story-telling abilities. Rico was nice enough; he just couldn’t take a hint. No matter how disinterested Taylor acted, he would plod along with his narrative of who-knows-what.

Cody was who she was really interested in. After the calm, cool, and collected Theo left to make his map, Taylor had to settle for the next best thing, and that was Cody. He had muscles, passable hygiene standards, and a pulse; what wasn’t there to like? If only Rico would be quiet for two minutes…

When Taylor admitted that she might be a little scared to go exploring in this strange place, Rico had to jump into action. He couldn’t live with himself if he let a girl feel scared; he had a sense of honor to abide by. In his experience, the best way to deal with terror is to make the situation lively and light-hearted, and so he tried to calm Taylor’s nerves with some of his funniest anecdotes. But no matter how vivaciously he told his stories, she didn’t laugh along. He’d be damned if he let her fall into despair, so he would just have to try harder to liven her up.

Cody was just happy to be along for the ride. He was flattered that Taylor wanted to spend time with him, but he was used to having babes all over him. He knew he was a stud magnet, and he was more than fine with that. He knew Taylor wasn’t really scared, and he had looked forward to spending time with her as well. But then that dweeb Rico had invited himself into the group, and so those plans got derailed. Now he was just enjoying the look of frustration and consternation spreading across Taylor’s face as Rico wailed on.

The Lounge was coolly lit, as it should be. Worn but comfortable couches lined the walls, and smalls booths were intertwined amongst the furniture. There was a small bar area in the one corner, but all it held now was a modest coffee maker. Toward the far end of the Lounge, there was a small, raised stage with a single microphone stand. The mic connected to the Lounge’s stereo system, but that didn’t let the sound carry far outside the shop’s doors. It was a quaint, little hole-in-the-wall in which sophisticated types would sip coffee and discuss world events, but now it housed shallow individuals trapped listening to the ramblings of an anxious auxiliator.

“…and then mama grabbed Ricardo’s prized baseball bat and yelled ‘Die, you nasty interloper!’—she had just learned the word from helping Sofia with her spelling words—and she cracked the bat right on top of the spider. But she didn’t know that it was a mother spider, and hundreds of little baby spiders starting spreading out everywhere, so Sofia was crying because there were more spiders now and Ricardo was crying because he thought mama had dented his bat, and mama was now beating the bat all over the ground trying to crush the little insects.” Rico paused to let his audience take in all the details of his farcical anecdote. He eagerly searched their faces for amusement, but they remained as stoic as ever.

“And then what happened?” asked Taylor deadpan. She got it; Rico’s family was highly dysfunctional. She didn’t need eleven stories to understand this “humorous” concept. Cody suppressed a chuckle at Taylor’s obvious disdain.

Rico hardily continued his tale. “Well, all our screaming had woken up pops, so he came downstairs and wanted to know what all the fuss was about, but Sofia was so frightened that she just jumped straight into his arms, except he wasn’t expecting this so she ended up tackling him to the ground. She knocked all the wind out of him, and before he could get up, the spiders had made their way over to him, but mama was hell-bent on killing those spiders, so she raised the bat—”
“I’m thirsty,” interjected Taylor. “Like, really thirsty. Is anyone else thirsty?”

“Uhh, not really—” Taylor elbowed Cody inconspicuously in the ribs. “I mean, yeah, I am getting kind of parched.”

“O-oh! I can start some coffee and finish my story while we wait.”

“No, no! That’s not necessary. Actually, I’m in the mood for something cold. Coffee’s too hot. Rico, would you be a dear and fetch us some water from the food court?” Taylor put on her puppy-dog-eyes and ogled Rico with her most insincere sincerity.

“Yo-o, of course. But don’t you want to hear the rest of my story?”

“Dude, c’mon, that’s story’s totally—”

“Exciting! Almost too exciting; it’s straight-up action-packed action. Sometimes you got to leave your audience with a bit of suspense, Rico honey.”

“Ah-ha! Rico’s little yarn was a little too much for you to handle! That explains it. Don’t you worry, I’ll fetch your beverages and be back in a flash, then we’ll get this story going the right way!”

Rico quickly sprang from his booth and bolted out the door. As soon as he was out of earshot, Taylor turned to Cody and said, “I thought we’d never get him to shut up.”

“I didn’t understand a single thing he said,” replied the Waterskier.

“Whatever. At least we’re alone now.”

“And these couches are pretty comfortable.”

“Hmm-hmm. So tell me a little about yourself, Cody Cameron.”

“Well, what do ya want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Pshaw, in that case, I was born in California, but I moved to Michigan when I was really young. I still had the California in me, and I just couldn’t stay away from the water. Next thing you know, I’m being drafted by Success Summit as an All-Star Waterskier.”

“Now that’s how you tell a story.”

“You ever do any skiing or surfing?”

“Actually get in the water? Eww, no. I prefer to lie on the beach and tan.”

“But that’s so boring!”

“Not to me, it isn’t.”

“What’s the fun in lying around? You can only have fun when you’re physically getting into something. Yeah, working up a good sweat, now that’s fun!”

“Ugh. We’re just going to have to agree to disagree.”
“Are you really that against exercise?”

“Listen, I get that the body is important, but I’ve found my own ways to explore physicality—ways that don’t involve breaking a sweat.”

“But that’s how you know it’s working.”

“Please! You’re such a boy.”

“Wait ’til Rico gets back; we’ll show you how great it is to just let wild.”

“Ugh. Don’t even talk to me about that dweeb. He might be an All-Star Marathon Runner, but in my book he’s an All-Star Loser.”

“Taylor…”

“Who can just talk and talk and talk like that without saying anything?”

“Taylor—”

“If they gave out a trophy for being oblivious, Rico would have won every competition.”

“Taylor!”

“What? What is it?”

Cody was staring fixedly at something behind the All-Star Lucky. Taylor followed his gaze to find a very dismayed Rico; he’d overheard more than Taylor wished he had. Rico dropped the bottles of water he had been carrying.

“Did you…really mean all that?” asked the Marathon Runner.

Taylor hesitated. “Rico, I…uhh…”

Holding back tears, Rico replied, “I was just trying to be nice.” He turned his back and once more ran out of the Lounge.

Taylor angrily turned back to Cody. “You could’ve warned me sooner that the geek was standing right behind me!”

“I tried, but—”

“Just shut up. I’m going to go find Mr. Cries-a-lot and pretend to be sorry.” In a huff, Taylor got up and stormed out of the mellow shop, leaving a stunned Cody alone in the Lounge.

The dorm area consisted of a square hallway underneath the food court. There were two doors situated on each side that opened to the different quadrants of the mall. The bedrooms connected to the inside of the square so that the rooms were directly underneath the center of the food court. They were arranged in a 4 X 4 pattern, with the corner rooms counting for each side. That left only twelve rooms in the interior of the square; the other four were located in the corners of the exterior, far removed from the food court.

There were two doors hidden behind the escalators in the South Sector. While Markus took the left door to explore the boys’ dorm on the Western end of the mall, Francesca took the right.
Francesca was alone, but she didn’t mind that. Ever since she was young, she had had an A-type personality, and, much to her chagrin, most others did not. Being surrounded by slackers was trying to her, so getting away from humanity was a nice reprieve. The hall was pleasantly quiet; shortly after parting with Markus, she was unable to even hear his footsteps.

She studied the layout of the hallway scrupulously. Every bedroom door was exactly the same; frivolity is a sign of a weak constitution. There were markers on each door to designate whose room it was.

Francesca found her room and smiled to herself. The All-Star Tutor was situated in one of the corner rooms, so she was even more removed from everybody else. She put her hand on the doorknob and turned; it was unlocked. If her door was unlocked, then everyone else’s should as well. She could very easily spy on her classmates’ rooms before they got to them.

No; that’s wrong. That is not how an All-Star Tutor behaves. Francesca shook her head and dismissed the thought.

Her bedroom—like everyone else’s—was modestly furnished. A bed in the center took up the majority of the room. A door in the corner led to a small bathroom: toilet, sink, and shower. There was a key on the nightstand next to the bed, and a letter next to the key. A vanity lined the wall opposite the bed. A chest of drawers stood in the corner across from the bathroom door.

Francesca picked up the letter; it was from Monobear. “Hey, stupid, this is your bedroom. You should probably thank me for giving you such a luxurious apartment, even though I don’t need gratitude for all the good I do. This is where you have to sleep. I shouldn’t have to tell you, but since you’re all minors you cannot sleep anywhere except the dorms. You wouldn’t want to get Monobear in trouble for doing something socially unacceptable, would you? The key on the nightstand will lock your room and yours alone, but it’s up to you whether you feel like locking it. Sincerely, the Super, Generous, Beautiful Monobear.”

Francesca read the letter twice to make sure she fully understood it. Monobear even wrote in that obnoxious vernacular of his. The Tutor put the letter away and investigated the chest of drawers. She threw open the doors and let out a sardonic cackle at what she saw. She quickly clapsed her hands over her mouth; she had uttered an uncouthly loud sound.

In the quiet immediately following her ululation, Francesca made out a faint scream from the other side of the hall. It was muffled from inside her room—perhaps the dorms were soundproof—but it was a scream nonetheless. She made her way out and locked the door behind her.

She crept down the hallway toward the source of the outcry, but as she rounded the corner, she was jumped by a wily individual, slamming her onto the floor. She was dazed for a moment, but she regained her composure quickly. She turned to face her assailant: Markus was eyeing her defensively, arms and foot raised in a mock-martial-arts stance.

Francesca slowly got to her feet; she could just slap Markus she was so annoyed with him. “What in the world are you doing, son?”

Markus had set out his exploration jovially enough, but once he was by himself, panic started to set in. Markus liked people, well, he loved the attention of people; he rarely found himself truly alone. Of course, he couldn’t admit this, for actors are expected to act aloof in public. The quietude of the hallway didn’t help to ease his eerie nerves. When he found his room, he was too afraid of a monster lurking behind the door in wait to enter. He was getting ready to head back out when the monster of his imagination growled, and its ubiquitous echo enveloped him.
Markus’s own frightened voice matched the monster’s cry. The Thespian called upon his stage-fighting experience, and he prepared to subdue the beast. It approached, and he struck. In the aftermath, he realized that the sound was not caused by a monster, but by something much more frightening.

“I—you…you frightened me,” said the Thespian.

“I frightened you? You just attacked me like some run-of-the-mill hoodlum!”

“You snuck up on me!”

“Hush! You haven’t even apologized to me yet.”

“What? But I—sorry…”

“Like you mean it!”

“S-sorry!”

“Good. Now why are you lurking around here?”

“You know. I was hanging in the guys’ dorm.”

“Loitering more like it!”

“Gah! And what are you doing sneaking up on people?”

“I heard a scream, so I came to check on it.”

“Oh…that was me…”

“For heaven’s sake, use your inside voice, boy.”

“It’s not my fault! I heard a scary noise…”

“Oh! That may have been me…”

“That hideous ‘Rah ahh ahh’ was you? So it’s all your fault!”

“It’s rude to point fingers and, even worse, to accuse a lady of misgivings.”

“That’s not fair. You scared me…”

“Why were you so agitated in the first place? One little cackle shouldn’t be enough to upset someone.”

“Well, I, uhh, was a little frightened to begin with. Killing each other…it’s a little off-putting—and I’ve read some strange scripts!”

“Lots of things in life are scary; the trick is not letting yourself be afraid of them.”

“Easy for you to say! You’re strong. They’ll eat me alive. If anyone’s going to die, it’s going to be me.”

“First, I’m not strong. Just don’t let people push you around. Second, nobody is going to die. Whatever that Monobear is after, he’s not going to get it; we’re too good for that.”
“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I believe in people…I have to. That’s why I’m a tutor.”

“Still…we don’t know how this is going to pan out. I’m used to having a script, knowing what’s going to happen five pages from now. But I haven’t the foggiest idea what’s going to happen next.”

“Shh…come here.”

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“It’s called a hug. Haven’t you ever hugged someone before?”

“On stage, sure. You mean people actually do this in real life?”

“They do. It’s a sign of affection. You’re okay. Everything’s okay.”

“…thank you…”

“Of course.”

“…don’t tell any of the guys about this, yeah?”

“My lips are sealed. Now let’s finish checking out the dorms.”
Chapter 1--The Beauties and the Beasts--Part 2

The Laundromat was, in fact, a Laundromat. Washers lined one wall, and dryers the other. There were extra hampers and baskets stuffed into a corner, and a long table for folding clothes spanned the center. It was as void of aesthetics as any laundry facility, although music from decades prior filtered softly from the ceiling.

On the inside, Lily was scared, but on the outside she was a bundle of joy. It was scary to be away from home and away from a familiar wi-fi hotspot, but she was surrounded by friends now. Most people Lily could talk to for extended periods of time were acquaintances on the Internet, and Internet friends aren’t always online. But she got to see everybody everyday now, and so they would have to be her friends whether they liked it or not.

Elizabeth wasn’t so much disturbed by the current circumstances as she was discomforted by them. With her parents’ wealth, she had never had to share facilities with others before. The idea of a Laundromat, of doing one’s own laundry in front of others, was such a radical idea. The Historian had always had someone to take care of her clothing needs for her, and so she was intrigued to see how this social situation would play out.

Jenny was a naturally cautious person, and so she was loath to drop her guard for even a fraction of a second. Just because she was stuck with these people didn’t mean she had to be friends with them. People are unpredictable; she’d be better off by herself. The less she had to do with them, the better.

“So this is a ‘Laundromat?’” pondered Elizabeth aloud.

Jenny just looked at the Historian, and Lily replied, “It is, desu! Isn’t it quaint? It’s just like the ones back home.”

Elizabeth’s eyes lit up. “You mean you’ve been to one of these before?”

“Sugoi, of course! The Laundromat we went to had a television that played Spanish soap operas in the corner.”

“There’s more than one kind? That’s so exotic.”

“Desu. What about you, Jenny? What’s your Laundromat like?”

Jenny had been nonchalantly watching the others converse and it caught her unawares to be addressed. “I—I do not use Laundromats. I prefer to wash my clothes in private.”

“So you don’t use them either?” asked a shocked Elizabeth. “Then how do you get your clothes clean? Do you use a river?”

“I have a washing and drying machine in my home. I have no reason to do laundry elsewhere.”

“I wonder how my laundry gets cleaned, then…”

“Lizzie, do you not know how to do your own laundry?”

Elizabeth’s temper flared. “My name is Elizabeth! Please do not call me by anything else.”
Jenny raised an eyebrow at the Historian’s sudden change in demeanor; Lily was severely wounded at having upset her friend. “G-gomen! I am gomen!”

And as rapidly as her anger had appeared, Elizabeth’s ferocity dissolved. “That’s alright. And no, I do not know the proper procedure for ‘doing laundry.’”

Jenny could see that Lily was still slightly shaken, and so the Sandwich Artist said, “If you need me to, then I can instruct you.” Why was she putting herself out on the line like this? Judging from Elizabeth’s sudden outburst, perhaps it would be best to stay on this girl’s good side.

“I would be most appreciative of that,” replied Elizabeth sweetly.

“And I can assist you!” added Lily jovially.

Jenny wanted to roll her eyes, but that would be construed as rude.

“We can have a laundry party!” broached Elizabeth.

“Desu! That would be so much fun!”

Jenny politely nodded her head.

Lily looked down nervously. “Umm, guys…”

“Yes?”

“I think…ganbatte…I think we should all be BFF’s! There, I said it. I just get a really good vibe from both of you, and I know we haven’t known each other long, but I want us to be friends until forever!”

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled. “Oh my, Lily, I was thinking the exact same thing! It would be an honor to call you my BFF’s. What say you, Jenny?”

Jenny desperately wanted to say “No,” and even more desperately to say “Hell no,” but for some reason her mouth formed the words, “Yes, I would like that very much as well.”

Lily let out an earth-shattering squeal. The Kawaii and Historian rushed the Sandwich Artist and captured her in a bone-crushing embrace. They were giggling in profound ecstasy. Jenny, on the other hand, wanted to roll her eyes harder than Adele rolling in the deep.

Delilah was at home in the Salon. Some kids liked to play video games, some liked to play sports, but Delilah had always like playing with make-up. As a Southern belle, Delilah had been in her fair share of beauty pageants; she may not always have won, but she was intrigued by the art of beauty. For her, there was no greater purpose in life than making others—and vicariously herself—become beautiful.

A flawless mirror lined the one wall with a short counter underneath, and five adjustable chairs stood in front of the counter. On the side opposite the wall were another five chairs, albeit with domes for perms and curls. Two sinks for hair washing and a cash register were situated in the back.

Delilah was the most frantic to explore the Salon. She carefully observed every pair of scissors and every bottle of hairspray to become acclimated to her environment. Aside from hair
products, though, there was a lack of regular cosmetics.

They boys did not share Delilah’s enthusiasm. Randolph was greatly turned off by the idea of a Salon. To spend inordinate amounts of time and money on one’s own appearance was such a sublime example of vanity. The Monk had taken a vow of humility; his bald head reflected just how little stock he put in his outward appearance. Nevertheless, he could see how happy it made Delilah, and it is hard to contest with that level of bliss.

Austin meandered through the Salon aimlessly. Like most things, the Salon was uninteresting to him. He understood fashion and the way that world worked well enough, but he could never muster up the energy to fully indulge himself in the arena. That’s not to say he was displeased by the Salon, just bored by it. He did enjoy the various “girly” color accents scattered throughout the Salon; it made the parlor seem calm and safe.

The group had been quiet, each meditating on his or her own thoughts. Delilah continued her exhaustive inventory of the Salon, Randolph tried to achieve peace with place of existence, and Austin searched for any object of exciting aesthetic value. Finally, the monotony overcame Austin’s being, and he uttered a yawn that echoed throughout the store. Delilah’s ears pricked up, and she turned to face the Idle.

“Oy, flower boy, what’re you yawnin’ over?” asked the Cosmetologist. “Am I keepin’ you up?”

“Hmm, no,” replied Austin. “I’ve just seen my fair share of hair Salons before, is all. Another one is, well, not revolutionary.”

“Of course it ain’t! Salons are places to gossip and have a good time, not to be startin’ revolutions.”

“Oh, you misunderstand me. I meant that going to another one is rather underwhelming.”

“Underwhelming”? Why, I could whelm you right now for sayin’ somethin’ like that.”

Randolph felt the need to intervene. “Now, Delilah, let’s not let our tempers get us carried away.”

“Are you serious?” asked the Cosmetologist.

“I want what is best for the group, and fighting is detrimental to everyone.”

Delilah took a deep breath to compose herself. “I wasn’t lookin’ to stir up trouble. I was just gonna explain to flower boy over here that every Salon is unique, and you gotta look for what makes ‘em special.”

Randolph opened his mouth to speak, but Austin proceeded anyway. “I guess a so-called beauty guru would say something like that, I mean, it’s obvious that you’ve spent time in many different parlors.”

Randolph was ardent to keep Delilah’s temper in check, but Austin kept lighting the fuse. Randolph started, “Now, friends—”

Delilah cut him off. “And what’s that supposed to mean? I’ll have you know I’ve worked in Salons you’d need a six-month reservation to get into.”

“Wow, that surprises me. I figured you had been to a few since no parlor would have the
resources to fix what you keep doing to your face.”

If a group of schoolgirls had been present, they would have offered Delilah some ice for that burn. Unfortunately, there was nothing to cool the Cosmetologist down. “What did you say, flower boy?”

Randolph stepped between the two to intervene, but they gently pushed him aside. “I just feel bad for whoever gets their beauty advice from you.”

“Well at least I know how to dress myself! You wouldn’t know good looks if it came up and bit you on your fruity little face.”

“YOLO. Life’s too short to care about these sorts of things.”

“Then why’re you bringin’ it up?”

Randolph seized his chance. “It is best to treat others how you wish to be treated.”

“Shut up, baldy! This doesn’t concern you. No hair, no opinion.”

“I don’t care how others treat me. I don’t care about a lot of things; it’s worked out pretty well for me.”

“You seem to care an awful lot about how I look.”

“Because I care about you as a person. I couldn’t live with myself if I let you go on thinking you’re something you’re not. You’re beautiful as you are; you don’t need grotesque amounts of make-up to prove that.”

Delilah’s emotions had been on a roller coaster dealing with this kid, and yet he maintained the same deadpan demeanor the entire time. “I…you…I don’t know whether I should be flattered or offended.”

“Take it as you wish—I couldn’t care less either way.”

“Fine! You know what? I’m goin’ to show you just how beautiful I am, you little punk. I’m goin’ to have a night of make-overs, and this class will be the best-lookin’ group of people on the planet!”

“Cool. I can’t wait to see what you do to me, and how long it’ll take my hair to recover.”

“Except you’re not invited. In fact, none of you stupid boys is invited. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some plannin’ and preparation to do.”

Delilah stormed off to the back of the Salon.

Randolph turned to Austin. “Perhaps you should be more careful with what you say. Your words have upset Miss Delilah.”

“I don’t mean to upset people when I talk,” replied the Idle. “The opposite actually.”

“Oh? How so?”

“I’m a very candid person; I only speak the truth. If the truth upsets you, then make it so that the new truth is to your liking.”
“But what if you are not able to change this painful truth?”

Austin shrugged his shoulders. “How should I know? You’re the theological one, not me.” With nothing else to say, Austin wandered off to somewhere else in the parlor.

Randolph was left standing in the middle of the shop to contemplate how quickly his peers could turn on and attack each other. He shook his head and said, “I shall have to pray strongly for these people that we may all get along.”

Monobear—or whoever brought these kids to this place—must have ransacked the students’ belongings, for Theo severely lacked the majority of his cartography equipment. He had no rulers or measuring tape to figure out the proportions of the mall. He couldn’t find a T-square to make a proper right angle. He even lacked a protractor! All he had to construct his map was pencil and paper.

The mall was designed as a giant plus-sign. The Southern border contained the only entrance, which just so happened to be trapping the students in. As seen by the others, each sector was also home to a variety of shops. The Northern, Western, and Eastern borders were blocked off similarly to the shops in those areas, and so it was dubious that they provided exits to the outside world. The center of the plus was the raised food court, fountain in the center, with the dorm area underneath. Without adequate measuring equipment, Theo couldn’t be sure, but there should have been an empty square within the square of bedrooms.

Theo made note of the location of each and every security camera in the mall. There was no systemized pattern to their placement; they were arranged helter-skelter throughout the mall. If that was the case, then there might be a blind spot where the students could hide without Monobear seeing them. He would have to investigate this matter further if he could get his hands on some more supplies.

The Northern, Western, and Eastern sectors had no lights activated. There was nothing here that the students should be doing, but there was nothing stopping them from being in the corridor. Theo had to navigate these areas from the residual light from the food court’s glass roof. While exploring one of these darkened areas, Theo met the other wandering explorer: James Beck the Movie Producer. With his camera knowledge, perhaps James could explicate if the blind spots could exist.

James was carefully observing the wall underneath a camera when Theo called out to him. “Hello there! James!” James jumped and let out a quick cry of shock. He noticed Theo, but he stood his ground and waited for Theo to get to him instead of meeting the Cartographer halfway.

“What do you want?”

“I saw you over here and had a question to ask you.”

“Then ask it already. Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Oh, sorry. These cameras…they’re oddly placed. There doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to them.”

“Is there a question coming?”

“Can you hide from them? I mean, is there a limit to their range that we could abuse?”
“What a stupid question! Have you even looked at these useless things? They swivel on a mount; you can’t hide from a moving target.”

“Damn. I was hoping there’d be a place that we could discuss our way out without Monobear catching wind. Have you found anything interesting while you’ve been out?”

“Why would I tell you?”

“I…was just curious. Are you alright?”

“Fine! I’m fine! Just go away and let me get back to business.”

“Okay…but what exactly are you investigating now?”

“Like I’d tell you!”

“I’m just making conversation. If we’re going to be stuck here together for a while, we might as well be on friendly terms.”

“You’re just as disgusting as the rest. None of us here are friends. We’re competitors. It’s kill or be killed. Having friends makes you weak.”

“Our power is strongest combined. If we all work together, then we can figure a way out of this.”

“I have been looking for a way out all day! There isn’t one! The only ‘way out’ is to pull off one of those murders the deranged toy was talking about.”

“You can’t honestly believe that.”

“‘You can’t honestly believe that.’ You don’t know a blasted thing about me. I can’t spend my life being locked up with you group of losers. I am getting out of here one way or another.”

“Then I propose we form an alliance. You’re obviously intelligent, and I think if we pool our skills, then we can accomplish a lot more than on our own.”

“As if I would side with someone like you. I already said that having friends makes you weak, so don’t expect any cooperation out of me.”

“It was just a suggestion. The offer still stands.”

“Fine, whatever. Now go away and leave me be. And don’t think I’ll be kind to you in the future. If the opportunity arises, I will not hesitate to kill you to get out of this cesspool.”
Chapter 1--The Beauties and the Beasts--Part 3

At the arranged time, Markus made his rounds and gathered the students back to the food court. Jenny, Lily, and Elizabeth arrived at the food court ahead of time and began the lunch preparations; the limited cafeteria options deigned that the students would be having water and sandwiches for their lunch. The Thespian retrieved Rufus, Jordan, and Melissa from the General Store and Taylor and Cody from the Lounge. Delilah, Austin, and Randolph were more than willing to disband from the Salon, and Francesca and Rico were summoned from their rooms. Theo and James arrived later since Markus was loath to explore the dark, scary parts of the mall, but a nudge from Francesca sent him on his way.

Once the sixteen students were seated together, Melissa opened up the discussion.

Melissa: “Hello, everybody. I hope the initial shock of our situation has abated a bit. I think it would behoove us to recount what we have found in our respective fields. I have—”

Rufus: “The General Store has everything we need to live in relative luxury. Toothpaste, deodorant, shaving cream. It’s nothing fancy, but it’ll do.”

Melissa: “Umm, yes. That is true. What else is there to report on?”

Jordan: “I heard that there was a Lounge in the mall…”

Taylor: “Yeah. It’s great. Fantastic even. You could say it’s the best thing on Earth.”

Cody: “Uhh, yeah. There’re some couches and chairs, and there’s a mic stand and a kinda stage-like area. It’s real mellow.”

Melissa: “Rico, anything to add?”

Rico: “No-o. What they said sums it up.”

Melissa: “Moving on then. Who’s next?”

Elizabeth: “We discovered the most wonderful place. It is called a Laundromat. I have only ever read about them, but they are quite intriguing in person.”

Lily: “It’s really cool. There isn’t a TV or anything, so you’ll have to bring something to occupy your time while doing laundry.”

Jenny: “There are eight washing machines and eight drying machines. I am assuming that there is detergent in the General Store?”

Melissa: “Yes, there is. And now I believe there is only one other shop.”

Delilah: “There is a beautiful Salon. We don’t have to worry about our hair gettin’ too long or our nails gettin’ out of control. I would be more than happy to give a new hairdo to anybody who asks.”

Austin: “There’s nothing else too spectacular to note about the place. Just your standard barber shop equipment.”

Delilah: “Excuse me! It is a Beauty Salon, not a simple barber shop!”
Randolph: “Please, let us all get along.”

Melissa: “Then that leaves you four.”


Francesca: “We each have a room assigned to us, and right now they’re each unlocked. After we finish here, I suggest you all go and retrieve your keys. We each have a bed and bathroom, and the dresser is the pièce de résistance: we’ve got a surplus of the outfits we currently have on.”

Taylor: “WHAT? Repeat that.”

Francesca: “One of the biggest wastes of time in the morning is figuring out what outfit to wear. Well, that task has been taken care of for us.”

Taylor: “No! No no no no no! That is unacceptable! You can’t honestly expect me to wear the same thing everyday!”

Lily: “We do have a Laundromat, desu.”

Rufus: “Hmm…I suppose it’ll be easier to remember who’s who then if we’re always wearing the same general outfit.”

Taylor: “This is an outrage!”

Delilah: “I hear you sister! I repeat my offer to give y’all makeovers to spice up our looks some.”

Melissa: “I fear we’ve gotten off track. Theo, James, we haven’t heard from you yet.”

Theo: “I’ve taken a comprehensive tour of the premises. There is nothing to note of interest outside the South Sector. I’ve made a rudimentary map of the mall if anyone is interested.”

Melissa: “I would like to see that after we finish. James.”

James: “What do you want me to say? The cameras have some strange weak point that we can exploit? Sorry; no dice. There’s no hiding in this…this…mall.”

Melissa: “Thank you. Does anyone have anything else to add?”

James: “Yeah, I do. What now? What do we do now?”

Melissa: “Well, I, uhh…”

Rufus: “What do you mean?”

James: “Where are we now? There’s nothing left to investigate. There’s no way to get out of here. We. Are. Trapped. What are we supposed to do inside this prison?”

Lily: “Oh, he has a point.”

Markus: “What do we do?”

Cody: “What’s he mean by all that?”

Elizabeth: “I don’t quite understand what’s going on.”

Melissa: “We survive. We work together, and we stay alive.”
Jordan: “Melissa…”

James: “Idiots! We are not all going to live and make it out of here. Sooner or later, one of us is going to desperately want out of here, and someone is going to die because of that. Why can’t you peasants get that through your thick skulls?”

Rico: “But we’re, uhh, all friends, aren’t we?”

Jenny: “Yes. Friends.”

James: “I don’t like repeating myself, so I’m only going to say this once: I’m not your friend. You get attached, and then the killing gets hard. Things get messy. Stay out of my way, and maybe you’ll live to see another day.”

Randolph: “Come now, James, do not talk like that. We wish you no harm. Please, have faith in us.”

Taylor: “No, if he wants to be a jerk, let him. Good riddance. We don’t need a drain on our society.”

Austin: “Sigh, look who’s talking.”

Taylor: “Say that to my face.”

Austin: “Okay. Look who’s talking.”

Randolph: “Friends, let us stop our bickering.”

Lily: “Please don’t argue…”

Melissa: “Enough! You can be insolent all you want, but you are still one of us, and as long as I’m around, I refuse to let any one of you die.”

James: “Say that again after someone is murdered and you’re forced to look the murderer in the eye.”

Melissa: “Shut up! No one is dying, and that is final.”

James: “Whatever. Just don’t expect me to act like a part of your group.”

Melissa: “Fine.”

Theo: “Then that brings us back to where we started. What do we do now?”

Rico: “Yeah, what do I need to do?”

Markus: “I dislike this not-knowing.”

Delilah: “I’ve got an idea…”

Melissa: “To be honest, I don’t know, and I don’t care. Entertain yourselves. Just remember that we are a group, and that we are all in this together.”

James: “Geez, whatever. Goodbye, losers.”

Melissa: “Before you go, I have one last matter of business. So we’re all on the same page, I enjoin
that we all have our meals together. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And no, you don’t have to interact with us.”

James: “Hmph.”

Elizabeth: “That sounds fine by me. Does this count for snack time as well?”

Cody: “I can dig that, dude.”

Francesca: “This way I can keep tabs on how everyone is doing.”

Austin: “Hmm…I suppose that’s alright.”

Jordan: “Fine.”

Rufus: “Bene.”

Jenny: “Good.”

Randolph: “I shall have something to look forward to everyday now.”

Delilah: “I see nothin’ wrong with this.”

Theo: “It will be a good time to regroup.”

Lily: “Yatta! More time together with friends!”

Markus: “It seems that we are all in agreement then.”

Taylor: “Woohoo. Sounds like so much fun.”

Rico: “Hey-y, sounds like a plan.”

Melissa: “Good. Then since that’s settled, I’d like to call this meeting to a close. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to have some alone time in my room to sit and think.”

After lunch, the students disbanded and went their separate ways. For the first time, the students were free to explore the mall of their volition. Trust and suspicion wavered in their minds. Some sought out the solace and company of others, while some decided to keep to themselves in their rooms.

Jenny very much would have liked to stay in her room, but Elizabeth and Lily trapped her in the food court to talk and gossip. Delilah made herself at home in the Salon, and Markus kept her company, while Rufus, Theo, and Randolph found the Lounge soothing. Taylor snagged a pair of sunglasses from James before he departed into the depths of the mall so she could work on her tan under the skylight; Austin joined her since tanning required very little energy. Cody bided his time in the General Store in the hopes of finding something fun to do. Rico, still deflated from earlier, stayed in his room, as did Francesca and Jordan.

Melissa wasn’t alone in her room for long before she felt the uncontrollable need to be around people. She made her rounds through the mall to check up on her classmates, to know what’s going on in their minds. Melissa had to be in charge no matter the cost. She could tell that some of her peers found her ubiquitous presence annoying and overbearing, but she did not overly care what they thought of her so long as they listened to her. She had her trusted advisers to keep
their eyes and ears open, and so all she had to do was reinforce her positive—albeit naïve—attitude.

Dinner time rolled around, and everyone obeyed her earlier suggestion. At Elizabeth’s bequest, the BFFs gathered and prepped the food for everyone. Supper was a lovely arrangement of hot dogs and hamburgers with off-brand cola. James sat and ate his meal in silence and with a scowl. There was a mixed air of forced friendship and skeptical bemusement lingering over the meal. The dinner concluded without incident, and before long, the students headed to their respective rooms for the night. No one would sleep easily, but sleep would come more easily to some than to others.

Austin the Idle was wide awake when his head hit the pillow. No matter how many times he yawned or how tired he felt during the day, the second he made the decision to seek slumber the bliss of oblivion eluded him. He had even had an exciting day too! By all means, he should be exhausted; if only he could will himself to sleep.

Taylor the Lucky could not get comfortable in her bed. Her ordeal with Rico had left a bitter taste in her mouth all day, and she just couldn’t shake the feeling. She believed the unpleasantness had hurt her chances with Cody, and the other boys weren’t too spectacular in comparison. The Monk, Thespian, and Idle were too scrappy, and she would never be able to put up with the egos of James and Rufus. Theo was still a possibility, so at least there was one back-up if things went awry.

Markus the Thespian couldn’t turn the lights out in his room. This was a strange new place, and there was no way he could get comfortable here. He missed his home, he missed his friends, and he missed his own bed. In a few days time, this strange predicament would resolve itself, and he’d be back where he belonged. It just had to work out that way.

Lily the Kawaii was ecstatic to have a room to herself. She could jump on the bed, and there was no one to tell her not to. She had freedom, and she had friends. After she tuckered herself out, Lily fell into a deep, restorative sleep.

Randolph the Monk meditated and offered a prayer for his comrades. He had faith that his friends would pull through and not get mixed up in Monobear’s crazy ploy. Just from watching Austin’s and Delilah’s little scuffle, Randolph could tell that students’ greatest enemies were themselves. They would have to overcome their own misgivings before they could hope to escape. If not, then they certainly would need the skills of a practiced monk.

Jordan the Golfer closed her eyes and drifted off. She just wanted to be left alone, to not have to bother with anyone. For whatever reasons—being black, being a woman, being an athlete—people had always found a reason to give her flak. The easiest solution was for her to remove herself from this derision. She did not like being dragged into the fray by Rufus and Melissa, but things could’ve been worse.

Cody the Waterskier fell asleep quickly. He found it easy to fall asleep by recounting the events of the day. Thinking about things made him tired, so he avoided thinking about things. He liked to ski and do athletic activities because he could turn his brain off. The other students were doing a lot of thinking, and Cody really hoped he wouldn’t have to do so as well.

Francesca the Tutor found solace in being alone. She had to put on airs as a tutor, but now she could let her hair down. She didn’t have to worry about being hard on the troubled or being comforting to the confused; she could just be herself. As a tutor, she had to adapt to her tutees, and so sometimes she wondered what her default personality was. Her versatility disgusted her at times; she just hoped it wouldn’t hurt her relationships with the others.
Theo the Cartographer had studied sleep-inducing techniques from all over the world, but nothing was helping now. It was in everyone’s best interest to get along, but James was clearly against that idea. Theo had seen the effects of humanity, and he wasn’t keen to let those same effects play out here.

Delilah the Cosmetologist eased herself into a light slumber, but right before she dropped off the edge of consciousness, her brain remembered Austin, and she was wide awake. How dare that little squirt insult her! If she could get alone with him, then she would give him a piece of her mind.

James the Movie Producer sat troubled in bed. He wanted a way out of here, but he could not figure one out. James was a Somebody, and the other students were Nobodies. It was an insult to be drawn down to their level. He would rather kill himself than live out the rest of his days with these losers—not that he’d ever be able to; luckily he could kill someone else to achieve the same result.

Jenny the Sandwich Artist tried very hard to fall asleep, but her mind was racing. Lily and Elizabeth were nice, but she was not sure if she wanted them as friends. Jenny had always been very selective in her menagerie of acquaintances, but her options were limited now. Granted, it would behoove her to maintain friendly relations with her classmates; nevertheless, there was a nagging afterthought burning in the back of her mind.

Rico the Marathon Runner usually fell asleep instantly, but he couldn’t now. It was too quiet in his dorm room. Not to mention that his interaction with Taylor kept replaying in his head. Rico was a nice kid; people liked him. Then why did that girl say such hateful things? Before falling asleep, Rico decided that he would just have to work harder to regain her favor now.

Elizabeth the Historian tried to ignore her stomach as she lay in bed. The day had been taxing on her, and all the excitement had left a hole in her belly. She was used to hearty cuisine, not run-of-the-mill groceries. If the food didn’t improve soon, Elizabeth would be petitioning the authorities for an upgrade.

Rufus the Latinist was a long-time insomniac. How else could he have mastered a dead language? Only now he didn’t have his books to keep him occupied. Instead, he would have to reflect on the events of the day. Could he trust Jordan and Melissa? And who else was suspicious or of a weak constitution. Rufus didn’t have enough information yet; he’d have to wait the others out before he could make any definitive decisions.

Melissa the Politician was a bundle of nerves when she retired for the night. Could this all be real? It was difficult to wrap her head around. Sixteen students, all forced to live together in a eerily creepy mall, the only way out to kill one of their friends. As a Politician, nay, as a human being, Melissa could not let that number dwindle. She would thwart Monobear’s plans if it were the last thing she did.
With varying levels of energy, the sixteen students woke up the next morning and headed to breakfast. The students were as cold or friendly as they were before. After everyone had eaten, Delilah broached her idea of an all-girls makeover night in the Salon. Her idea was received well, and they would put her plan into action that very night. The boys were quick to retaliate, however, and they wished to be included as well. Theo proposed that they have a boys’ open mic night in the Lounge while the girls enjoy themselves. Though not as popular, the boys could not come up with a better idea, so an open mic night it was.

The students spent the rest of the day idling as they had the afternoon before or preparing for the night’s activities. With the day spent this way, the time flew by. Before long, the students were gathered in the food court for lunch, and then they were gathered for dinner as well. Despite the melancholy attitude of the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing, the students were in high spirits.

The boys met before the girls since the girls’ noses needed desperately to be powdered before their makeovers. The microphone and system were all set, so all the boys needed was an act. Markus was the only one overtly willing to go onstage, except his performances were not conducive to standing behind a microphone. The boys had a dilemma to figure out.

Markus: “Well, if I’m not acting up here, then who is?”
Rico: “Perhaps I could tell a story!”
Rufus: “Keith, don’t roll your eyes like that. It’s rude.”
Cody: “What? Who are you talking to?”
Rufus: “You. You are Keith the Surfer, no?”
Cody: “No, dude, I’m not. Cody the Waterskier.”
Rufus: “Close enough. I never claimed to be good with nomina.”
Theo: “We’ve been together for two days, though. You should know everybody’s names by now.”
Rufus: “Hmph. Mea culpa.”
Rico: “So-o am I going up or not?”
Randolph: “I have no objections, friend.”
Austin: “Hmm…I think it depends. What story are you going to tell?”
Rico: “I’ve got this really entertaining one about when my brother and I got lost on our way to the beach.”
Austin: “That sounds, uhh, riveting. Are there any other options?”
Theo: “I can demonstrate the tribal songs of the Uzuhli.”
Rufus: “And I can recite some Latin poetry.”
Austin: “Oh…these all sound so enticing...”
James: “Excuse me, but can someone please explain to me why I’m here?”

Randolph: “I thought we were all having a pleasant evening together.”

Markus: “I was under the impression that there would be some quality entertainment here. Everyone knows we’re in desperate need of it.”

Theo: “What are you getting at?”

James: “Why am I here? Is there any integral reason for my being here?”

Rufus: “No. We’re here to enjoy ourselves. Well, that and make sure the girls don’t have all the fun.”

James: “Then why am I still here…?”

Cody: “I could ask the same question.”

Rico: “Wh-what? You don’t want to be here either?”

Cody: “Nah, I meant, why is James still here?”

Rufus: “James? I thought his name was Jeffrey…”

Cody: “Uhh, I mean, no one’s keeping you here against your will, man. You’re free to go as you wish.”

Randolph: “Although we hope you will stay.”

James: “Me? Go? And leave you all to plot against me? No thanks. I want to make sure you simpletons aren’t up to any funny business.”

Theo: “So you’re using paranoia as your excuse now…”

James: “Excuse me? You got something to say?”

Theo: “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t want to be. Admit it, deep down, you like us. We’re friends, James.”

James: “I would never be friends with the likes of all of you!”

Austin: “Compensation.”

James: “What now?”

Austin: “You don’t really have any friends, so you act like you don’t need any. You’re just compensating.”

Randolph: “Mister James, you have nothing to worry about with us. We only wish the best for you.”

James: “Tch.”

Markus: “So…are we doing this thing tonight, or are we just gonna discuss our feelings?”

Rico: “I’m fine either way, so everyone knows.”
Rufus: “Ecce. Let’s get back to the mic stand. We can have a fun night yet.”

Cody: “Good. I don’t wanna get all mushy with you bros.”

Markus: “There’s nothing wrong with letting your emotions run free.”

Randolph: “It can be cleansing for the soul; this is a no-judgment zone.”

Austin: “Says the man whose ideology revolves around judging the actions of others.”

Randolph: “I may have my own opinions, but it is the judgment of the universe that truly matters most.”

James: “The universe ain’t thinking about killing anyone, though.”

Rufus: “That’s enough out of you. We are going to have a pleasant evening. If nobody gets behind that mic, then I will start reciting Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. ”

Markus: “Yes! I’ve got some monologues memorized if you’ve got an open mind.”

Rico: “My story is still on the table!”

Cody: “At this point, I don’t care what we do, just so long as we do something.”

James: “This is going to be one wild and crazy night, isn’t it?”

While the boys tried to salvage what fun they could from their gathering, the girls were preparing their own get-together. The Salon was set up for an average business day. Delilah decided to work on a first-come-first-serve basis. Francesca, who had to be punctually early, was the first to arrive, followed by Taylor. Melissa came in after she checked on the boys to make sure they weren’t up to anything funny, and she was followed shortly behind by Jordan. The three BFFs were the last since Elizabeth wanted to rob the food court one last time before the party.

Lily: “Sorry we’re late everybody! But don’t worry, we’re here now!”

Jenny: “Yes, our apologies.”

Elizabeth: “So what is going on now?”

Delilah: “I’m finishin’ up with Taylor here. Franny was first in line, but she doesn’t want a new hairdo, so I’m just goin’ down the line. Next is Melissa, then Jordan. Then you three gotta fight it out.”

Jenny: “Either of you may go before me.”

Lily: “Elizabeth, would you be mad if I go first?”

Elizabeth: “Not at all. Francesca, why aren’t you getting a makeover?”

Francesca: “I don’t really enjoy all that pampering. It feels unnecessary. I am who I am; why should I hide that?”

Jordan: “Preach it, sister.”

Francesca: “Heh heh, can I get an amen!”
Jordan: “…no…”

Taylor: “Wait, are you saying you don’t want a makeover?”

Francesca: “I do believe that is what I said.”

Taylor: “That’s ridiculous! Who doesn’t want a makeover? You get to be all pretty and attractive; boys won’t be able to resist your womanly charms.”

Melissa: “We’re talking about boys already? I thought we could gossip a little first.”

Delilah: “You? Gossip? I didn’t think you could loosen up.”

Melissa: “Even a politician has to sit back and relax sometimes. This is like one big sleepover, except we go back to our respective rooms afterward.”

Delilah: “Well I’ll be damned. Girl knows how to have a good time.”

Jenny: “Sleep…over?”

Lily: “Don’t tell me you’ve never been to a sleepover before!”

Jenny: “There are…many things I have not done.”

Elizabeth: “Is a sleepover like a slumber party?”

Jordan: “They’re the same thing…”

Elizabeth: “Oh, goody! Then when do we break out the sparkling grape juice and shortcake?”

Francesca: “I really want to know what kind of slumber parties you’ve been to.”

Delilah: “Alright, that should do it for you, darlin’. Melissa, hop on up here.”

Taylor: “Delilah, you are a genius. This is the best look I’ve had in ages.”

Melissa: “You’ve certainly got me excited. Francesca, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Francesca: “Trust me, I do, and I’m fine.”

Taylor: “Well, I’m going to pop over to the Lounge and see what the boys think of my new look.”

Lily: “Have fun!”

Jenny: “Should I be doing anything specific right now?”

Delilah: “Hun, relax and enjoy yourself.”

Jenny: “I…I shall try…”

Delilah: “Oh, Missy, who does your hair? Please tell me you haven’t been cuttin’ it yourself.”

Melissa: “What would you like me to say instead?”

Delilah: “That you will find a proper hairdresser when we get out of here.”

Melissa: “With any luck, that hairdresser will be you. I like what you’re doing.”
Delilah: “It’s just years of practice.”

Elizabeth: “So…do you think we really will get out of here?”

Lily: “We have to, desu! It’s crazy to think otherwise.”

Francesca: “I’ve seen people in tough situations before; we can get through this.”

Jordan: “Still, we should be prepared for anything…and that includes staying here.”

Melissa: “So long as we’re all together, we’ll be fine.”

Delilah: “And…there! How do you like it?”

Melissa: “Oh, Delilah, it’s lovely.”

Delilah: “Glad you think so. Jordan, you’re up. Any requests?”

Jordan: “Nothing too flashy, please. I’ve never looked good with extravagance.”

Delilah: “Simple but elegant, comin’ right up.”

Lily: “Taylor! Welcome back! How were the boys? Did they like your makeover?”

Elizabeth: “Yes, please fill us in.”

Francesca: “Well don’t just stand there, girl; spill the beans.”

Taylor: “I, uhh, I don’t know.”

Jenny: “You do not know? Were the boys not in the Lounge?”

Taylor: “Oh, they were. Except they were all sitting in a circle, clapping their hands, and chanting in some strange language. I didn’t want to interrupt them for fear that they might summon an evil spirit on me.”

Francesca: “Don’t be absurd! They were probably just having fun.”

Jordan: “Or maybe they were drunk.”

Elizabeth: “But we’re underage!”

Taylor: “That’s never stopped me before.”

Delilah: “Shoot! This girl’s got game as well!”

Melissa: “Hee hee, it’s never stopped me either.”

Delilah: “Missy! You are just full of surprises, dearie.”

Taylor: “Oh my God. You people are all crazy.”

Lily: “But we’re a good kind of crazy!”

Jordan: “There’s a good kind…?”

Taylor: “Yeah, you people are all definitely crazy. But that’s just going to make everything fun and
The night concluded in amiable spirits, and all sixteen students slept more soundly this night than the last. For once, the students were at ease and felt good. They were breaking down the classmate boundaries and becoming real friends. Despair was giving way to hope. But those fuzzy feelings couldn’t last forever.

After their raucous evenings, the students met for another bland breakfast. Even James was permitting himself to smile. Everyone was finally getting along.

Until Monobear showed up. Halfway through their meal, Monobear appeared on top of the fountain and called out to the students.

Monobear: “Oy! Why haven’t any of you brats killed each other yet? This is a game of mutual killing, not mutual living!”

Melissa: “Shut up, you stupid toy! We’re not killing each other.”

Monobear: “I am not a toy! I am the great and wonderful Monobear!”

Theo: “Melissa’s right, though. There will be no murders here.”

James: “Speak for yourself…”

Austin: “You’re not fooling anyone with that charade.”

James: “Stop saying things like that! You’re creeping me out.”

Taylor: “Besides, we’re still in the mall. It may be a shabby, run-down, obsolete, make-my-eyes-sore-looking-at-it mall, but it’s still a mall, and that’s enough for me.”

Lily: “And we’re all best friends! We could never think of harming each other.”

Monobear: “Grr…I can tell that you’re a stubborn lot. Fine. You just don’t have the right incentive yet.”

Jordan: “Incentive?”

Rufus: “Quid?”

Melissa: “Don’t listen to him; it’s obviously a ploy to get us to turn on each other.”

Monobear: “No ploy. I’m just trying to expedite the process. I’m all about efficiency, I’ll have you know. I’ve taken factories full of people and replaced them all with robots to make the factories run smoother. Although disposing of the bodies was more troublesome than I had imagined.”

Cody: “Uhh, is anybody following this?”

Francesca: “Trust me, he’s just speaking nonsense.”

Markus: “I wonder where he gets his material…”

Monobear: “Upu, now where was I?”
Elizabeth: “I believe you were saying something about an incentive.”

Monobear: “See, is it so hard to play ball with good ol’ Monobear? Haha! Yes, the incentive. In addition to getting to leave the mall, I’ll throw in a special prize to whoever can pull off a murder.”

Jenny: “What kind of prize?”

Monobear: “If you jackwagons would be quiet for four seconds I could hurry up and tell you. But no, you just have to interrupt your supervisor as often as you like; that’s not an annoying character trait at all! And that was sarcasm! Imagine if I had been trying to be sincere! You wouldn’t even be able to fathom those kinds of insults.”

Randolph: “Our apologies. We shall be quiet so that you may finish your piece.”

Monobear: “That’s two of ya that got a brain. Now this special prize is something even I would want, so you know it’s gotta be good. When you walk out of here, I’ll set you up in the fanciest mansion money can buy. You’ll have a house with a bowling alley, swimming pool, tennis court, three hot tubs, an electric fence, a hedge maze, an observatory, torture dungeon, and even a kitchen! You’ll be the envy of all your neighbors. Not to mention your palace will come with a plethora of servants to wait on you hand and foot. I’ll personally oversee the finances of the home, so you’ll never have to work another day in your life; you can live in luxury until your sad little lives come to an end. So, sounds pretty good, right?”

Randolph: “To indulge in excessive luxury makes an individual’s soul weak. It is better to live humbly than grandly.”

James: “I’ve already got a house like that in Hollywood. Don’t you have anything better?”

Elizabeth: “Mother wouldn’t want me to live anywhere other than the family estate.”

Francesca: “Why in the world would I need a house like that?”

Monobear: “Upu…”

Jenny: “I would no longer have to work…”

Markus: “Think of the parties I could throw…”

Lily: “My…my own house…”

Taylor: “Is it beachfront?”

Monobear: “I can construct it anywhere you like. Name the place, and it’s yours. I’ll even build on top of other people’s houses if we need to.”

Delilah: “That place would stick out like a sore thumb.”

Rufus: “It would have to have one impressive library, and even then…”

Austin: “I’m pretty much fine with anywhere, so that doesn’t appeal to much to me.”

Rico: “O-oh, I could finally move my family out of that broken-down shack.”

Monobear: “Anything you want, all you have to do is commit one eensy little murder.”

Cody: “I don’t spend time indoors, but if it’s on the beach, I dunno.”
Theo: “I couldn’t settle in one place for long; the wander-lust would take over.”

Jordan: “I think that would attract too much attention…or would it be secluded? I wonder…”

Melissa: “Oh, please! You think we’re that easy to persuade. We would never kill each other over some worldly possessions. It’s simply not worth it.”

Monobear: “Maybe not to you, but to someone else, it could change their entire life.”

Randolph: “Melissa has a point. There are very few reasons why someone should take another’s life, and this is certainly not one of them.”

James: “Still, I don’t like the idea being planted into people’s brains. Crap. This makes things complicated now.”

Monobear: “It’s not complicated; it’s simple. You kill someone, and you get to live in an elegant estate. Now, I’ll get out of your filthy hair so you can figure out how you’re going to do each other in. Monobear out!”

Francesca: “He disappeared again!”

Markus: “He just vanished!”

Cody: “What just happened?”

Taylor: “How is that possible?”

Lily: “That thing weirds me out…”

Rufus: “So, where are we at now?”

Theo: “Hmm?”

Rufus: “Obviously, we’ll all agree it’s a stupid reason to kill, because admitting it would make us seem suspicious. Nevertheless, we can’t ignore that someone may act upon Monobear’s invitation.”

Jordan: “We need to stay safe.”

Melissa: “Yes. Everybody, don’t lose your heads. We are better than this. Try not to think about what the bear said, and let’s continue as we have been. It’s just another day.”

The students mumbled amongst themselves. The news was weighing heavy on everyone’s minds. Excepting the Historian, the students’ appetites greatly diminished, and breakfast was soon adjourned. The students were now left to muffle through their own thoughts and the opinions of others.
It was the third day of captivity, and the weather outside continued to be sunny and pleasant. Taylor had enjoyed passing the time by soaking in the UV rays afforded to the food court. Despite the sun’s rays, the air conditioning in the mall kept her from really warming up. She would have loved to show off her body in her swimsuit, but it was just too cold for such a thing. She had been lying on her back previously, but today she was on her stomach since she had misplaced the pair of sunglasses she took from James.

Austin found her ability to do nothing for so long admirably inspirational. When she got into the zone, Taylor moved less than a corpse. Her breathing slowed down, and she became practically unresponsive to outside stimuli. Austin tried to emulate her devotion; he would become one with the inability of action.

Markus was wandering the mall looking for something to do when he came across Taylor and Austin not moving. His fidgety brain instantly jumped to the worst possible conclusion. He started to hyperventilate, but there was no one else around to assess the situation; he would have to do something! The Thespian slapped himself across the cheek to regain his composure—or instill false confidence—and approached the pair of dead bodies. If they had been alive, they surely would have noticed his presence. Markus was nearest Taylor, so he tentatively reached out a hand to test her pulse. His fingers were inches from her neck when her voice called out to him from beyond the grave: “Hands off, pal!”

Markus screamed and fell back in recoil. “G-g-ghost! M-m-murder!”

Her face still buried in her chair, Taylor responded, “What are you blabbering on about?”

“Ahh! I’m so sorry you’re dead! Wait, if you’re dead, then you know who murdered you, right? Tell me who it is and I’ll bring them to justice so you can have your peace. Please don’t haunt me!”

Taylor turned her head slightly so she could peer at Markus with one eye. “I’m not dead, you idiot. Have you never seen someone tan before?”

“W-w-what? You’re not dead!?! It’s a miracle! But w-wait, what about Austin? Is he dead, too?”

True to his title, Austin showed little initiative, even when doing something as mundane as tanning. The Idle had refused to set up a chair near Taylor; instead he had insisted on lying face-down on the floor near her. “No…I’m not dead…” said Austin into the ground.

Markus wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Oh, what a relief. I thought someone did you in while I had my back turned.”

Taylor continued to watch him expressionlessly. “Do you need something? I’m kind of in the middle of something here.”

“Not really. I was just seeing what everyone was up to.”

“Well now you know.” Taylor returned her face to the chair.

Markus was being ignored, and he wasn’t sure what to do about it. After a moment of awkward silence, Austin, unmoving, asked, “Is he still here?”
Taylor, also unmoving, replied, “How should I know? Just get off your butt and check.”

“But I’m not on my butt.”

“Your stomach then.”

“But that would require movement. Can’t you ask him if he’s still here?”

“I can’t; I’d get an uneven tan. If you want to know so badly, why don’t you ask him?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. Markus, are you still here?”

“Uhh, yeah, I’m still here.”

“Good. I want to know your opinion on something. What do you think about Jordan? She seems kind of shady, don’t you think?”

“Jordan? I wouldn’t really know. She mostly keeps to herself, doesn’t she?”

“That’s what I think is so shady about her. What’s she got to hide?” Austin yawned.

“Maybe she just hates all of us,” offered Taylor. “I wouldn’t blame her. You lot are pretty pathetic.”

“Sigh. Look who’s talking.”

“So quick on that, Fitzpatrick.”

“I speak my mind.”

“I can appreciate that. If I didn’t have standards, I’d consider dating you.”

“Likewise.”

Markus was confused. These two openly insulted each other, and yet there was no emotion in their voices. Where was their passion? Where was their soul? They may have been alive, but they sure acted as if they were dead inside. “Uhh…”

Austin yawned again. “Oh, Markus, I forgot you were there. Back to business. Jordan. When you look in her eyes, you can tell that she’s thinking about something. She has that calculating look to her.”

Markus was about to reply when Taylor cut him off. “Every girl is like that. We’re naturally discerning creatures; that’s why it’s so hard to please us.”

Markus’s initial fear had abated, and his stage-wit was resurfacing. “I’d like to get that in writing,” he said.

“Go stick a fork in your shorts,” came Taylor’s response.

“I’m just trying to figure out whom I should avoid now,” said Austin. “I wouldn’t be surprised if somebody acted upon Monobear’s incentive. I don’t think I’d mind it very much, but I would prefer not to get murdered sometime in the near future.”

Markus asked, “Who else do you think is suspicious?”
“Besides you?” added Taylor, directed at Markus. The Thespian’s face flashed red. “Kidding,” replied the Lucky.

Austin pondered the question for a moment. “Hmm…you know, Francesca also keeps to herself a lot. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was scheming up something.”

Markus’s face flushed red again, and, though he wasn’t quite sure why, his heart rate increased slightly. “Francesca? W-what about her is suspicious?”

“Just that she keeps to herself.”

“And she hasn’t been trying very hard to be a team player,” added Taylor. “Last night, Delilah gave a makeover to every one of us girls, except for Francesca, because she refused.”

“Really? Then why do you still look like such a train wreck?”

“Very funny, Fitzpatrick. Come up with that one all on your own?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

“Whatever. But believe you me, if anyone could have used one of those makeovers, it was Francesca.”

Markus felt like he should say something to defend Francesca, but he wasn’t sure what to say. The best he could come up with was “Did I ever tell you what I thought about Jordan?”

The two tanners were silent for a second. “I don’t think you did,” said Austin. “Or if you did, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“So, what do you think?” asked the girl.

Markus hadn’t anticipated the conversation being drawn back to him so quickly. He hadn’t thought of a valid response; he just wanted to steer the conversation away from the Tutor. He felt like a deer caught in headlights. He thought quickly and just said, “It’s always the quiet ones who’ll get ya.”

That answer must have been satisfactory, because the two lazybones had nothing to say in reply. Another round of awkward silence ensured, but Markus was okay with it now.

“Hmm…” pondered Austin aloud. “Markus, you got all fidgety when we brought up Francesca.”

Markus felt his face flush again. How could this kid tell that? He hadn’t even been looking at Markus! “I—err—I—uhh—”

Taylor raised her voice a little. “Ooh, do you have a thing for Francesca, Markus?”

“I don’t—I mean—that’s none of your business.” The idle teens giggled to themselves. “Oh yeah, well, what about you and Cody, huh, Taylor?”

“What about us?”

“We’ve all seen the way you ogle him.”

“It’s obvious, even to me,” added the Idle.
“Ugh, yeah it’s obvious to everyone except him. I swear, he’s denser than a sack of bricks. I’m not sure if I can be any more forward with him.”

Markus had intended to catch her off guard, but she didn’t seem to care what others thought about her. How noble.

“Yawn. Give him time; I’m sure he’ll come around. It’s a small mall.”

“He better. I really hate wasting my time.” Awkward silence. “Markus, are you still here? I can hear you breathing, and it’s distracting me from my tanning.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry that you’re still here. Go bother someone else.”

Austin, having continued to face the ground this entire time, simply said, “It’s been lovely talking to you.”

Markus wasn’t sure what to do for a second, but he turned and walked away in a daze. Markus thought that theatre kids were weird, but these two were strange and unpredictable. There was no knowing what they might do.

On the other side of the food court, two of the BFFs were sitting down to converse with the two most strapping boys. Theo sat across from Elizabeth, and Cody across from Lily. The set-up was ideal for a double date, except no one at the table had any romantic interest in anyone else at the table.

“Aren’t there usually three of you?” asked Cody.

Elizabeth tilted her head and smiled. “Jenny said she needed to go powder her nose. I’m sure she’ll be back any second.”

“Jenny gets lost very easily, but we always manage to find her, desu,” added Lily.

Theo raised an eyebrow. “It’s not a very big mall. I can’t imagine it’d be easy to get lost.”

“Some people can hit a baseball, and some just aren’t good with geography; it’s just the way people are,” replied Lily.

“So you guys are all pretty close then, huh?” asked Cody.

Elizabeth nodded politely. “Oh, yes. I believe our official title is ‘Best Friends Forever.’”

“Sugoi!”

Theo leaned back in his chair. “Then I don’t suppose any of you would be willing to murder, since getting away with it means dooming your friends.”

Elizabeth frowned and looked down. “The thought of killing someone is gruesome enough as it is… but the thought of losing Lily and Jenny? It is too much to bear.”

“Desu, I like everyone here; I could never hurt any of my friends!”

“Dudettes, you gotta admit that the house would be a pretty tubular place to hang.”
Elizabeth cocked her head to the side now; this was a most interesting conversation.
“Tubular?”

“Totally! You could have the sickest parties! You could trash the place, and then
Monobear would have to clean it up! Shaw, I could sleep in until noon everyday and still be able to
have breakfast. No worries, man.”

Theo closed his eyes in thought. “I’ve been to gatherings like that. They never ended
well…”

“That’s what makes ’em so killer! Dude, this one time, well, I don’t know exactly what
happened cuz I blacked out, but I was told I did some wicked stunts.”

Yet another fun colloquialism for Elizabeth; there were no wicked stunts in her textbooks.
“Oh? Do you know what kind of wicked stunts?”

“Like I said, my memory’s a black hole, but it had something to do with a skateboard, a
bowl of pudding, and a staircase.”

Theo looked uneasy. “I don’t want to hear any more about this. Lily, what would you do
with the house?”

“Nani? I hadn’t really thought about it. Hmm…if I had a house that big, I think I would
throw lots of parties, too.”

“Righteous!”

“And I would invite everyone in our class, and we’d play pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, and
tell scary stories, and eat lots of food. There’d have to be a ton of dancing, too, of course. And we’d
stay up late and not go to bed until like eleven!”

Cody’s initial enthusiasm at Lily’s idea was fading fast. “Like, eleven at night?”

Lily was ecstatic, however. “Yeah! I know, it’s crazy!”

Theo brought everyone back to Earth again. “You’d just have to kill for the house first.”

“Retasu, I know. I wouldn’t be able to kill for that, but it’s still fun to think about.”

Without invitation, Elizabeth gave her piece. “If I had the estate, I would turn it into my
own personal historian’s haven. I’d do all my research in quiet there, and I’d decorate it with
priceless artifacts and antiques collected from all over the world. I would have an entire room filled
only with decorative mirrors.”

Theo raised an eyebrow. “Why a room filled with mirrors?”

“So I can look at myself, of course. And after I die, it can be used as a museum for future historians
and archeologists alike to learn from.”

“That’s a, uhh, very noble cause you have,” said Theo.

“I’ve spent a lot of time studying the past, things that have already happened and are long
since over. As such, I’ve learned how to view the present through the eye of history to assess the
world around me. With any luck, I hope that future generations will be able to do the same. What
about you, Theo? You’re the only one who hasn’t said what they were going to do with the house.”
“Dude, I bet you’re going to fill the house with a huge map collection, or you’ll have it built on some tall mountain with an amazing view that only you know about.”

“No, no. We have a map of everything now. I’m sure he’ll make a grand ocean-side estate so he can start mapping out the ocean, desu.”

“Hmm, hmm. So, Theo, tell us.”

“I…I actually wouldn’t do any of that.”

“What?”

“Nani?”

“Oh?”

Theo turned to stare off into the distance. “There’s a tribe I met in central Africa. Real remote. Cody, you may remember the name: Uzuhli. Nicest people I’ve ever met. They’re also the poorest. I’d want the estate set up to provide for them.”

“Dude…”

“Daw, that’s so…so…kawaii.”

“Theo, that’s a wonderful idea.”

“I just wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I had to kill for their safety. I know they wouldn’t like it.”

Elizabeth scowled slightly. “Oh…yes…the killing part. I’d forgotten about that.”

“What a bummer. It’s a shame none of us will get to see that stuff happen.”

“Well, we could still have our parties, right? Yeah, definitely. Cody, you and I should totally plan a party for everyone! Yatta! We can have it tonight to warm everybody up!”

Cody was—to say the least—not interested in working with Lily’s idea of a “good time.” “That’s a totally rad idea, but I don’t think we could get the right supplies. We’ll have to wait until Monobear opens up a party store for us.”

“Oh…okay. We’ll just have to wait, then.”

Theo continued to look away. “Yes. All we can do now is wait…but wait for what exactly…?”

Jenny had once again managed to elude her “BFFs.” Everywhere she went, there they were. They were more omnipresent than certain intelligence agencies. She could never get a moment just to herself. Her current plan was to lock herself inside her room and pretend she didn’t exist until she could remember what her own thoughts sounded like.

She was hastily, stealthily moving through the mall. Before entering the dorm hallway, she turned back to make sure she had effectively given her agitators the slip; no one was following her. She quickly stole into the hallway and proceeded to her room. In her haste, she was not paying full attention to her surroundings and tripped over something lying across the floor. In mild confusion
and embarrassment, Jenny turned to see what had caused her misstep, and, to her surprise, she found Jordan staring blankly at her. Her back against the wall, Jordan was casually hanging out in the hallway; she didn’t even looked like she cared that she’d been trodden upon.

“S-sorry,” Jenny quickly stammered.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” came Jordan’s calm response.

“I, well, uhh—”

“You were trying to get away from Lily and Elizabeth, weren’t you?”

“Well, the thing is…yes…”

“Ha. Come sit and keep me company.” Jenny did as she was told. “Those two can be a little much, can’t they?”

Jenny was not sure what angle Jordan was trying to play, so the Sandwich Artist decided to play it safe. “Yes. They can talk quite a lot.”

“I’d use the word ‘loquacious’ to describe them.” Jenny merely nodded in accord. “You’re not talkative like they are.”

“No.”

“I like that. I only speak if I have something important to say; otherwise, I keep my mouth shut.”

“I understand.”

“No, really, I do not talk this much. But I feel that I can relate to you. I think we should be friends.”

“I am already friends with Lily and Elizabeth.”

“You can have more than one set of friends. This way you can talk to me about them and how they annoy you.”

“You are proposing an alliance?”

“No, I am proposing a friendship. We get along, you can’t ignore that.”

“It is true. I do not find your being obnoxious.”

“And that’s all the more you need.”

“Well then, friend, may I ask why you are sitting alone in an empty hallway?”

“Because I wanted to be alone. The people here can be so pushy. You know that.”

“But why in this hallway?”

“I needed a secluded place where I can be alone.”

“Then why not use your room? Have you lost your key? You can stay in my room if you are in need of a place to sleep.” Jenny was not sure why she had just offered her bedroom to a girl
she hardly knew. She really did not want Jordan staying with her, but she could not control what words came out of her mouth.

“No, I have my key. Thanks for the offer, though. It’s too quiet in my room."

“I am having trouble understanding. Do you want to be alone or with people?”

“Alone, mostly. But it’s dangerous to be completely alone, Jenny. I know this from experience. In the hallway, I can just barely make out the sounds of people in the food court. One needs to be reminded of humanity every now and again instead of being shut off by it.”

“That is a wise philosophy.”

“It’s served me well enough so far.”

“…you are not going to kill me, are you?”

“Not unless you plan to kill me first.”

“I do not.”

“Then it’s settled; we won’t kill each other.”

Jenny allowed herself to show a slight smile. She enjoyed talking to Jordan. The Golfer had a calming air to her, unlike Lily’s and Elizabeth’s boisterous attitudes. Although Jenny did enjoy solitude, it was nice to know that she wasn’t completely alone. The duo continued to sit in amiable silence, trading remarks every now and then in relative peace and comfort.
Chapter 1--The Beauties and the Beasts--Part 6

Francesca was browsing through the shelves of the General Store. She was looking for a cloth to polish her eyeglasses with, but the store’s selection was very limited. The store did have cloths, but the Tutor was afraid that they would be too harsh; it would be unwise to scratch her only pair of glasses. It seemed that Monobear had provided the same outfit several times over, but he neglected the accessories—even though James seemed to have an infinite supply of sunglasses at his disposal.

The store also had a strange display of hair-ties. Francesca had become adept at pulling her hair up with whatever utensils were at hand—a pencil being her trademark—but normal scrunchies were much easier to deal with. None of the items she came across appealed to her though; they were too colorful, too flashy. She could see Taylor or Lily wearing them, but not herself.

As for studying supplies, there were pencils and paper, but no notecards, highlighters, or whiteboards. Even if she was cooped up in this mall, Francesca wanted to keep her mind in agile shape. The others could let their minds degenerate, but not her! She’d dealt with harsher study environments, so she would just have to adapt and make due.

“Are you just going to wallow in here all day?” asked a voice from the entrance of the shop. Francesca jumped in started agitation; she had become lost in her own thoughts. She turned to see who called her, and there stood James the Movie Producer glaring at her. “I’ve been waiting for you to get your stuff and go for the past fifteen minutes,” he said. “Are you unable to make basic decisions, or do you want me to smell like one of you common pigs?”

“What on Earth are you talking about? If you need something, then just come in here and get it.”

“As if it was that simple! Is it really my fault that I hold myself to higher standards?”

“Are you going anywhere with this? Or can I go back to my shopping?”

“Just hurry up so I can get in here and do my shopping.”

“The store is big enough for more than one person; your shopping is not dependent on me.”

“Ugh, you just don’t understand. I don’t want other people to know what I’m buying.”

“What? Is that it? Eh, heh heh heh!”

“God, woman, is that horrendous screech really issuing from your mouth?”

“Heh, you gave me a good laugh!”

“What’s so funny? I’ve fired interns just for looking at me sideways!”

“That’s such a petty thing to be self-conscious about.”

“Hmph. Where I come from, it’s uncouth to even think about what goes on in a bathroom.”

“Oh please, we’re all human. I’ve tutored enough to know that not everybody has read Everybody Poops.”

“Urgh, that is exactly the kind of talk I wish to avoid.”
“Sweetie, you have nothing to be ashamed of. What even is it that you need? Maybe I can help you look for it.”

“Err, well, if you must know, I’m running low on deodorant…”

“This is only our third day…how can you be low on deodorant already?”

“The thought of offending someone with my physicality is such a repulsive thought, so I try hard to look—and consequently smell—my best at all times.”

“If you don’t want to offend people, try watching that sharp tongue of yours.”

“I said ‘with my physicality.’ I could care less if I insulted someone; it’s their fault for being so easily offended.”

“What a terrible thing to say!”

“It’s true, though. You can’t honestly tell me that some people’s stupidity has never vexed you. You’re a tutor for crying out loud; your vocation is to deal with stupid people.”

“They’re not stupid; they’re troubled. And no, I have never thought such a disgusting idea.”

“You would say that.”

“If you have something to say, boy, then say it.”

“Hmph. Just look at you: any girl who dresses like that has to think kindly of others.”

“After that remark, I’m not thinking too kindly of you.”

“Honestly. Did you rip that old thing out of your grandmother’s closet?”

“She only wore it a few times…”

“You’re out of touch with society. You work hard to bring everybody up to speed, but you don’t bother catching up yourself.”

“I…I don’t put any stock in vanity.”

“It’s not vanity; it’s the times. If I were you, I’d kill for that mansion. Then people might have a reason to respect you.”

“People respect me because I’m a decent human being.”

“No, they really don’t. I mean, I don’t anyway. Your get-up makes you seem pretentious and stuck-up, like you’re better than everyone else. A tutor’s a high position, and so that automatically puts you in a position to look down on others, and from my experience, people don’t take kindly to that.”

“But all you do is look down on people.”

“I never said it was good experience.”

“I didn’t realize I could rub people the wrong way…how would you suggest I work on this?”
“Tch, you’re already a hopeless case. Like I said, the best solution is for you to do somebody in and claim that prize.”

“I can put up with your vituperative demeanor, but how can you wish death upon one of our friends?”

“Listen, doll, I am probably the most anxious to kill here. I will do whatever it takes to escape this hellhole. But if Monobear’s offering this as an incentive this early in the game, then he’s got to have something grander planned for farther down the line. When I kill, I’m going to make sure it counts for something. In the meantime, I need other people to open up that avenue for me.”

“That’s…demented. Are you out of your mind?”

“What does it matter? I’m famous! When you’re famous, you can get away with anything.”

“I’ll…I’ll be keeping a close watch on you.”

“That’s what you say. Anyway, I’ve wasted enough time here today. If you’ll excuse me, I’m off to go put ideas in other people’s heads.” Without retrieving his toiletry, James left Francesca to mull over their conversation.

Fame…respect…notoriety…she would never fall for such entrapments. Francesca devoted her life to helping those in need; she didn’t need to raise herself onto a pedestal. But if she could improve her outward appearance to others, then they might be more willing to listen to her. Instead of a tutor, she could become a full-fledged teacher. Such noble goals couldn’t be contested…

Rufus sat in the Lounge, sipping a cup of coffee. It was quiet, and he could reason his way through the mess of suspects: who would kill for the house, and who wouldn’t. It was a puzzling list, since so many of his classmates could be hiding ulterior motives, especially the Liar. Randolph could secretly be plotting the demise of every student, or Lily could be hiding behind dark corners with knives in her hands. The only person he was certain wouldn’t kill was himself, but that didn’t bring him much comfort.

He sipped his coffee disdainfully; there was no creamer. Then there was the matter of his alliance. He was glad that he had gotten to Jordan early, but she was shifty. She kept her opinions to herself, and it was difficult to get a read on what she was thinking. He could try to be her partner, but he wouldn’t be quick to trust her. Melissa was problematic as well; what better candidate for the Liar? No matter how strongly she acted like the group’s leader, she was leading nobody. Rufus would sooner be a fool than follow her.

He leaned back and sipped his coffee again; it was an egregious brew. Rufus couldn’t quite say why, but he got a bad vibe from Taylor. If she truly possessed good luck as her talent, then she would be a difficult opponent to contend with. By the gifts of birth alone, she had an advantage in this game. Yes, a game. That’s precisely what this was: a game. Rufus enjoyed games, and he enjoyed winning games even moreso.

Rufus was taking another unpleasant sip of his caffeinated concoction when Rico entered the Lounge. The Marathon Runner made a face when he saw Rufus; he certainly hadn’t expected the Latinist to be here. “Yo-o. Wassup?”

“Salve.”
“Is it just you in here?”

“It is.”

“I see…”

“I take it that I am not whom you are looking for?”

“What? Whoever said I was looking for someone?”

“Well, you certainly aren’t acting like you intended to chat with me.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just…I was looking for someone specific.”

“You’ve come this far. Tell me who it is; maybe I know where they are.”

“It’s, err, Taylor.”

“Oh…her…”

“Have you seen her?”

“Minime, I know not where she is. Why are you bothering yourself with that girl in the first place?”

“We sorta started out poorly, so I was gonna see if we could try over. Start fresh, ya know.”

“Don’t waste your time with her; she isn’t worth it.”

“She isn’t? How come?”

“She’s a brat. A spoiled brat. She doesn’t belong in a class of super-talented students. You’re better than she is.”

“You think so?”

“Indeed.”

“Shoot. I don’t know where I went wrong, though. I was just trying to impress her with one of my stories, and she turned on me…”

“You tried what now? This wouldn’t be one of your stories like you told at the open mic night, by chance, would it?”

“Yeah! I’ve got a load of ’em! You wanna hear one?”

“No no, that’s not necessary. Listen, there’s a certain…art to storytelling; Homer would recite the Iliad and Odyssey from memory. Taylor has a very…refined sense of taste when it comes to the oral tradition, and she simply doesn’t…appreciate your modern ability to spin a yarn.”

“But I’m not spinning yarn; I’m telling stories. But whatever. Hey, if you know so much about storytelling, do ya think ya could teach me a thing or two? So I’d be a better speaker!”

“You want my help to teach you with something? Why, I’m honored. Of course I’ll help you; it’ll be my pleasure.”

“A-ah! Thanks, man!”
“What’s all the ruckus?” asked Delilah standing shortly behind Rico in the Lounge entrance.

“Salve, umm, Desiree. What brings you here?”

“Delilah. I was tendin’ the Salon when I heard a commotion comin’ from next door, so I thought I’d see what’s goin’ on.”

“Yo-o! We’re just talking. You can join us if you like.”

“Well, hun, that depends. What’re alla yins talkin’ about?”

“Uhh, nothing…” Rico was slightly embarrassed to reveal the nature of their conversation.

Rufus managed to slip in the truth without giving Rico up. “We were discussing the behavior of some of our classmates.”

“Shoot, gossip? Why didn’t you say so earlier? Move over, hun, I wanna sit for this.”

“We were discussing Taylor most recently. What is your opinion of her…Daisy?”


“Whoa-oa, you came up with that answer pretty fast.”

“Darlin’, when you’ve been a hairdresser for as long as I have, you figure out how to read people pretty quickly. There’s only so many types of women who come to get their hair did.”

“Daria, that’s a remarkable ability you have.”

“My name is ‘Delilah.’ And shucks, hun, it’s nothin’. Now what else ya got for me?”

Rico scratched the back of his head. “Well, we haven’t really gotten very far—”

“What do you think of Jordan?”

“The black girl? She’s a real quiet one, she is. Not very excitable. So long as nobody provokes her, she won’t harm a fly.”

“Hmm…”

“I think she’s nice, I mean, she’s never said anything mean to me.”

“Rico, has the girl even said anythin’ to ya?”

“Well now that you mention it…”

“Darcy…? You, what impression do you get from…what’s his name? The boy with the canteen.”

“Theo? Sugar, I haven’t cut his hair yet, so I wouldn’t know.”

“O-oh? You have to cut their hair to use your superpower?”

“I just need some alone time to get a good feel for ’em, and that usually happens while I’ve got scissors to their skull.”
“That’s still a remarkable talent. I’d love to pick your brain some more later.”

“That’s still a remarkable talent. I’d love to pick your brain some more later.”

“That’s still a remarkable talent. I’d love to pick your brain some more later.”

“Anytime, darlin’. Just holler if ya need me. Now I’ve wasted enough time talkin’ about my clients behind their backs. I’m gonna head back to the Salon now. I think I’ll grab a cup of coffee first, though.” Delilah’s words didn’t quite sink into Rufus until it was too late. She poured herself a cup and was bringing it to her mouth. Rufus wanted to cry out not to drink the putrid coffee, but his voice was dry. Despite the Latinist’s silent protestations, Delilah took a hearty swig. She smiled. “Now that is one fine cup o’ joe.”

Randolph meditated while listening to the soft tussling sounds of the Laundromat. It was peaceful in this realm of laundry, and it gave him time to reflect on the universe. He did have a specific reason for being here, though. Taylor had asked him to do her laundry for her; she was much too busy to attend to it herself. Randolph wondered how she had accumulated so much dirty laundry in the space of three days, and her reply was that if she didn’t change her clothes frequently, then she’d be no better than a common hillbilly. Unable to turn down a simple request, Randolph agreed on one condition: he would not launder her undergarments. She was fine with that condition, since it would be creepy if he had earnestly wanted to.

While the clothes tumbled, he could concentrate on his meditation, which meant concentrating on nothing and everything at once. He could feel the spirit of his classmates, and it was a palpably strong spirit. This was a good thing, but it was also bad; on the one hand, they possessed the will to do good, but on the other hand, they contained the ambition to do evil. As it stood, the moral scale could tip in either side’s favor. It was Randolph’s belief that the side of Hope would prevail over Despair, but only time would provide the answer.

The washing machine dinged, and Randolph was woken from his trance. He took Taylor’s clothes from the washer and delicately placed them in the dryer. He added an extra dryer sheet into the machine to make Taylor’s clothes smell even fresher; he thought she would like that. Before he could return to his meditation, another girl needed the Monk’s attention.

Melissa Davis was once again spending her time by keeping tabs on her classmates. She was their leader, so it was important that she knew what they were doing at all times. And with the introduction of Monobear’s incentive, it was of even greater importance; she wasn’t going to lose anybody in this mall. She couldn’t lose anyone—not again.

“There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you,” said the Politician.

“Ahh, Melissa, it is so good to see you,” replied the Monk, stepping forth to shake her hand.

“I came to check up on you, make sure you were okay.”

“Oh, thank you for your concern. I am fine.”

“I don’t doubt that. I just want to make sure you aren’t planning on taking Monobear’s incentive to heart.”

“No, I could never harm someone; that would go against the monastic code.”

“Err, what order do you belong to?”

“It’s a newer order, with an emphasis on spreading the gifts of the true nature of the universe to the world’s inhabitants. I don’t think you’d be familiar with our name.”
“I suppose you’re right. But, uhh, are you really doing laundry on our third day here?”

“It is not my own. The clothing belongs to Miss Taylor.”

“O-oh?”

“You seem confused. Would you like for me to launder your clothes as well?”

“No, I’m perfectly capable of cleaning my own clothes, thank you. I’m just not sure why you’re doing someone else’s laundry.”

“Because she asked me.”

“Oh? Would you murder someone if you were asked?”

“Melissa, there are limits to what I’ll agree to do.”

“Good to hear…”

“Is something the matter?”

“What? No…”

“You look awfully tired.”

“I haven’t slept well the past two nights. It’s been a lot to take in all at once, and I’m just trying to keep us all together.”

“And you are doing a splendid job at that.”

“I’m not so sure. Most of the people I’m not worried about, but that James bothers me.”

“He’s a real stick in the mud.”

“Exactly. He’s not good for the morale of the group.”

“Neither is worrying about things that are out of your control.”

“Hmm…I suppose…”

“If you’re interested, I know a trick to help with falling asleep at night.”

“I doubt it’ll do anything for me, but it’s worth a shot. What is it?”

“Clear your mind of everything that vexes you. Let yourself succumb to your surroundings and commune with the universe around you. In that peaceful state, your body will relax itself into slumber.”

“That sounds wonderful, truly, but I don’t do relaxation. I’m used to high-energy environments. Heck, I practically eat stress for breakfast.”

“Stress is full of empty calories.”

“Thanks, I’ll have to remember that one.”

“Monks often have surprisingly good senses of humor.”
“You learn something new everyday. Speaking of monks, you’re pretty good with figuring out the truth of stuff, right?”

“I don’t intend to boast, but I have had experience in that particular area.”

“Then what are your thoughts on who the liar in our group is? Who isn’t being one-hundred percent truthful?”

“Melissa, I would never question the motives of my friends. To believe that any of them would be trying to deceive me…that is rude and distrustful on my part.”

“I’m sorry, I was only curious.”

“I understand that, but you mustn’t let yourself get carried away by Monobear’s negative ploys and inventions. You are better than that.”

“Thank you, Randolph. That makes me feel a little better about our situation.”

“That is one of the many reasons why I’m here.”

“Well, I should head out and check on how the others are doing.”

“I will see you later, then. And remember, if you ever need to discuss something, I am always open to conversation.”
By the time lunch rolled around, the festive airs from the previous night had evaporated. Everyone’s thoughts were consumed by Monobear’s incentive. Midday became the afternoon, and the afternoon transformed into the evening, but no passing of time improved the students’ demeanor. Their minds were sullied and heavied with the fear of the unknown.

Melissa Davis, All-Star Politician, erased all thoughts of the house from her mind. Her career would be destroyed if such a scandal were made public, and the best way to avoid the scandal was to avoid the cause. As the leader, it was her duty to keep everyone alive. What kind of example would she be leaving if she fell to those dark desires? She would abide no death.

Austin Fitzpatrick, All-Star Idle, figured he would be happy with a grand, luxurious mansion or without. So long as the bed was comfortable, he didn’t care too much where he stayed. He was no Gatsby; he didn’t need a house to show off. A quiet, secluded house, however, would give him the peace to enjoy his ennui, and there would be no meddlesome neighbors to try to galvanize him to action.

Delilah MacDonald, All-Star Cosmetologist, could see her dream estate in her mind’s eye. The palatial structure would overtower all nearby buildings, and she would rest at the very top. Every person all over creation would be able to see her brilliance and recognize the lovely figure of Delilah MacDonald. She would lie in luxury and have everything she ever wanted. But only in her dreams.

Cody Cameron, All-Star Waterskier, could just imagine how off the charts the parties he would throw would be. They’d be so fun, he’d completely forget the lame situation he was currently in. He’d be the most popular dude in the whole world. And with every sick party comes hot chicks. He’d be king of the world if he could get his hands on that house.

Jenny Zemenovski, All-Star Sandwich Artist, imagined the impracticality of having a large estate. It would be too flashy and precocious, not fitting for a humble sandwich maker. Jenny had had very little experience with forms of wealth, so she had trouble imagining the mansion as something enjoyable. She’d never been in a position where she was free to want something, and so this vision was not coming easily to her.

Rico de Naranjas, All-Star Marathon Runner, wondered what it would be like to have a big house. Growing up, he’d had to share a room with his brothers, and he never really had much he could call his own. He took up running because it was a cheap sport to take up. But to have money? The possibilities of what he could do seemed endless; he would have things he could call his own. But he still wasn’t sure if he would ultimately enjoy that.

Jordan Koulibagh, All-Star Golfer, dismissed the idea of owning the house. She would surely find a way to enjoy it, but for no palpable reason, there would be people who criticized her for it. She’d had enough trivial bickering to last her a lifetime; the last thing she wanted was more attention. Nevertheless, she needed to stay on top of things so that the killers could never get the upper hand. To her, it wasn’t so much a question of when, but a question of who.

Randolph Luther, All-Star Monk, continued to pray heartily for the well-being of his peers. He had seen what kind of devastation can come from desperation. The students were being tested, and they had the strength to pass, but the Monk’s fear was that someone would cheat and take the easy way out.
Francesca Maysworth, All-Star Tutor, could not get James’s meddling words out of her head. To kill for such shallow prestige was a ridiculous notion, but it did have a certain allure to it that she couldn’t ignore. She knew that she was a stronger person than this, and the fact that she even considered the idea was troubling to her. No, it was absolutely out of the question.

Theo Cook, All-Star Cartographer, kept thinking about the Uzuhli people. In one of his greatest times of need, they had cared for him, and he had never been able to properly return the favor. Ever since that day, they’d been in his thoughts. He’d do anything for them, but was this really the way to repay their kindness? He would be sure to make things up to them, but in due time.

Taylor Erzen, All-Star Lucky, wanted that mansion—nay—she needed that mansion. Her destiny was to be an heiress with all the world to wait on her hand and foot. For her, it was a dream come true, and no one can stand between a girl and her dreams. And Taylor had a knack for getting whatever she wanted; this little perk came from her title.

Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist, couldn’t care less about the house. A house was just a place to go to at the end of the day. Nothing special. Rufus was a simple person, and an overly ornate estate did not appeal to him. He was sure that it would appeal to someone else, though. He had his suspicions, but he kept those to himself.

Lily Smith, All-Star Kawaii, thought less about throwing a party in her possible mansion, and instead focused on throwing an awesome party in the mall. Obviously, they’d use the food court. Or maybe the Lounge since it had a mic stand. But the Lounge would get crowded. And they’d have to find better food somehow. This planning was becoming complicated; it’d be much easier if she had that house.

Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian, was worried that someone might kill for the mansion. He would love to have a grand estate, to throw parties for the most talented performers in the business. He’d have the funds to put on as many and whatever productions he wanted; he’d be an A-list celebrity for sure. But no matter how much the vision appealed to him, he didn’t think he had it in him to kill one of his classmates. He’d killed actors onstage before, of course, but that was all pretend. In the mall, this was real.

Elizabeth Barrington, All-Star Historian, fantasized about her dream museum. Her parents’ home was grand enough, but it was just a fancy home. Elizabeth wanted her name to go down in history for her grand accomplishment and contribution to history; she wanted a mansion she could name. She wanted her palace to be as famous as the Monticello, Mount Vernon, or Montpelier. She wanted, wanted, wanted, and she would not be content with that feeling alone.

James Beck, All-Star Movie Producer, could only wait for someone to murder. He had spent his day in the hope of inciting someone to give in to their odious thoughts. As he had told all whom he came across, he certainly wouldn’t be doing any killing, and so it was up to them to move the game forward.

The third night passed into the fourth day. The fifteen students woke and, as usual, headed to the food court. It wasn’t long before the presence of a missing individual was felt. Panic rose quickly among the group. Had their worst fears been actualized? Before beginning their meal, it was decided that it would be best to ascertain the whereabouts of the missing party. Students were dispatched to the dorms to knock on the missing person’s door, but there was no answer from within. Soon, the entire class was searching the mall. As they searched, no one dared to say a word, for what everyone wanted to say was taboo.
Amidst the abject silence, a cry echoed through the corridors of the mall. A quick, short cry of terror and alarm. In the backs of everyone’s minds, they knew what that cry meant, but they could not acknowledge its meaning. Slowly, and with heavy, fear-laden footsteps, the students drew to the source of the cry.

The cry came from the first to stumble upon the hair Salon. The scene was impossible to comprehend, and the body’s natural response was to shout out in confusion. The Salon was now a sacred, haunted place; no one could step inside lest they upset the preternatural quality of the place. After a crowd has gathered at the Salon’s entrance, Monobear issued an announcement over the PA system.

“Attention, you pinheads. A dead body has been found. Begin your investigations, because the school trial will be held shortly.”

Soon, every remaining member of the class had congregated to the Salon. The dismayed and distraught students stared at the awful scene before them. Propped up in a Salon chair was the dead body of Success Summit’s All-Star Tutor, Francesca Maysworth.
Abnormal Days

Her body was propped under one of the domed chairs so that the top of her head was hidden from view. Her head was drooped to the one side, and a pair of sunglasses obscured her eyes. The pencil that tied her hair together was smashed into two perfectly identical pieces on the ground at her feet near a pair of scissors with blood on the blades; her hair fell lightly past her shoulders. Her arms rested palm-up on the chair handles, a pool of blood in her right hand, a puddle in the left. Cuts had been made on her wrists and palms. In death, she looked calm.

The fifteen students continued to stand in the doorway, but as if struck by a burst of energy, the reality of the situation sunk in, and they began to react. Tears welled up in Markus’s eyes, and—not wanting the others to see him cry—he fled the scene. Randolph knelt down on the ground and began to pray for his fallen friend. Cody’s ubiquitous smile vanished; Rico had to look the other way.

The BFFs had been the last to gather, and so they had to push their way to the front of the crowd to get a better look. Upon seeing the body, Lily began crying hysterically, Jenny fainted, and Elizabeth looked mildly shocked. The Historian thought it best to get Lily out of the area, so she had the Kawaii help her move Jenny’s body to the Laundromat for some quiet.

Melissa, Jordan, Rufus, and Theo were able to keep their composure for the most part. Melissa desperately desired to sit and think, but she needed to be strong for everyone else’s sake. Jordan and Rufus had been anticipating the murder, so now that the possible was actual, they could easily accept it. Theo had seen worse events transpire, but this sight still hurt.

The others weren’t as pensive. Delilah was shouting about the atrocity that occurred in her Salon. How dare someone defile such a positive, feel-good space! James was smug; it looks like he’d gotten to someone after all. Taylor and Austin were of the opinion that if someone had to have died, Francesca wasn’t such a bad choice; she was obnoxiously self-important, antisocial, and had a superiority complex.

“N-now what?” asked Rico tentatively.

Melissa was at a loss for words. “Well, we, uhh…”

“We search for clues,” said Rufus firmly.

“W-what kind of clues?” asked Rico again.

“Anything that will help us discover the killer’s identity.”

“This is my Salon! I ain’t about to let you hoodlums rub your grubby little fingers all over my beauty supplies; I ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

Jordan was discontent. “And how do we know you won’t mess with the crime scene?”

“Because I’ll guard the body with her,” said Cody. “Trust me, I’m more useful this way.”

Now Rufus was discontent. “This leaves a lot of people milling about one area impatiently. Too many cooks in the kitchen…”
Taylor put her hands on her hips. “Then what do you expect us to do? The crime scene’s right here! What other place is there to investigate?”

Theo replied, “We don’t know for sure that everything happened in the Salon. We need to do a comprehensive search of the entire mall to make sure nothing is overlooked.”

“Excellent explanation, Theo!” said Melissa, putting on airs. “Taylor and James, you look over the dorm area. Rico, search the Lounge. And Austin, check out the General Store. Randolph, why don’t you make sure Markus, Lily, and Jenny are alright?” No one felt like fighting with the Politician, so they did as they were told, thus leaving Cody, Delilah, Rufus, Jordan, Theo, and Melissa herself in the Salon with Francesca.

“Who’s going to inspect the body?” asked Jordan. The question was simple enough, but no one was overly enthusiastic to get up close and personal with the corpse.

“I ain’t layin’ a finger on the body; I don’t frisk people,” said Delilah.

“Dude, it just ain’t right…” offered Cody.

“I… I would prefer not to,” said Melissa.

“It’s just a dead body; it’s not like she’s going to jump out and attack us,” dixit Rufus.

“If you need me to, I suppose I can,” came Jordan’s response.

“I’ll do it,” volunteered Theo. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I have no aversion to touching a dead body.”

“Then it’s settled,” finalized Melissa.

Delilah and Cody stood back to give everybody room to work. Melissa and Jordan looked over the Salon while Theo investigated the body, Rufus peering over his shoulder.

“There are cuts on both palms and wrists.”

“That seems a bit excessive. How deep are they?”

“Not very. I’m guessing they were done by a thin blade of some kind.”

“Then I’d have to say that the bloodied scissors on the ground are responsible.”

“I’m not in a position to contradict that.”

“The scissors, though, they’re… left-handed scissors, aren’t they? Yes, you can see the little L on the side, here. Millicent, would you come here for a moment?” Naturally, no one responded. “Ecce! You with the red hair! Veni!”

Melissa strode over to the boys. “What is it? Did you find something?”

“These scissors were made for a left-handed individual, and, as I’m sure you’re aware, not too many people in our society claim manus sinistra as their dominant hand.”

“Are you going somewhere with this?”

“Would you be so kind as to find out who is and isn’t left-handed?”
“Is that information really necessary? I’d rather focus my attentions here.”

“I have a feeling it just might be. Don’t worry, we can handle things here.”

“Oh, alright.” Before heading out, Melissa made sure to interrogate everyone in the Salon: Rufus, Jordan, Cody, Delilah, and herself were right-handed, while Theo was a lefty.

Theo continued his inspection of the body. There were no markings of interest on her lower body, so he moved toward her head. The pencil in her hair had fallen out, but her pearl necklace was still intact. Theo looked closely at the necklace, and he found some dried blood on the backs of the pearls touching the front of her neck; the blood was hidden from view and could only be seen by someone trying to look for it.

The sunglasses were obscuring most of Francesca’s face, and so Theo delicately removed them. Rufus was shocked to see several small, jagged cuts circling her eyes; these cuts were too small and haphazard to have been deliberately construed by a blade. Thankfully, her eyes were closed. Theo next lifted up her bangs, and he found a large, dark bruise covering the center of her forehead. Judging by the size and discoloration, whatever Francesca hit must have hurt.

While the boys contemplated the Tutor’s visage, Jordan was busily examining the layout of the Salon. She wasn’t an expert on beauty parlors, but the space was consummately organized. If there was something out of place, then it was either very small or expertly hidden. As such, Jordan was having difficulty finding any evidence that would incriminate one of her classmates. Though she was loath to ask for help, Jordan needed a second set of eyes.

“Delilah,” started the Golfer, “I think you can help me.”

“Sure. Whadya need, shug?”

“I can’t tell, but is there anything amiss with the Salon?”

“Whadya mean ‘amiss?’ I keep my Salon in tip-top shape.”

“My point exactly. Is there anything out of place? Anything that the killer did or left behind that makes the Salon, well, different.”

“I’ve spent enough time in here to know this place like the back of my finely manicured hand. I would know if there was somethin’ wrong; I’d feel it naggin’ me at the back of my mind. The only thing out of place here is…Frannie.”

Jordan looked around the Salon once more; it looked as refined as the night everyone had received makeovers.

Cody was growing anxious watching the others work. He didn’t like that Rufus and Theo kept whispering to each other while pointing at the body. Finally, he had had enough of their secrecy and joined their small group.

“You guys have been at this long enough! Have you figured out who did it yet?”

Rufus glared at Cody’s interruption. “That is what we are trying to figure out. There is a lot we don’t know, and I can’t see how we will know.”

“What do you mean? You’re not giving up hope already, are you, man?”

“Nonsense, stulte. We’re missing more arcane things, like the time of death. You aren’t a
licensed coroner by any chance?"

‘fraid not.”

“Perhaps Monobear can assist us. He does have cameras watching every inch of the mall,” offered Theo.

“Did somebody call for me?” Monobear, as always, suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

“Ah, yes, we were wondering if you could answer some questions for us.”

“Upu, that depends. I can’t spoil the fun of solving the mystery for you pains-in-the-butt. Now spit it out! What do you want? I’m a very busy bear!”

“Audi, we want to know what Francesca’s time of death was.”

“Why didn’t you just say so? You idiots would be lost without me. If it’s info you want, it’s info I’ve got. All you’ve got to do is say the magic word!”

“Dude, like, please.”

“Ta-dah! I present to you the indispensable Monobear File 1, complete with all your diagnostic reports on today’s most groundbreaking incident. Enjoy!”

Rufus skimmed over the report’s information. “This is just what we needed. Why didn’t you give this to us sooner?”

“Upu, I wanted to see what you would come up with on your own.”

“Hey, man, lemme get a look at it!”

“Don’t fight, children. Or at least wait until the trial’s over. I’ve got enough Monobear Files for everyone, so don’t be stingy.”

Rufus was annoyed that Monobear had been withholding information from them. “Lousy bear. Give us these sooner next time so we don’t waste precious time.”

“Don’t be so flippant, you little prick! You don’t want to know what happens to those who cross the great Monobear!”

Theo intervened. “Thank you very much, Monobear. We are grateful for your gift. Would you mind sharing your gift with our friends so that nobody feels left out?”

“I would be honored to oblige an upstanding young citizen who knows how to treat his superiors! Sayonara, suckers.” And as mysteriously as he had appeared, Monobear once again disappeared.

Rufus began to read the file earnestly. “That lousy bear…this thing barely tells us anything we didn’t already figure out! ‘Victim suffered cuts on the left and right palms and wrists, as well as smaller cuts around the eyes. There is evidence of trauma to the front of the skull.’ Useless! What a waste of time!”

“Does it give the time of death we’ve been searching for?” asked Cody thoughtfully.

“Oh, it does. ‘Time of death: 10:45 p.m.’”
“Jesus, man, while we were all sleeping. I mean, we do all go to bed at Night Time, and that is ten o’clock.”

“Apparently, not all of us. Oh, and this is interesting. ‘Cause of death: dubious.’”

Lily had cried herself into a half-asleep stupor. She couldn’t bear to think that one of her friends was dead, or that one of her friends was responsible for the crime. She was thankful that Elizabeth was staying strong for the two/three of them. Lily desperately wanted Jenny to wake up so that she could have someone else to talk to, but the Sandwich Artist was out cold.

Randolph had passed by to check on all the girls, and they told him that they were managing to get by. He remarked that he had not expected to visit the Laundromat so soon since he had spent the previous evening until Night Time doing laundry. It was comforting that the others still cared, but the murder messed with the dynamic of the group; who was to be trusted?

Elizabeth left Lily to care for Jenny until she woke up. Elizabeth was getting worried that Lily’s eyes would not stop running, so she searched the Laundromat for something to mop up the Kawaii’s face with. The Laundromat was pristine, though, and there wasn’t a spare tissue to be found. Elizabeth was growing desperate, and she was willing to settle for some lint from one of the dryers. It was while she was searching for the minimal essence of absorbency that she came across something peculiar.

“Lily, would you come here for a moment?”

“W-w-what about Jenny?”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine by herself for a few seconds.”

“O-okay, if you’re sure. What is it?”

“Look at what I found in this dryer. Isn’t it neat?”

“I-it’s just a w-washcloth.”

“Yes, but it’s pink.”

“So?”

“I’ve never seen a pink washcloth. Well, here, anyway. All the washcloths in my room are white, and I believe the ones in the Salon are white as well.”

“N-now that you mention it, a-all the washcloths in my room are white too.”

“Then how did we end up with a pink one?”

“I don’t claim to be an expert on laundry—”

“You know more than me.”

“When you mix white clothes with colored clothes, the color b-bleeds into the white.”

“So what you’re telling me, is that someone laundered this washcloth with something pink?”
“It’s more likely that it was with something red.”

“And if we all have the same sets of clothes…who here wears red?”

“Err, well, Jenny does, desu.”

“I mean besides her, obviously.”

“Well, Markus has that red button-down, and Delilah has that red blouse.”

“Doesn’t Theo have a red shirt?”

“It’s more like a maroon, I think. I don’t think it would stain a washcloth pink.”

“Oh…my head…”

“Jenny! Sugoi, you’re awake!”

Jenny’s head was throbbing. The one minute she was standing outside the Salon, and the next she’s staring up at the Laundromat ceiling. She barely had time to revel in her consciousness before Lily and Elizabeth were on top of her. Lily was crying for an entirely different reason now.

“Jenny! Tomodachi-chan, w-we were so worried about you.”

“Jenny, my dear, you took quite the tumble. Are you feeling alright?”

“Ugh, I will be, thank you.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what in the heavens happened back there?”

“It is embarrassing, but I do not, umm, like blood. I cannot even look at it.”

“Jenny-chan, that is nothing! I was afraid of the dark all the way until last summer.”

“And I can’t stand being near cacti; you have nothing to be ashamed of. Now put a smile back on that face.”

“I feel like smiling would be rude in the wake of recent events, but, umm, thank you; I mean it.”

Randolph rapped lightly on Markus’s door.

“Go away! I want to be alone!”

“Master Markus, it is I, Randolph. I came to check on your well-being.”

“I’m fine! Now go away!”

“Markus, I can sense that you are upset. Would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t want to talk to anyone. Leave me alone!”

“Markus, I’ll take a monk’s oath not to tell anyone.”

“I said ‘go away!’”
“Markus! Still your hostility. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re going to be there all day, then.”

“All the more time for me to meditate before the trial. You got Monobear’s file, I presume.”

“So what if I did?”

“Do you not want to get to the bottom of Francesca’s death?” Silence. “I thought that you of all people would be trying to figure out what happened.”

“W-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means precisely what you want it to mean.”

Markus opened the door a crack. “Monk’s oath?”

“Monk’s oath and scout’s honor.”

Markus stepped out of his room. “I… I went to see Francesca last night.” Randolph wanted to express interest at Markus’s strange confession, but he repressed himself, for the Thespian’s sake. “But it’s not what you think!”

“What is it, then?”

“Okay, so maybe it is what you think. I couldn’t get to sleep last night. I kept thinking about how everyone was acting after Monobear’s big announcement, and I was starting to feel really anxious. So I went to see Francesca to calm my nerves.”

“And what did she say?”

“I went to her room and knocked, but there was no answer. I just figured that she was a heavy sleeper and couldn’t hear my knocks, but looking at the Monobear File, I don’t think that’s the case.”

“And why is that?”

“I went to her room around 10:30. I hung around for probably another thirty minutes in case she woke up or something… If she died fifteen minutes after I got there… then there’s no way she was in her room.”

“I see. That is most troubling.”

“If I had only gone to her a few minutes earlier, maybe I would have caught her before she left and saved her from… that…”

“Forgive me for playing the devil’s advocate, but do you have a way to corroborate your story?”

“Do I what? No! It was Night Time, everybody should have been asleep.”

“You didn’t see or hear anyone else in the hallway?”

“Err, no, I didn’t. And I’d know if I had; the hallway has some serious echo.”
“Ha ha, I have noticed this phenomenon while chanting some of my mantras.”

“It’s my fault that Francesca’s gone…”

“Markus, you musn’t blame yourself for matters beyond your control.”

“I just hope we catch the sick son of a bitch.”

“Markus! Your language! Remember that this is one of our friends we’re talking about.”

“Fine. I can’t wait to single out that carcass fit for hounds.”

Monobear’s voice now rang out over the PA system. “Attention, vermin. I’ve decided that you’ve had long enough to conduct your investigation. Move your sorry butts over to the food court and we’ll get this trial under way.”

All the color flushed from Markus’s face; he was not ready for a school trial.

“We had better hurry,” said Randolph. “I do not think it would be a wise decision to keep Mister Monobear waiting.”

The Salon gang were the first to reach the food court. Once Melissa arrived, she cornered Rufus and Jordan. The trio huddled together while the stragglers straggled in.

Melissa started. “I went around and talked to everybody. Besides Theo, the only other lefties are Taylor and James, although Markus claims to be ambidextrous.”

Rufus pondered this for a moment. “Hmm…that’s interesting.”

Jordan was skeptical. “Does that prove anything?”

“Not yet…Apol! I need more time!”

Melissa gave Rufus a stern look. “Well you don’t have more time! We need to pool our information so we can figure this out.”

Jordan shook her head. “Look who all is here already. We don’t have the time to figure out everything.”

Rufus sighed. “We’re just going to have to piece things together during the trial.”

The Politician was relentless. “We’ll just have to be quick then. What’s the most pressing matter on your minds? You have five seconds.”

Jordan looked off to study the faces of her classmates. “Something about the crime scene is bothering me, but I don’t know what.”

Rufus closed his eyes in serious contemplation. “And I’m having difficulty fathoming the cause of death.”

Melissa cocked her head. “Great. At least we have somewhere to start.”

Jordan shifted her feet uneasily. “Everyone’s here. It’s suspicious that we’re all together. Let’s disband for now.”
The Politician and her advisers left to mingle amongst the other twelve students. Before long, Monobear appeared sitting on his spot on the fountain.

“I’m so glad you brats made it. That was a lie! Could you tell? I was hoping I would get to hunt down at least one of you. Oh well, there’s always more time for games later. Let’s get down to business. I bet you all can’t wait to single out the murderer. I wonder who it could be. Of course, I already know, but it would be no fun if I accidentally gave the answer away. Now, get in the elevator, and we’ll head to the trial room.”

On Theo’s best map of the mall, there was not a single elevator. Jordan stared blankly at the robotic bear. “What elevator?”

“Upupu…this elevator!” Monobear jumped off his pedestal, and the fountain began to drain. There was a loud bang, and the fountain began to rise. As it ascended, it became obvious that Monobear’s elevator was pushing the fountain up into the air. The elevator was a perfectly square elevator, no frills or thrills. Once it reached the top of its track, the doors creaked open. The students gave each other uncertain glances before loading into the elevator.

Once all fifteen were safely inside the vehicle, the doors groaned shut, and the elevator slowly began its descent. Everyone’s mind was racing, and the arcane silence filled the dumbwaiter. The ride seemed to last forever, but eventually the ground shifted into place, and the doors opened. The students stepped into a grandly lit room with luxurious carpet and wallpaper. It didn’t look like anything else in the mall.

Monobear, who had stayed in the food court, somehow appeared before the students. “Welcome to the trial room! Here you’ll debate the death of your friend to your hearts’ content, and then you’ll vote on who you think the killer is. Simple, right? Just remember, if the murderer is voted out, the rest of you get to live. Guess wrong, and the murderer will be the only one breathing tonight. Now stop wasting time and get into position!”

Monobear motioned to the circle of podiums in the center of the room. There were sixteen podiums arranged in a circle, one for each student, and at the head of the circle was a throne for Monobear to watch the proceedings from. Each student had a designated podium that they were to stand behind; there was no hiding from anyone during the trial. In Francesca’s spot, a sign had been erected with her face on it so that she could “watch” the trial. Even in death, Francesca was still a part of this deadly game.

Behind Monobear’s throne, a large, elaborate door adorned the wall. Despite its grandness and elegance, it gave off a foreboding and ominous aura.

Monobear took his seat, and beat a gavel off his throne. “I commence this school trial under way!”
Chapter 1--The Beauties and the Beasts--Part 9

Melissa: “This is it, everybody. Let’s put our heads together and get through this as quickly as possible.”

Lily: “I—I’m scared. I don’t like this.”

Elizabeth: “It’s okay, Lily; it’ll all be over before you know it.”

Rico: “Whoa-oa, this can’t really be happening.”

Austin: “This place…it’s so…gaudy…”

Taylor: “Now’s not the time to play interior decorator!”

Randolph: “It would be best for us to focus on the matter at hand.”

Delilah: “Yeah, what Baldy said.”

Rufus: “Then let’s begin.”

Jenny: “Where exactly do we begin?”

Melissa: “Since most of us were in the Salon, why don’t the rest of you report what you found first?”

Taylor: “There was nothing in the dorms.”

James: “I can confirm that.”

Rico: “I also didn’t find anything in the Lounge.”

Austin: “The General Store was pretty free, but I did find these lovely decorative soaps.”

Rufus: “Oh really? Let me see those; toss them over here.”

Austin: “Sure, here you go. Ow! Why’d you throw that at me?”

Rufus: “Because you’re being stupid and wasting time.”

Elizabeth: “Ahem.”

Melissa: “Yes, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth: “We have something interesting to report.”

Melissa: “Then let us hear it!”

Elizabeth: “In one of the dryers in the Laundromat, we found a pink washcloth.”

James: “Say it ain’t so! A pink washcloth? What is this world coming to?”

Elizabeth: “I didn’t think it was interesting either, but then I remembered that all the washcloths and towels I’ve seen are white.”
Cody: “So how’d it become pink?”

Theo: “Are you seriously asking that question?”

Lily: “It raises a good point, though! Someone must have washed it with a red shirt.”

Markus: “So? A lot of us have red clothes. All it proves is that someone forgot to pick up all their laundry.”

Randolph: “If only that were the case.”

Jordan: “How do you mean?”

Randolph: “I was in the Laundromat all last evening until Night Time. There were no excess clothes in any of the machines.”

Rico: “Then that means…”

Rufus: “Someone was in the Laundromat when they should have been in bed.”

Melissa: “You think the washcloth belongs to the murderer? Who would do laundry after killing someone?”

Rufus: “Who here has red clothing?”

Markus: “Hey! Hold up! I didn’t do anything!”

Delilah: “Do you really think a cosmetologist would mix up her colors with her whites?”

Theo: “Uhh…my shirt’s maroon…”

Melissa: “Jenny, how do you account for yourself?”

Jenny: “I…I did not do it. I could not have done it…”

James: “Oh, sure, and I couldn’t have gotten stuck living with a bunch of Neanderthals.”

Jenny: “You have to believe me! There is no way I could have done it!”

Jordan: “Jenny, you’re acting awfully suspicious.”

Cody: “I’m gonna need to see some proof, dudette.”

Jenny: “I…I…”

Elizabeth: “It wasn’t Jenny.”

Jenny: “Elizabeth…”

Theo: “How can you be so sure?”

Lily: “Jenny’s a, uhh…what did you call it?”

Elizabeth: “Jenny is haemophobic; she’s a haemophobe.”

Austin: “Hey. I find that very offensive. The world is a changing place, and you just have to accept people for whot they are.”
Rufus: “Austin, you’re being stupid again. She said haemophobe; she doesn’t do blood.”

Austin: “Oh…I must have misheard.”

Randolph: “Pardon my interruption, but I believe there is one other person who owns red clothing.”

Melissa: “Urgh, new rule: from now on, instead of announcing that you have information, you just give us the information.”

Randolph: “Does that mean you would like me to speak now?”

Melissa: “Yes, Randolph, it does!”

Randolph: “While doing laundry for Miss Taylor yesterday, I discovered that she was not as adept at separating her laundry as she claimed.”

Taylor: “No.”

Randolph: “She had instructed that she did not wish me to launder certain items of hers, and I did not argue the point.”

Taylor: “No no.”

Randolph: “The truth of the matter is that I caught a glance of Miss Taylor’s undergarments.”

Taylor: “No no no.”

Randolph: “The article of clothing in question would match the color specifications.”

Taylor: “You perverted priest! You meretricious monk! How dare you!?!?”

Randolph: “I swear, it was purely by accidental chance.”

Rufus: “Randolph raises a valid point, though. We could be wearing red without showing it.”

Jordan: “This is an awkward question, but who else is wearing red…’undergarments?’”

Nobody ventured forth.

Jordan: “The people have spoken.”

Taylor: “This is ludicrous…”

Cody: “How do we know nobody’s fibbing? I think there’s really only one way to know what everybody’s wearing underneath their clothes…”

Elizabeth: “Don’t look at me like that, you creep!”

Rico: “Hey-y, I’ll do whatever I have to!”

Taylor: “No way! That won’t be necessary!”

Austin: “Do you have any idea how long it took me to get dressed this morning? And now you want me to take my clothes back off?”

Melissa: “Let’s just drop the red clothing bit for now. If we run into an impasse, we can revisit the matter.”
Delilah: “Why are we even discussin’ this in the first place? We’re arguin’ about laundry.”

Rufus: “Because no one has claimed the washcloth as their own; somebody doesn’t want that cloth connected to them.”

Theo: “Is it possible that the washcloth was not from last night? I mean, could somebody have been doing laundry this morning?”

Randolph: “I was up since seven when Monobear’s morning announcement went off. I went straight to the food court, and I never saw anyone go to or from the Laundromat.”

Lily: “Besides, it was in the dryer. Someone would have had to wash it first, and there’s no way they could have gotten that done by the time we started searching for Francesca.”

Markus: “Lily, how long do the washers and dryers run?”

Lily: “I believe it’s fifty minutes for each. Why?”

Markus: “I went to see Francesca at 10:30, but she wasn’t there, and she was dead by 10:45. Even if the mysterious washcloth launderer had begun their load at the brink of Night Time, they would have been close enough to the scene of the crime to know that something was amiss.”

Melissa: “And I doubt that anyone would just ignore something like a murder happening fifty feet from them.”

Jordan: “Further proof that the washcloth is connected to the crime.”

Rico: “So the washcloth is important. Why is it important?”

Rufus: “That will be our next line of questioning. It’s time we turned to the murder itself. I presume everyone has read the Monobear File.”

Randolph: “I have.”

James: “Yeah.”

Rico: “Of course!”

Taylor: “Well, duh.”

Austin: “It almost put me to sleep.”

Markus: “I read it.”

Jenny: “And we all read it as well.”

Rufus: “Good, then we all know what is going on with the body.”

Taylor: “I got a question. What’s the deal with the cuts around her eyes and the bruise on her forehead? I didn’t see any of that when I was in the Salon.”

Theo: “The sunglasses were covering her eyes, and her hair covered her forehead. You all were sent out before we found that.”

Elizabeth: “Where did the sunglasses come from?”
Taylor: “There’s none in the General Store; I’ve checked.”

Austin: “I swear I saw you wearing a pair earlier, though. While you were tanning.”

Taylor: “I borrowed them from James; he’s got a ton of them.”

James: “It’s part of Monobear’s ‘same outfit everyday’ deal. And she didn’t ‘borrow’ them; she stole them from me!”

Taylor: “Steal…borrow…both sides of the same coin.”

Jordan: “So where are your sunglasses now?”

Taylor: “I misplaced them prior to the murder, so I don’t know where they’re at.”

Austin: “That’s kind of suspicious.”

Taylor: “You got something to say to me, twerp?”

Melissa: “Can we focus? This is rather important for all of us.”

Jenny: “There were cuts on her palms and wrists, yes?”

Theo: “Correct. We found a pair of scissors nearby that we believe to have been responsible.”

James: “Let me guess, they’re left-handed scissors?”

Rufus: “Yes, but how—”

James: “You sent your little advocate around asking everyone for their personal information! You don’t think that’s going to raise suspicion? I may be left-handed, but I’m no killer.”

Taylor: “I’m not either, for that matter!”

Theo: “Nor I.”

Elizabeth: “So she died from exsanguination?”

Austin: “English?”

Rufus: “Did she bleed out? I’m not so certain. There’s still the trauma to the front of the skull.”

Melissa: “What could she have hit her head off?”

Rufus: “Did she hit her head, or did someone smash her head into an object?”

Rico: “I’ve hit my head plenty of times, but it’s never as bad as when one of my brothers pushes me into something.”

Cody: “So Francesca was pushed?”

Rufus: “Don’t jump to conclusions.”

Lily: “What about the cuts around her eyes? What caused those?”

Theo: “We are…still trying to figure that out.”
Taylor: “Why did we leave you to search the body? You haven’t come up with anything!”

Theo: “We did notice that there was more blood on her right hand than on her left.”

James: “Is that supposed to mean something?”

Austin: “It means that there’s more blood on her right hand.”

James: “Thanks, Einstein, I needed that.”

Austin: “No problem.”

Theo: “There was also blood on her necklace, right up against her neck.”

Taylor: “Okay, now that is interesting.”

Melissa: “You didn’t tell me that. How did it get there?”

Elizabeth: “She obviously arranged her necklace with her bloody hands.”

Jordan: “Then why is it in only that one spot?”

Elizabeth: “She was very meticulous.”

Rufus: “How about, no.”

Elizabeth: “Hmph. We’re assuming that the murderer did a lot of things. Isn’t it possible that Francesca is partly responsible?”

Markus: “Are you saying she was asking for this? That’s the most fallacious slander I’ve heard yet!”

Elizabeth: “Maybe it was Francesca who was doing laundry. Yes, I’m sure of it. She was doing laundry, but she accidentally mixed reds with her whites, so she went over to the Salon and slit her wrists. I’ve got it! It’s a simple suicide!”

Jordan: “A suicide? But then why would we be looking for a murderer? Monobear?”

Monobear: “Upupu. I’ve seen this before. In the case of a suicide, the murderer and victim would be the same person. If you guess wrong in that case, then no one lives! It’s truly despairing, isn’t it?”

Melissa: “I can’t say it fills me with warmth, but a suicide would be a little easier to deal with.”

Markus: “Are you serious? There’s no way she would have killed herself over a wardrobe malfunction!”

James: “The chick was a perfectionist. Combined with the stress of living here, maybe she snapped.”

Markus: “No! I refuse to believe that!”

Rufus: “And the theory leaves too many open questions. For instance, why was her hair down?”

Lily: “It’d be for the same reason that she adjusted her necklace, right? She wanted to look nice for death.”
Theo: “But there wasn’t any blood on the pencil. In fact, the pencil was smashed in half.”

Delilah: “She took out the pencil, stepped on it, slit her wrists, and then fixed her necklace. Those are weird priorities.”

Jenny: “If the cuts on her wrists were the kiss of death, then why the cuts on her palms?”

Elizabeth: “She had to test how strongly to use the blade.”

Cody: “Too much power on her right hand, and then she got it right with her left.”

Austin: “Her left was right?”

Cody: “Yeah, she got the left right, so she proceeded to cut her wrists afterward.”

Rufus: “We’re missing one important detail.”

Taylor: “And what’s that?”

Rufus: “There was no blood on the scissors’ handles.”

James: “Tch, I remember that now. The blades were red, but not the handles.”

Randolph: “Hmm…I see…”

Rico: “So-o, uhh, what’s that mean?”

Jordan: “It means that Francesca didn’t cut her own wrists; someone else was holding the scissors.”

Elizabeth: “Preposterous! It had to be a suicide!”

Melissa: “The more we talk about it, the less a suicide makes sense.”

Elizabeth: “Oh…I thought I had it figured out…”

Delilah: “Have we made any progress?”

Jordan: “We’ve ruled out a suicide.”

Delilah: “Wow, we’ve come so far.”

Monobear: “Upupu…take as much time as you need. I love watching you worms squirm. But don’t take too long or I might get bored!”

Rufus: “Let’s turn our attention to the sequence of events, in that case. What happened first? The bruise to the forehead, the cuts around the eyes, the cut hands, the bloody pearls, or the broken pencil?”

Melissa: “Do we have any way of figuring that out?”

Theo: “I can’t really think of a way…”

Jordan: “Nothing makes sense to me either.”

Rufus: “Fu, I’m coming up empty. If we assume that her hands were cut first—”
Taylor: “We can’t work in suppositions! Nothing will get decided if we think hypothetically.”

Rufus: “If you’ve got a better idea, I’m open to suggestions!”

Monobear: “Heh heh heh, I like it when you *squirm.*”

Markus: “Hey, I’ve got a question. When you removed the sunglasses from her face, what’d you do with her regular glasses?”

Rufus: “Her…regular glasses?”

Theo: “I don’t think…she wasn’t wearing any…”

Melissa: “Glasses just don’t go missing.”

Jordan: “The murderer stole her glasses…?”

Lily: “The murderer wanted to blind her so she couldn’t fight back, desu.”

Jenny: “Was her eyesight that bad?”

Markus: “She was a tutor, right? That means she’d do a lot of reading—”

Rufus: “And a lot of reading would leave you near-sighted.”

Lily: “Exactly! So we do a search of everyone’s rooms, and whoever has the glasses is the culprit!”

Jordan: “You misunderstand.”

Rufus: “Near-sighted means she *can* see near her; it’s distance that’s the problem.”

Theo: “Without her glasses, she still would have been able to see someone trying to kill her.”

Austin: “Maybe they killed her for those ugly glasses. I was ready to smash them to bits myself, they were so hideous.”

Markus: “Take that back! Admit she made them work!”

Cody: “Dudes, now is not the time to fight.”

Rufus: “Smash her glasses…fight…by Jove, I think I’ve got it!”

Melissa: “What? You have? Well don’t just stand there; tell us!”

Rufus: “Good ol’ Francesca…she put up a fight; there was a struggle. When she hit her head, her glasses broken, and the shattered lenses cut her eyes.”

Lily: “My goodness!”

Markus: “At least she went down kicking.”

Delilah: “But is that all that happened?”

Theo: “I’m willing to bet the killer came at her with the scissors, and that that spurred the confrontation.”

Rufus: “That would explain the blood difference.”
Rico: “It would?”

Cody: “Yeah, totally, you know, it’s like, if Francesca was chilling, then—”

Randolph: “Perhaps it would be better to let Rufus explain.”

Rufus: “It’s simple, really. The murderer approached Francesca from the front, scissors in left hand, so Francesca swiped at them with her closest hand, i.e. her right. Since it was cut first, it would bleed the most.

Jordan: “It would’ve kept bleeding if she hadn’t been killed shortly thereafter.”

Theo: “No pulse, no bleeding.”

Jenny: “What happened after she cut her hand? She hit her head?”

Rufus: “Precisely. The blow either knocked her out or killed her.”

Jordan: “If there was hemorrhaging, the knock out would have been fatal regardless.”

Melissa: “But the killer wouldn’t have known that, so she slit Francesca’s wrists just in case.”

James: “And the cut on her left hand?”

Theo: “Purely for show; to match the one on the right.”

Delilah: “Then where does the blood on the pearls come into play?”

Markus: “If the glasses were done away with, then what’s not to say other evidence was done away with as well?”

Elizabeth: “How do you mean?”

Markus: “The cuts around her eyes. That would have bloodied her face up a bit, yeah? And a little blood dripped onto her necklace.”

Taylor: “Then where did all this blood go?”

Jordan: “The murderer must have cleaned it up. Leave no trace of the struggle.”

Taylor: “But that doesn’t explain the blood on the pearls.”

Rico: “I think I’ve actually got this one! With her last strength, Francesca inverted the pearls so that we’d be able to find the blood.”

Austin: “She was more clever than I thought.”

Rufus: “Good guess, but I think it’s more likely that the killer missed the backs of the pearls; you couldn’t see the blood unless you got very close to the pearls.”

Jenny: “Then that just leaves the broken pencil.”

Rufus: “I think that that pencil is the ultimate clue to this case.”

Melissa: “Explain yourself.”

Rufus: “In due time. For now, let’s go back to cleaning up the evidence. How did the killer dispose
of the blood?"

Elizabeth: “Oh! Oh oh oh! The washcloth! It was the washcloth, right?”

Jordan: “We were searching for red clothing, but—”

Lily: “Blood is red! That’s what stained the washcloth pink!”

Cody: “Then the washcloth belongs to the murderer! I vote for Lily’s room search.”

Markus: “No, I was in the dorm hallway when the murder happened, and I guess the clean-up too. I would’ve heard if someone entered the hall to retrieve a washcloth.”

Rufus: “Don’t be so hasty. We have another issue to discuss first. Where was Francesca slain?”

Melissa: “In the Salon, right?”

Delilah: “You’d best not be yanking my chain. I don’t want no murder to have taken place in my Salon if I can help it.”

Rufus: “The Salon was in such nice condition. It didn’t look like a struggle had taken place there at all.”

Delilah: “Except for the corpse, that place was as spic and span as I’d left it the day before.”

Rufus: “Use your imaginations now. Where else could the murder have taken place?”

Melissa: “We searched the entire mall; nothing was out of order except the Salon.”

Jordan: “But the Salon wasn’t out of order.”

Rufus: “So where’d the murder take place, rather, where could the murder have taken place?”

Theo: “I see what you’re getting at. Where did the murderer get the scissors?”

Rico: “The Salon?”

Elizabeth: “No, there’s nothing wrong with the Salon.”

Randolph: “Then the scissors must have come from the General Store.”

Austin: “There are scissors in the General Store? I’ve never seen them…”

Taylor: “Because there aren’t any. Where the hell did the murder weapon come from?”

Rufus: “That’s what I wanted you to realize. The murder couldn’t have taken place anywhere.”

Cody: “Dude, I may not be the brightest tool in the shed, but I know that don’t make sense.”

Rufus: “Ecce. Delores! Think fast!”

Even though he had gotten her name wrong, Rufus carefully chucked one of Austin’s decorative soaps at Delilah, who caught it with her left hand.

Rufus: “Vinco.”

Delilah: “Hey, peabrain, what’s the deal? You like throwin’ things at people when they ain’t
Rufus: “Everybody, we have our murderer. Notice how she caught the soap with her left hand. Morgan’s list of left-handed people did not include Delores, so why did she catch the soap with her non-dominant hand?”

Delilah: “Excuse me for not thinkin’ about what hand to use when somethin’ comes hurtlin’ at my face!”

Jordan: “I was there when Melissa interrogated her; she’s a righty.”

Rufus: “No, that was just the first of many lies. Isn’t that right, Delores?”

Delilah: “If you’re goin’ to accuse me of somethin’, at least have the decency to use my actual name. It’s Delilah, not ‘Delores,’ you sack of flour.”

Rufus: “Mea culpa. She lied about being right-handed, and she lied about the Salon being in perfect order. The scissors had to have come from the Salon, but Delilah never ventured that information. There’s only one reason she would withhold that information, and that’s because she’s Francesca’s killer.”

Delilah: “That’s ridiculous! What proof do you have?”

Melissa: “Rufus, you can’t just accuse people willy-nilly.”

Rufus: “My proof? The pencil.”

Rico: “I’m not following.”

Lily: “I don’t get it.”

Randolph: “Please explain.”

Rufus: “The pencil Francesca used to tie her hair back was smashed into two perfect pieces. Like someone stepped on it to break it into two perfect halves. That was a deliberate action; it wouldn’t have happened during a struggle. Therefore, the pencil was broken *ex post facto*.”

Austin: “Are you people really that against speaking a common language?”

Jordan: “He means that it was done after the fact.”

Rufus: “Yes. Francesca removed the pencil herself, and later the murderer broke it. Why would Francesca let her hair down in a Salon?”

Melissa: “…because she was getting a haircut…”

Markus: “Francesca didn’t care about looks…”

Jenny: “She was the only one during girls’ night not to get a makeover.”

Elizabeth: “So the poor dear was embarrassed and wanted a private session?”

Delilah: “Y’all are crazy! I didn’t do anythin’ to Miss Priss.”

Rufus: “Stop lying already. Markus already said that no one came into the hallway for a washcloth, so the washcloth *had* to have come from the Salon, even though you claimed it was in perfect
The truth is that you got her there and tried to stab her with the scissors. But she caught onto you and put up a fight. You beat her head off something in the Salon—probably the dome we found her under—and then you slit her wrists and palm for good measure. You broke the pencil to add confusion to the scene, and then you wiped away all the blood except for what was on her hands and the back of her pearls, maybe make us think it was a suicide. You disposed of her broken glasses, covered her face with the sunglasses—which I’m guessing were left over from girls’ night—and then went to dispose of the washcloth. Except the blood had already stained it, and washing the item just turned it pink. There was no big problem, though, because you were a Salon expert and could convince us that nothing was out of order. All the evidence points to you and your lies. I bet that if we went to the Salon, there’d be one washcloth missing from the total.”

Monobear: “Upu, let me save you the time. I’m a very meticulous bear, and I keep beautiful records of everything. I can confirm that there is one less washcloth in the Salon than I had initially provided the establishment with.”

Rufus: “Straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Monobear: “I’m not a horse! I’m a bear!”

Rufus: “Err, straight from the bear’s mouth…”

Delilah: “Urgh, you’re wrong! I didn’t do anythin’! I swear! If y’all want to vote for me, then it’s your funeral, cuz the real killer is goin’ to get away scot-free!”

Melissa: “Enough! Delilah MacDonald, I accuse you of the murder of Francesca Maysworth!”

Delilah: “Oh yeah? What’re you gonna do? Arrest me?”

Melissa: “Worse. I’m going to vote for you. I can’t abide by someone breaking the rules of society, so I’m afraid it’s time that we draw this case to a close.”

Jordan: “Monobear, I think we’re ready to get the voting underway.”

Monobear: “Yeh heh heh! How exciting! Did you figure out the right answer? We’ll just have to see. On the podiums before you, you’ll notice an electronic board with pictures of all your classmates on it. Click on the picture of whom you think is the murderer. Be careful; you only get one vote, so you better make it count!”

The students looked at each other and looked at Delilah. Hesitantly, they cast their votes. As the votes rolled in, Monobear was dancing, reveling in the despair and anxiety flowing through the room. Finally, all the votes were accounted for, and Monobear beat his gavel off his throne.

Monobear: “And the votes are in. By a landslide, Delilah MacDonald is the winner! But wait, this isn’t a competition you want to win; you don’t actually want to have people vote for you. But enough is enough! It’s time for the results. I can now say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Delilah MacDonald is, in fact, GUILTY! Upupupu!”

Delilah: “This is…I didn’t…fine! You know what? Yeah, I killed her. Big freakin’ deal. Are you all happy now?”

Lily: “Francesca was our friend…”

Delilah: “Puh-lease! Frannie was a drag on all of us. She was frumpy and uptight; you’ll all be happier without her.”
Markus: “Shut up!”

Delilah: “What?”

Markus: “Shut up! Shutupshutupshutupshutupshutup!”

Randolph: “Markus, calm yourself.”

Markus: “I’m not going to stand here and listen to her insult Francesca like that. Francesca was a sweet, caring girl, and she wanted nothing but to help others. None of you gave her a chance, so you can’t say what she was and what she wasn’t!”

Delilah: “Like we care! Just because you’re in love with her doesn’t mean the rest of us are. Get over yourself.”

Markus: “If anyone’s a tartar on our society, it’s you! You’ve done nothing but make snide comments since we got here!”


Rufus: “Well, now that the cat’s out of the bag, I have a question.”

Delilah: “Why delay the fun?”

Rufus: “How did you get Francesca alone with you? I never pegged Francesca as being gullible.”

Delilah: “She wasn’t gullible; she was naïve. I’m speakin’ honestly here, now. It was Frannie who came to me. James had gotten her all hot and bothered over how she looked. She said she never put a lot of effort into her looks because she didn’t think she looked like much. After the night of makeovers, she was even more self-conscious. She asked if I would make her beautiful. As a cosmetologist, that’s my job. I accepted. She wanted to have our session in private so that nobody would notice, so we arranged to meet at the Salon at night.”

Jordan: “Then why did you do it?”

Delilah: “When we first made our plans, I didn’t intend to kill her. It was just going to be a routine makeover…but I couldn’t get the idea of that mansion out of my mind. I had Francesca in my hands…it was so easy…you don’t understand! Do ya have any idea how much a cosmetologist makes? Even a high-end one like myself? I’ll give ya a hint: it ain’t as much as ya’d think. To live a life in luxury…to not have to work for a livin’…it was too good to be true…so I decided to take it for myself! And in the grand scheme of things, what is one life? People die everyday; does it really matter who? One person ain’t gonna make a difference in the universe.”

Theo: “It wasn’t just one person, Delilah. If you got away with this, then the rest of us would have been executed as well. You’d have had the blood of fifteen on your hands, and that’s not easy to ignore.”

Delilah: “Don’t try to make me feel bad. What’s done is done. I stand by my decisions. Shucks, I really wanted that house. I guess there’s only one thing left for me. Doesn’t feel real, ya know. Don’t think I won’t go down without a fight, though! Hey, Monniebear, what kind of execution do you got in mind? Are we talking firin’ squad, or am I gettin’ the chair?”

Monobear: “Ohoho, I’ve got something much more intense planned for you! If you have any last words, I’d say them now!”
Delilah: “I guess…I wish y’all the best of luck. Whether you make it out of here or not, do something great for me. Yeah, good luck. Except for you, Austin. You’re a spoiled little brat! I hope you’re the next to get killed!”

Randolph: “My word!”

Melissa: “Do you really want those to be your last words?”

Austin: “I’ll miss you too, darlin’.”

Monobear: “Upupu! Time to get this under way!”

The elaborate doors behind Monobear swung open, and chains flew out, wrapping around Delilah’s arms and legs. She strained against the chains, but they held her fast. Once secured, they pulled back, and they carried her into the dark. Upon Monobear’s instruction, the other students rushed after the Cosmetologist to watch the proceedings.

“I call this one Extreme Makeover: Brain Edition!” yelled Monobear, barely containing his excitement.

Delilah was strapped into a domed chair. Her arms and legs were fastened to the chair; there was no escape. The Cosmetologist could move her neck to look around, but it only made her more frightened to take in her surroundings. Monobear pushed a button on his throne, and the chair whirred to life.

The chair bounced up a notch, giving Delilah some slight elevation. She’d done the same thing thousands of times for her shorter clients. The chair bumped up another notch, and then another, and then it flew up. The air rushed past Delilah’s face as she was catapulted into the sky. It didn’t make sense that there was any room for her to ascend, but this entire ordeal didn’t make sense. Delilah had just enough time for the vertigo to set in before the next phase of her punishment began.

The chair began spinning. Slowly at first, but then it started accelerating. It reminded Delilah of a carnival ride, except this one was much scarier and twice as deadly. The height and spin was making Delilah nauseated, so she closed her eyes to block out the stimuli. That initiated the third phase.

The dome above her head kicked into life. Almost immediately, Delilah could feel the heat pouring onto her skull. She could feel her hair acting up, and she was beginning to feel light-headed. High up in the air, spinning around at breakneck speeds, and being baked alive by a furnace surrounding her head.

As the heat grew to its greatest intensity, the spinning stopped, and the chair plummeted to the ground. The sudden descent kicked up a cloud of dust, and as the dust cleared, the other students could see what remained of Delilah. Her hair singed, her scalp burnt, and her brain fried, All-Star Cosmetologist, Delilah MacDonald was no more.

The other students could only watch in awful terror as Delilah was killed right before their eyes. Monobear’s incessantly obnoxious laughter filled the room; he had greatly enjoyed the spectacle.

“Rah hah hah hah! That was one of the most entertaining things I’ve seen in hours! Unfortunately, that’s all I’ve got. Now get out of here and give your Monobear some peace and quiet.”
The students were slow to respond since their brains were still having difficulty accepting all that had happened. With a little more cajoling on Monobear’s part, the students made their way back to the elevator with heavy steps.

On their way, Melissa saddled up to Rufus and whispered in his ear. “You done good, kid.”

He smiled at her. “It was nothing. In fact, it was fun. After all, it’s just a game.”

Sixteen students had arrived at the Mall of Monomerica, fifteen took the elevator ride down, and now fourteen were taking the elevator ride back up. The same three thoughts were running through their heads: if, when, and how soon would the students be returning to the trial room? The game had just begun.

End of Chapter One.

Surviving Students: 14

Markus Aslanius—All-Star Thespian
Elizabeth Barrington—All-Star Historian
James Beck—All-Star Movie Producer
Cody Cameron—All-Star Waterskier
Theo Cook—All-Star Cartographer
Melissa Davis—All-Star Politician
Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner
Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky
Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle
Jordan Koulibagh—All-Star Golfer
Randolph Luther—All-Star Monk

Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist

Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii

Jenny Zemenovski—All-Star Sandwich Artist
The elevator reached the top of its climb, and the kids departed. The fountain returned to its natural resting position. The students stood around idly, unsure what to do. Francesca and Delilah were dead. Gone. Ceasing to be. The remaining students may not have had long to get to know their late classmates, but the impact of reality was still heavy. Nevertheless, life had to go on.

Elizabeth’s stomach growled. She innocently inquired what the time was, and Markus replied that it was practically time for lunch. With Francesca’s early-morning disappearance, the students were whisked away from their breakfast. They had investigated and debated through the morning, so it made sense that they should be hungry; however, their appetites were low after such gruesome realizations. A meal would probably do them well, to get their minds off murder.

Jenny went over to the food joints to prepare the day’s sandwiches, but she found a pleasant surprise; in addition to new sandwich ingredients, the food court was stocked with the makings for simple salads, as well as small glasses of lemonade. The increased variety gave the kids some glimmer of ease.

The students ate their meal, and the lunch came to an end. Once more, the students were faced with the uncertainty of the future; where did they go from here? What they needed was guidance, and there was only one person who could give it to them.

Melissa: “Alright, gang, it’s time for some real-talk.”

James: “Gang? Real-talk? What are you, some kind of camp counselor?”

Melissa: “I’m just trying to be friendly.”

James: “Well stop. One, it’s creepy, and two, we’re not friends; we’re strangers stuck together under the same circumstance.”

Melissa: “If that’s how you feel, then fine. My fellow peers, we need to have a discussion about the recent events.”

Lily: “Oh, do we have to? Can’t we just ignore it and pretend that all that nastiness never happened?”

Randolph: “It is best to face one’s problems head-on.”

Lily: “Apply directly to the forehead…”

Taylor: “What is there to say? We were all there; we saw what happened.”

Jordan: “I think it is important that we go over what led to that event.”

Cody: “You mean the murder.”

Jordan: “Not just the murder, but also the trial and the incentive.”

Rufus: “The Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing, basically.”
Austin: “But we are living it. It’s not like we don’t understand what’s going on.”

Theo: “Are you so sure?”

Austin: “Hmm?”

Jenny: “I am lost.”

Melissa: “The truth is that Francesca and Delilah are dead. Two of our classmates are no longer with us.”

Elizabeth: “I do believe that that much we understand.”

Rico: “But that’s only because Delilah murdered Francesca, yeah?”

Markus: “Urgh…don’t remind me.”

Melissa: “That’s precisely what we need to talk about. Does everyone realize how serious murder is? How serious killing is?”

A round of yeses and nodding heads ensued.

Melissa: “I am not convinced. Delilah killed for material possessions. That is not a reasonable motive for taking the life of another human being.”

James: “And, pray tell, what is?”

Melissa: “Killing should only be a last resort if your own life is in danger.”

Theo: “I agree with Melissa. I’ve seen people kill for much less, and the devastation is always just as overwhelming.”

Randolph: “But one should always try to end things without going to such extremes.”

Jordan: “Indeed.”

James: “And who are you to say such things? What makes you so high and mighty?”

Melissa: “I am your leader, so you will listen to me. I obviously didn’t do a good enough job earlier, so if you need stricter commands, then that’s what you’re going to get.”

James: “And who named you leader in the first place?”

Rico: “I was under the impression that she was our leader…”

Cody: “Dude, does anyone else even want to be the leader?”

Melissa: “As an All-Star Politician, I have dedicated my life to taking care of others, and just because I’m trapped in a mall doesn’t mean I’m going to change!”

James: “Just listen to yourself! The rules of the outside world don’t apply here!”

Melissa: “James Beck, what is your problem!?!?”

James: “You are, Melissa. You’re not letting these people think when you herd them like sheep. I understand that they’re not much more intelligent than sheep, but shallow-thinking sheep are more useful than brain-dead sheep.”
Taylor: “Some of us would take offense to being called sheep.”

Rufus: “And some of us would take offense to being called shallow thinkers.”

James: “Look, see, and hear the people speak! Every day is always ‘Melissa says this,’ and ‘Melissa says that;’ it’s boring me to death!”

Melissa: “Excuse me for trying to keep everyone alive. I happen to value human life.”

James: “And I don’t? I value the lives of everyone here. Each and every one of you is my ticket out of this place.”

Melissa: “Shut up! Shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup!”

Markus: “Hey, that’s my line…”

Melissa: “I have had enough of you! So help me God if I don’t tie you up somewhere. All you’re doing is trying to poison the minds of our friends!”

James: “How many more times can I say it? We. Are. Not. Friends. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can be done with this stupid game.”

Lily: “Stop it! We are friends! We have to be, right?”

James: “You can’t be serious.”

Taylor: “Hell, even if I dislike most of you, I do kinda like some of you.”

Rico: “Yo-o, why shouldn’t we be pals? We’re all pretty cool cats.”

Austin: “Even if you do keep me awake, I guess I can put up with all of you.”

Randolph: “Friendships makes life worth living.”

Jenny: “We need to get along if we hope to get out of this predicament.”

Jordan: “My sentiments exactly.”

Melissa: “Look, see, and here the people speak.”

James: “Tch.”

Melissa: “I hate to say it, but this recent unpleasantness was what we needed for everyone to get on the same page. Today marks a new beginning, and from here on out there’ll be no more killing!”

Elizabeth: “Hear, hear!”

Theo: “Well said.”

Cody: “Totally!”

Rufus: “That settles that, then.”

Lily: “Retasu, desu!”

Markus: “A new beginning, huh? I can get behind that.”
Monobear: “What is going on here?”

Like an unwelcome house guest, Monobear appeared and imposed himself upon the conversation.

Monobear: “Is that the stench of hope I smell? DISGUSTING! You should all be ashamed of allowing yourselves to wallow in such filth; I gave you brats showers for a reason. But if you need help, Monobear wouldn’t mind helping you scrub away the dirt.”

Melissa: “You! What do you want?”

Monobear: “I heard shouting, so I wanted to make sure you were arguing about what my best feature is. It’s my nose, by the way. But when I got here, I found out you were talking about ‘hope.’ EWW! That makes me sick just thinking about it. You really should listen to Sunglasses here and give into despair; it’ll make your lives much easier.”

Melissa: “Is that what you’re after? Despair? Well forget it! We’ll never lose hope!”

James: “Speak for yourself.”


Jordan: “Majority rule says it doesn’t.”

Monobear: “Who cares about majorities!?? My vote has the weight of 11,037 of your measly little votes, so what I say goes!”

Rufus: “11,037…that’s oddly specific.”

Monobear: “I have gone over the calculations very meticulously, and I can assure you that that is the number that I want.”

Melissa: “It is the right of the people to petition their government if their government is acting against the wishes of the people.”

James: “In which case, I would like to file a formal complaint against Melissa.”

Monobear: “Is this really how you talk to each other? It’s so mundane and boring. You’re giving me a headache with all your bickering. But while I’m here, I may as well tell you that I have opened up the North Sector of the mall since you were all so good about killing each other. Keep it up and this whole mall will be open before you know it. Toodles.”

Monobear vanished in a cloud of mystery.

Melissa: “Ugh, where were we before that stupid robot interrupted us?”

James: “You were about to resign from your position as dictator.”

Melissa: “Haha, nice try. And I am not a dictator.”

Elizabeth: “Pardon my interruption, but did that beast say that new stores have opened up?”

Taylor: “There better be a clothing store this time; I am getting so sick of this same look everyday.”

Austin: “Maybe there’ll be a nice lingerie store for you.”
Taylor: “Are you trying to start a fight, fairy boy?”

Randolph: “The prospect of new places intrigues me.”

Cody: “Maybe there’ll be a pool to ski on.”

Rico: “Or an indoor track!”

Jenny: “Can they fit those in malls?”

Lily: “I’m getting so excited just thinking about the possibilities!”

Rufus: “We don’t have anything better to do.”

Jordan: “I guess so…”

Markus: “Ahh, I can taste the sweet allure of adventure once again.”

James: “You can’t be serious. This couldn’t possibly be one of Monobear’s traps.”

Theo: “It seems like we’re off to explore. I hope we find something good.”

Melissa: “Then I declare this lunch over.”

James: “Who gave you—”

Melissa: “What are we waiting for? Let’s go already.”
The symmetrical nature of the Mall of Monomerica made the North Sector a mirror image of the South Sector. On the eastern end of this sector stood the Pharmacy and Hobby Shop, while the Video Store and Bookstore rested across the hall. The students were hopeful that this quadrant would offer an exit, but a closed Department Store barred them from leaving. Like before, the students split up to explore the various shops and would report their findings over dinner.

Markus, Theo, and Randolph headed to the Pharmacy. The Pharmacy offered the health needs that the General Store did not. Whereas the General Store was stocked with adhesive strips and cotton swabs, the Pharmacy was home to bottles of multivitamins and antibacterial ointment. In addition, the drug store boasted a fine collection of tea leaves, throat lozenges, and antibiotics, along with various needles and syringes to administer the more potent panaceas.

The Pharmacy was arranged with the counter in the far back, and the stronger medicines secured behind the unmanned counter. The other health items were placed neatly upon the shelves. One unavoidable aisle in the center of the store was palpably the design of Monobear. Bottles marked “DO NOT INJECT,” “KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN,” or “WARNING: POISON,” lined these shelves. Barring this outlier, the Pharmacy contained an air of ease and smelled faintly of medicinal herbs.

Markus was still shaken up from the trial. He hadn’t really thought about his relationship with Francesca in too much detail prior to the engagement, but Delilah’s belligerent comment of their being boyfriend and girlfriend had taken him aback. Francesca had supported him and kept him going during the uncertain times, and she made him feel good, but had he really been crushing on her? It didn’t matter now, since that evil Delilah took her away. Markus didn’t like the venomous thoughts he harbored toward Delilah, but he wasn’t ready to admit the reason for his ill will.

Theo had escaped the first trial unscathed. There was a time in the middle when he thought the murderer might get away, but, thankfully, the matter resolved itself. In the heat of the investigation and trial, Theo thought that he handled himself well-enough. Almost too well. Most of the students had found the premise highly unnatural and disconcerting, but Theo had remained calm and composed throughout it all. Theo was hopeful that none of the others would have the chance to get used to the procedures for the sole fact that there would be no more murders to instigate such affairs.

Randolph deeply mourned the loss of two of his friends. There was darkness in their hearts, and he had been helpless to expunge it. He’d have to pray earnestly for their souls. Above all else, Randolph had been disgusted to vote for Delilah. He wanted to give everyone the benefit of the doubt and believe in the good inside of them, but he had been forced to send one of them to their doom. Was this all some kind of test, and, if so, what was he being tested for?

Theo was examining the various toxic chemicals when he caught Markus staring at him. Ever since the trial, Theo had thought that Markus had been ogling him a rather uncanny number of times. Theo did not like the attention, and it made him feel awkward to be such an interesting object of fascination.

“Markus, is something on your mind?” asked Theo.

“Well, you keep looking over here when you think I’m not paying attention. Do you have business with these poisons?”

“N-no, nothing like that. And I’m not staring at you or anything like that, no way.”

“What are you doing then?”

“Well, uhh, okay, this is kinda embarrassing, but, as you know, I’m a bit of an actor.”

“Thespian, yes.”

“What can I say? I love the lime light, and it loves me. But, uhh, recently I have found that I do not like the current portrayal of my character, so I was looking to you for inspiration.”

“Hmm? What could you learn from me?”

“Oh, you know. After watching you handle yourself in the trial, I found a few character points that I wouldn’t mind adopting myself.”

“That? It was nothing, really. Just be yourself.”

“You think so? You weren’t the one who ran crying to his room after seeing a dead body!”

“Maybe I wish I had…”

“For heaven’s sake, I needed a girl to keep me from becoming an emotional wreck! I need to be able to stand on my own two feet here.”

“I still don’t see how I can help you out with this…”

“For the love of— I need you to teach me how to be tough! Sheesh, you’re as dense as you are humble. ‘In the theatre, modesty can hurt you.’ So, what do you say? Train me?”

“I don’t know if you want to be tough like me.”

“Nonsense! If it’ll keep my tear ducts dry, then I’m willing to do anything. I’m tired of being scared of everything. It’s time for a new Markus to hit the stage!”

“Well, if you’re so sure about this, I can’t really say no.”

“Ahh, thank you so much! Beware, world, for you’ve never seen someone like me! So, master, what’s the first thing I should know about being a strong character?”

“Well, uhh—” Theo was cut off from his impromptu lesson by a small cry from Randolph in the corner of the Pharmacy. Holding the thoughts where they were, Theo and Markus rushed to see what had riled the Monk. They found Randolph furtively scanning the shelves in the tea aisle.

Acting as tough as he naturally does, Theo asked, “Randolph, is something wrong?”

Randolph beamed at Theo. “Friend, nothing is the matter. In fact, it is the exact opposite.”

Trying to act as tough as Theo naturally does, Markus asked, “But didn’t you cry out just now?”

“Haha, indeed. My apologies, I let myself get carried away, but I experienced a sudden influx of happiness. For you see I have stumbled upon my favorite brand of tea in this little
Theo let out a sigh of relief. He did not realize that he had been holding his breath. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

“And I think I saw some honey a few aisles over. I wonder if this store has ginseng…”

“You really like your tea, huh?” asked Markus nonchalantly.

“Haha, I do. It is one of the few worldly objects that I allow myself to indulge in. I find that drinking it has a very calming effect upon the drinker. I would love to brew some for anyone who’s interested.”

Theo nodded in thoughtful appreciation. “I may have to take you up on your offer. I think all of our nerves are shot after what happened.”

“It is a tragedy, no? As dreadful as this ordeal has suddenly become, we must not lose hope that we will receive our deliverance. There is a point to our being here.”

Markus didn’t like the sound of that. “A point to our being here? Are you saying that there was a point to Francesca’s death? Because I was of the understanding that it was a senseless murder from a pointless motive.”

“Master Markus, I do not mean to undermine Francesca’s existence, but it was simply her time to go.”

“I can’t believe that…she had so much potential…”

“If you cannot accept that, then understand that at least she is now exempt from this Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. She doesn’t have to live in fear and worry anymore.”

“I guess…”

Theo wished to add his two cents, but a scream from the Hobby Shop next door distracted the boys. They turned to face the entrance to the shop, and they soon saw Taylor running toward the dorms and covering her face with her hands. There were more shouts from next door, but then things seemed to have settled down.

Randolph was shaken at the sudden outburst. “Should we go see if Miss Taylor is okay?”

Theo considered the proposition, but decided against it. “I’m sure whatever it is, it’s none of our business. We should finish investigating the Pharmacy to make sure we don’t miss anything.”

The Video Store was a relic from the past. There wasn’t a single disc in the vicinity, only copious amounts of VHS tapes and VCRs. The movies and television shows adorned the walls in their cardboard boxes. The store had everything from programming for toddlers to cult-classic horror films. Best of all, though, the store had an automatic tape rewinder. An old television set lined the back wall, and a few couches were strewn in front of it for viewing comfort. The couches looked suspiciously similar to the ones in the Lounge.

Lily was in heaven. The Video Store reminded her greatly of home. With all the new, exciting people and places she had been discovering, Lily hadn’t thought much about home. Even
during the trial and investigation, Lily had just wanted to disappear in her dorm room and shut out the world. But thinking about home drove up other matters that concerned Lily more; she hadn’t been online in days! Despite the pang of homesickness, Lily knew that she would be able to withstand anything so long as she had her best friends by her side.

Jenny never cared for movies, so her thoughts kept drifting to the trial. Being stuck with Lily and Elizabeth all the time, the Sandwich Artist hadn’t gotten the chance to branch out and engage many of her fellow students. Francesca and Delilah had seemed nice enough, but those were merely Jenny’s first impressions. Jenny felt caged, and she needed to break out, but she couldn’t bring herself to do anything grand to achieve her goals.

Elizabeth had shrugged off the deaths easily. People flew in and out of the Historian’s life so often that she never gave much thought or care to her acquaintances. Soon enough the hole would be filled with something worth her attention. The Video Store certainly wasn’t filling the void. Elizabeth found the idea of a Video Store repugnant; why didn’t people just buy their movies? And where were the DVDs at? Most of the movies in stock had been produced before Elizabeth had been born. Was she really supposed to enjoy such uncultured hogwash?

Lily was eyeing the wall of cartoons when her heart let out a cry of joy. Of all the places, she had found the terrible subbed version of Heretic Angel ☆Mochi Mochi Princess. “Eeeeeee!” exclaimed the Kawaii princess. Her best friends approached to see what had livened Lily up.

“Sweet desu! I can’t believe it! It’s really her! I haven’t seen the official subbing of Heretic Angel ☆Mochi Mochi Princess in almost nine years! I wonder if it’s as terrible as I remember.”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “Some silly cartoon? Isn’t this for little kids and creepy old men?”

“No way! Heretic Angel ☆Mochi Mochi Princess is a classic for all generations. I mean, at least I think it’s supposed to be. The story goes that it was super popular in Japan, but the English translating team butchered the localization process, and so we were basically left with an incomprehensible garble of anime goodness.”

Jenny tried to hide her confusion. “Localization…garble…I do not understand a single word you have said.”

“Nani? Surely you watched cartoons as a kid, ne?”

“No, actually.”

“My dear, neither did I. They’re poor programming; absolutely no mental stimulation.”

“But that’s what makes them so great! You can turn your brain off and just enjoy the images flashing before your eyes.”

Elizabeth was unimpressed. “That sounds like it would just give me a headache.”

“No! It’s really quite great! I know! We’ll have a big movie night and you can witness first-hand how sugoi anime can be!”

“Ugh, you cannot expect me to spend an entire night watching cartoons. If we’re going to do this, then we have to do it right. That’s why I propose that we add a documentary or two into the mix.”

“Blech, documentaries. They’re so boring!”
“Not if you find a tasteful one. Besides, you might actually manage to learn something.”

“I guess fair is fair…what about you, Jenny? What kind of movies do you like to watch?”

“Me? I do not know. I suppose I am not much of a movie watcher.”

Lily couldn’t believe her ears. “Someone who doesn’t watch movies? What do you do in your spare time?”

“Spare…time…? Like when I am sleeping?”

Elizabeth was having trouble grasping Jenny’s workaholic attitude as well. “Not quite, dear. When you’re not working, what do you do to relax? For instance, when I’m not studying, I enjoy sketching the flowers in my garden.”

“Yeah, and I like to sing as loud as I can!”

“Hmm…I do neither of those things…”

“Oh dear, next you’re going to say that you sit silently in the dark.”

“What would be the problem with that?”

“Child, you need to get out more.”

“Forget my doki doki anime, I think the movie night should all be up to Jenny’s decisions. She needs to experience the wonders of cinema on her own accord, and we’re going to make her.”

“Something about that doesn’t seem quite right, but I can go along with the idea. Okay, Jenny, go pick out whatever movies you want to watch.”

“Well, I did see one earlier that looked interesting…”

“Well don’t just stand there; tell us.”

“I believe it was called The Notepad.”

“My goodness! The Notepad is quite possibly the most famous chick flick in existence. I myself have seen the wonderful work at least a dozen times.”

“Eeeeee! I love love love that movie!”

“Oh? Is it really that great a movie?”

“Heavens, no. It’s just a sappy, romantic film that gets you in all the right places. It’s disgusting how much enjoyment I actually get out of it.”

“That…actually sounds wonderful to me. I…really like those kinds of movies. Everyone is happy at the end, and it just makes me feel warm inside. I love seeing people happy like that…” She wasn’t sure why, but Jenny could feel herself opening up slightly to her friends. Normally she was a steel cage of emotions, but maybe she didn’t need to be.

Before Elizabeth had the chance to ridicule Jenny for being such a hopeless Romantic, Jordan stormed into the Video Store. The visibly distraught Golfer sauntered over to the girls, a fierce look of righteous fury covering her face.
Elizabeth was the first to acknowledge Jordan’s temperament. “Jordan, what an unexpected surprise. Why, you look as if some barbarous villains have invaded your homeland.”

“I feel like they may as well have.”

Jenny cautiously approached Jordan. “What is the matter?”

“It’s…sigh, it’s nothing, really. Rufus just said something that really rubbed me the wrong way. I think I just need some time away from him and his stupid face.”

Elizabeth looked knowingly at Lily. “Ahh, boy trouble.”

Lily replied, “Ahh, yes,” even though she had no idea what “boy trouble” actually was.

Jordan blushed. “It’s nothing like that.” She looked specifically at Jenny. “I swear.”

Jenny believed her. “I believe you.”

“Thank you, Jenny.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “I don’t believe it for a second. Be in denial all you want, but at the end of the day, the truth remains as it is.”

“You’re as stubborn as he is! I’m telling you that it’s nothing like that!”

“And I’m telling you that you don’t know what you’re talking about. Those in love are oft blind to the fact that they are so enamored.”

“How could I possibly think about love in a place like this?”

“I’ve always wondered what you think about. So quiet…always keeping to yourself. It’s awfully suspicious.”

Jenny didn’t like the tone that Elizabeth was using against Jordan. “Come on, Jordan, let us go for a walk. Just the two of us. It will help you to cool down.” Jordan gladly took the cue, and together the two of them left the confines of the Video Store.

Lily absently asked, “What was all that about?”

Before Elizabeth could reply, the girls heard a scream from across the way, followed by Taylor running to the dorms. Elizabeth shook her head in admonishment. “Lily, my dear, I fear that we are the only ones capable of holding ourselves together.”

The Bookstore exuded the same cool air as the Lounge. The checkout area was a circular desk set in the center of the store so that the four walls were completely smothered in books. The store supplied the students with cooking magazines, car repair manuals, joke books, etc. Highlighted in a big display in the back was a section devoted entirely to murder mysteries, perhaps to give the students some ideas. As opposed to the Video Store, the Bookstore carried many contemporary works of fiction and nonfiction alike.

Melissa was still steaming from her interaction with that James Beck. More than anyone else, Melissa understood what it meant to be responsible for the lives of others, and for the Movie Producer to undermine any individual’s existence was too much to bear. She hadn’t gotten a good chance to know either Francesca or Delilah, but she missed them greatly and mourned their loss.
Jordan hadn’t anticipated Monobear’s punishment to be so gruesome. Until that point, the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing had just seemed like a game to her, but this made it far more real. She hadn’t had much intention on playing the game in the first place; she wanted to find a loophole in the rules and upset the games-master. Certainly, Monobear was behind this farce, so removing the bear from his position would end the game.

Rufus had all but forgotten about the trial by the time they reached the Bookstore. Francesca had let herself get murdered, and Delilah had let herself get caught; it was pitiful. If these people really wanted to get out of this mall, then they would have to work much, much harder. There was no doubt in the Latinist’s mind that he would be able to escape the game unscathed; it was all a matter of time.

Melissa, Jordan, and Rufus had intended to meet together alone so that they could discuss their plans to keep a watch on the others, but Rico followed them into the store. Rico felt like he had been completely useless in the trial. Rico enjoyed being happy and go-lucky, but that trial was a real bummer. However, the other three had handled themselves very well during the process, and if he could figure out the secret to their stalwart success, then maybe he could find his place in the school community.

Rufus was perfectly content with browsing through the stacks of books; discussion could wait until later. Melissa was uneasy and wanted to get down to business. While Jordan and Rico were preoccupied, Melissa sidled up to Rufus and spoke in a quiet voice.

“What are we to do with our guest?”

“Hmm? You mean Rico? He’s harmless.”

“I agree; he doesn’t have the strength to kill a fly. But I don’t want him eavesdropping on our discussion.”

“A politician who doesn’t trust her own people…”

“Shush, it’s nothing like that. I just want to keep our alliance a secret so that the others don’t get suspicious.”

“Alliance? That’s what you’re calling it now?”

“Is it not so? We’re in charge of everyone…albeit clandestinely…”

“It just seems like a silly word to use to me…”

“Whatever. Just, are you going to get rid of Rico or am I?”

“Like I said, Morgan, Rico’s harmless; it doesn’t matter if he hears anything.”

“Melissa, Rufus. My name is Melissa. Please drill that into your brain.”

By now, Jordan and Rico had noticed Rufus and Melissa’s furtive whispers, and so they approached the secretive couple. The Politician and Latinist, slightly embarrassed at their overt exclusivity, turned to face their classmates. Jordan merely raised an eyebrow to express her concern, but Rico was more vocal.

“Yo-o, what’re you two talking about? No wait, let me guess, I got this. Hmm…so you’re standing in front of the young adult section…oh, that’s an easy one. It’s obvious that you’re secretly discussing the finer points of these novels, since it’s so well-known how embarrassing it is
to like this literature. Ha-a, I can tell by your stunned expressions that I have guessed correctly. See, this analytical stuff isn’t so tough after all; I guess I’ve learned a lot already!” Rico beamed, happily pleased with himself.

Melissa was speechless, having no idea what Rico was talking about. Rufus smirked to himself. “Sorry, Rico,” said the Latinist, “but you’re a little off the mark.”

“Wha-at? I am? Uhh, lemme see…uhh…you actually do think the books are dumb, and you’re just whispering in case you offend Jordan for liking that sort of stuff?”

Jordan was taken aback. “Excuse me? What would be wrong with liking young adult literature? Not to say that I do like it.”

Melissa continued to be confused, while Rufus chuckled slightly. “She would be the type of person, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Melissa finally entered back into the conversation. “What are we even talking about?”

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Rufus directed the conversation. “We were just getting to the point. We have a lot to discuss after Dorothy and Francine’s trial. It seems that our hold on the others is not as absolute as we had hoped.”

Melissa cast her head down. “I am so ashamed. I feel like I’m the one to blame for this catastrophe.”

Jordan turned to face away from the crowd. “You can’t blame yourself. People are unpredictable; we can only hope for the best.”

Melissa picked her head back up. “We shouldn’t have to hope for the best! We should just be living the best! Why does no one else understand that?”

Rufus shook his head. “Not everyone has had the same life growing up as you did. I’ve grown used to complacency, but for some, this experience is unbearable, but they would never show it for fear of showing weakness.”

“Do you really believe that?” asked the Politician.

Rufus looked her directly in the eyes. “Remember how I always said you were naïve? That hasn’t changed. This is a game; you have to play aggressively to win. If you’re not willing to fight, then you have no right to compete.”

“Game? Compete? What are you talking about?”

“Nonne intelligis? This is a life-or-death game we’re in. Kill or be killed.”

“Yo-o, I feel like I’m intruding on something here. If you don’t mind me…I’ll, uhh, be over there.”

Melissa opened her mouth to release Rico, but Rufus cut her off. “Nonsense,” said Rufus. “You’ve witnessed enough of this conversation already, so you might as well stick around for the rest.”

“Seriously? You mean I can hang out with the elites?”

Melissa blushed. “What do you mean with the elites? We’re not any different than you.”
“Ahh, c’mon. It’s like, there’s a bunch of you who are really important, and then the rest of us are just kinda here as jokes.”

“No…no, that’s not true. It can’t be…people don’t actually think that…”

“I mean, that’s just my opinion. Like there’s you three and then Theo. You did do a lot with the last trial. You’re making all the moves while the rest of us are just sorta existing.”

“I refuse to let that be true! Each and every one of you is special! No one is unimportant!”

Rufus raised an eyebrow. “Megan, your naïveté is showing.”

Jordan interposed. “Rico raises a good point. There does seem to be a hierarchy in the class. That kind of disruption can be deleterious for morale and camaraderie.”

“Then we’ll just have to break down the hierarchy!”

Rufus rolled his eyes. “Again with you naïveté. The hierarchy is perfectly fine. Like I said: this is a game. The ones at the top are the ones we’re actually competing against.”

Jordan furrowed her brow. “If we’re such hearty competition, then why are you confiding in us?”

“You’re either my friends or my enemies; which do you prefer? Although, really, you’re hardly competition to me.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” asked Jordan, her cool temper rising. She was beginning to have enough of Rufus’s complacent attitude.

“You were present during the trial, \textit{ita?} I solved the case, I nabbed the culprit. If it weren’t for me, Danielle would be living the life of Riley at the moment.”

“You are \underline{not} taking all the credit for the trial. That is…beyond human. We are all in this together; you’re no more important than anyone else here.”

“Say that again after I win this game.”

Melissa was growing annoyed as well. “And how do you plan on doing that, huh?”

“I think Monobear’s instructions were clear enough.”

“You are unbelievable,” said Jordan. “I thought you wanted to be friends because you saw something special in me, but apparently you’re only interested in furthering your own career.”

“Ahh, so you do understand. \textit{Mirabile est.} Now we can work more efficiently.”

Jordan let out a small cry of frustration and stormed out of the Bookstore.

Rufus turned to Rico. “Was it something I said?”

Melissa looked at the Latinist disparagingly. “What even are you?” The Politician turned and left Rufus and Rico to their own devices.

Rico was unsure about how great the “elites” were. “Did you really mean that?”

“Of course I did, well, to an extent.”
“But you can’t be real! We’ve already lost two people! We can’t lose anymore!”

“What is Monobear’s goal?”

“To make us kill each other, and so far he’s doing a good job.”

“Are you so sure?”

“What?!”

“Monobear is…an interesting character. I think…no, it’s too early for that. Maybe later…”

“You’re losing me, bro.”

Rufus smiled. “All in due time.”

Just then, a cry could be heard coming from elsewhere in the sector, followed by the All-Star Lucky running through said sector.

Rufus turned once more to Rico. “Well, Rico, it’s comforting to know that we’re not the only ones losing our minds.”

Taylor, Austin, Cody, and James walked into the Hobby Shop. The store was mundane and simple. On the tables and low-lying shelves were model train kits, knitting supplies, paints and brushes, notepads/sketchbooks and pencils, and a plethora of puzzles. A small wooden ceiling fan squeaked faintly as it rotated. Opposed to Monobear’s grandiose and magnanimous bearings, much of the mall seemed to be stuck in a humbler time.

Taylor had warranted too much attention during the trial, and people knew too much about her. It was embarrassing; she could just die from embarrassment. Taylor liked to hold herself high, but the commoners seemed to be dragging her down to their level. Miss Lucky was going to be somebody someday, and so she needed to maintain a pristine demeanor in the face of the unpleasant.

Austin had virtually forgotten about the trial. He had been physically present, but that was about all the more present he had been. He didn’t even have his decorative soaps anymore. He wasn’t exactly sure why he was in the Hobby Shop now, but he decided to just go along with it. With any hope, he wouldn’t have to do anything here.

Cody was shaken, not so much from the trial itself, but from Delilah’s execution. Cody had seen his friends wipe out on some destructive waves before, but Delilah bit the dust with her stunt. It reminded Cody of how easily any of his classmates—including himself—could be gone from the world. It was a scary thought, and he resolved to do his best not to let harm fall to any of his peers.

James was ecstatic after the trial. Everyone had pinpointed the murderer, and so Monobear would soon offer another incentive to keep the murder ball rolling. The Movie Producer could only imagine what kind of prize would await him after his victory.

Taylor looked over the merchandise disinterestedly. “Wow. I was looking forward to actually finding something to do here, but this stuff is so lame. ‘Lucky’ my ass.”

“Doing things is overrated,” added Austin.
Cody rubbed the back of his hand and let out a forced chuckle. “Yeah, this stuff is totally bogus. Only wimps would build model planes, trains, and automobiles.”

Taylor was glad that Cody was agreeing with her. “Teehee, you betcha. And knitting? I wouldn’t be caught dead with sewing needles in my hands.”

James rolled his eyes. “If—you’re dead, you really don’t have much of a say of what’s in your hands.”

Austin cocked his head to the side. “I hadn’t thought of that…hey, if someone murders me, can you put a broken floral crown in my hands so it looks like I died from disappointment. That would be pretty nifty.”

“Dude?”

Taylor put a hand on Austin’s shoulder. “Austin, don’t joke about things like that.”

“Huh? I wasn’t joking. I don’t want my death to be boring.”

James snickered to himself. “Then how do you want your death to be?”

“I think I’d like to go out in a blaze of glory. That way people will be like ‘Hey, remember that Austin Fitzpatrick kid and what he did. That was pretty cool.’”

Taylor was skeptical. “You? Isn’t your special talent doing nothing, though?”

Austin smiled. “Yawn, that’s what would make it so interesting.”

Cody rubbed the back of his head again. “I, uhh, I don’t think I quite get it, but okay.”

Austin didn’t understand how Cody couldn’t understand. “Haven’t you ever thought about what your death would be like?”

James had to interject. “Studies have shown that thinking about death can stimulate your brain into releasing endorphins.”

Taylor ignored him. “Sure, I guess. Like, I want to go out when I’m like ninety years old surrounded by friends, family, and my adoring fans.”

Cody had to think for a minute. “I don’t think I’ve ever really thought about it much. I don’t think it matters so long as I feel good about it. Live life with no regrets, ya dig?”

There was a brief moment of silence. “Let’s switch the topic to something a little less morbid,” said Taylor.

“Is no one going to ask me how I want to die?” asked James impudently.

Austin stared blankly at the Movie Producer. “No one cares what you think.”

The bluntness of the statement greatly offended James. “Oh, and what makes you say that?”

“Dude…”

Taylor took a step toward James. “No one likes you, loser. Your negativity is so annoying. You’re no fun to be around. God, do you not understand why you don’t have any friends?”
James was quick to retort. “Oh, that’s rich coming from a valley girl.”

“What did you call me?”

Austin added, “Yeah, what’d you call her?…because I wasn’t really listening…”

“I see your type all the time in the industry. You think you’re entitled to everything because you have a pretty face, but that beauty is only ever skin deep.”

Taylor could feel her emotions rising. “You don’t know anything about me, you dick!”

“Please, it’s written all over your face. You want nothing more than for people to like you. I’m surprised you didn’t just die from embarrassment during the trial when we all learned one of your more intimate secrets.”

“Shut. Up! No one wants to listen to you speak!”

“Heh, you can’t even come up with a proper rebuttal because you know it’s all true. Face it, you’re as shallow as they come; you’re no better than me!”

Taylor’s emotions had reached a boiling point. She glanced nervously at Austin and Cody, wondering what they were thinking, but she couldn’t be sure. She turned angrily back to James. “You...you...shut up!” At once, her anger broke into tears, and, with her hands covering her uncontrollable flow of emotions, she bolted out of the Hobby Shop.


James replied, “You’re going to take her side? How was what I did any different than what you say to people?”

Austin stared impassively at James as he spoke. “I’m neutrally candid; there’s no venom in my voice when I talk to people. I don’t try to make people upset on purpose.”

“Yeah, man, that just makes you a bully,” added Cody.

“Stop attacking me!” yelled James. “You’re all delusional! And you feel the insatiable need to gang up on the individuals who can see reality for what it is. It’s not my fault that you have the intelligence of gourds!”

“You’re digging yourself a deeper hole, man.”

“Excuse me for acting out after I’ve been provoked!”

“No one has provoked you,” said Austin. “I would’ve said the same thing as Taylor.”

“Then I said the same thing back to her! The bitch had it coming.”

Remaining composed, Austin simply said, “Hey, don’t say things like that.”

“Dude, not cool. You don’t talk about chicks like that.”

“Tch.”

Cody moved forward so that there was very little space between him and James. “No matter what you do, you don’t make a girl cry. That’s Guy Code 101.”
James turned away. “What do you know?”

Cody put his fists together. “If you make her—no, any of the girls cry, then I’m gonna give you something to cry about.”

Austin raised a finger to gain everyone’s attention. “And I won’t do anything to stop him.”

“Tch. You’re just as pathetic as the rest of them.” James sneered and walked coolly out of the Hobby Shop.
The afternoon faded into the evening, and once more the students gathered together for dinner. The updated dinner menu offered the students pasta with a choice of either tomato sauce with meat or tomato sauce without. Along with the cola, the students could now enjoy the flavors of generic purple drink.

Normally the students would laugh and joke during dinner, but tensions were running high. The close proximity that they were forced to endure was wearing thin on their nerves, and the increased stress of their predicament didn’t help matters either. Friendships strung up from the get-go were being tested, and many of the shallow relationships were showing the first signs of breaking.

Jenny was even more aloof with the other BFFs, Jordan wouldn’t give Rufus the time of day, and Taylor hung her head for most of the dinner. Cody and Austin were staring down James, while Markus was staring down most of the guys.

After they had finished dining, the students got down to business discussing the new features of the mall.

Melissa: “We’ve all had a tiring day, and, to be honest, I’m low on energy at the moment as well, but we need to persevere and get through this—whatever this is. Would anyone like to share what they found today?”

Lily: “Ryoukai! We would! We looked through the Video Store. It’s got a bunch of nifty tapes that we can all watch on the big TV there.”

Markus: “Tapes? You don’t mean VHS tapes, do you?”

Jenny: “That is the correct format of media.”

Markus: “Ugh, it’s like we’re living in the Stone Age.”

Randolph: “We should be thankful for what we have; not upset over what we do not.”

James: “Does that go the same for venereal diseases?”

Randolph: “Oh...I, umm, well—”

Austin: “Cough bully cough.”

James: “You got something to say to me?”

Cody: “You got something to say in return?”

James: “Tch. Whatever.”

Theo: “Am I...missing something?”

Melissa: “ORDER! Was there anything else notable in the Video Store?”

Elizabeth: “Not particularly, no.”

Melissa: “Moving on. My group investigated the—”
Rufus: “Marilyn, if you don’t mind, I’d like to give our explication last.”

Melissa: “What for?”

Rufus: “I have my reasons.”

Jordan: “Careful, your idea might be too brilliant.”

Rufus: “We can only hope.”

Theo: “In that case, Markus, Randolph, and I visited the Pharmacy. It has plenty of medical supplies in case anyone falls ill.”

Randolph: “It also has a fine selection of tea.”

Markus: “And poison! Don’t forget the poison.”

Melissa: “P-poison?”

James: “Don’t say things like that so casually!”

Theo: “I think it’s one of Monobear’s inventions. There’s a whole display set up for it.”

Rico: “Hey-y, we should just destroy the display so nobody can get any ideas.”

Jordan: “With how fast Monobear can restock the shops, all the poison would just be back the next day.”

Randolph: “Other than that, the Pharmacy seems pretty harmless.”

Melissa: “Then that leaves…”

Austin: “For you people who like to do things, the Hobby Shop may have something interesting for you.”

James: “If you like dinky model trains and grandma sewing.”

Cody: “Yeah, the merch is pretty lame, but it’s better than nothing, right?”

Austin: “Nothing deadly, though, unless you count James’s breath.”

James: “What was that!?!?”

Austin: “Were you unaware? I think you suffer from halitosis. You may want to check the Pharmacy.”

James: “Why I oughta—”

Cody: “Yeah, dude, maybe you should.”

Melissa: “Taylor, to my knowledge, you were also a member of the exploration team.Anything to add?”

Taylor: “Hmm, what? Me? No…”

Melissa: “Alright, then. Rufus?”
Rufus: “Gratias. Meredith, Rico, Jeanette, and I stopped at the Bookstore. I am happy to report that the Bookstore holds more current material than the Video Store. I also would like to bring attention to a particularly interesting item I found there.”

Melissa: “What is that?”

Rufus: “It’s a file I found wedged in between two books in the foreign literature section. It didn’t look at all like it belonged there, so I took it out.”

Jordan: “When did you find that?”

Rufus: “After you left.”

Rico: “But I didn’t even see it…”

Rufus: “You must have been distracted at the time.”

James: “Cut to the chase already! What’s it say?”

Rufus: “I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

Jordan: “Then why even bring it up?”

Rufus: “It’s written in an Eastern language. Why would an American mall house something like that? Don’t you find that suspicious?”

Elizabeth: “What do we do about it then?”

Rufus: “Obviously, we have to translate it to find out what information it contains, and to my knowledge, Lucille has the most experience with Eastern cultures.”

Lily: “Oh, you mean me? Then I shall try my best!”

Rufus: “I hereby place Lucille under an aegis of murder protection. No one has permission to kill her until she has finished translating the document.”

James: “There we go, one of the ‘haves’ telling the ‘have-nots’ what to do.”

Melissa: “Here we go again…”

James: “This is a game all about killing! To declare someone off-limits is inane and ridiculous!”

Lily: “I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

Elizabeth: “Nor do I.”

Jenny: “…oh, I also do not object.”

Randolph: “Perhaps we should just agree to cease the killing altogether.”

Theo: “That would probably be for the best.”

Markus: “Killing is for the weak anyway!”

Jordan: “Doesn’t declaring Lily off-limits make her more of a target?”

Rico: “I can field this one! Yeah, so-o, uhh, if someone knows what’s in that document, they might
Rufus: “Hmm…the document certainly is a mystery. I’m sure it’s nothing, though.”

Lily: “But I don’t want to be a target!”

Melissa: “How many times do I have to say this? No one is going to die anymore. If everyone would stop thinking that way, we wouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

James: “Then it’s never going to happen as long as I’m breathing.”

Cody: “Maybe we can arrange for that to happen.”

James: “And then you’ll all go to a trial, dumbass.”

Taylor: “…please stop…”

James: “The beast speaks!”

Austin: “Cut it out, Beck.”

Theo: (“What is going on with that group?”)

Markus: (“I don’t know. Do you think Taylor’s flight has anything to do with this?”)

Theo: (“I would assume so.”)

James: “Oy! What are you two whispering about?”

Melissa: (“Why do these meetings always dissolve into pointless bickering?”)

Rufus: (“Have you done any serious thinking about whom you’re dealing with here?”)

Melissa: (“Not you too. Why can’t we just believe in each other?”)

Austin: “Look, you’re making a scene.”

Cody: “If you make somebody cry again, I swear to God…”

Lily: (“What movie should we watch first?”)

Elizabeth: (“I’m sure I’ll find something good.”)

Jenny: (“I was hoping we could watch Romanna and Jules.”)

Elizabeth: (“Oh, no no no. We shouldn’t waste our time on trivial films like that.”)

James: “Idiots! You’re all idiots!”

Jordan: (“Why does that sound so familiar?”)

Rico: (“Because Rufus said something similar to you this afternoon.”)

Jordan: (“Thanks, Rico. I had completely forgotten about that.”)

Rico: (“Anytime, Jordan. That’s what we super sleuths are here for!”)
Cody: “You. Me. Five minutes. No holds bar.”

Austin: “And I’ll watch.”

Randolph: (“Ohm…ohm…ohm…”)

James: “Tch. You’re all crazy.”

Melissa: “ORDER! It doesn’t appear that we have anything else important to discuss, so—”

Theo: “Actually, while everyone is gathered, I have something I would like to say.”

Melissa: “Go ahead.”

Theo: “I was thinking about making a more detailed map of the mall, and I realized something about the layout of the mall: there aren’t any bathrooms except in our rooms.”

Rico: “Hu-uh?”

Lily: “What’s so important about that?”

Theo: “Isn’t it odd? Why would someone construct a mall without putting in ample bathrooms?”

Melissa: “It seems strange, true. But living in a mall is strange in and of itself.”

Rufus: “It begs the question, though. What was the extent of Monobear’s renovations?”

Jordan: “Is that a question we can really answer?”

Rico: “Yet another mystery has reared its ugly head!”

Randolph: “What shall we do about this strange occurrence?”

Rufus: “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Melissa: “I agree. If something does come of it, then I’m sure it’ll become apparent when the time comes. Thank you, Theo, for your input.”

Theo: “I’m just doing my best.”

Markus: “I see…”

Taylor: “…is that all…?”

Melissa: “Sigh, yes. Meeting adjourned.”

Taylor: “Melissa, can I have a moment in private?”

Melissa: “Certainly, anything.”

Cody: “I got something I wanna run by ya, too.”

Melissa: “Alright, alright. Let everyone clear out first.”

The remaining students went their separate ways.

Melissa: “Now, what did you want to talk to me about?”
Taylor: “…am I shallow?”
Melissa: “What? Where is this coming from?”
Taylor: “Never mind that. Just answer the question.”
Melissa: “No. Why would I think that?”
Taylor: “I don’t know. The way I act, I guess. Because I’m not, really! I’m not a vain person!”
Melissa: “I don’t think I’m the one you’re trying to convince of that.”
Taylor: “…I think you might be right about that…”
Melissa: “Why did you come to me with this?”
Taylor: “Well, you’re our leader, right? You have to listen to what we say. Besides…I feel like I can trust you; you’re down to earth, approachable.”
Melissa: “That’s a pleasant compliment. I’ve been hearing the word ‘naïve’ thrown around a lot lately.”
Taylor: “I think you need to do some convincing of your own.”

With a smile beautifully adorning her face, Taylor left to go out on her own.

Melissa: “What can I do for you, Cody?”
Cody: “It’s about James.”
Melissa: “Don’t get me started on that kid.”
Cody: “I don’t like him, either. So I was wondering, is there something we can do to settle him down?”
Melissa: “What do you mean?”
Cody: “He’s been antagonizing a lot of the other students, so I was thinking maybe we could put him in a position where he is unable to do his antagonizing.”
Melissa: “You’re not…”
Cody: “We could just tie him up and leave him in the Lounge or Video Store or something. We’d feed him, of course, and stuff like that, but we could keep him away from everyone else.”
Melissa: “As nice as that sounds, I can’t condone it. If we want to get through this, we’re going to have to believe in each other. That means giving each other the benefit of the doubt.”
Cody: “I don’t like it…”
Melissa: “I don’t like it, either, but there’s not much more we can do. We can only hope he comes around.”

That night, the students went to bed more or less themselves. The day had been stressful for everyone, and so the students were glad to get some well-deserved rest. For some, sleep came
easy; while for others, it did not. In the morning, the fourteen survivors regrouped for a pleasant
breakfast; the enhanced repertoire of culinary excellence now boasted the flavors of fresh fruit and
coffee. After dining, the students were preparing to go about their individual business when
Monobear appeared before them.

“You dunderheads did such a fine job in the trial yesterday that I thought I’d give you a
special treat,” said the robot bear magnanimously. “A favorite past-time for you Neanderthals is to
stick your faces in front of televisions for Saturday morning cartoons. I don’t know what day today
is—I ripped my daily calendar apart because it said something that offended me—but I have an
equally mindlessly entertaining gift waiting for you in the Video Store. Now hurry up and get your
sorry selves over there! The feature presentation is about to begin!”

Most of the students were rightfully skeptical of Monobear’s gift, but Lily’s innocent
interest convinced everyone to heed Monobear’s words. As a group, they traveled to the North
Sector and entered the Video Store. The more naive members made themselves comfortable on the
couches in front of the large television display, while the more austere elected to stand.

Monobear was waiting impatiently for the students to settle, and once they did, the
festivities commenced. With a grandiose flourish, Monobear popped the tape into the VCR and hit
the play button. The television screen was black for a moment, even though the tape was spinning.
There were muffled sounds in the background, but nothing distinct.

Then, the cap was taken off the recorder, and the screen erupted into light. It took the
camera a minute to focus, but then the television revealed an unnatural sight. Markus let out an
audible gasp, Melissa was shaken, and Taylor clasped her hands over her mouth. Jordan had to look
away, Lily buried her head in her arms, and James frowned at the image on the screen. Rufus,
Austin, and Theo kept their eyes stoically locked on the screen.

There was no time stamp on the screen, but the recording had been made with a commercial
video camera. The room on film was blank and sparsely decorated. A single chair sat in the center
of the screen, and sitting in the chair was the object of everyone’s interest. Sitting casually, All-
Star Tutor Francesca Maysworth smiled complacently at the camera.

Randolph said a quick prayer, Cody cursed under his breath, and Rico yelled, “It’s a
ghost!” Elizabeth and Jenny placed comforting hands on Lily’s back, but neither of them could
believe what they were witnessing. Monobear was laughing at the visible effect the film was
having on the students.

On screen, Francesca titled her head slightly and began to speak. “I’m usually the one
telling people what to do; not the other way around.” Her slightly-abrasive personality was still
intact, and her face shone with the brilliance of life. “I’m still surprised you were able to convince
me to go along with this, but I guess I shouldn’t downplay the abilities of us All-Stars. It’s all for
the best I suppose.

Hmm…where to begin…I actually wavered a lot in deciding to come to Success Summit.
The class sizes were very small, and the students were already known for being exceptional. You
see, that didn’t leave a lot of room for the skills of an All-Star Tutor. Who would even need a tutor
there? But the school has a wonderful reputation, and that would certainly look good on an
application.

“Has Success Summit changed my life? Definitely, and for the better, but probably not in
the way you’re thinking. The school is supposed to foster our talents and give us the tools to reach
the peak of success, but those tools aren’t intangible. What I’m trying to say is that the personal
element of the school is the most instructive. I’d be nobody if it weren’t for the people I’ve gotten
to know. The relationships we make far transcend the realm of creating a strong business network; these are deep, meaningful friendships that will last a lifetime.”

Francesca bowed her head, and the tape ceased spinning. It was so surreal to hear Francesca’s voice again that the meaning of her words was lost in her presence. The movie in and of itself was not unnerving, but the students felt greatly unsettled.

The Video Store had adopted an ominous aura, and the place felt haunted now. The students were desperate to leave and escape elsewhere in the mall, but Monobear wasn’t about to let their brief stint into despair end so quickly.

“Like every great film, there is an equally great sequel!” said the bear. “I really am a great host, because I’ve got another movie lined up for you to watch!” In a blur of motion, Monobear popped Francesca’s movie out of the VCR and put a new one in. The students had a grim feeling about what they would soon see.

Like the first film, the second opened on the same blank room. The only difference was that the person sitting in the chair had changed. In Francesca’s place sat All-Star Cosmetologist Delilah MacDonald. Delilah had done up her make-up special for the camera, but she still looked like her old self. She gave her hair a ceremoniously attractive flip and began her soliloquy.

“Howdy! Should I say ‘howdy?’ Is that too cliché? I’ve never been on camera before; how do I look? You know what, can I just start over? Salutations. No, that doesn’t feel right either. I’d expect Rufus—or should I say Rafael—to say something like that. You know, I was talkin’ to him the other day, and I still don’t think he knows my name’s Delilah. Whatever. Just edit somethin’ fancy in for my intro.

“Oh, I love it here at Success Summit. The second I got that letter in the mail, I packed my bags and got on the next train headed to greatness. I didn’t have to give it a second thought! I felt honored that they thought little ol’ me had the potential to truly be somebody. Now, I’ve won my fair share of beauty pageants, believe me, but when you get the chance to practice beauty on a grand scale, you take it.

“Without a doubt this school has changed my life! I used to think I was a pretty face with a good knowledge of how beautification works, and now I know I’m a gorgeous face with a consummate knowledge of how beautification works. Heck, I’ve got salons in Paris already beggin’ me to come work for ’em. I really do like it here, though, otherwise I would’ve jumped on the French Express ages ago. The best part of being here is that everyone’s attractive. There ain’t a bad lookin’ kid in the bunch. And them beautiful people are always successful; that’s a fact!”

The tape ended, and the students were trapped in stunned silence. Monobear laughed.

“Upupupupupupu! I can tell that you all enjoyed my little spectacle; you’re all speechless at such a magnificent display of talent! If you ever feel the uncontrollable urge to watch these marvelous beauties again, I’m just going to set them on this special little shelf over here. Have fun now, and don’t get carried away on your Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing!” The robot vanished, leaving the students alone in the Video Store.

Silence occupied the space. Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Everyone’s mind was reeling in feeble comprehension. Finally, Markus broke the sacred silence. “What does that mean?” he asked. He didn’t have to specify that he inquired to the nature of the films because everyone understood his intention.

Melissa stared straight ahead and replied. “I do not know.”
It was unhealthy for the students to remain in the Video Store for much longer. With the increasing strangeness of the mall on their minds, they departed to sort through the confusion on their own. The hours came and went, and the students were able to put the ugliness behind them and try to get on with their lives.
With the help of one of the stronger boys, Rufus had dragged a chair from the Lounge to the Bookstore so he wouldn’t have to walk back and forth so much. At his current rate, he would have the most interesting books read within a week. Then he’d have to move on to the less interesting romance novels and how-to manuals.

In the books, he could escape the anxiety of those around him. Everyone thought with their hearts, not with their brains, and it was nice to garner a reprieve from such absurd behavior. Even the most sapient creatures, those whom he had aligned himself with, were giving in to these primitive impulses. How could they hope to win if they couldn’t keep level heads?

Rufus had come to a particularly cliff-hanger-esque chapter break when Rico entered the Bookstore. Perfect timing.

“Yo-o!”

“Salve, Rico.”

“I hope I’m not early.”

“You’re right on time.”

“Awesome! So…where do we begin?”

“Where, indeed. I find that the start is a good place to begin.”

“Alright.”

“Here, give this one a go.”

“Ehh? The *Iliad*? What’s it about?”

“You don’t know Homer?”

“The yellow guy from TV?”

“By Jove, no. Homer, the great blind storyteller, author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*."

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard of him.”

“You children are more deprived than I thought.”

“So I just…read it?”

*Ita.* Read to the end of the first sentence and then we’ll discuss it.”

“Sure...’The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus' son, Achilles, that destructive wrath which,’ hey, how long is this sentence? It’s like five lines long!”

“But there’s a certain art form to it, no?”

“I can’t get it. Why are you having me read this?”

“You said you want to learn how to tell a story better, so why not study the works of the
greats? Homer would tell this story solely from memory. Look how long the book is.”

“It’s heavier than any textbook I’ve ever had…”

“And he was able to captivate his audiences. If you want to connect with people, you have to learn how to use rhetoric effectively.”

“Oh, yeah, totally, I get you. I mean, do you think I get you?”

“Not rhetorical questions.”

“Dangit! I just don’t get this.”

“Rico, don’t beat yourself up. You’re a smart kid, you’ll get this.”

“But I’m not smart! You saw me in the trial; I couldn’t get a thing right!”

“But you were trying, and that’s all that matters. Once we give up, we’re done for. It’s like running a marathon; you just have to pace yourself. You can’t rush into this.”

“But I need to get better! All of you have these amazing talents, and then I’m stuck doing nothing…”

“But you do have an amazing talent. I couldn’t run a quarter of a mile without having to stop for a break. We each bring something important to the table.”

“Easy for you to say…”

“We’re each our own worst enemies. Once we defeat ourselves, then we can defeat the real enemy.”

“How you can say such hopeful things after you’ve said such hateful things? I thought Jordan was going to cry earlier.”

“Eheu. Different people need to be dealt with differently. You need positive encouragement, whereas Jordan needs a more deliberative push.”

“How can you be so smart about these things?”

“I do a lot of thinking.”

“I don’t. I wish I did, though.”

“Take that back. Thinking all the time is not a walk in the park.”

“No-o way! Being smart would make life ten times easier!”

“It can also make life ten times lonelier…”

“Hu-uh?”

“You end up thinking too much about something…you can’t just enjoy it because you’re always thinking about it.”

“Rufus…”

“You feel isolated, and the only person you have for company is yourself, but what’s the
point in that when you can’t even like yourself. There’s a reason others are repulsed by you, so what redeeming trait can there even be?”

“Uhh, Rufus?”

“There’s a reason I can’t sleep at night when I’m forced to be alone with my thoughts, and yet I choose to ignore the very essence of the dilemma.”

“Rufus!”

“Quid?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Quid?”

“You’re being as crazy and irrational as me. Stop it. You don’t need to be saying those kind of things!”

“I…what…?”

“Listen, you’re helping me out with this rhetoric shtick, so let me help you out. If you’ll do the thinking for the two of us, then I’ll do the not-thinking for us.”

“I…ego…you also have to agree not to tell anyone about what I just said. I…lost my composure there for a second…”

“Heh-heh, no worries, man. We’re tight!”

“Bonum. Now where were we with your lesson?”

For privacy’s sake, Theo and Markus agreed to meet in the dimly lit East Sector of the mall. None of the shops here were open, and the fluorescent lights neglected to give off their vibrant buzz. The strange absence made the abandoned sector feel ominous, thus making it the perfect location for strengthening one’s constitution.

Theo still felt uncomfortable how interested in him Markus was. Theo was aware that he was physically fit, but he never considered himself overly strong. The Cartographer enjoyed neutrality; he didn’t want to be too strong or too weak. He was fine with just getting by. He would quickly realize that he and Markus were very different people.

Markus was anxious. He was nervous as to what “becoming strong” would entail, but he was restless to change. He had to take life by the horns, and he wouldn’t be able to do it on his own. If the Thespian had any hope of succeeding, he would have to undergo a massive personality overhaul. Markus could not settle for complacency; he needed more.

“Well, we’re here,” said Theo matter-of-factly.

“Indeed we are,” replied Markus. “So, what is the first act of this journey? Where do I begin my metamorphosis?”

“Gee, that’s a, uhh, good question…I’m not entirely sure…”

“Lucky for you I created a few scenarios in my head just in case something like this
happened. Tell me a story about a time when you were exceptionally brave, and then we’ll act the scene out together. I shall shed my cowardice vicariously!”

“You’re really putting me on the spot here. I’ve never done any sort of acting.”

“Oh, please, it’s so easy that Rico could do it. It’s just like when you played pretend as a kid.”

“Alright, let’s give it a shot. A story about bravery, huh? Okay, I think I got one. It was a cool summer night in the Uzuhli village. I was drinking—well, they called it ‘tea,’ but it was more like moonshine.”

“Yes, all great adventure stories must involve alcoholic beverages. It shows the ruggedness of the protagonist and how they can overcome an altered state of mind to emerge victorious.”

“Uhh, sure. Anyway, I was drinking with my friend Ra’ek, when we were interrupted by a deafening boom outside our tent.”

“The denouement!”

“We quickly left the tent to see what was causing the commotion. The sky was on fire. The guerilla army was invading our camp. The Uzuhli men quickly grabbed their weapons to fight off the invaders, but they were greatly outnumbered…”

“So you leapt into action, and your heroism turned the tide of battle!”

“No. I ran back into the tent. I took Ra’ek’s wife, and I laid us down on the ground, covered ourselves with dirt, and I pretended to be dead. The guerilla fighters had no interest in dead bodies; they only wanted the land.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yes, they were vile men.”

“No! That’s your story of bravery? Puh-thetic! That was seriously weak! I wanted bravery, not cowardice. How do you expect me to figure out how to be strong from a tale like that?”

“I think it is a good learning instrument. Bravery…strength…it isn’t about being fierce in battle; it’s about making the tough decisions count. I would’ve been slain by the guerillas had I fought, and so would Naba, Ra’ek’s wife. I saved us from that torment. Yes, I lost a valuable friend that day, but I’m still alive to tell the tale.”

“Really? That’s all you have to say about that?”

“Yes. Are you starting to understand? Being strong has nothing to do with muscles or fortitude; it’s staring disaster and despair in the face and not letting it get to you.”

“Hmm…I was worried something like this might happen…”

“How do you mean?”

“You poor soul, you don’t understand what it means to be strong. I mean, I should be one to talk, but I at least understand the principle behind the concept; you haven’t got a clue.”

“I thought you needed my assistance in this matter?”
“Oh, I thought I did, too, but you have very little experience to give me. I need a master who will show me how to be strong, how to give off that imperturbable aura of unbreakable stoicism.”

“You’re speaking shallowly. You cannot hope to become strong overnight.”

“Au contraire! I am an actor; I can become someone different at the drop of a needle. I just need my inspiration first. Once I can get into character, then I’ll be unstoppable.”

“That’s a fool’s ideal. You don’t crave bravery; you only seek bravado. Listen to me: that’s a dangerous path to follow.”

“I’m sorry, Theo, but you’ve already discredited yourself in front of me. I’m sure your humble sense of pride is good enough for you, but I need more. It’s one thing to not let myself be pushed around; it’s another to become a force to be reckoned with.”

“I understand that Francesca meant a lot to you, but you’re not thinking clearly. She wouldn’t want this.”

“Can you say for certain what the dead do or do not want?”

“…”

“I didn’t think so. The curtains have barely opened, but already I know what I must do. Don’t try to talk me out of it; I need to do this.”

“I can see your conviction. If you truly feel this strongly, then I cannot stop you. But please keep in mind what I have told you.”

“Thank you, Theo. May we both have a good run at this.”

Taylor took her own laundry to the Laundromat; she couldn’t risk having anyone else do it for her. The simple act of laundering clothing allowed her to clear her mind of any ill thoughts. James’s words from the day prior were still biting her conscience. Though most of his fallacious accusations were far from the truth, there was a semblance of veracity in his specious statements. Taylor understood that a great many people had shallow personalities and that deep thinking was not one of her strong traits, but she felt uneasy being strictly classified as such.

So what if she was shallow? She had a right to be. Taylor had had a very easy life heretofore. If she wanted, if she needed something, she got it. Many of her peers struggled with the day-to-day trivialities of teenage life, but Taylor had breezed through the weeks. Too often she wondered why the people around her complained like babies so much. Perhaps it was just her All-Star attribute shining through that gave her an easy pass through life, or maybe she was shallower than a dried-up puddle.

But was Lucky even that noble of a talent? She didn’t have to do anything or apply herself to utilize her innate abilities. Compared to the others, she was rather plain. She’d really felt like an outcast from the first day. The only person she had formed a close relationship with was the kid who was special for doing nothing, and even then, they had only formed a love-hate relationship. She couldn’t even connect with the rest of the girls! Approaching the most approachable person had taken a great deal of courage on her own part.

Taylor was so absorbed in her disparaging thoughts that she didn’t notice Lily sneaking into
the Laundromat. Lily’s ostentatiously upbeat personality made her presence quickly known, however.

“Taylor!” Lily cried. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Oh…hello.”

“Nani? Daijoubu?”

“Uhh, English?”

“Are you okay? You don’t seem yourself. Especially during dinner last night and then this morning…”

“I’m fine, I think.”

“Nipah! Good. I don’t like it when my friends are sad.”

“Your…friends? I thought you were friends with Jenny and Elizabeth.”

“Desu, I am. I’m friends with everyone here. We’re all friends, right? Even James. Some of us get along better than others, but we’re still all friends.”

Taylor resisted the urge to call Lily out on her naïveté. “Sure.” But then the urge was too much to handle. “How can you mean things like that?”

“Huh? It’s obvious, isn’t it? We have to be friends; we don’t have a choice.”

“Our only choice is picking who we’re going to kill to get out of here.”

“No! That’s not it at all! We might not have much here, but we do have each other, and so we gotta make that count! We have to look past our differences and get closer. That’s what Melissa says anyway. I know she sounds like a broken record, but what she says is true: if we work together, we can accomplish whatever we want, including getting out of here.”

“I still don’t get how you can be so sure about that. Our situation sucks. Monobear wants us to despair, and I don’t think that that’s an overly difficult thing to happen.”

“Shushie! I won’t let you talk that way. We. Are. Friends. Period. End of story.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m too much of a realist to believe that.”

“Just give it a shot! If not for yourself, then for me.”

“Lily…”

“You’re a pretty girl, Taylor. It would be a waste for you to stop trying.”

“Lily…you know what? You’re right. I’ve been feeling mopey for a while now, and that’s gotta stop. What the hell, let’s give this a shot!”

“Yatta! I knew you could do it.”

“Yeah…I just needed someone to believe in me. Alright, no more depressing thoughts; it’s only good vibes from here on out. If someone’s got a problem with me, then tough! I’m not changing a thing!”
“Eeeeeee! I’m so happy for you!”

“Ahh, I feel so much better. God, what was I thinking earlier?”

“I don’t even know!”

“Wait that’s…you don’t. So you just saw me and knew I was feeling bummed out?”

“Yup. Like I said, we’re friends, and what are friends for?”

“Huh, I guess you’re right. Lily, we need to hang out more.”

“Nipah, I would like that, desu.”

“Why did you come to the Laundromat, anyway?”

“Oh, I went to get more drink after dinner last night, and I accidentally spilled it all over one of my skirts. I hope the stain didn’t set in.”

“What a strange coincidence…”

“Did you spill drink on yourself, too?”

“No, I just meant it’s strange how you had business in the Laundromat as well…”

“Desu.”

Without discussion beforehand, both Jordan and Randolph had gone to the Salon to pay their respects to their fallen comrades. Ever since the trial, the students had avoided the Salon like the plague. What should have been a calm place had adopted a sour air. It felt cursed.

Randolph lamented that there had not been proper funerals for the dearly departed. Neither person had died naturally, and so their souls must be in anguish. He would have to pray earnestly for them to have a safe journey to the afterlife. When not in meditation, Randolph had been spending a great deal of time in prayer; there was much to pray for.

Jordan did not have an overly spiritual reason to sojourn to the Salon. She had not known Francesca and Delilah well, but she felt the loss of their presence. Their disappearances had happened far too quickly, and Jordan needed to find closure. The Golfer had begun to find her solace, but then Monobear’s videos had brought her back into a strange limbo of defiance.

The two stood outside the Salon in quiet meditation. After an adequate moment of silence, Jordan opened the conversation.

“It feels haunted, doesn’t it?”

“Hmm…I do not know if I would use the word ‘haunted,’ but there is an ethereal feel to the location.”

“But it’s just a hair Salon, right? The crime scene’s been all cleaned up, so there’s nothing unusual about it.”

“We humans have the ability to make the simple become sublime in our heads, and so it is quite possible that we are projecting our emotional ties to our friends onto the Salon.”
“Are you a monk or a psychologist?”

“A simple monk. I do do a lot of meditation, however.”

“But it’s just a Salon.”

“I sense that you have some misgivings. Would you care to talk about them? I’m an excellent listener.”

“Humble, too. I’m not in the mood for sharing just yet.”

“My offer stands.”

“Why don’t you tell me why you’ve come here first, and then we’ll see how I feel.”

“If that is what you wish, then I am in no position to object. I came to offer salvation to Misses Francesca and Delilah.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a monk and not a psychologist.”

“Touché.”

“It is the duty of the living to carry on the legacy of the dead. They may be gone from our lives, but they live on in our hearts.”

“Hmm.”

“Would you care to join me in praying for them?”

“…No, I would not.”

“I understand if you are still experiencing turmoil over the loss of our friends, but I would encourage you to cleanse yourself through prayer.”

“I’m sorry, but that catharsis isn’t for me.”

“I do not mean to pressure you, I just think that you would feel better.”

“I’m sure I would, but I don’t agree with your practice.”

“How do you mean?”

“You wish to remember the dead. But they’re just that: dead. Gone. I think it’s an injustice to tie their souls to our plane of existence.”

“That is a most interesting theory.”

“Why can’t we just let them rest in peace? Constantly bringing them up in conversation and thought…it’s rude to their spirits.”

“I think most of us want to be remembered after we pass, though.”

“Maybe, but once my time spent on this earth is over, I don’t want anyone to linger in remembrance of me.”
“If you don’t mind my saying, that is a sad thought, indeed.”

“After I go, I want people to move on with their lives. The past is done with; let’s move on to the future.”

“You are a pragmatist.”

“…you’re the Liar, aren’t you? All-Star Monk? No way. You have to be an All-Star Psychologist.”

“Ha ha, I assure you that I cannot lie; it wouldn’t be right.”

“…”

“So you came to close this particular chapter of your life so you can move onto the next?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Perhaps you are rushing things.”

“I’ve never had a problem moving forward before…so why can’t I just accept what’s happened and move on? It feels like there’s something else tugging at the strings of my heart, and I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“You know what my remedy to that situation is.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I need to sort this out on my own, I believe.”

“Don’t become so reliant on yourself. We’re all your friends, and we’re willing to help you. All you have to do is ask.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

With her mind made up, Jordan took a step and crossed the threshold of the Salon. She didn’t feel any different.
Melissa was insistent on getting to know her classmates better to put a final end to the senseless killing. It would be best to unite everyone under a common flag, and so she would need a strong core alliance to help carry out her missive. The Politician was determined to get fourteen people out of this mall in one piece.

Melissa agreed to meet Elizabeth at the food court for a light afternoon snack. Despite her impudent actions, Elizabeth had handled herself well in the trial. Her thoughts weren’t particularly astute, but she was able to do some analysis without being prompted, and Melissa could use that sort of ingenuity.

Elizabeth didn’t mind the meeting; she and the girls had been having a bit of a spat. A small fight among friends was common enough, especially when forced to live together for upwards of five days. It was nothing they wouldn’t be able to work through, though.

During breakfast, Randolph had shown everybody how to properly prepare tea from the leaves he’d found in the Pharmacy, and so the girls nibbled on fruit slices while sipping tea. Melissa sat with impeccable posture, while Elizabeth leaned in leisure slightly over the table.

“Elizabeth, I’m sure you’re wondering why I wanted to speak to you,” stated Melissa.

“Not at all, dear,” replied the Historian. “One should always have company during tea time.”

“Well, the matter at hand is—”

“No no no. You don’t start into the business matter right away. For shame, that’s not proper etiquette. We must first make casual small talk before discussing anything of import.”

“Fine. What would you like to talk about?”

“Small talk, Melissa. It doesn’t matter what we talk about. The weather, politics, pop culture, infectious diseases, small animals. Anything, really, is up for grabs.”

“I don’t think most of those topics are able to be discussed due to our present condition.”

“A pity, isn’t it? I’d give anything for a glance at the outside world. I know, let’s talk about what we think is happening outside.”

“I can comply with that. Based on how quiet the mall is, I’d assume that there is very little activity outside the mall’s property.”

“But a mall as large as this should attract some attention.”

“Unless the mall was abandoned.”

“Even then, it should be a haven for hormone-filled teenagers to get together.”

“Perhaps the building was condemned, then.”

“Even more of an allure for said teenagers.”

“You do know we’re teenagers ourselves.”
“Are we really? I’ve never connected much with this generation. Too noisy and rambunctious. Sometimes I feel like an old maid trapped in a darling youth’s body.”

“I can understand your plight. I’ve always taken charge and had to be a leader, so I’ve always had to be more mature than my age would suggest. There’s a certain amount of ostracism attached to it.”

“There’s no ostracism in books, though. Ahh…sweet textbooks…”

“Have you looked for any literature in the Bookstore.”

“I did casually browse the shelves for something to study, but alas, every title in the history section was familiar to me.”

“Hmm. Have you ever done any research of your own?”

“I have dabbled here and there. Why do you ask?”

“As a Historian, who better could we have to write an account of our stay here?”

“This sounds remarkably like business.”

“I assure you that I had no intention of broaching this topic at this moment. The thought just popped into my head right now.”

“A History of the Mall of Monomerica…the idea does sound intriguing…”

“Just food for thought.”

“And that’s only the second best type of food; the first is French cuisine.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“Well, you’ve adequately warmed me up. I suppose I’ll listen to whatever it is you’d like to say now.”

“Right, then. I would like to know where your head is at.”

“On my shoulders, dear, attached to my neck.”

“You’re as comedic as Randolph, but I digress. I’d like to know what you’re thinking, what’s running through your mind.”

“This business is awfully personal, no?”

“Elizabeth, you handled yourself quite well yesterday, and I want to make sure you’re on board with the rest of us.”

“What exactly does being ‘on board’ entail?”

“Working on finding a way out of this mall. Together. I’m sure we can best Monobear if we remain vigilant and don’t give in to his temptations.”

“Oh, if that’s all, then you can definitely count me in. I want out of here just as much as the next guy, but murder…why, it would simply ruin my dress.”
“So I can count on your support?”

“Definitely. In fact, I’m sure you can vouch for the support of Lily and Jenny, as well. We’ll back you up.”

“That is good to hear. United we stand.”

“And the more the merrier. Now, is there anything else you’d like to talk about?”

Austin was incredibly and irrevocably embarrassed. The Idle could feel his face turn red, and he hoped that nobody was looking his way. This was out-of-character for him, and he felt dirty acting upon the thought. Austin had actually considered doing something!

Boredom was Austin’s default emotion, and so he had grown to love it, just as someone who wallows in despair learns to love it. Detached from the outside world, Austin didn’t have any responsibilities to adhere to, and so he should’ve felt like he was in paradise. But instead he felt restless. He was surrounded by special people who were always looking for something to do, and the infectious atmosphere of productivity had drawn him in.

Austin snuck his way over to the Hobby Shop, fearful that anyone might see him. The mall’s spacious layout drove the students to various locales, so he did not run into any of his peers. Until he entered the Hobby Shop, that is. Austin figured that he could find a puzzle or something mindless to work on without feeling a great sense of accomplishment.

Upon entering the establishment, Austin’s face lit up again as he was forced into interaction with Cody. Cody had already been in the Hobby Shop investigating the model trains. Cody’s vocation was only possible when the water was in its liquid form, but during the winter months, the Waterskier would have to find something else to occupy his time. Snowboarding and regular skiing were cool enough, but Cody preferred the open expanse of lakes and rivers to hills. Cody’s boredom led him to develop a clandestine hobby: model making.

Each boy was embarrassed by the other’s presence; neither wanted to admit why he was there. Normal Guy Code would deem that both parties simply go their separate ways and never speak of the incident, but these were All-Star Guys, and the rules of normalcy didn’t necessarily apply. And so the two boys stared each other down in abjectly awkward silence until the weight of the uncomfortable atmosphere caused one of them to buckle.

“Hi,” said Austin.

“‘Sup,” said Cody.

“I just…came here…by accident…I was looking for the bathroom…”

“Oh, uhh, yeah, me too.”

“Then…why are you still here?”

“Err, I, uhh…”

“You came to see how silly these models and puzzles are, right?”

“Yeah! Totally!”
“Because we didn’t get enough of a chance yesterday because James was distracting us.”

“Dude, you took the words right out of my mouth!”

“I don’t understand who would even want to come here in the first place…”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead buying something from this store.”

“…there aren’t any public bathrooms in this sector…”

A moment of silence passed in which the boys regarded each other.

Austin broke. “I came here to find a dumb puzzle to build.”

Cody relented as well. “I was looking for a model to build!”

Austin tilted his head to the side. “That’s cool.”

Cody blushed. “Are you being sarcastic?”

“No, of course not. Sarcasm is for people who wish to hide how they’re feeling.”

“So you really think it’s cool.”

“It’s your hobby, so why not? I don’t have much going on, so I can’t really judge people who do.”

“It’s just…kinda embarrassing, you know? I don’t want the others thinking I’m some weird kid.”

“We’re all weird kids, though.”

“I’m not used to being weird. I’m just a regular guy.”

“No, you’re an All-Star. Like me and everybody else. I don’t think you can be that special without being a little weird.”

“I guess. Where I come from, you gotta be one with the group, you know? You can do your own thing, but then you’re gonna be an outcast. I’m used to being treated like a dude; I don’t want the others to treat me any different now.”

“If you’re afraid I’ll tell them about your hobby, you don’t have to worry. It would take too much energy to spread gossip like that.”

“Heh, if you say so. So what brought you here anyway?”

“Err, umm, I was feeling bored, so I thought I might pick up a puzzle or something.”

“A puzzle ain’t as bad as making model trains.”

“It’s still embarrassing. I’m not supposed to do things, remember? How did I get such an audacious thought in my head, anyway?”

“Everybody likes puzzles. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Hmm…maybe we were both overreacting. It seems kinda silly that we should be embarrassed, doesn’t it?”
“…yeah…”

“Let’s not worry about it, then. I won’t tell anyone if you won’t.”

“Sounds like a plan, man.”

“Then I guess I’ll just start my browsing…”

“And I’ll hide this kit under my shirt and head back to my room. Catch ya later, dude.”

Austin waved goodbye and watched Cody leave. As the Waterskier departed, the Idle couldn’t help but think that Cody was a pretty nice guy. He was certainly more complex than he initially gave on. He also couldn’t help but think that the Waterskier was kind of cute, too.

Jenny was upset with Elizabeth and Lily; they never listened to what she had to say. On top of that, Elizabeth’s bossy nature oppressed Jenny, and Lily’s indefatigable energy exhausted the Sandwich Artist. Jenny had found a confidante in Jordan, but the Golfer was just as much of a loner as she was, and so it was difficult to hold onto a conversation for long.

Jenny had grown tired of people, and so she sought to do something for herself for once. The other BFFs had poo-pooed her movies suggestions, but Jenny would just go ahead and watch whatever movie she wanted without them. Feeling in charge, Jenny marched into the Video Store, but there was someone else browsing the shelves already. Jenny quickly took on a deferential stance so as not to offend with her intrusion.

James had wandered into the movie store shortly after lunch, and he hadn’t felt a need to leave since. The films from the morning had left a bad taste in his mouth, and he watched them again to figure out what was bothering him. Alas, it was to no avail, and so the Movie Producer still felt uneasy. He began an exhaustive search of the store’s wares to see if he could find a clue hidden among the various items.

Jenny paused in the doorway, but James didn’t seem to notice her. She took a tentative step forward, and still he did not flinch. He seemed to be absorbed in reading the bios of the various movies in stock. Feeling a little bolder, Jenny waltzed further into the store and began browsing through the romantic comedy section.

As long as she was quiet, Jenny figured that she could avoid instigating James’s righteous fury. The thought was short-lived, however, as she saw a particularly intriguing title, and as she reached for it, her elbow knocked down a rather portentous stack of tapes, thus creating a cacophony of falling films. Jenny blushed a deep shade of red as she anticipated an unpleasant interaction with James.

James was still absorbed in his search. Not bothering to look at the Sandwich Artist, he said, “Tch. Do you mind? I’m kind of busy over here.”

Jenny bent over in shame. “I am sorry. Please be excusing me.”

“Whatever. I’m not in the mood to talk down to you.” That was the nicest thing Jenny had ever heard James say. “Just stay out of my way and we’re good.”

“Yes.” Jenny began to pick up the fallen tapes. Crisis averted, apparently. Jenny stole a quick glance at James. He was scowling like usual, but he didn’t seem to be full of his usual malice. Nevertheless, the awkward air of the Video Store was tense.
James muttered under his breath. “The hell is wrong with me?” With each tape he inspected, he felt a gnawing at the back of his skull that something was amiss, but he could not put his finger on it. How could he look for something if he didn’t know what he was looking for?

Jenny mistook James’s rhetorical musing as a serious statement directed to herself, and so she asked, “What was that?”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

Without her brain’s consent, Jenny’s mouth asked, “You can tell me if something is bothering you.”

“Tch, as if. It’s just…something doesn’t feel right, you know?”

Jenny just wanted to watch a movie; she had no idea what James was being bothered by. “Yes,” she replied.

“Even after watching those stupid movies of Monobear’s a second time—objectively, at that—I can’t make heads or tails of anything. This store, this mall, it’s not…right.”

Jenny nodded more out of politeness than in agreement.

“Heh, someone who gets it.”

“Would it be alright if I asked what you are looking for?”

“You have to tell me what you’re looking for first.”

“A, uhh, ‘chick flick.’ I am looking for a chick flick.”

“I made one of them once. Piece of garbage. Only ranked third in the box office when it debuted. To each their own.”

“And now you?”

“I don’t know what I’m looking for. Something, I guess. You see, and this probably sounds crazy, but those videos…there was something…familiar about them. At least, I think that’s what I felt.”

“Familiar?”

“It doesn’t make sense. Francesca and Delilah had to have made those before they died, but the way Francesca talked…it seemed like she already knew everybody. It doesn’t make sense.”

“There are a lot of things going on in this mall that do not make sense.”

“Yeah, like why I’m talking to you.”

“So what do you think they mean?”

“To be honest, I think they were made to freak us out. Like Monobear used some fancy CGI to make it look like our friends were giving us a message.”

“Our friends?”

“Classmates! Whatever.”
“The videos looked very real to me.”

“As much as I want to believe it was CGI, I have trouble believing it myself.”

“You are a Movie Producer. Perhaps you had a hand in the making of those tapes.”

“Don’t be crazy! How is that even possible?”

“It would explain why they seem familiar to you.”

“And then you’re going to say that the sandwiches here are actually familiar to you too.”

“No. I would recognize a sandwich that I made, and I am assuming that you would recognize a movie you produced.”

“…that’s why I’ve been looking through these shelves. For something that is definitely familiar to me, but so far I’m pulling up nothing.”

“Would you like me to help you look?”

“I don’t see how you can be any help to me. How are you supposed to know what’s going on in my head?”

“I apologize.”

“Don’t. Stop being so sorry all the time. Take charge of yourself for once. It’s sick seeing you get pushed around by the Victorian chick and her hyperactive sidekick. Grow a pair.”

“A pair of what? Do we have gardening supplies somewhere?”

“Nevermind. Just get your movie and go.”

Jenny did not wish to argue, and so she found the first title that piqued her interest and headed out. It had been a strange interaction, but not necessarily an unpleasant one. She gave James one last look before departing for good. He was still invested in the secrets of the shelves; never once had he looked at her during their conversation. Best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Once he was sure that Jenny was out of earshot, James spoke to himself once more. “If only I could find something that would let me get out of here…”
The students reconvened for dinner. They were quieter than they had been. The strength of their friendships was being tested now. Melissa could sense the slight air of hostility, and she was affixed to do something about it—while attending to her own agenda. After dinner, she put her plan into action.

Melissa: “Alright, gang, I’ve got tonight’s activity all lined up, so don’t go anywhere.”

James: “This’ll be great.”

Melissa: “I’ve noticed that we haven’t been the nicest to each other lately, and I think that has to do with the fact that we don’t know and understand each other very well. Therefore, I’ve designed a game to give us such knowledge: it’s called Two Truths and a Lie.”

James: “Yup, this is great.”

Melissa: “I’m glad at least one person is enthused! The way the game works, we’ll each take turns telling two true statements and one false one. It’s then everybody else’s job to guess which one was the lie. Does everyone understand?”

Jenny: “What does the winner get if they can stump the others?”

Melissa: “Oh, let me explain. There is no winning or losing with this game; the objective is just to get to know each other better.”

Elizabeth: “That sounds simple enough.”

Markus: “Heh, with my pro skills, you won’t be able to decipher a lie from a truth.”

Rico: “Another chance to utilize my hidden investigation talents!”

Randolph: “I do not think I will be good at this game.”

Lily: “Eeeeeeeeee! Let’s start! Let’s start! Let’s start!”

Melissa: “Since I came up with the idea, I’ll start and then we’ll proceed in a clockwise fashion. Now, let’s see… I am an only child, my dad’s an accountant, and my mom’s a secretary.”

Austin: “I’ve always thought that I could make a nice secretary.”

Lily: “Wait, what do we do again?”

Rufus: “We have to guess which fact Maylene lied about.”

Jenny: “Who is… Maylene?”

Taylor: “I think it’s gotta be the accountant one. No way Melissa’s dad’s got that boring of a job.”

Cody: “Yeah, I can see that, too.”

Austin: “Really? I thought it had to be the only child bit. Melissa’s too caring to be an only child.”

Rico: “Uhh, I still need a minute.”
Jordan: “My money’s on the mom.”

Theo: “If I had to guess, I’d say the only child bit.”

James: “Obviously it’s the only child; she doesn’t have any social skills that would’ve come from having an older sibling.”

Elizabeth: “But she didn’t say anything about an older sibling.”

Randolph: “Hmm? Do you have an older sibling?”

Melissa: “Is that my cue? Do you want me to reveal now?”

Rufus: “You might as well; we won’t be able to make a unanimous decision.”

Mellissa: “Okay, then. The lie was about me being an only child. I have a younger brother Ryan.”

Elizabeth: “You poor child, your life is so…normal.”

Melissa: “Hey, I’m happy with my life, so that’s all that matters. Now, Theo, it’s your turn.”

Theo: “Alright, then. How about…I’ve traveled to Prague, to St. Petersburg, and to Buenos Aires.”

Elizabeth: “Oh, I’ve always wanted to see the cathedrals in St. Petersburg.”

Taylor: “I wouldn’t mind hitting up the sun in Buenos Aires.”

Rufus: “I hear Prague is nice this time of year.”

James: “How are we supposed to know which of those is a lie? They’re all equally as possible.”

Melissa: “The point of the game isn’t to make your lie stand out.”

Jenny: “It could not be Stal—St. Petersburg, could it?”

Rico: “My guess is for, umm, Buenos Aires.”

Austin: “Where even is Prague?”

Theo: “It’s the capital of the Czech Republic.”

Taylor: “That makes it sound like you’ve been there…”

Markus: “There’s no real way to know, right?”

Melissa: “Why don’t you tell us, now?”

Theo: “Sure. Unlike Melissa, I lied on the last one. I’ve spent very little time charting out South America. The conquistadors did a pretty good job of that already.”

Melissa: “Next?”

Elizabeth: “That would be me. I’m naturally a red head, I’m near-sighted, and I have an extensive knowledge of cultivating apple trees.”

Rufus: “That last one was too specific.”
Jordan: “And she does wear glasses…”

Elizabeth: “But what do I need my glasses for?”

Rico: “O-oh! She basically admitted she was lying about her eyewear.”

Lily: “She does wear her glasses quite a bit.”

Jenny: “That is not so uncommon for people with eye problems.”

Melissa: “I’d be thrilled if there was another ginger here, but I think I’m alone on that front.”

Markus: “I have to agree with Melissa. I’ve seen a lot of stage make-up, and that hair is one-hundred percent natural.”

Elizabeth: “Oh, you got me. I don’t have red hair at all.”

Rico: “So she tricked us…interesting…”

Melissa: “What fun! Cody, you’re next.”

Cody: “Awesome! Here goes: I skipped a grade in elementary school, I’ve been stung by jellyfish more times than I can count, and I’ve been approached by professional college waterskiing teams to compete for them.”

Randolph: “This will be a tough one.”

Jordan: “Another round of crazy assertions.”

Austin: “I can actually believe all of those.”

Melissa: “I’ll hazard a guess at the college invites. I think you’re still a little young to be drafted.”

Lily: “What about skipping a grade?”

Rufus: “Farfetched, really. Not even I did that.”

Jenny: “Then it must be the jellyfish? But that is so likely…”

James: “I don’t think it’s so much a matter of him getting stung as it is a matter of how high he can count.”

Taylor: “Wait, didn’t you say you lived in Michigan? Why would there be jellyfish up there?”

Cody: “You remember that?”

Theo: “I don’t recall this.”

Taylor: “It was while we were in the Lounge when we first got here.”

Melissa: “So, which is it?”

Cody: “Taylor got me; I’ve only seen jellies in aquariums. Your turn, man.”

Austin: “Thanks. Oh, I’m not very good at this kind of thing, but here goes nothing. I once slept for eighteen hours straight, I once received an award for doing nothing, and I was even born late. Oh wait, oops, I think that was two lies and a truth. Sorry.”
Rufus: “That doesn’t necessarily change the nature of the game.”

Jenny: “We should just guess the truth, then?”

Elizabeth: “That shouldn’t be too hard.”

Melissa: “I think the trophy is a lie; it just doesn’t seem real.”

Lily: “People have gotten awards for dumber things.”

Markus: “Like I got a bouquet of flowers once for playing Tree Number Seven. Granted, I did have more lines than anyone else.”

Theo: “The true statement must be his sleeping habit.”

Taylor: “Yeah, that bit doesn’t really surprise me to be true.”

James: “And his being born late would?”

Jordan: “I wouldn’t think that modern doctors would allow him to be born too late.”

Cody: “So, dude, what didn’t you lie about?”

Austin: “Uhh…what all did I say again? I kinda zoned out in the middle.”

Randolph: “Sleep for eighteen hours, award for doing nothing, and being born after you were due.”

Austin: “Oh, that first one was the true one. My record’s actually nineteen and a half though, and that’s only because I really had to pee. I was thinking of trying again with a catheter—”

Melissa: “Moving on! Taylor, it looks like your next. What are you going to covertly share with us?”

Taylor: “I thought it’d never be my turn. Fine then. I have a pet hamster named Charles, my hometown is Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and I look great in a swimsuit. And I did remember to tell two truths and one lie.”

Rico: “It’s gotta be the hamster, right? Why name a hamster ‘Charles?’ There’s a serious lack of logic, there.”

Elizabeth: “Isn’t Kitty Hawk where the Wright Brothers built their airplane? You don’t seem like an aviation enthusiast to me.”

James: “Obviously it’s the swimsuit one.”

Austin: “Obviously you need to be quiet.”

Cody: “Obviously.”

Theo: “If it’s between Kitty Hawk and the hamster, I’ll say that the lie involves the hamster.”

Jordan: “I don’t see the hamster, either.”


Rico: “Yo-o, it’s my turn. Alright, prepare to get stumped! My two truths and I lie are this: I run
the slowest mile in gym class, I come from a huge family, and I’ve won seven different marathons.”

Rufus: “I don’t think that’s as tricky as you might think.”

Jordan: “That…really isn’t much of a challenge.”

Theo: “It’s…obvious right?”

Lily: “I know! It’s the marathon winning, right?”

Jenny: “No, remember his talent? He’s an All-Star Marathon Runner; of course he’s won some.”

Elizabeth: “And, by extension, I’m sure he has a quick pace for the mile.”

Taylor: “And good heavens do I know that the family part is true.”

Melissa: “Sorry, but I think we figured you out, Rico.”

Rico: “Whoa-oa, no you didn’t! I did stump ya. You should listen to Lily more often.”

Lily: “I agree.”

Markus: “You don’t mean…”

Rico: “I haven’t won a single marathon race! I’m an expert marathon runner, not an expert marathon winner.”

Elizabeth: “But…the mile…”

Rico: “I practice endurance, not speed. It’s all about pacing yourself. I’m in this for the long haul!”

Melissa: “Well, whaddya know? Rufus?”

Rufus: “I suppose I’ll go now. Hmm…ecce: I cannot ride a bike, I cannot whistle, and I cannot snap my fingers.”

Jenny: “So we must figure out what you can do.”

Randolph: “You shouldn’t be so negative; you can do anything you put your mind to.”

Rufus: “Uhh, thanks for that.”

Jordan: “They all sound equally likely to me.”

Markus: “Whistling and snapping are so easy; everyone can do them.”

Theo: “Not necessarily everyone. If you don’t exercise certain muscles, you don’t know how to properly control them.”

Cody: “Amen to that!”

Lily: “What do you mean by that?”

Cody: “Uhh, forget I said anything.”

James: “Why am I still here…?”
Rufus: “I grow bored with this. After reading ancient texts into the wee hours of the morn, I’ve had to develop ways to keep my fingers from atrophying, and so I do possess the ability to snap.”

Jordan: “How cool. Do go on.”

Lily: “Nope! It’s my turn now, so you’re gonna have to listen to me instead! Umm…now what was I thinking of? Oh yeah! I run a really popular blog, I have two older brothers, and I live above a Laundromat.”

Jenny: “She’s never said anything about brothers.”

Elizabeth: “Or a blog, even.”

James: “I’d be surprised if she even knew how to operate a computer.”

Markus: “Listen to me! People who have to say that their blog is popular are lying to themselves about the popularity of said blog.”

Austin: “That…doesn’t make sense.”

Markus: “It does if you don’t think about it.”

Taylor: “What kind of nonsense is that?”

Austin: “Oh, you’re right.”

Randolph: “So you think the blog is the lie?”

Lily: “Watashi wa katsu. I don’t run a really popular blog; I run a super popular blog!”

Jordan: “And yet no one questioned the Laundromat…”

Lily: “So the brothers?”

Lily: “Both of them are older, just like I said. The one’s the real rebellious type, you know, into motorcycles and stuff, while the other is a total teacher’s pet.”

Melissa: “Hmm…the rebellious brother…”

Elizabeth: “And the Laundromat?”

Lily: “Some people live above pizza parlors; we live above a Laundromat.”

Markus: “If you don’t mind, I would like to take my turn, now.”

Lily: “Go ahead.”

Markus: “First, I can play a convincing character, no matter the play. Second, a play I wrote is still being performed on Broadway. And third, my dancing is second to none.”

Randolph: “Oh dear, another of these very probable ones.”

Theo: “Markus, you don’t have to try to prove how good you are at this.”

Jordan: “Could it be the Broadway play? How long can a play stay there until the novelty wears off?”
Melissa: “Unless it’s just that good.”

Austin: “Theatre just puts me to sleep…”

Cody: “Me too…”

Rufus: “Can we focus? Look at Markus. Do you really think someone with that physique could dance gracefully across a stage?”

Randolph: “People can often surprise you.”

Markus: “And now: the grand reveal! The lie was the first thing I said! Every actor has his limits, and mine is playing a villain. I can do well enough at faking being a woman, but when it comes to being evil, I’m simply too good.”

Melissa: “James, it’s your turn now.”

James: “Do I really have to go?”

Melissa: “Yes, yes you do.”

James: “Whatever. I hate all of you, I’m an All-Star Movie Producer, and I was an only child.”

Lily: “It’s gotta be the first one.”

Elizabeth: “Lily… I don’t think so…”

Melissa: “Sigh.”

Rico: “This one’s too obvious, I think…”

Austin: “Wow, what a great set of statements.”

Randolph: “Oh dear…”

Jenny: “Umm, so it is the fact that he was an only child which is incorrect, yes?”

James: “Heh, you guys can figure something out for once. And it’s not that I was an only child, but that I am an only child.”

Rufus: “That was a very personal bit of information you shared with us.”

James: “Uhh, no it wasn’t. Were you even paying attention?”

Rufus: “All too much. You deliberately used the past tense. If you had always been an only child, then there would have been no need for you to differentiate by time, therefore, something happened that changed your sibling status.”

Markus: “I get that you’re a Latinist and all, but English please.”

Jordan: “He’s saying that something happened to James’s sibling. Maybe a divorce or something.”

James: “Tch, you just look too deep into everything!”

Randolph: “If you ever need to talk about—”

James: “It’s your turn, Jenny.”
Jenny: “Oh, okay. I shall do my best. Let us see…I have worked in restaurants all my life, I can tie my apron with my eyes closed, and I am named after my grandmother.”

Elizabeth: “I’m afraid I know the answer to this riddle.”

Taylor: “Don’t spoil it for those of us still trying to figure it out.”

Lily: “Hey, I know it too.”

Cody: “The first one’s pretty likely, so I doubt that’s the lie.”

Theo: “Her grandmother could be just as likely, though.”

Rufus: “Based on Erika’s and Lindsey’s outbursts, I’d say that the apron bit is a piece of false information.”

Rico: “Huh, really?”

Rufus: “Most definitely.”

Jordan: “You’re so analytical.”

Jenny: “May I tell the truth, now?”

Melissa: “Go ahead.”

Jenny: “It is the apron statement.”

Elizabeth: “Heavens, the girl has to tie it in front of her and then swivel it around to the front.”

Lily: “I’ve offered to tie it for her, but I’m not so good at tying knots.”

Melissa: “We’ve almost come full circle. Randolph, you’re next, and then Jordan will finish up.”


Markus: “Well, the tea one has to be true.”

Austin: “And I can verify the meditation. In fact, I’ve joined him on a few sessions.”

Lily: “Oh…I thought you were just sleeping next to each other with your legs crossed.”

Elizabeth: “We need to get you out more.”

Rico: “The process of deduction states that the clothing must be the lie.”

Theo: “Can we really argue something so preferential, though?”

Rufus: “We don’t have any evidence that contradicts.”

Taylor: “Alright, just tell us already.”

Randolph: “Oh my, I am so sorry, but I could not bring myself to lie; they are all true facts. My sincerest apologies.”
Rico: “Whuh? We were duped again?”

Jordan: “I will go now. I was named after a professional golfer, I was named after a fictional character, and I was named after my grandfather.”

Rufus: “A valid attempt, but lacking nonetheless.”

Jordan: “Shut up and let the others figure it out.”

Lily: “So if two of those statements are true…”

Austin: “It’s like making sense of a scattered puzzle.”

Jenny: “Could a fictional character be considered a professional?”

Markus: “If they were a professional in the book, then sure.”

Rico: “But for sure, the grandfather and fictional character can’t go together.”

Theo: “That eliminates one possibility.”

Melissa: “I guess…that the professional part is wrong.”

Jordan: “Actually, being named after my grandfather is the lie.”

Rufus: “Ita, I knew it.”

Rico: “But how?”

Rufus: “Not that I want to base my reasoning off of race, but the grandfather doesn’t fit with either of the other two statements. The one you cleverly deduced, and the other is just improbable. Factoring in how young Jordan is and in what era her grandfather would have lived in, it doesn’t prove likely that he would have been a professional golfer.”

Jordan: “Hey, thanks for bringing race into this, I really appreciate it.”

Rufus: “There’s that…and the fact you looked upwards when you said the grandfather part; you’ve got a tell.”

Melissa: “So you noticed that too…”

James: “Are we done now? I’d like to get out of here while my sanity’s still intact.”

Melissa: “Now that our fun little game has come full circle, I don’t have a reason to keep any of you here.”

James: “Goodbye and good riddance, then.”

Melissa: “But you’re all welcome to stay and hang out until Night Time starts.”

Elizabeth: “Sorry, but we already made plans for the evening.”

Cody: “Yeah, I’ve got a, uhh, a thing.”

Rufus: “I was in the middle of a good chapter.”

Markus: “And I need to get back into character.”
Taylor: “Don’t look at me. I have to, like, wash my hair or something.”

Melissa: “Alright, alright, I can take a hint. I’ll just be here sipping tea if anyone wants to talk.”

Even if they didn’t want to admit it, Melissa’s activity did ease the spirits of the students. The bonds between them may not have strengthened greatly, but the students did have a better knowledge of each other, and hopefully this feeling of camaraderie would keep them all together. That night, they went to bed happier, and they woke up happier as well. They headed to breakfast in joviality, and they ate with zest.

But all good things must come to an end.

As the students were finishing up, Monobear once again reared his glamorous head. The fourteen students’ hearts sank at having to see their guardian once again.

Monobear grabbed their attention and began one of his lengthy soliloquies. “I can’t believe there’s still fourteen of you rapscallions alive. That number should be much smaller! Don’t you want to get out of here? You saw how that dumb broad failed, so learn from her mistakes and pull off a better murder!”

Melissa spoke up. “Go away! We’re done with killing each other! You might as well let us out because we’re done with your sick game!”

“Upupupu…you say that now, but can you be so sure of that tomorrow? Although, you may be right. There might never be another murder among you ever again. You may have actually beaten me at my own game. BUT HOW BORING WOULD THAT BE!?! Terribly boring, if you couldn’t figure it out. That’s why I’ve come up with another incentive for you.”

“Everybody, don’t listen to him! Just cover your ears!” ordered Melissa.

“I doubt any of you want a life full of luxury anymore, so I’ll switch things up a bit. Last time I offered you prestige, so this time I’ll offer you power. Monobear has his ways to influence certain people, and so Monobear can grant you any position of power that you want. If you aspire to be the head of a lucrative company and rake in the millions through embezzlement schemes, then I’ve got you covered. If you want to lead the armies of a powerful nation, or if you want to lead the country itself, I can arrange that for you as well. Maybe you want to be a successful television personality who has the power to influence what people do with their lives. Who cares? Whatever you want in the realm of control! I can give it to you!

“There’s just one little catch, and I know you know what it is. Just knock off one of your classmates and the prize is yours. Why, with all that power, you might even become stronger than me! Isn’t that a scary thought. It makes me shiver! Oh wait, maybe something else is giving me goosebumps—or are they bearbumps? But it would be inappropriate to tell you about that right now. Any questions before I go off into the wild?”

The students were speechless, either in awe or in defiance.

“By your silence, I infer a negative response, so I’ll see you whippersnappers later, and when I do, one of you better be dead!”
Monobear disappeared, and the students were left to fathom his strange offer. Everyone half-ass-edly agreed that the machine’s motive was ridiculous, but each student would have to figure out the veracity of that statement for themselves. Foregoing deliberation, the students disbanded and went through the motions of the day.

The tense atmosphere that had nearly dissipated was oppressively pressing on the mall’s inhabitants once more. As easy as it was to rile up the students, it was just as easy to depress them. Filled with heavy thoughts, they were weighed down by uncertainty. A select few were able to see through the fog and maintain their spirits, but their attitude was not infectious. If hope wasn’t catching on its own, then it would have to be forcefully shot into the students like a vaccine.

On their sixth night in the mall, Melissa called another class meeting. Her previous meeting had been a success; she had been able to assess who was adept at lying and who was not. As a bonus, the students had also gotten to know each other a little better. The motive behind tonight’s gathering was for everyone to start taking a proactive approach in escaping from the mall. They had a common enemy in Monobear, and they needed to see that.

After dinner, Melissa began her announcements.

Melissa: “I apologize for keeping you all for another night, but I have some business which I would like for us to go over.”

Jordan: “It’s not like we had anything better to be doing.”

Melissa: “It is my belief that I have been communicating my feelings about this game accurately, but I want to dissolve any confusion that may have arisen at any point. The question I want to answer tonight is this: why are we here?”

Lily: “Isn’t that because, umm, oh, I don’t know…”

Jenny: “Were we ever told why? I recall being told how to leave but not why we are here.”

Rico: “Monobear brought us here, right? Yeah-ah, and he wants us to kill each other.”

Austin: “The reason we’re here is to kill each other?”

Taylor: “Hey, I haven’t done anything to anybody! There’s no need for me to be killed.”

Theo: “So you’re thinking this is a punishment for something we did before?”

Elizabeth: “I highly doubt we’re all criminals.”

Melissa: “Now we’re getting to the heart of the matter. Why would Monobear bring us here and make us play this game?”

Randolph: “There are strange people in this world; we may never know his real motive.”

Rufus: “But we can give it our best guess.”

Markus: “I’ve been in enough mystery plays to know that people love a good murder whodunit. Perhaps this is all for the bear’s sick enjoyment.”
Cody: “That makes sense. He’s always talking about how we bore him.”

Taylor: “This has to be illegal on so many different levels.”

James: “Exactly what part of this was legal to begin with?”

Austin: “I don’t like the idea of somebody watching me like this for pleasure.”

Theo: “It would help to explain the overabundance of security cameras.”

Jenny: “Thank goodness there are no cameras in the bathrooms, then.”

Elizabeth: “Thank goodness, indeed.”

Rico: “I guess even Monobear has his limits.”

Jordan: “What if we entertain the thought that we aren’t here for his enjoyment?”

Theo: “Then we’re back to the punishment argument.”

Melissa: “And if it’s neither?”

Cody: “You’re really stretching my brain here.”

Melissa: “Think of it this way: what has Monobear always said his goal is?”

Randolph: “To fill us with despair.”

James: “Then that’s his motive. Case closed. Can I leave now?”

Markus: “Not so fast. Filling kids with despair is not a reason to kidnap them and lock them inside an abandoned mall.”

Theo: “There’s no evidence that this place is abandoned.”

Elizabeth: “Then what better explanation do we have as to the existence of this cursed place?”

Rico: “Monobear brought us here specifically, so maybe he engineered this place just for us.”

Taylor: “Who has the means to just build an entire mall for kids to murder each other in? Why not a hotel or something?”

Jenny: “If he can promise things like power and prestige, then maybe Monobear is much more powerful than we might suspect.”

Lily: “Umm, this might sound like a dumb question, but who is Monobear?”

No one had a good answer to that question.

Jordan: “At the very least, he is a highly-sophisticated robot, but we’re still nowhere near artificial intelligence capabilities of the sort he displays.”

Theo: “Then you’re saying that someone’s controlling him.”

Rufus: “It’s probably safe to say that the one who kidnapped us is the one controlling Monobear.”

Melissa: “I agree.”
Lily: “But who is he? Or is it even a he?”

Randolph: “I fear that the answer will forever elude us.”

Austin: “Perhaps we should meditate on it a little longer.”

Randolph: “Oh, good idea. We could brew some tea.”

James: “So the point is that we still don’t know anything; we can only speculate.”

Elizabeth: “Lily, perhaps you should show them that thing now.”

Lily: “Oh! Good idea! I started translating the document like Rufus asked me to. I haven’t made much progress because I don’t have a dictionary to look up most of the words, but I have managed to decipher a few things.”

Melissa: “Oh? Like what?”

Lily: “Well, it’s set up like a list, desu. And this one phrase is repeated a bunch of times. It’s a really weird phrase, too. It means something along the lines of ‘super duper’ or ‘extra special,’ but I think it might be meant to say ‘All-Star.’ I think that mainly because one of the listings would then read ‘All-Star Kawaii,’ and that’s my title, desu.”

Jenny: “So it’s a list of all of us? But why?”

Markus: “And more importantly, why is it in some weird language?”


Austin: “What else have you found on it?”

Lily: “The word ‘zetsubou’ is used repeatedly as well. I’m not sure what it means, but it must be important. The other major thing I found was a reference to a ‘Monokuma.’”

Jordan: “You don’t think that means ‘Monobear,’ do you?”

Lily: “‘Kuma’ does mean ‘bear.’”

Cody: “So what does any of that mean?”

Melissa: “It solidifies the fact that we’re supposed to be here and that this didn’t happen by chance.”

Rico: “That doesn’t make me feel any better about it…”

Lily: “I’ll keep working on it, though! I won’t quit until I can read it perfectly!”

Rufus: “If anybody comes across a Japanese-to-English dictionary, you know whom to give it to.”

James: “So to recap, we know nothing. Great. What a brilliant waste of time this meeting has been.”

Melissa: “It’s true that we haven’t progressed very far, but I think one thing is certain: we have a common enemy.”

Jenny: “Monobear…”
Markus: “That devil…”

Rico: “This whole thing is his fault…”

Cody: “If I ever get my hands on that robot, I’ll tear him to shreds!”

Randolph: “But we should avoid violence as much as possible!”

Theo: “It would never do. It’s the controller we have to focus our attention on.”

Austin: “How do we even do that, though?”

Melissa: “I’m glad you asked. We have to beat Mr. Monobear at his own game.”

Jenny: “We have to murder Monobear without getting caught?”

Melissa: “No, we have to commit no murders at all. If we deny him the satisfaction of getting us to do as he wants, then we’ll prove the victorious party.”

James: “Bullshit.”

Melissa: “Excuse me?”

James: “You’re talking horseshit. You want us all to band together and charge into battle against an unknown enemy. With what power? You think our captor’s just going to let us go if we refuse to kill each other? As if! This mall was designed for us to live in for the rest of our lives; this bastard’s in this for the long haul, and so are we! The only hope we have of getting out of here is to murder. Why can’t you get your thick skull around that fact?”

Melissa: “Shut up.”

James: “Excuse me?”

Melissa: “Shut the hell up! I have had enough of your attitude! You are not helping matters any! You’re nothing but an annoying dissident, and I’ve had enough of it! Cody!”

Cody: “Yes, dudette, err, ma’am!”

Melissa: “Hold him down while I find a rope to tie him up with. We’re putting an end to his negativity right here, right now.”

Cody: “Yes, ma’am!”

Rufus: “Are you sure this is wise?”

Jordan: “Maybe you should think this through a little bit more.”

Melissa: “I’ve made up my mind already. As the leader of this class, I am calling the shots here.”

James: “Who gave you the power to say such things? I certainly never gave you support!”

Melissa: “I DON’T NEED YOUR FREAKING SUPPORT! My authority comes from God, or from the universe, or the flying spaghetti monster, or the Four Dark Gods, or whatever else you want to believe in. The fact is that my power is absolute, and what I say goes! Cody, now.”

Cody got up and grabbed James in a tight hold. James struggled, but Cody quickly brought
him down to the ground and pinned him there. Nobody had the guts to interfere. Wordlessly, Melissa left to acquire a rope from the General Store, and upon her return she bound James up tight. She could feel the eyes of her peers burrowing into her soul.

Melissa: “Don’t worry, we’ll give him plenty of food and water. This way he can’t bother any of us. We’re going to lock him up in the Salon. Meeting dismissed. C’mon, Cody, let’s move this troublemaker. If anybody needs me, I’ll be in my room for the rest of the night after settling this creep into his new apartment.”

Rudely pushing the stunned and bound James toward the South Sector, Melissa and Cody departed from the group. Some of the students thought that Melissa had taken the right course of action, while some thought that she had made an error in her judgment. Others simply thought that she had lost her mind.

Markus: “Wow.”

Randolph: “Oh my.”

Rico: “Did that really just happen?”

Rufus: “Serves him right.”

Taylor: “How can you say that? That was awful!”

Rufus: “He was showing his weakness, and so Melissa displayed her strength. If we wish to play the game as James wishes, then the strong will have to pull power moves on the weak; it’s just survival of the fittest.”

Jordan: “You would say that.”

Rufus: “Have I hurt you in some way?”

Jordan: “You wouldn’t be able to understand; your ego would get in the way.”

Rufus: “I can’t help that I’m better than everyone else.”

Rico: “Do you really believe that?”

Rufus: “Of course. Looking at my competition, it’s not much of a challenge.”

Elizabeth: “Uhh, your ‘competition’ is sitting right here.”

Jenny: “Umm, I believe that that makes you a little suspicious.”

Rufus: “I stand behind everything I’ve said.”

Markus: “You’re just proving to be an ass.”

Rufus: “So?”

Theo: “I think we’re all a bit on edge right now.”

Randolph: “Yes, we should all take a deep breath.”

Rufus: “Oh, I’m perfectly cognizant. I can’t help it if you all can’t keep up. Your loss, anyway.”
Jordan: “I’ve had enough. Good night!”

Elizabeth: “Come along, girls. We have business elsewhere.”

Rufus: “Whatever. It’s foolish to live naively. Common enemy or not, this game has been set in motion, and it will be difficult to stop.”

Tenser than they had been at the outset of the meeting, the remaining students went their separate ways for the rest of the night. Some lingered longer than others, unsure what to do, but eventually Austin was the only student left in the food court. He raised his head to look at the dark sky above the ceiling light. What’s happening to us? he thought.

The following morning marked the seventh day of captivity for the students. The grandeur of power was alluring to some while distastefully off-putting to others. In order to circumvent the ill-fated feelings surrounding the incentive, the students tried to live as normally as possible.

Markus needed a new coach, and so he turned to Cody for assistance. The Thespian asked the Waterskier to meet him in the dark East Sector, and Cody was willing to comply. Markus felt assured by his decision for a new teacher, for Cody was readily able to teach him the material he was hungry to receive.

“Rule number one,” said Cody, “is to puff out your chest as much as possible. Being tough and strong is all about looks, so you got to have good posture. No slouching; even if you aren’t very big, you have to act like you are.”

“I should have brought a notebook so I could take notes,” Markus replied enthusiastically. He was finally getting what he wanted.

“No way! Taking notes is for weaklings. This is stuff you just got to learn to do.”

“Forgive me! I will do my best!”

“And don’t apologize; you don’t need to be sorry for anything.”

“Really? But what if I do something…unsavory?”

“Being tough is all about trusting your instincts. If your guts told you to do something that was later uncool, then you gotta stick to your guns and stand by your decision. You have to have faith that you’re always making the right decisions and not regretting anything that you might do.”

“That sounds very Zen, to just live life as it comes.”

“Yeah, but you gotta make sure you actually are living life, and that life’s not living you.”

“Umm…I don’t exactly understand what you mean with that one.”

“Uhh, if you wanna be tough, then you have to take a proactive approach to life. You can’t sit idly by and let things happen; you have to be the force that makes them happen.”

“Yes, yes! That is definitely what I want! I want to make my presence known when I walk in a room! I want people to know who I am because of what I do!”

“Sounds like you’re on your way to me.”
“Ahh, I am starting to feel the power of strength flowing through my veins.”

“Careful, though, you can’t let that kind of power go to your head. Unbridled strength can be a curse more than a blessing.”

“Whatever. I’m gonna be the most stalwart player in the world; nothing is going to be able to shake me!”

“You also gotta know when to tone it down a bit.”

“Nonsense, bigger is always better.”

“Hey! What did I just say? You can’t let that kind of power go to your head, or else you’ll just end up being a bully!”

“Then what’s the point of being tough if you can’t do anything with it? Right now, someone might be plotting to take someone else down for the power they want, but if I’m strong then I can stop them.”

“Listen, it’s great that you want to do great stuff like that, but you gotta put it into perspective. You can’t rush into the fire or else you’ll get burned.”

“Just battle scars I can brag about.”

“Dude, Earth to Markus, do you copy?”

“Cody, I appreciate your help. Immensely, I do. But I got to do things my own way; I can’t be your clone.”

“I’m not asking you to act just like me, just to take some pointers. I think you’re diving into the deep end without your water wings, and I don’t think the lifeguard is paying attention.”

“You’re as bad a Theo. I understand that I’m embarking on a potentially dangerous journey, but it’s one I need to go on, so you can cease your protestations because they’re falling on deaf ears.”

“I can’t feel good about myself, though, if I let you run yourself into danger—or worse.”

“Please, nothing bad is going to happen. Once I master this new mantra, I’ll be invincible.”

“I’ve tasted my fair share of waves to know that no one is invincible. No matter how tough you are, you can still be taken down.”

“Ugh, whatever. Tell me, what do you think the point of being tough is?”

“Heh, this is the very best part of the lesson. Being tough and strong is all for the ladies. Chicks dig a guy who can stand on his own two feet. You gotta make yourself stand out in a crowd so that the gilrlies can tell where you are.”

“Wrong!”

“Uhh, what?”

“You don’t understand the reason for it, either! The whole point of being strong is so that nothing can stand in your way, nothing can hurt you. I WANT TO BECOME A ROCK THAT CANNOT BE MOVED!”
“Dude…”

“Thanks for the lesson, Cody. You’ve been a real help, but I don’t think there’s anything else I can learn from you. I bid you adieu.”

Feeling dissatisfied once more, Markus marched off to the beat of his own drum. Cody worried for the little guy.

Taylor asked Rico to meet her in the Pharmacy; she wanted a discreet location to get something off her chest. She was determined to prove James wrong, to prove that she wasn’t a selfish, shallow, and self-centered individual. She had to prove this not only to herself but also to the other students, and so she had to start taking the steps to being the bigger person. And that meant apologizing to those whom she had been rude to.

Rico didn’t know why Taylor wanted to get alone with him; he was just happy to be a part of the group, to feel wanted. But he had to keep his wits about him. Rufus had told him to not be so gullible, to take a firm stance against the whims of others. For all he was aware, Taylor could be drawing him in alone to do him in. The Marathon Runner was a bundle of ambivalence.

Taylor was severely out of her comfort zone. This was such an awkward thing to do, and, like, people just don’t do awkward things. She was ready to bag the whole operation, but a nagging voice in the back of her head told her to steel herself and commit to the plan.

“Hey…Rico…”

“Yo-o, what’s up?”

“Pffft. Okay, so, this is awkward.”

“Things are only awkward if you make them awkward. People tell me I’m awkward all the time but I don’t understand what they’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh, yeah. Anyway. I need you to hear me out. I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m not always as nice as I usually am.”

“Hu-uh?” Rico was genuinely surprised.

“Yeah…like when we first got here, and it was you, me, and Cody in the Lounge. I kinda said some things that weren’t so nice…”

“Oh, I’m sure Cody knew you were only joking; I doubt he took any offense to what you said.”

“I wasn’t talking about being mean to Cody…I said some mean things about you…”

“Huh? When?” Rico had blocked the unpleasant event which sent him away in tears out of his mind.

“I just said! When we first got here and started exploring.”

“Yeah, I remember, you, me, and Cody went to the Lounge. We told stories.”

“And I apologize for what I said then.” That was easier to do than Taylor had imagined it to be; the words just flowed out. And she meant them, nonetheless.
“That’s great, and I forgive you, but I don’t recall what you’re feeling sorry for.”

“Ugh! I said your stories were lame! That you can’t tell when people don’t care what you have to say. Geez! Are you really that obtuse?”

“Oh…” It was starting to come back to him now. That’s why he’d had Rufus give him storytelling lessons, and why he wanted to be a better detective so that he could be a better part of the group. But once he’d found a single person to give him the time of day, those things didn’t matter so much. “So-o…are you apologizing just so you can say mean things to me again?”

“What? No! That would be something only vain people do. I’m apologizing; I’m not vain. Listen, I really am sorry.”

Rico didn’t feel very forgiving anymore. Remember what Rufus told you, he thought. Don’t let other people push you around for being too nice. “Oh yeah, well what if I don’t forgive you?”

“But…you already said that you do forgive me.”

“Maybe I’ll take it back.”

“You can’t just ‘take back’ an I-forgive-you.”

“But maybe I will anyway.”

“What can I do to prove how sorry I am?”

“I don’t know! If you really are sorry, then I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“Ugh! But I don’t know what! And that’s the frustrating thing!”

Rico’s detective instincts had finally kicked in. He saw the poignant question form before his eyes: if Taylor was only doing this for her benefit, then wouldn’t that still make her a shallow character? “Why are you even doing this,” he asked indignantly.

Taylor was taken aback for a second; the truth was always hard to handle. “Because… uhh…because…I’m scared…”

Rico had not been expecting that answer. “Scared? Of what?”

“Of everything! If I get killed, I don’t want people to have this one-bit impression of who I am! I’m so much more than a pretty face, but I fear that that is what everybody sees me as. I don’t want to be remembered that way. Or if we lose someone else because of Monobear’s stupid incentive, then I don’t want that person having the wrong impression of me.”

Rico’s cold façade melted faster than low-grade candle wax. “Taylor…I don’t think you’re shallow.” Rufus had also given him some instruction on how to lie better; the best lies were caked with bits of truthiness.

“Of everything! If I get killed, I don’t want people to have this one-bit impression of who I am! I’m so much more than a pretty face, but I fear that that is what everybody sees me as. I don’t want to be remembered that way. Or if we lose someone else because of Monobear’s stupid incentive, then I don’t want that person having the wrong impression of me.”

Rico’s cold façade melted faster than low-grade candle wax. “Taylor…I don’t think you’re shallow.” Rufus had also given him some instruction on how to lie better; the best lies were caked with bits of truthiness.

“You…you don’t? Oh, that is such a relief! You don’t know how much that means to me! So you forgive me then?”

“I’d be lying if I said I was never upset, but you totally seem for real, so of course I forgive you. All that was just bluffing before.”

“You have no idea how happy that makes me! Okay, starting tomorrow, there’s going to be a new Taylor Erzen on the block!”
“Tomorrow? Why not start today?”

“Too much work. Change doesn’t just happen overnight. Okay, bad example. But if I put too much energy into this right away, I’ll totally break out.”
Chapter 2--The Leaders and the Rebels--Part 8

Rufus took a stack of books with him to the Lounge. The Bookstore’s lighting wasn’t well suited to prolonged periods of reading. Neither was the Lounge, for that matter. In fact, the Lounge probably had worse lighting. But at least here Rufus wasn’t confined to a single chair; he could flop around from one couch to another as they became uncomfortable while reading. He would always begin reading in a normal sitting pose, but his body arrangement would slowly devolve into a jumble of limbs splayed helter-skelter.

With one leg on the floor, the other on the top of the couch, and his head almost on the floor, Rufus had reached the epitome of reading comfort. It was an incredibly silly pose, however, and when Lily and Elizabeth burst into the Lounge, he fell to the ground haphazardly in embarrassment. He had been in the middle of a chapter.

The two girls were fuming at each other. Something had riled them up and got their blood burning toward each other. And just when everyone was starting to get along again. With no regard to the Latinist’s wishes, Lily and Elizabeth marched over to Rufus.

Hands on her hips, Elizabeth said, “We thought we’d find you here.”

“Yeah!” Lily added haughtily.

“Eheu, you found me. Can I help you, ladies?”

“Yeah, you can,” replied Elizabeth impudently.

“Yeah!” Lily added for emphasis.

“What seems to be—”

“Tell her she’s wrong,” said Elizabeth.

“No, tell her she’s wrong,” said Lily.

“But I don’t—”

Elizabeth turned to face her companion. “Science fiction is not a more popular genre than documentaries!”

“It is too! When did you last see a documentary in theaters?”

“The theaters I go to often show documentaries. I can’t help it if I have a fine taste for movies.”

“And I can’t help if I like to watch superhero movies!”

“Ladies, I—”

“What is it?” Elizabeth snapped. “We’re trying to have a conversation here.”

“Yeah!”

“I’m sorry, but you were—”
“You better be sorry for interrupting us.”

“Yeah!”

Rufus could feel his left eye begin to twitch. These girls had come into his sanctum of literary peace and then blew him off after requesting his help. He wanted to yell at them for their barbarism, but Rico’s innocence was getting the better of him. Recall what Rico said, he thought. Just be nicer to people. Being nice was harder than it looked.

“Oh, please! Next you’ll be saying that you’d rather watch a romantic comedy than an indie film.”

“Why would I watch an indie film? I can’t speak Indian, desu.”

“It’s short for ‘independent film!’ Why would I think you would know that?”

“Because you think everyone has your bad taste in movies.”

Rufus took a step backward; maybe if he backed away slowly, they wouldn’t notice and he could escape to safety.

Elizabeth spotted his movement before his foot could come to rest. “And where do you think you’re going, bub? We aren’t finished with you.”

“Yeah!”

Rufus’s eye twitched again. “For the love of…what do you even need me for?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “We need you to break a tie for us.”

“We’re at an impasse. We need you to decide who’s right.”

“Fine. So long as you’ll let me put my two cents in edgewise.”

“Fair enough.”

“Desu.”

“Now, from the beginning, what’s the issue?”

“Lily here is insistent that science fiction films surpass documentaries. She simply lauds the blockbuster hits. She doesn’t understand that the true beauty of cinematography lies within the more obscure pieces. Like a painting in a museum, the most precious are the least recognized. I need you to tell her that she has the bad taste in film.”

“Don’t listen to any of what Elizabeth said! She’s the one with the bad movie taste. I like what sells good, and there’s a reason why it sells good. You can’t argue with statistics. Elizabeth is just some tsundere on the outside who pretends she doesn’t like what everyone else does so she can be cool. Tell me I’m right, desu.”

Rufus’s head was swimming with insults, but he held his tongue. “De gustibus non est disputandum,” he replied. “Of tastes there is no disputing,” he translated. “That’s a gnomic phrase if you ever get stuck on a quiz show, the gods help you.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes again. “You would say that.”
Lily was more defiant. “And just what exactly are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that neither of you can be right. You’re just arguing matters of opinion; it’s mundane.” Neither of the girls could argue with his logic. “Now, why on Earth did you feel it necessary to include me in your trivial squabble?”

Lily didn’t like the question, and so she hung her head in shame. “Well, you see…”

Elizabeth was more blunt. “Because we needed someone to end the debate, and we don’t really care what you think. All we wanted was a decision.”

The vitriolic remark didn’t hurt Rufus, but he understood its bite. “You contradict yourself. You want my opinion, and yet you don’t care what it is?”

“You misunderstand,” Elizabeth pointed out. “We didn’t want to seem silly in front of someone else. We could care less what you thought of us, so long as you gave us an answer.”

Lily rubbed her foot bashfully on the ground. “Nobody really cares what you think anymore, not since you called us all stupid.”

Rufus didn’t remember when he had said such a thing, but it did sound like a thing he might say. The feeling was mutual, and so he was able to move on to the next salient point of conversation. “Aren’t there usually three of you?”

Elizabeth scowled in response, and so Lily responded, “She said she needed some alone time.”

Rufus smirked. In his head, he would apologize to Rico for what he was about to say. “I see. So you only came to see me since you didn’t have your friend’s opinion to ignore.”

It took the two girls a moment to process what the Latinist had said. Suddenly, though, realization struck both of their faces instantly, and it did not leave a pretty mark. Elizabeth turned to Lily and vice versa.

“Oh, God, we do ignore her a lot, don’t we?”

“Now that you mention it, I think we do.”

“When was the last time we did something that she likes?”

“I don’t even know what she likes!”

“This isn’t good!”

“Not at all!”

Rufus smirked ostentatiously. “Ahh, so that’s how your group dynamic works.”

The girls were too distraught to deal with Rufus’s sass. Lily asked, “Are we terrible people?”

Elizabeth was too proud to let that statement hold truth. “Of course not! We have to make it up to her somehow.”

“What if we watch one of those movies she seems to like?”
“Nonsense, that’ll never do. Come, we have some serious brainstorming to do.”

As brashly as the girls had entered, they left. Rufus picked up his book and resumed his spot on the couch. Morons, he thought, I’m surrounded by morons.

Jordan and Jenny were lounging around on the Video Store couches. Their movie had ended ages ago, and the screen repeated its static blue screen ad infinitum, but the girls were too engrossed in each other’s presence to turn the television off. The Golfer and Sandwich Artist had found kindred spirits, and they were able to relax in front of each other; it was a purer kind of friendship.

Jenny smiled apologetically. “I am sorry. I feel like I have been unloading all my problems onto you, and yet I do not think you have shared any of your grievances with me.”

Jordan dismissed her with a wave of her hand. “Don’t be silly. I don’t mind listening at all; everyone needs a confidante.”

“It is just…Elizabeth and Lily can be so irritating sometimes. They never listen to me…”

“Maybe they’re not good friends, then.”

“Maybe…but it is not like I can just stop hanging out with them. That would be rude…”

“You can’t make yourself miserable, though. It’s not fair to you.”

“Again, thank you for listening.”

“Jenny, you’re starting to sound like a broken record the way you go on apologizing and thanking me for the tiniest things.”

“I am sorry, it is just in my nature to do so.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then I don’t mind.”

“Enough about me; air your misgivings, if that is alright.”

“If you insist…I guess, hmm, how should I say this…I think Rufus is my major antagonist at the moment.”

“Rufus? I did not think he was very aggressive.”

“Oh, he is, but it’s a passive aggressive. From the start, he said he wanted me on his side because he thought I was smart—which I am. I thought he viewed me as an equal, but now he just looks down on all of us like we’re vermin.”

“So you think he really does mean those things he says.”

“Unfortunately, yes. And then Rico said something the other day that bothered me. He said that I was one of the ‘elite’ members of the class, and that was because I was aligned with Rufus and Melissa. I don’t think I want to be connected to those two.”

“Whom do you want to be connected to?”

“Nobody, I think. I’d rather us all be one cohesive unit, but I doubt that’ll actually ever be
possible; we’re just too different. I fear we’ll dissolve into factions and our lives will be filled with tension instead of peace.”

“Is that why you avoid people? So you do not get on their bad side?”

“…Yes…it’s not a trait I’m particularly proud of. I shy away from people because I don’t want to give them anything to hate me for.”

“But if you do that, then you do not give them anything to love you for.”

“It sounds so simple, I know, but putting it into action is a different story.”

“Take it from me. Even if you are scared, you still have to be outgoing. You cannot succeed unless you put yourself out there.”

“Are you speaking from experience?”

“Umm, yes, I think so. I have never been a popular child, but you will stay lonely if you never try to actively make friends. It is okay to be by yourself every now and then, but it is also nice to be around others, too, on occasion.”

“You know what? I think we’re currently sided with the wrong people. We should just forget about dumb Elizabeth and Rufus; we should just form our own group, you and me. That would be so much nicer, don’t you think?”

“That does sound nice, but I do not think that I can just leave Lily and Elizabeth; it would break Lily’s heart if I abandoned her.”

“I understand. My offer stands if you change your mind.”

“Hmm…let me sleep on it, and I will give you a definite answer then.”

As awkward as it had been, Austin had asked Melissa and Theo to meet him in the food court. The puzzle he took from the Hobby Shop offered him no respite from his restlessness. He continued to feel the disgusting urge of wanting to do something, but he could not figure out what. As he was lying in boredom, a thought popped into his head of something he might do, but he needed to run the proposal by others first.

“Uhh, I’m not really sure how to start,” said Austin. “I mean, I didn’t just ask you guys here on a whim or anything.”

Melissa smiled. “I’m sure you have a good reason for wanting to speak with us; I’m always available if you need to talk.”

“I am open as well,” said Theo.

“Yawn, cool. So I guess I’ll just get into it. I had an idea for a thing, but I’m not very good at doing things, but you two seem like you would be, so I was wondering if you would help me with my thing.”

Melissa cocked her head to the side, but Theo showed no emotion. “That depends on what the thing is,” said the Cartographer.

Austin was visibly unsure of himself. Planning projects was just not his forte. He was so
used to doing nothing, but that wasn’t making him feel better anymore. “The thing is... uhh, I guess it’s kinda like a yearbook.”

Melissa became very interested in Austin’s idea. “A yearbook? What exactly do you mean? What do you want to do with it?”

“Well, I was thinking about how it’s only been a few days since the trial, but it feels like we’ve almost completely forgotten about Francesca and Delilah.”

“I’m sure there’s at least one person who hasn’t forgotten,” added Theo, thinking of Markus.

“Who knows how long each of us will be here?” asked Austin, sincerity in his eyes. “If our numbers get any smaller—”

“It won’t come to that,” said Melissa quickly.

“If something happens, then I don’t want our friends to be forgotten. So I think a yearbook would be a cool thing to have. Like, we could all have bios about ourselves in there, and write down happy memories we’ve made so far and stuff. I mean, it sounds cool to me.”

Melissa nodded excitedly. “Oh, I agree. It would be an excellent tool to solidify our group.”

Theo was a little more skeptical. “I agree that it’s a good idea, but I wonder about the logistics of it.”

Austin smiled faintly. “Good, I was hoping you would be able to work out the nitty-gritty of it.”

Theo continued, “For starters, we’ll lack any photos or pictures of Francesca and Delilah.”

“Couldn’t we take pictures from their Monobear tapes?” asked Melissa. She loved this idea, and she would not let it die.

“That sounds like a viable option. But do we even have a camera? What’s a yearbook without realistic pictures?”

Melissa dismissed him with a wave of her hand. “All kinds of strange things appear in the General Store. I’m sure a camera will turn up at some point, especially if we show interest in acquiring one.”

“Fair enough. And what about the production of it? We don’t exactly have a computer lab available to us.”

Melissa wasn’t sure how to answer this issue, but Austin had a backup idea. “It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. It could just be like a scrapbook more than anything else.”

“Well, then, I don’t see any other problems. Except: who’s going to be doing the actual work for it?” added Theo.

Austin wanted this question answered, as well, for he did not like the most obvious answer.

“Since Austin came up with the idea, naturally he’ll be in charge of it.” To Austin’s chagrin, Melissa had displayed the most obvious answer.

Austin wouldn’t go down without a fight, though. “But remember how I’m bad at doing
things? And you guys did already offer to help me…”

“I don’t remember—” started Theo.

But Melissa finished, “Of course! It’s a splendid idea, and we’d be honored to help out. Anything you need us to do, just ask. Oh! I wonder if we could partner with Elizabeth on this project. I convinced her to write a history of this mall and our time in it.”

Theo was impressed. “That’s a heavy undertaking. I’ll have to discuss some things with her on it.”

“Yeah…maybe I’ll talk to her too…eventually…” added Austin. He was pleased with how his idea was panning out.

“Good, then it’s settled. We are just going to have the best time together from here on out!” Melissa was beaming with happiness at everyone’s newly found initiative.

Randolph held a small loaf of bread in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He did not like how severe Melissa had been with James, and so the Monk took it upon himself to ease the anxiety of the mall’s prisoner.

Randolph approached the Salon with a smile to show that he came in friendly spirits. James’s cold gaze pierced through his sunglasses; he did not care for company. This was not Randolph’s first visit to the Salon, and James was no friendlier than he had been any other time.

“I come bearing gifts,” said Randolph warmly. James ignored him. “Why, I remembered the funniest thing on my way here.” James did not look like he was in the mood for a clever joke. “But perhaps I’ll tell you it some other time.” Randolph would have loved to make pleasant small talk, but the chances of a two-way conversation appeared to be slim to none. Instead, he would have to utilize one of the secret talents of the monks: talking at someone.

“I’m sure you think you know why you’re being held here. You think that the people in this mall aren’t thinking correctly and that you’ve been unjustly punished for speaking out against these atrocities.” James was silent. “This has often been the case throughout history, but more often than not, the reverse is true; it’s just not reported. You can’t see it, but your behavior was socially unacceptable. The sooner you realize that what you did was wrong, the sooner you can be rehabilitated back into the class.”

From his position tied to the chair, James regarded Randolph with what seemed like abject scorn. He didn’t care for what this measly monk said; he had done nothing to stop that crazy Melissa, no one had done anything to stop her. They were all spineless cowards now in his book.

“I have to pee,” said James matter-of-factly.

Randolph was taken aback by James’s words. This was not Randolph’s first visit, but it was the first time James had said anything to him. The Movie Producer had not so much as said thanks for the food and drink before. “Oh, why, I do suppose that would be a concern.”

“So are you gonna untie me or what?”

“Melissa instructed that I cannot keep you unrestricted. As such, I brought a pair of handcuffs with me that we can use in your transport.”
“Why are they pink and fluffy?”

“Err, I try not to think about it. This mall has some very strange paraphernalia, and I had to make due.”

“Tch, whatever. Just get them on me so I can use the bathroom. You’ll have to take me to my dorm room so I can use the bathroom there.”

“Of course.” In a swift motion, Randolph untied the roped binding James to the chair and slapped the handcuffs around his hands behind his back.

“You better have a key for these things.” He did. James didn’t say another word during the journey to the dorm area. With great difficulty, James fished for his key in his pocket and unlocked his room. He turned to face Randolph.

“You gonna come in and watch or am I allowed a fraction of privacy?” sneered James.

“I shall simply stand guard outside the door.”

James went about his business, and then the pair began the trek back to the Salon. Randolph felt the need to add his two cents along the way.

“You don’t have to be nasty to everyone. We can get out of here if we work together.”

James stopped moving. “You think I care if anyone else gets out of here? I only care about me getting out of here.”

“I understand, but if we work together—”

“I know that everyone wants out of here because they hate being trapped here, but have you actually thought about our set-up? It’s a dream come true! No responsibilities, no worries, nothing. We can leave in peace here together. For the lot of you, it’s paradise, a utopia. You should be loving it here. But to me it’s hell. I got a reason for wanting out that none of you would understand.”

“Is that so? Then what is your reason?”

“Tch, like I said, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me. I’m a monk; not-knowing is my specialty.”

“Fine, Monk, you really wanna know? I had an older sister out there. Had. A couple years back she committed suicide. Tragic, I know. I was mortified. Wanna know one of the last things she said to me? She said, ‘We’re special, you and I, so at least one of us has to make it big.’ I figured this whole Success Summit thing was my ticket to immortalizing myself with fame, but I can’t do anything to make it big while trapped in this mall. I don’t want out for myself, I want out so I can fulfill a promise to someone. But I doubt any of you peasants could understand something like that.”

Randolph was almost in tears. He had presumed that James was a tortured soul, but now he fully understood how tortured his soul actually was. Randolph would have to pray extra hard for James now.

In the most austere voice he could muster, Randolph said, “Turn around!”
James rolled his eyes and did as he was told. He figured that the Monk thought he was just making the story up and wanted to get him back to the Salon as quickly as possible. To his surprise, James felt the constriction of the handcuffs loosen, and then he heard the shackles fall to the floor. He turned quickly to face the monk.

“What do you think you’re doing?” James asked perplexed.

“I’m freeing you from your chains. I see that you do not sincerely wish harm on others for the sake of violence, but that a flame of sincerity burns within your heart.”

“Isn’t Melissa going to flip when she hears you let me go?”

“It can just be our secret until she finds out. And if she does, I’ll just say that you got the better of me when I took you to the bathroom.”

James began to back away from Randolph, unsure what to do now. “Hey, uhh, you’re not so bad after all, I guess. You might even be a halfway decent guy.”

“All I ask is that you do not make me regret my decision.”

Wordlessly, James dismissed himself from the monk and went off in search of his own place within the mall.
That night marked the end of the first week within the Mall of Monomerica. Relations between the students were not optimal, but they were making progress. Nevertheless, as the students went to bed that night, dark thoughts infiltrated their mind. There seemed to be a ubiquitous feeling of dread hanging over them, as if something terrible were about to happen.

Jordan Koulibagh, All-Star Golfer, knew that power was a risky item to mess with, but it was also a very rewarding item. It would be nice for the world to see another woman in charge. She was shrewd; she had chutzpah. If she put her mind to it, she could definitely conquer any obstacle in her path.

All-Star Monk Randolph Luther detested the allure of power. People had an unusual fascination with being in charge, and this obsession often led to corruption. Randolph wished to remain pure in his desires, wanting only for food, rest, and shelter; he had no need to dictate the lives of others.

Jenny Zemenovski, All-Star Sandwich Artist, had never been a fan of holding power. Countless times she had been offered managerial positions within her sandwich shop, but she always turned them down. Jenny knew her place, and she liked being there. Making sandwiches was a simple business, and she couldn’t bring herself to want complexity.

All-Star Movie Producer James Beck reveled in his freedom. In Hollywood, influence was everything. If an actress could get the director in the palm of her hand, she would have whatever role she wanted. If he could be in charge, he wouldn’t have to listen to pointless numbskulls who have to be reminded to breathe on occasion. He probably wouldn’t be a just ruler, but he’d sure as hell be an effective one.

Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian, felt stronger than he ever had before. He had played scores of strong characters before, but only now did he truly understand what was going through their heads. If anyone tried to mess with him now, they would get what’s coming for them. Markus didn’t need Monobear’s power, but he couldn’t wait to show everyone just how strong he really was; the world was his for the taking.

All-Star Kawaii Lily Smith had a hundred ideas running through her adorable little brain. When she wasn’t thinking about how to be extra special to Jenny, she was pondering Monobear’s incentive. She had never been entrusted with power before, and she wondered what it would be like; however, she could partially imagine it. If she ran the world, the entire planet would be kawaii as frick. Plushies everywhere. Lots of vibrant colors. And animals, so many fluffy animals. It would be a paradise.

Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist, felt that the current state of the world was a dismal assemblage of uncultured failure. The stupid and incompetent run amok with no regard to the condition of the future. If he had the power to alter even a fraction of the world, then humanity would certainly be better off, and the gods know that he has the intelligence to steer the human race in such a direction. Who can compete with such a noble notion?

All-Star Marathon Runner Rico de Naranjas felt like he could take on the world. Granted, he felt like this on most days. But he was starting to find himself among all the other students, and it made him glad to have a place. He had no need for power, but influence was never not a bad thing to have. He wouldn’t have to worry about fitting in, then, because everyone else would have to conform to his ideals.
Taylor Erzen, All-Star Lucky, was not a conceited bitch, or so she had convinced herself. She had the power within her to change and persuade the hearts of her comrades, but what if she tapped into the raw energy behind this potential? If she could sway the minds of others so easily, then having the means to do so on a global scale would only increase her popularity. With the right tools, she could have the whole world wrapped around her finger.

All-Star Idle Austin Fitzpatrick didn’t like the idea of being in charge of anything. Heading the yearbook project was stressful enough, and barely any progress had been made to its incipience yet. Being in charge of anything else would surely kill him with anxiety. He was a follower, not a leader.

Cody Cameron, All-Star Waterskier, felt at odds. On the one hand, he wanted to protect everyone in the mall, but after his interaction with Markus, he realized how dangerous it would be to put himself out there. He didn’t know what he would do with Monobear’s promise of power, but he doubted it would be anything drastic. Cody just wanted to live with everybody in peace, but as the old adage goes, one cannot have peace without war.

All-Star Historian Elizabeth Barrington had already begun her history of the Mall of Monomerica, and she was interested to see how this particular chapter would end. There had already been enough famous Elizabeths throughout time, and one more would not make much of a difference in the history books, and that’s what the Historian was primarily interested in. The only power she could want would be to have people leave her in peace when she was studying, and that wouldn’t be much of a power at all.

Theo Cook, All-Star Cartographer, understood the importance of having someone strong in a position of leadership. As much as possible, Theo had tried to stay out of leadership positions for fear of making a grievous mistake, but he always found himself drawn back to them somehow. It seemed that the stars wanted him to take charge, and it is difficult to argue with the wants of the heavens.

All-Star Politican Melissa Davis loved power. It was the sole reason she was a young politician, so that she could become a supreme adult politician. Melissa knew that she had what it took to be a leader, and if she could, she would lead the world ten times over. But leaders had to look out for the best interest of their followers. Could she betray her current followers for the support of a greater number of prospective followers? She could not.

Fourteen students had managed to survive a week within the confines of the Mall of Monomerica, and on the morning of the eighth day, all fourteen woke to another eventful day. The entire group, sans James, met for breakfast. Nothing was out of the ordinary, but the previous night’s feelings of foreboding would soon come to fruition.

When noon rolled by, only nine of the students were assembled for lunch. Absent were Jordan, Melissa, Rufus, Rico, and, of course, James. The other nine waited for their classmates to show up, but they never did. Fearing the worst, the students split up to search for their missing compatriots. Markus and Jenny searched for Jordan, Lily and Elizabeth for Melissa, Theo and Cody for Rufus, Austin and Taylor for Rico, while Randolph “searched” for James.

After a quick glance into the various stores, the groups turned their attention to the dorm area. A scream from Lily sent chills down everyone’s spines. Markus and Jenny were the closest to Lily’s group, and as they arrived, an announcement issued over the PA system.

“Attention, you pinheads. A dead body has been found. Begin your investigations, because
the school trial will be held shortly.”

Lying on her bed in the fetal position was the dead body of Success Summit’s All-Star Politician, Melissa Davis.
Abnormal Days

In death, Melissa lost the fortitude she had displayed so well. She looked vulnerable now, and her fetal position didn’t help her weak look either. Her hair fell in clumps on her face. She had an expression of intense pain emblazoned on her face, but mixed in with the pain was a look of hope, that all was not entirely lost. For a girl who never stopped moving, the peaceful state of death did not look natural.

The students were not taking the death of their leader well, especially since they all—sans James—had dined with her not four hours earlier. Jenny escorted Lily out of Melissa’s room, but Elizabeth stayed behind to help with the investigation. Markus decided to be strong and not run off in tears. Austin and Taylor stayed close to Cody, partly from wanting him to protect them and partly from wanting to keep his anger in check; he felt a righteous anger for not being able to protect Melissa. Randolph began an earnest prayer for Melissa’s safe departure, and Theo began to examine Melissa’s body in detail.

Since Elizabeth and Lily had found Melissa, the Historian did not know what anyone else had found during the search. She voiced her query, but the appearance of some of the missing parties provided her answer. Jordan, having been in the girls’ dorm, was the closest to the crime scene, so she arrived first. She was clutching her stomach, and she had the look of death on her face.

As soon as she entered, Austin’s senses became overloaded. “What is that smell?” he asked clutching his nose.

Jordan cast the Evil Eye toward him. “I didn’t have anyone to hold my hair back,” she said nonplussed.

Austin tilted his head in confusion, but then Rico and Rufus entered, the Latinist leaning slightly on the Marathon Runner. “Quid est?”

Rico asked, “Do-on’t tell me…did…did…”

Taylor looked at the ground, “It’s Melissa.”

Elizabeth observed everyone’s entrance. “Where did you all come from? Why weren’t you at lunch?”

Jordan turned her deathly gaze toward the Historian now. “Do you really want to know?”

Rufus pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’d rather not talk about it…just thinking about it is giving me a migraine.”

Rico was willing to spill the beans. “Rufus got sick and was throwing up in his bathroom, and I was there to make sure he didn’t get too seriously ill.”

Austin looked mortified. “S-so that means that that smell is…?”


“That still leaves one more unaccounted for,” said Markus.
“Nah, he’s still at the Salon, yeah?” asked Cody.

If anyone had noticed, a bead of sweat rolled down Randolph’s cheek.

Before anyone could offer any salient information, All-Star Movie Producer James Beck sauntered into the room. “Heh, I was looking all over for you chumps. Who died? Huh, so somebody finally did the bitch in? Serves her right; she was really starting to ride on my nerves. It only goes to show—”

Before James could finish whatever hateful comment was brewing inside his head, Cody rushed over and punched him square in the face. James was sent to the floor from the blow, and the second impact knocked him out. Austin and Taylor rushed to hold Cody back before he could do any more damage.

Rufus and Jordan just looked like they were going to be sick, Markus was waiting for his turn to punch James, and Rico and Elizabeth were incredibly agitated.

“Yo-o! Somebody do something before things get out of hand!” yelled Rico.

“All you morons will have to wait for me to do the nasty!” Elizabeth cried out.

Theo turned away from Melissa’s body and was completely confused by what he saw. “Huh? What’s going on?”

Elizabeth was even more flustered. “Cody has gone mad and has started punching everyone!”

“Stop yelling,” replied Theo calmly. “This is no way to act right now. We have a serious investigation to handle. If you’re not going to be productive here, then please go be productive elsewhere.” It was hard to argue with Theo’s logic.

Cody was the first to leave, and he left in a huff to search for other clues in the mall. Jordan uneasily staggered out of the room, and Rufus, claiming he needed to lie down, followed suit with Rico in tow. Randolph and Taylor somehow managed to pick up James’s unconscious body and take him someplace out of the way while Austin “supervised.” Markus, Elizabeth, and Theo remained to look over the scene of the crime.

As each student left the room, Monobear stood outside to hand them Monobear File 2. The contents read that Melissa Davis had died from poison, and that death had occurred sometime between breakfast and lunch. Markus read the data over thoroughly, but the file didn’t offer any critical information to nab the culprit.

Theo continued to examine Melissa’s body. There were no external wounds on her body, but there was a small pinprick on the inside of her left elbow. Theo leaned over her to get a better look, but he lost his balance and fell into the dead body. He wound up with his face mere inches from hers, staring into her eyes. Theo did not find Melissa’s body repulsing this close to him; in fact, she even smelled rather pleasant.

Markus raised an eyebrow at Theo. “Getting a little close to the deceased, huh?”

Theo hardly registered Markus’s necrophilic comment. “Markus, come smell Melissa’s breath,” replied the Cartographer.

“You want me to what? No way. I wouldn’t even do that on stage!”
“We don’t have time to argue. If we don’t solve the case, then we’ll be in the same predicament as Melissa here.”

Markus reluctantly acquiesced and murmured to himself, “If anybody sniffs me when I’m dead…” He got close to Melissa’s mouth and took a quick whiff; he didn’t smell anything. He took a mightier inhale, but still he noticed nothing spectacular. “I don’t smell anything.”

“How?” was all Theo had to say in response.

“Markus! Come here a minute, would you? I think I found something,” called Elizabeth from the bathroom.

“Coming,” said Markus, but before he could traverse the few steps to the bathroom, Monobear rushed in from the hallway and stood in his way.

“What do you think you’re doing!!?” demanded the crazed robot.

Time for Markus to show off his own fortitude. “I’m going to investigate Melissa’s murder in the bathroom.”

“But that’s a girl’s bathroom! Boys are not allowed in the girls’ bathrooms, and vice versa. I told you on day one that it was against the rules, so unless you want to be punished, I can’t let you proceed into there. I…I can’t risk you finding something you wouldn’t be prepared to see. I have to maintain your innocence, you know.”

“Oh, whatever.”

Elizabeth overheard the exchange. “All right, I’ll just tell you what I found. There’s a syringe in the garbage can.”

“A syringe? That’s not what you’re talking about, is it, Monobear?”

“Upupu…I wish that was it…but sadly, no.”

“There’s also some weird fibers on the floor, but I think they might just have come off her clothing.”

“So what does that all mean?”

“I don’t know. Theo, what do you think?”

“Huh? Sorry, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

In the lightest sense, Lily was hysterical. Melissa had been a rock for her and the others could lean on, but that foundation had crumbled now. She was distraught beyond words, and she wept more tears than she did for Francesca.

Jenny took Lily to the Kawaii’s room to calm her down. The Sandwich Artist had wanted to help out with the investigation, but Lily’s well-being was more important. Jenny felt bad that she had not been able to accomplish much during the last trial since she had fainted during the investigation, but since there was no blood now, there was no excuse for her idleness. She worried about Jordan’s well-being as well, but her “BFF” came first.

Lily’s breathing had begun to slow, and the water merely trickled from her eyes instead of
bursting in a torrent of tears. Jenny had read Monobear File 2, but she was still sketchy on a few
details, and she felt that she could approach Lily about the scene now.

“Lily, what all happened when you went to check on Melissa?” asked Jenny.

Trying to control her unstable voice, Lily replied, “W-w-we went into the dorms with e-e-
everybody else, but when…when…we got to Melissa’s room…she was…” The truth was too
difficult to explicate.

Jenny was still uncertain. She had personally pounded on Jordan’s door and all she got back
was a distressed moan. “Did Elizabeth break the door down for you to get in?”

Lily didn’t comprehend. “N-no. W-w-why would she? The door was unlocked. Lizzie just
tried the handle and the d-door swung open.”

“You know she does not like it when you call her ‘Lizzie.’”

“I don’t care! I’m upset! Look at me! I’m upset!”

“I…I can see that.”

“Why do I have to be upset? W-why can’t I be brave like everyone else and help
investigate?”

Jenny did not have a good answer. She could lie and say something to make her feel better,
but Lily was a sensitive child, and Jenny couldn’t bring herself to lie to her friend. “I do not know.”

“I-it’s not fair! I want to help too.”

Jenny could see that Lily was on the verge of another mournful relapse, but she had an idea.
“Maybe we can help by not doing anything.”

Lily was still not in a mood to comprehend vague statements. “What do you mean? How
will that help?”

“Everybody will be searching for clues, and that will put ideas in their heads, but if we are,
umm, detached, then we can sit back and review everything objectively.”

“Even so…that means we’ll have to vote for someone again, doesn’t it?”

“…Yes.”

“I…I don’t know if I can bring myself to do that. I don’t want to believe that any of our
friends are killers. Voting for Delilah was hard enough…”

“We just have to keep on moving forward.”

“I guess…”

Jordan returned to the sanitary sanctity of her own room and loudly and audibly slammed
the door behind her. Rufus retreated back to his own room, and Rico followed him like a puppy.
Rufus was relieved and annoyed to have somebody by his side looking after him. The Latinist was
used to austere independence, but he didn’t totally detest Rico’s company. Rico was keen to stay by
Rufus’s side, but that was a dangerous endeavor.
As much as it pained him, Rufus ordered Rico to leave him during the investigation. Rico was loath to leave, but Rufus was unmovable; Rufus was out of commission for now, and so Rico would have to do the investigating for the both of them. With valor, Rico took up the challenge. Taylor, Austin, and Randolph had taken James to the Lounge, and Cody wanted to check out the General Store. Rico figured that he would cover the most ground by searching for clues in the North Sector.

Since the Monobear File stated that Melissa had been killed by a poison, Rico felt that the most logical place to search for the murder weapon was the Pharmacy. His heart sank when he found the ostentatious poison display; there was no discounting the gravity of the reality. On the highest shelf, Rico could see that a vial of poison was absent from the display. Rico wanted to get a better look at what specific poison had been used, but he couldn’t quite reach the shelf. He reached on his tip-toes to grab the closest bottle, but as he did so he lost his balance and upset the top shelf. The shelf was falling, but Rico managed to grab it in time to prevent the bottles from crashing to the ground. Nevertheless, the display was askew. Rico set the shelf on the ground and began to reorganize the deadly bottles. After he had turned them all rightside-up, he noticed that the display looked very different: instead of there being space for one missing bottle, there was enough room for two. Rico thought this was curious, but he didn’t know what it meant. Maybe Monobear was just bad at stocking shelves.

After fixing the display, Rico felt cramped for time. He didn’t have the means anymore to do a thorough search of the mall; instead, he had to give a cursory glance to the remaining stores. Before he ran to the other stores, he gave the Pharmacy one more once-over; it seemed like someone had opened a bottle of syringes. Hastily, he ran through the Bookstore, the Video Store, and the Hobby Shop, but nothing seemed to be amiss in any of the shops. Rico had a few more places he wanted to investigate, but Monobear announced over the PA that the investigation time had ended and that the students needed to report to the food court fountain. If only he had had more time!

Cody had had enough of James heartless prattle; the dude didn’t know when to stop. The Waterskier didn’t like that he had lost his temper, but he couldn’t change the events of the past. Why was James even free in the first place? Cody’s gut told him that James had a very important part in the murder, and Cody had learned to follow his gut’s instincts; he wasn’t about to let that bastard get away with hurting their leader.

First, Cody needed to figure out how James had managed to get loose. The Movie Producer should have been tied up in the Salon, so that’s where Cody began his search. There wasn’t a shred of evidence to suggest that James had ever been forced to live in there. Cody punched the wall in consternation. His temper was really getting the better of him today, but that James just made him so angry.

Cody had watched Randolph and Taylor haphazardly carry James to the Lounge, and Cody knew he needed to apologize, but he was still too riled up to make a beneficial impact on their relationship. Instead, he wandered into the General Store. After Melissa had him tie James up, she had shown him where to get more rope in the General Store in case it was needed. Cody didn’t feel right about using the rope, but desperate times called for desperate measures. In the corner of the store, there was a large, coiled nest of rope. Melissa and Cody had cut off what they needed, but there was still more rope in supply than even how much Theo had used on his journeys. Upon inspection, Cody found that the cut he and Melissa had made was the last fray on the rope. The punk must have hidden it somewhere.
Dejected that his search was proving fruitless, Cody felt that he had cooled down enough to regroup with the others in the Lounge.

Meanwhile, the Lounge group had been busy among themselves. Randolph and Taylor were not the most physical members of the class, and they struggled to deliver James to safety. It would have been nice if they had had another body to help transport the unconscious asshole, but Austin didn’t have the upper body strength to make a noticeable difference—at least, that was his excuse to watch them while they worked. With difficulty, they found a couch and sprawled James on top of it. Then they had to figure out what to do.

Randolph had carried James’s head and shoulders, and something had bothered him about the Movie Producer’s appearance during the journey. He lifted up James’s collar. “Miss Taylor, would you please have a look at this. I think I’ve found something.”

Taylor looked at what Randolph was pointing to, and, sure enough, there were small brown fibers tucked underneath James’s collar. “So what?” asked Taylor. “The kid got some dirt under his collar, big deal.”

Austin had to disagree. “James is too persnickety to allow his clothes to stay dirty.”

“So if it’s not dirt, then what is it?”

Austin peered in close to take a look. “It looks like…like rope particles.”

A bead of sweat rolled down the back of Randolph’s neck. “Well, we did have him tied up, so it’s only natural that there be rope particles on his person.”

Austin was still skeptical. “But nobody tied his neck up, right? I mean, I didn’t see the binding, but I can’t imagine you strung his neck up.”

“No…when I delivered food he was always bound arms and feet to the one chair.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Then where did these rope fibers come from?”

Before anyone could answer, Cody joined the gathering. He was visibly dismayed to see that James still had not been revived.

Taylor lit up upon seeing him, though. “Cody! Great timing. You see, James here has some rope particles under his collar, and we don’t know how they got there.”

“Pshaw, I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure out how the party-pooper managed to escape in the first place.”

Randolph had had enough; the weight of his white lie was driving him mad. “I have a confession to make!” Everyone looked at him confused by his sudden outburst. “Yesterday, when I went to give James his supper, I untied him and set him free. I could not stand having him caged like some sort of animal. I apologize most deeply for any confusion I may have caused!”

Taylor and Austin were mildly annoyed by Randolph’s tampering, but Cody was slightly relieved. “Great! If you set him free, then you must know where the rope holding him up is at.”

Randolph did not quite grasp Cody’s tone of voice. “What do you mean by that? The rope should be in the Salon where I left it.”

Now Cody was mildly annoyed. “Uhh, no, dude. I just checked the Salon not ten minutes
ago; it’s dry as a bone in there.”

Austin called it as he had seen it. “That doesn’t exactly bode well.”

Before anyone could agree, Monobear’s announcement aired, inviting all the students back to the food court fountain/elevator. Cody slung James’s limp body over his shoulder and the group set out for the trial.

The thirteen students in somber spirits met before the fountain. Monobear was giggling to himself as more and more students appeared. Lily and Jenny were the first to arrive, followed by Theo, Elizabeth, and Markus. Rico turned up shortly thereafter, and Cody’s gang followed suit. Rufus and Jordan, both holding their stomachs, brought up the rear.

Four days ago, the students had not known what Monobear meant by the trial, but now they understood full well what lay in store for them. In a grandiose fashion, the fountain receded and the elevator magically appeared in its place. With uncertainty in their hearts, the students boarded the elevator. James had yet to come to, so they propped him up in the corner of the elevator. The doors shut behind them, and the descent began. Either one or twelve of the All-Stars would be riding the elevator back up.

The ride seemed to take forever, but eventually the elevator came to a halt. With a creak and a moan, the doors swung open and revealed the trial room. As per custom, Monobear opened with his usual monologue. “Welcome to the trial room! Here you’ll debate the death of your friend to your hearts’ content, and then you’ll vote on who you think the killer is. Simple, right? Just remember, if the murderer is voted out, then the rest of you get to live. Guess wrong, and the murderer will be the only one breathing tonight. Now stop wasting time and get into position!”

The room had been redecorated, but no matter what interior decorations had been set up, the room would still be filled with a ghastly eeriness. Twelve students took their positions in the circle of podiums, and James was slung over his. Three signs now stood in place of the fallen students, a red X over their portraits. Stylistically, Monobear had made Delilah’s X in the form of criss-crossing scissors.

Monobear took his seat, and beat a gavel off his throne. “I commence this school trial under way!”
Chapter 2--The Leaders and the Rebels--Part 11

Markus: “Okay, gang! In Melissa’s stead, I will steer the course of this trial. I swear on her life we’ll figure out who her murderer is!”

Lily: “So…so someone really did kill Melissa?”

Monobear: “Upu, that is correct. One of you little munchkins did the dirty deed! Do you feel the despair?”

Elizabeth: “So where do we even start?”

Theo: “Let’s discuss the cause of death.”

Taylor: “What’s there to discuss? The Monobear file clearly states that she was poisoned.”

Theo: “Let’s just entertain the possibility that she wasn’t.”

Jenny: “If she was not poisoned, then what could it be?”

Austin: “I don’t recall any wounds on her body.”

Randolph: “And there certainly wasn’t any blood.”

Rico: “Poison really would fit the scenario. There was even some missing from the Pharmacy.”

Theo: “That’s a little convenient, though.”

Rufus: “What…are you…getting at?”

Elizabeth: “I’d like to know that, too. I saw the body myself. She had to have been poisoned.”

Jordan: “Then how was she poisoned?”

Markus: “Elizabeth found a syringe in Melissa’s bathroom. Whoever killed her must have tossed it there.”

Theo: “Indeed there was a pin prick where a syringe might have been used on Melissa’s left elbow.”

Cody: “Case closed, then. The culprit did her in through lethal injection.”

Austin: “I don’t see a problem with that.”

Theo: “Hmm…what about the location of the syringe? Isn’t that interesting?”

Elizabeth: “A trash can? Hardly.”

Jenny: “But why did the murderer leave that evidence out in the open?”

Randolph: “Perhaps they had to dispose of it quickly.”

Rico: “The injection wouldn’t have killed her immediately; there would have been time to clean up the scene, right?”
Lily: “Maybe the kill—maybe the person likes to keep things neat and tidy.”

Rufus: “You…can’t be serious…”

Jenny: “Umm…if you think about it, it does seem kind of weird.”

Markus: “You’re going to have to illuminate me.”

Theo: “The murderer wanted us to find the syringe.”

Rico: “Why would they do that?”

Randolph: “Is it a trick? Like what Delilah did with the cuts?”

Theo: “Precisely.”

Jordan: “If you’re so smart, then just tell us how you know this.”

Theo: “It goes back to the cause of death. Remember what the Monobear File said.”

Cody: “It said that Melissa was poisoned.”

Theo: “Almost. It said that she was killed by poison. In the wild, “poison” has a very specific context. Venomous snakes are not poisonous.”

Taylor: “The point?”

Theo: “You can’t inject a poison into someone; you have to feed it to them.”

Jenny: “Thus the trick…”

Rufus: “How clever…I had no idea…”

Randolph: “So she was poisoned, just not in the way we were thinking.”

Elizabeth: “Oh, and I was hoping this one would be simple.”

Markus: “Ha! We’ve seen through the culprit’s clever ruse! They won’t get away with this.”

Cody: “Have we made much headway, though? At the end of the day, she was still poisoned.”

Rico: “But we should think about why the killer went through the trouble of planting the syringe.”

Elizabeth: “I have an idea. It was something Monobear said during the investigation. Remember the rule about boys and girls not being allowed in different bathrooms? If someone dropped a syringe off in Melissa’s bathroom, then that must mean that the killer is another girl.”

Lily: “What? Oh no!”

Jenny: “I…please do not suspect me…”

Taylor: “If someone thinks I did this one, too…”

Jordan: “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Theo: “Or that’s what they want us to think.”
Austin: “Huh?”

Rico: “He-ey, I think I get it. The syringe is going to automatically make us suspect the girls, but really it does the opposite.”

Randolph: “Oh?”

Cody: “I don’t follow, man.”

Rufus: “It’s…simple…you see…ohhhh, venter meus…”

Markus: “Ha! I understand, but I’ll let Theo give us his more eloquent explanation.”

Theo: “If the killer wanted to place suspicion on the girls, then it makes the boys even more suspicious.”

Elizabeth: “Well that’s a relief.”

Cody: “Yeah, but there’s eight of us; that doesn’t make matters any more simple.”

Jenny: “Eight is easier to deal with than thirteen.”

Rico: “We can’t rule out the possibility that it was a girl, though.”

Randolph: “Yes, we must keep our minds open.”

Taylor: “Ugh, it feels like this trial is going nowhere. We deduce one thing to find that it’s barely made a dent in the mystery.”

Randolph: “We must have patience; all things in due time.”

Austin: “Okay, are we just going to continue to ignore the giant elephant in the room?”

Monobear: “I’m a bear.”

Lily: “What elephant? There’s an elephant in here? How…?”

Austin: “No. That horrific odor, the one we smelled back in Melissa’s room.”

Jordan: “I know you’re not talking about me.”

Austin: “Oh, so it’s still you…”

Jordan: “I’d rather puke than wash my hair, sorry.”

Rufus: “Oh…please don’t…talk about that…”

Theo: “Hmm…”

Elizabeth: “Uh oh, Theo’s thinking again.”

Jenny: “What is it?”

Rico: “He-ey, isn’t it weird how both Rufus and Jordan got sick?”

Theo: “I was just thinking the same thing.”
Taylor: “People get sick. We’ve been trapped in a mall for over a week; it’s weird that not more of us have gotten sick.”

Cody: “But at the exact same time and in the exact same way?”

Randolph: “When did you two start to feel ill?”

Rufus: “Shortly…after breakfast…”

Jordan: “What he said.”

Markus: “Did anyone see Melissa during this time?”

Lily: “I didn’t.”

Jenny: “Nor did I.”

Elizabeth: “I wonder if she got sick as well.”

Theo: “No, I can contradict that.”

Taylor: “How so?”

Markus: “I, uhh, I know this one too. Melissa’s breath didn’t smell bad, you know, like Jordan.”

Jordan: “I swear to God…”

Austin: “So it all was just a coincidence?”

Cody: “Great! We’re just wasting more time!”

Lily: “Or else something happened to change her breath.”

Rico: “Wait, I thought we were done thinking the killer was an OCD neat freak.”

Jenny: “I think Lily might be onto something here.”

Markus: “Yeah, like, how do you forcefully feed someone a poison?”

Rufus: “If they’re…already…in a weakened state…”

Theo: “It wouldn’t be hard to get her to take something to ease her stomach but lace it with something else.”

Elizabeth: “So the murderer just waltzed into her room and fed her poison soup?”

Jenny: “The door was unlocked.”

Jordan: “Who vomits with the door open?”

Austin: “Melissa would certainly have enough decency to shut the door behind her.”

Cody: “So Melissa trusted the killer. How dare you take advantage of her!”

James: “You really expect to believe she’d be that naïve?”

Lily: “Whuh?”
Rico: “Hu-uh?”

Taylor: “How long have you been awake?”

James: “Long enough to listen to you nerds flap your gums for too long.”

Cody: “Hey, you’re just as much a suspect as anybody else, so cool it with the attitude.”

Randolph: “We are all working toward a common goal.”

Jenny: “Except for one of us…”

James: “You really want me to believe the killer poisoned three people to make them sick, and then only kill one of them? I don’t buy it. Where’s your evidence?”

Elizabeth: “Oh dear, we have been speculating quite a bit.”

James: “I want some cold, hard answers during my trial.”

Rico: “I can provide that evidence, I think.”

Rufus: “Rico, you…”

James: “Tch, fine, I’ll humor you. Give it your best shot.”

Markus: “You better know what you’re doing.”

Rico: “In the Pharmacy. I noticed that there was a bottle of poison missing. That would be enough to kill someone, surely. But upon closer inspection, there was actually space missing for two; the culprit must have rearranged the display.”

Taylor: “But what does that mean?”

Rico: “It means there were enough chemicals to affect three people and ultimately kill one of them.”

Theo: “The killer wanted it to look like the sicknesses were unrelated.”

Cody: “Then the three of you must have been poisoned at the same time.”

Rufus: “I was…sick all morning…”

Jordan: “We were only together during breakfast.”

Markus: “Then that must be when the culprit slipped something into your food and drink.”

James: “Heh, maybe you’re not so useless after all.”

Cody: “So now that we’ve got one problem figured out, I got a question of my own. Now that James is here, I want to know what happened to the rope binding him up.”

Austin: “What? Is there something special about it?”

Cody: “It’s missing.”

Theo: “I didn’t even realize it was gone.”
James: “Don’t look at me. It was in the Salon last I knew.”

Lily: “Umm, how did James get free in the first place?”

Taylor: “Randolph here untied him.”

Elizabeth: “Oh, all this talk of rope has made me remember something! In Melissa’s bathroom, there were strange fibers on the floor. I wonder if those were actually rope fibers.”

Theo: “At this point, I’m willing to bet they were.”

Markus: “I doubt it was the same rope, though.”

Cody: “I wouldn’t be so sure. I checked the rope supply in the General Store, and it’s untouched. If there was a rope in the bathroom, then it had to have been the one used to tie up James.”

Austin: “Why would the killer have needed the rope in the first place?”

Theo: “To get the syringe in the garbage can.”

Markus: “They could have lassoed the can over, dumped the syringe in, and then kicked the can back to place.”

Elizabeth: “Then that confirms that it was a boy. I never doubted my girls for a second!”

Lily: “Nani? How does it do that?”

Jordan: “A girl would have no need to use a rope to dispose of the pointless syringe.”

Rufus: “I concur…”

Randolph: “If that is the case, then I am afraid I know who the culprit is, bless their soul.”

Rico: “Huh? Cuz I also know who did it.”

Jenny: “Two people have the answer?”

Lily: “I don’t know if I want to hear it…”

Markus: “Alright, let’s hear what you have to say.”

Randolph: “Would you like to share first?”

Rico: “N-no, you go first.”

Randolph: “Alright, then. I do not mean to be hateful, but the murderer can be none other than James.”

James: “You can’t be serious, you bloody idiot! I never would have killed Melissa just for some lousy power! I’ve already got acres of influence under my belt!”

Austin: “Someone’s acting a little defensively.”

James: “Shut up! I didn’t do it!”

Elizabeth: “Hmm, you and Melissa surely did butt heads.”
James: “I swear it wasn’t me!”

Theo: “We haven’t heard Rico’s accusation, if it’s any different.”

Rico: “Uhh, it is, actually…”

Taylor: “And?”

Rufus: “Rico…go ahead…”

Rico: “I…I think that Melissa’s killer is actually Randolph.”

Taylor: “The monk? Do you even know what monks do?”

Randolph: “I am afraid that you are mistaken.”

Markus: “You better have some convincing proof.”

James: “Listen to what he says!”

Cody: “Whatever. Let’s just hear it.”

Rico: “If the killer needed the rope to move the garbage can, then what would be the most logical place to retrieve the rope from? The General Store, because to everyone else’s knowledge, James was still locked away. But Cody already said that the rope used had to have belonged to James. The only people who knew about that particular rope were James and Randolph.”

James: “You hear that, I’m innocent!”

Rufus: “Don’t be…so hasty…”

Jordan: “All that confirms is that the guilty party is either James or Randolph.”

Austin: “And those are the two accused parties.”

Randolph: “I apologize for disproving your argument once more, but there is evidence against James in this case.”

James: “What? No there isn’t!”

Taylor: “Oh, yeah there is.”

Randolph: “The rope fibers underneath your collar. While handling the rope, you must have gotten the fibers all over you, and you neglected to wipe off the ones under your collar.”

James: “I’m telling you, I did no such thing!”

Cody: “I always knew you were no good.”

Austin: “That closes the case, right?”

Theo: “I guess so, but still…”

Elizabeth: “And here I thought this trial would never end. Better luck next time, Rico.”

Lily: “Don’t say that! There can’t—there won’t be a next time!”
Jenny: “It was just a figure of speech.”

Rico: “Wait! You're all still missing something important!”

Markus: “And what could that possibly be?”

Rico: “Assume James was the murderer.”

Taylor: “Not so hard right now.”

James: “Why I oughta—“

Rico: “If he poisoned Rufus, Jordan, and Melissa to make them ill, then how did he do it? Because he wasn’t at breakfast.”

Elizabeth: “Oh, oh my.”

Rufus: “That…changes things…”

Jordan: “Damn, so that’s how it is…”

Theo: “That clears James’s name.”

James: “Tch. Maybe if you idiots listened to me for a change.”

Randolph: “Ha ha, you have a wonderful sense of humor, Master Rico. But you still have not explained away the collar fibers.”

Taylor: “He might not be able to, but I can. When we transported James to the Lounge after Cody knocked him out, Randolph had a hold of his head and shoulders; it would’ve been too easy to slip some fibers under his collar to frame him for the crime.”

Markus: “Randolph Luther, you stand charged with the murder of Melissa Davis with heavy evidence against you. What say you now?”

Randolph: “Ha ha ha, surely you all jest. Look at me. How could I have murdered sweet Miss Melissa?”

Austin: “Umm, with poison.”

Randolph: “I would never wish harm upon my fellow classmates. If you truly believe I am the killer, then go ahead and vote for me. Just know that you will be making the choice to seal your own fates.”

Taylor: “Enough with the love and tolerance shtick. If you actually cared about our well-being, you would have urged us to reconsider, to keep us all alive. You’re nothing but a phony. All-Star Monk, my ass. I bet you’re the liar.”

Randolph: “I am afraid that I am the real deal. Did you never learn what kind of monk I am?”

Theo: “By the robes, I would assume Buddhist.”

Randolph: “You assume incorrectly. I am a monk of the Zerostri order.”

Elizabeth: “I’ve never heard of them before.”
Randolph: “We’re a new type of monk. Some people might call us a cult, but we are monks through and through. We believe in love and tolerance through absolution. And no, that doesn’t mean the absolving of sins, that means the destruction of all. Absolutely nothing can be left to prosper. Only through complete and utter destruction can we hope to make the world a better place. I’ve been labeled as an anarchist and an extremist, but I am merely a humble monk. To anyone who will listen, I offer a promising story full of hope through oblivion. Complete annihilation is our one and only salvation.”

Lily: “That doesn’t sound very nice, but I’m confused. Did Randolph do it or not?”

James: “You bet your ass he did!”

Rufus: “Rico…why don’t…you explain everything…one last time…”

Rico: “It would be my honor. Let’s start at the beginning. This morning, the culprit deliberately poisoned Rufus, Jordan, and Melissa. The illnesses were made to seem coincidental, but the amount of poison used proves otherwise. Melissa got sick, and the culprit used her weakened state to take advantage of her—but not in that way! Being hospitable and probably offering her some tea to make her feel better, the killer gave Melissa a cup of poison to drink. Whatever concoction she drank covered up the smell of barf on her breath. The murderer didn’t stop there, though. He wanted to lay the blame elsewhere, so he used a syringe to make it look like Melissa had been poisoned through a lethal injection, but Theo proved that through semantics, this was not the case. The culprit wanted to dispose of the syringe to put suspicion on the girls by placing the instrument in Melissa’s bathroom garbage can, but he could not enter the room himself. Instead, he used the rope that had earlier bound James to bring the trash receptacle closer to himself. The syringe had the opposite effect of its intended use; it made the boys more suspicious. The use of the rope narrowed the suspicion down to Randolph and James, but since James could not have done the initial poisoning, then that means that the killer is none other than Randolph. There! How was that?”

Rufus: “Bonum…opus…”

Randolph: “Ha ha, you tell a good story. Stories won’t matter though, once we’re all gone.”

Taylor: “I’ve had enough of this creep. Let’s just vote him out already.”

Elizabeth: “I agree.”

Cody: “As do I.”

Monobear: “Upupupu. It seems we’ve reached a decision. Without any more delay then, let’s begin the arduous voting process!”

As much as the students did not want to lose another one of their classmates, the only way they could survive was to out the killer from the group. With heavy hearts, they put their faith into their votes.

Monobear: “Give me one moment while I tabulate these results. Let’s see…multiply by three…carry the one…subtract pi…and BINGO! The results are in! The majority vote is for our very own Randolph Luther. But is he the killer? Was this entire trial a sham? Is someone going to secretly reveal that they were the evil mastermind behind the plot? The short answer is: no. The long answer is: after reviewing the evidence, I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that Randolph Luther is, in fact, GUILTY!”
Randolph: “Ha. Ha ha ha. So you really caught me. Good for you. Destruction *is* inevitable, I suppose.”

Rico: “Ah-hah, so I was right!”

Elizabeth: “I can hardly believe it. It’s just so…strange.”

Rufus: “It’s just…a game…”

Cody: “Hey, I’ve still got a question. Why’d you do it?”

Randolph: “Hmm? There has to be a reason?”

Cody: “WHAT?!? If you killed her out of cold blood I’ll *personally* give you your punishment!”

Randolph: “Oh, that won’t be necessary. I may as well indulge your curiosity. The simple answer is that Melissa’s fate was a product of Monobear’s incentive.”

Jenny: “You killed for power?”

Austin: “That doesn’t make sense to me.”

James: “What would a monk need power for?”

Randolph: “Power takes many different forms. I believe in salvation through destruction, and I understand the true glory of such beautiful ruin, but others lack the comprehension of such a miraculous enterprise. If I had the influence to reach new followers all over the globe, then my message would be complete. The entire world would dissolve. Doesn’t it sound wonderful?”

Markus: “I’ve seen some weird things in my day, but this one takes the cake.”

Lily: “I don’t like what he’s saying.”

Jordan: “He’s crazy. Plain and simple.”

Cody: “But why Melissa, huh? Why her?”

Randolph: “She was the biggest thorn in my side. Always trying to keep everybody alive. People die; it’s what they do. Who was she to say otherwise? If I wanted my dream to become a reality, I had to remove the biggest boulder in my path. And she trusted me, which was the saddest part.”

Jordan: “Why poison us, though?”

Rufus: “Indeed…”

Randolph: “Because you’re smart. I didn’t want to risk you figuring out the mystery. But I guess I underestimated the abilities of the rest of you. But if I were the rest of you, I’d watch out for these two; they’re dangerous. Who knows what they’ll do.”

Theo: “So your greatest error was in your estimation of others.”

Randolph: “Yes, I am afraid so. I thought I needed to muddle up the crime scene or else the case would be too straightforward. I thought it would have been obvious that I gave her poisoned tea, and that the tea would be too easily linked to me, and yet you never identified that as the agent of poison.”
Elizabeth: “That would have made you suspicious, but anyone can make tea.”

Randolph: “It must just be time, then. Perhaps in another life I’ll be more successful. May we all get a chance to relive this occasion someday.”

Monobear: “Upu, it sounds like it’s time for everyone’s favorite past-time: Punishment!”

Randolph: “Ahh, yes, I am anxious to see what is in store for my demise. There won’t be any need for chains this time; I can gracefully admit defeat.”

Monobear: “Spoken like a true Zerostrian. Can’t you just feel the despair coursing through the room? I knew I liked this kid for a reason.”

Randolph: “Hmm? Despair? Oh no, there’s no despair here. My motives may not be socially acceptable, but I hold out a hope, truly, in an era of oblivion. That is my hope. There is a strong hope in each of us. If you wish to break them and fill them with despair, your job will not be easy. Nay, it may even be impossible.”

Monobear: “Enough of your religious prattle! Let’s get the show on the road! I’ve designed a special punishment just for you! Prepare yourselves for this: An Imbalanced Lifestyle!”

Randolph calmly and gracefully walked to the doors in the back of the trial room. They swung open, and he entered, never to return.

He stood in the center of the execution chamber. There was a great hiss as of a mechanism starting up, and then bamboo shoots shot out of the ground. Randolph had been standing directly on top of one, but he was balanced in such a way as to ride the shoot up to its full height. The Monk towered twenty or thirty feet up in the air on top of the pole.

The Monk’s intuitive connection to the world sharpened his senses. He jumped from his resting place onto another pole. As he leapt off, a spike plowed straight up through the previous shoot. It would have impaled him had he not moved.

Randolph jumped again, landing nimbly on such a small surface to avoid being shanked by a spike. He kept jumping and leaping, dodging every spear that came his way. It appeared that he was too adept for his punishment, but Monobear had another trick up his sleeve.

Randolph was preparing to jump off his current shoot, applying pressure onto the pole before releasing into the air. Just as he was about to leave the pole, the shoot retracted into the ground. This caused the Monk to lose his balance, and he lurched forward toward the sea of bamboo. He fell toward a shoot directly in front of him, and as he fell a spike drew up from the pole. The sharp point pierced the Monk’s body. Randolph was hooked. The other poles retracted back into the floor. The body of All-Star Monk Randolph Luther slowly slid down the pole, staining the shoot as he went.

The doors closed, and the remaining twelve students would never see the Monk alive again.

“Yeh, heh heh heh! He put up a good show! I wish I had filmed that; I bet the video would have gone viral!” Monobear was reveling in his own way while the students were trying to comprehend the gruesome act they had been forced to witness. “The poor idiot, the world’s already been destroyed! He didn’t need to kill anyone. What a waste! Oh well, that certainly makes for some good entertainment, though.”

“What do you mean the world’s been destroyed?” asked Jordan.
“Umu! I’ve said too much. This trial is over. Get back in that elevator, and return to your puny lives!” Monobear banged his gavel and ushered the students out of the trial room.

The remaining twelve students returned to the elevator. Rufus put a hand on Rico’s shoulder, half out of admiration, and half out of needing support. James even sent a thanks the Marathon Runner’s way.

The elevator began its ascent to the food court. As it reached the zenith of its journey, the doors opened and the students hoped that this would be the last ride in the elevator they would have to take.

End of Chapter Two.

Surviving Students: 12

Markus Aslanius—All-Star Thespian
Elizabeth Barrington—All-Star Historian
James Beck—All-Star Movie Producer
Cody Cameron—All-Star Waterskier
Theo Cook—All-Star Cartographer
Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner
Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky
Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle
Jordan Koulibagh—All-Star Golfer
Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist
Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii
Chapter 3—The Selfish and the Selfless

(Ab)Normal Days

The now twelve students stood in the food court in a daze. They had barely had time to come to grips with Melissa’s death, and now they had to face the fact that Randolph was gone as well. There would be more empty seats at the dining table now. A quarter of the class had lost their lives, but they were no closer to escaping from the mall.

Time had seemed to be at a standstill, but a hearty growl from Elizabeth’s stomach reinforced reality. Melissa’s body had been discovered shortly after noon, and the subsequent investigation and trial had taken up the remainder of the evening. It was time for dinner. As a reward for giving in to their murderous impulses, the students could now enjoy fish as their evening entrée. The students tried to smile through the meal, but no one was in the mood for feeling merry.

There were new stores open in the East Sector, but nobody had the energy to explore them. They decided that they would do that sort of investigation after breakfast the following morning. For the time being, the students wanted to head back to their own rooms and figure out their thoughts and feelings.

Elizabeth felt that she was coping fairly well, all things considered. She had found friends to pal around with, and she wasn’t really lacking anything necessary for survival. Before her death, Melissa had broached the idea of writing a history of the mall, and that was just the project Elizabeth needed to keep herself going. She had nearly forgotten about her passion for the past by being trapped in this strange place. Research and writing would bring her back to the real world, if only vicariously.

Theo felt the loss of his friends, but he didn’t let it show. He had learned to keep his emotions under control. Being cooped up in such a confined space, he should have felt restless, but he had made himself content. He had been running around on expeditions his entire life, and so his education had come on the road. This was the first real time that he had been around people his own age. For the most part, he was friendly, but he wasn’t sure how close friends they could be to one another. The BFFs were inseparable, Rufus and Rico had taken up a strange report, and Austin and Taylor, for however much they bickered, spent an inordinate amount of time together. Theo wondered if he could find a group to really be a part of, or maybe even find a best friend to hang out with.

Rufus realized that he had been sleeping better the past few nights. Under the stressful circumstances of their imprisonment, this fact was ludicrous. His daily life wasn’t much different than it had been; he passed the hours reading, contemplating the universe, or, when he was really bored, conjugating irregular Latin verbs. But in between chapters and verb tenses his mind would wander to the others in the mall. Surely at some point he would have to choose a victim so that he could flee the mall, leaving the others behind; undoubtedly, he would be able to fool these miscreants, but he could never settle on a good candidate. In fact, in his mind, there were some students who were absolutely off-limits.

Jordan had always been a loner, and that hadn’t changed. She enjoyed Jenny’s company, but their relationship was nothing serious. She couldn’t care less if she left the mall or not. The outside world was gross and oppressive, whereas there was safety—not necessarily security—in
the mall. And if what Monobear had slipped was right, that the world outside had been destroyed, then the mall was really a safe haven. She had come to terms with being there for an extended period of time, and she would warm up to the others eventually. They only had an eternity to get to know each other.

When people weren’t killing each other, Cody was enjoying his stay in the Mall of Monomerica. Everyone was so different; it was like a constant party. There were surprises around every corner, and so there was never a dull moment. Sure, James was starting to get under his skin, but that’s just the way the kid was. Hopefully after spending the night in the Salon slammer, James would learn his lesson and start to back off. If not, then Cody would just intervene again and make sure that no harm came to anybody. He had faith that everyone would come around and that they’d live together in righteous happiness.

Lily truly loved everybody, and it broke her heart whenever her friends had to leave her. During every trial, she had not been able to bring herself to vote someone out. She didn’t tell anyone, but every time they voted, Lily voted for herself. She didn’t believe that anyone could really kill, especially for Monobear’s dumb motives. Lily was normally a happy-go-lucky individual, but having to face the fact that her friends weren’t coming back made her irreparably sad. Thankfully she still had Jenny and Elizabeth; they always knew how to cheer her up.

Markus had had enough of this Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. If Monobear’s intention was to break his spirit, then the robotic machine had succeeded. His brief relationship with Francesca had struck his heart, and that had made him want to be stronger. And in his mind, Markus had become stronger, even surpassing the bravery and bravado of Cody and Theo, his strongest rivals. But being strong hadn’t stopped Randolph from poisoning Melissa. Strong Markus was not enough; he would have to become Aggressive Markus to make any real change.

James hated these people. They were filled with so much hope, and their naïveté was disgusting. They were nobodies; he was a somebody! It was insulting to be yoked together with them. And then they had the audacity to tie him up and knock him out! Monobear had yelled at him in the Salon for falling asleep somewhere other than his room, but it’s not like he had a say in the matter. Monobear let him go on a technicality, but James still had a sour taste in his mouth. What would his sister say about everything? She’d say that he brought this upon himself. He owed it to her to get out alive, and so maybe he should start trusting in his frie—classmates.

Austin felt more exhausted than he had at any other point in his life. He was being dragged out of his comfort zone in a big way. He wanted to go back home and remember the times when things were easy and nothing hurt. He missed Delilah and Francesca, and he missed Melissa, and a part of him even grieved for Randolph. It was too much for him to constantly face the deaths of his friends. He couldn’t help but get attached to these people, and then it pained him to be so forcefully separated from them.

Jenny didn’t know she was one, and she didn’t know what the word meant, but she was a humanist. She had been forced into independence at a young age, and so she had always had to rely on herself. She didn’t have time to make friends; she had to work to support herself. She never put much stock in people, but now she was experiencing people all the time. It was unbearable, but in a good way. Even if she sat back and watched everyone else talk, she could always find a type of comforting complacency. Maybe the Mall of Monomerica wasn’t such a bad place after all.

Rico wasn’t happy that he had sentenced someone to their (deserved) death, but he was glad that he was able to contribute to the students’ cause. This was his life, and he fit in here. He had even made a real friend! Rico had taken up running because it was an activity that one person could do alone, and even in a race, surrounded by hundreds of other runners, there was always that
sense of alone-ness. But he didn’t feel that now; he felt hopeful for the future.

At times Taylor enjoyed living in the mall, and at other times she didn’t. On the one hand, it was a mall! But on the other, it was a really boring mall. Where were all the shoes and department stores? Taylor knew that she didn’t always come off as genuine as she liked, but deep down she liked these people. They were annoying, but at least they were her friends. They were all equals. If the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing ever lost its flavor and Taylor grew bored of the mall, then she and the others would just leave. She wasn’t in any sort of hurry, but she was game for whatever the others were doing.

Monobear loved watching the kids despair. If only more of them would despair! Lily, Markus, and Austin were doing a fine job of wallowing in despair, but then there were the annoyances of Cody, Rico, and Elizabeth who were resisting it. Just as one student would begin to despair, another would be reinvigorated with hope. This meant that Monobear was not doing his job properly and that he would just have to work harder now. Unfortunately for the students, the person controlling Monobear was tenacious and full of despair-inducing ideas.

When the students gathered for breakfast on their ninth morning in the mall, they found that eggs, made to order, had been added to the menu. For the most part, they still felt uneasy, but a good night’s sleep had slightly refilled their hearts with hope. With Melissa gone, though, there was nobody to keep things orderly. The anarchic atmosphere was palpably felt, and that predicament would have to be fixed.

Markus: “Gang! It’s time that we had a new leader! And I’m the only one fit for the job!”

Jordan: “Is that so? You think you really have what it takes to keep us all alive?”

Markus: “I most certainly do! I’m the strongest one here, and I’m the only one who can see the forest from the trees! If you want any chance of surviving this Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing, then you will listen to what I say!”

Rufus: “That’s a rather bold claim. I’d like to see some evidence.”

Markus: “What more evidence do you need than what your eye already shows you? Who here is more fit to take on a leadership position?”

Austin: “I think Theo would make a good leader.”

Theo: “You do? I don’t know about that.”

Austin: “Sure, you’re a pretty just guy.”

Cody: “What about me? I think I could lead us all pretty well.”

Taylor: “Sorry, Cody, but you’re just a guy. Could you really make a tough decision when you had to?”

Cody: “Sure! I make tough decisions all the time, like whether I should go out on the lake when the weather’s crappy.”

Jenny: “I do not think those are the kind of decisions you would have to make.”

Rico: “Yo-o, if we’re talking about new leaders, I’d like to throw my name in the ring.”
Elizabeth: (“Lily, I could make a good leader. Be a dear and nominate me.”

Lily: “Oy! I think we should all consider Elizabeth for our new leader!”

Elizabeth: “Oh really? The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind. If you insist, then I suppose I could take up the job.”

Markus: “NO! I already said that I’m the leader, and that’s that!”

Cody: “Hey, that ain’t fair!”

Taylor: “What if we don’t want you as our leader?”

Jenny: “Taylor has a point.”

Markus: “Well tough luck! You’re just going to have to deal with it!”

James: “Are we still hung up on this leadership shit? We don’t need a freaking leader. This game is dog-eat-dog. Having a leader isn’t going to help keep any of us any more alive.”

Rufus: “I agree. In fact, it may be deleterious to have a leader.”

Theo: “How do you mean?”

Rufus: “Well, look at Morticia. She was our leader, and she was targeted for it.”

Lily: (“Does he mean Melissa?”)

Elizabeth: (“I think so? It’s been nine days; how doesn’t he know all our names yet?”)

Rico: “In that case, I don’t want to be the leader anymore.”

Jordan: “So it’s a double-edged sword. Interesting.”

Markus: “There’s nothing ‘interesting’ about it! The fact is that I’m your leader, and we’re living under my rule from here on out!”

James: “Jesus, what did I just say? Does anybody even listen to me?”

Elizabeth: “Did anyone hear something just now? It sounded like a whining animal.”

James: “I hate you all so much.”

Lily: “Yeah! It sounded like a really high-pitched buzz.”

James: “What? Are you on drugs?”

Jenny: “Wait… I thought we were talking about ignoring James.”

Cody: “Heh, that’s Lily, for you. Wouldn’t be the same if she didn’t say something random every now and then.”

Lily: “But I wasn’t being random XD I actually heard a whine.”

Jenny: “How did you just say that?”

James: “I want some of those drugs now.”
Markus: “Hey! Focus! It’s time we get down to business!”

Taylor: “Omigod, we’re trapped in a mall, how important can this business even be?”

Rufus: “Ecce, let’s humor him.”

Markus: “Since we put off exploring the East Sector yesterday, that is now our top priority. Who knows what clues are hidden there or what we’ll find to help us escape.”

Jordan: “The likelihood of either of those things happening is exceptionally low.”

Rico: “Why do you say that?”

Theo: “Monobear’s set everything up beforehand; he wouldn’t leave things that could be used against him out in the open.”

Markus: “Which is why we must set out as soon as possible to find whatever he overlooked!”

Elizabeth: “It seems that that’s settled, then. Come along, girls, let’s see what we can find.”

Rufus: “Eheu, Rico and I will just—”

Markus: “NO! As your leader, I will dictate who explores with whom.”

Austin: “Huh? But what if I don’t like my partners?”

Markus: “Tough luck! If we are to escape, we will all have to work together, so there’s no more playing favorites. I don’t want any factions rising up in this mall, so I’m separating everyone.”

Lily: “That’s not fair!”

Cody: “Dude, c’mon.”

Markus: “Enough! What I say goes! Now listen up, because I’m only going to say this once. I will be exploring with Taylor and Elizabeth. Rufus, James, and Lily, you’re all together. Jordan, you’re with Theo and Austin. And so that leaves Cody, Jenny, and Rico together. Now let’s stop wasting valuable time and get going already!”
Chapter 3--The Selfish and the Selfless--Part 2

There was no sense in arguing with the new Aggressive Markus, and so the students begrudgingly took the escalators down to the lit up East Sector of the mall. In the light, this portion of the mall was just as warm and accommodating as the others, i.e. barely hospitable. Like the other quadrants, this one had two shops on either side of the main hallway with a large blocked off department in the back. Since there were four groups, each group took a store.

Elizabeth, Taylor, and Markus wandered into the mall’s Gym. It wasn’t a particularly astounding gym, but it served as an adequate vehicle of exercise. At least now the students wouldn’t have to worry about losing their pristine figures. The equipment was simple but efficient. In the back were giant exercise balls for yoga, along one wall were treadmills, and various weights of varying masses lined the other. A weight bench stood in the center of the Gym for bench presses. For the less ambitious individuals, a small trampoline sat in the corner of the room.

There were doors in the back that led to small changing rooms. The changing rooms were nothing special; the door locked so that one could change in privacy. There was a small shower and towel rack, but that was all. It was a very low-budget gym. The boy/girl bathroom rule still existed, even though the changing rooms were not bathrooms.

Taylor looked around, but it was just a gym. “Well, leader, what are we supposed to do now?”

Markus was imperturbable. “We keep looking for clues, anything that’ll help us get out of here.”

Elizabeth commented, “I don’t know how well a treadmill would aid in a jailbreak attempt.”

“You have to look deeper than that! We need to comb every inch of this place! Even a stray hair could be used as a piece of evidence.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “A stray hair? What would you do with that? Tickle Monobear? I don’t think robots have the sense of touch.”

“No, that would be stupid. I’m using the hair as an example. That sort of minutia is what we have to be alert to.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes as well. “If you expect me to crawl around on hand and foot then you are sorely mistaken.”

Taylor put her hands on her hips. “We are trapped here. We’ve been here for over a week; if there was a way out, we would have found it already.”

“I won’t allow you to talk that way! To give up like that means that you have fallen into despair, and that’s just what Monobear wants! I will to fill you with hope even if I have to do it by force!”

“I hope that wasn’t a euphemism,” muttered Elizabeth to herself.

“But a hair is not going to magically whisk us away from here,” argued Taylor.

“The hair is an example! Read a book and learn what a metaphor is!”
“I know what a metaphor is, smartass!”

“Perhaps we should all calm down,” urged Elizabeth sweetly.

Ignoring her, Markus said, “Then use your brain and start thinking about the big picture! I swear I’m the only one who truly understands the gravity of our situation.”

“Your ego is as big as Rufus’s!” replied Taylor.

“At least we’re team players! You think only about yourself; you don’t give a shit about the rest of us!” Bullseye.

“You know, these treadmills do look like a lot of fun,” offered Elizabeth propitiatingly.

“You take that back,” said Taylor under her breath.

“Oh, did I strike a nerve? Perhaps I know how to galvanize you now.”

“Oh, I really hope that wasn’t a euphemism,” mumbled Elizabeth.

“I’ll strike your nerve if you don’t cut the crap! Who the hell do you think you are? One minute you’re a crybaby, and the next you’re some Nazi dictator!”

“I’m sorry if my multi-faceted personality is too much for you to comprehend.”

“Multi-faceted? That’s just a fancy way to say you’re bipolar!”

“I am an actor! It is my duty to take on different personas!”

“Oh, look, some of these dumbbells are pink,” mused Elizabeth.

“If you think you’re so great, then why don’t you just show it!”

“If you want a demonstration, I’d be happy to give you one!”

“Now, I know that wasn’t a euphemism.”

“You don’t have the balls; you’re all talk and no action.”

“Believable action is the foundation of acting!”

“Then stop yakking and bring it already!”

“Alright, you asked for it!”

“YOU TWO WILL STOP IT RIGHT NOW!” screamed Elizabeth. She was red in the face and had the look of death passing through her eyes. “YOUR HORRENDOUS BICKERING IS DOING VILE THINGS FOR MY COMPLEXION. IF I BREAK OUT FROM STRESS, THEN I WILL WRING BOTH OF YOUR NECKS!” Taylor and Markus were veritably shut up by Elizabeth’s vehement outburst. The Historian quickly regained her composure, and, through a smile, added, “I’m sorry, I seem to have lost my temper.”

Markus simply nodded, and Taylor muttered a “No kidding.”

“Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to see what else is hidden in this quaint little gym, and I suggest that you do the same.”
Fearful of causing Elizabeth to lose her temper once more, Markus and Taylor resumed their investigation of the Gym until it was time for everyone to regroup.

Rufus, James, and Lily were relegated to investigating the mall’s Electronics Store. Many of the stores contained outdated and outmoded artifacts, but the Electronics Store carried equipment far from being obsolete. The air inside the store even smelled new.

There was a shelf full of cell phones, a wall lined with walkie-talkies, an arrangement of portable radios, a menagerie of monitors, and a panorama of PDAs. The students discovered many devices that they could not name, and there was no sales associate to push the unwanted, unnecessary merchandise onto the prospective shoppers.

Rufus preferred “real” objects, and so he put little stock into technology, and subsequently the store bored him. James missed the taste of the outside world, and this reaffirmation of what was really out there brought a shred of happiness to his soul. Lily had never seen so many expensive gadgets in one place before; the most advanced thing she owned was her computer, and even that was at least a trillion years old.

Lily was rummaging through a box in the back and found a dusty portable radio. She wasn’t sure why, but she really liked it. She was proud of her treasure, and she wanted to show it off.

“Look what I found!” cried Lily.

James didn’t even bother looking in her direction. “Put that away; it’s trash.”

“You didn’t even look!”

“Doesn’t matter. If you picked it out, then it must be pointless.”

“Rude! Yamete kudasai!”

“What did you call me?”

Rufus was happy to let the two shorties go at each other, but he had business he wanted to discuss with one of them.

“Ecce, desistite. You’re all too impetuous. Calm down or it’ll be no fun trying to kill you.”

“Retasu! Don’t say things like that.”

“Stop being so naïve! You’re as bad as Melissa,” snarked James.

“And look where that got her,” added Rufus. “Now, if you don’t mind, Jeffrey, I’d like to discuss some things with you.”

“Tch, I’m just becoming more and more popular, aren’t I?”

“You really want to talk to him?”

“Ita. Our Movie Producer may have a short fuse, but he’s no one to overlook.”

“That better be a compliment.”
“Coming from me, I assure you it is.”

“Tch, then just get on with it.”

“Why didn’t you kill Montana?”

Lily let out a cry of consternation. She didn’t like eavesdropping on this conversation.

“What the hell? What kind of question is that?”

“I thought it was fairly straightforward. You had all the reason and means to kill her, so why didn’t you?”

“I’ve said all along that I’m just waiting for the right motive. Might as well make my time as productive as possible.”

Rufus stared James blankly in the eyes. “Bullshit.”

Lily covered her ears; Rufus made a swear.

James was slightly taken aback. “The hell are you talking about? Why would I lie about something like that?”

“Because you’re weak.”

Normally James’s anger would have risen to a boiling point, but Rufus’s matter-of-fact address had no emotion to rile him up. “Now I call bullshit.”

“I have to disagree. You’re all talk and no game. You can boast about leaving here all you want, but you’ll never make it on your own.”

“The hell are you saying all this for?”

“I want to know where your allegiances lie.”

Lily cocked her head to the side. “Allegiances? We have those?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. We each tend to gravitate to certain others within the group; haven’t you noticed? You yourself spend most of your time with Erika and Janet.”

“I…I hadn’t noticed…”

“Tch, what’s it matter who I like to hang out with?”

“Well, there are certain patterns in our group dynamics. Some of us are focused on leaving, some of us are focused on surviving. Which are you?”

“Uhh, have you not been listening to a word I’ve said the past week? I. Want. Out.”

“I would be okay with surviving,” offered Lily meekly.

“Then you need to be careful. If you don’t have the ability to get out of here on your own accord, then you’re left vulnerable. Perhaps your skills would be better suited to survival.”

“There’s no way I’m teaming up with these barbarians! It’s below me!”

“But we’re your friends!” Lily stamped her foot to prove her point, but she threw herself
slightly off balance.

“I’m so tired of repeating the naïveté speech.”

“I don’t care if I’m naïve; we’re all friends, and that’s that.”

“We’ve barely known each other a week! How do you expect me to buy such a weak argument?”

“Because it’s true. Maybe if you listened to what I’ve been saying since day one, then you’d understand.”

“So you think we’re friends, is that it?”

“Desu, I do.”

“Then prove it.”

“Anything, makeru mon ka!”

“Fine, then give me your stupid radio.”

“Uhh, whuh?”

“That’s a simple enough command. Give me your radio.”

“But…what do you want it for?”

“Don’t you trust me? Have faith that I have a good reason to take it.” James was planning on smashing it on the ground to prove his point.

“But I…I…”

Rufus, who had been silent after he got the answer from James he wanted, continued to watch on in mild interest.

“Well, what’s it going to be?”

“…alright…I’ll do it…”

Lily had been holding the outmoded machine close to her chest, but now she relaxed her grip on it. She felt a special connection to the radio; perhaps it had been super kawaii in a past life. But as much as she wanted it, she had to prove that the power of friendship was strong enough to overcome such hard feelings. She stretched her arms out and offered the radio to James.

James should have snatched the radio from her palms and immediately thrash it into the pavement, but he did not go after it right away. He could see how much it pained Lily to give it up. He didn’t expect her to be so attached to the inanimate object. He tentatively took it in his hands, but he did not drop it. He examined it, and he looked at Lily. He could see the look of sincerity in her eyes; she really meant to get on his good graces.

“Tch, you call this a treasure? It’s not as good as I thought it was. Here, you can have it back, I don’t need it anymore.”

Lily beamed; she had convinced James of her friendship and managed to hold on to her treasure as well.
“Now leave me alone while I check out the camera section.”

The three students resumed their various investigations, but the air in the room seemed lighter now.

The other people in the Antique Store bored Austin. Jordan didn’t say much before, and she was keeping to herself all the same amongst the artifacts of antiquity. Theo, on the other hand, was looking at the trinkets and identifying where they came from. He didn’t have a consummate knowledge in archaeology, but he had enough experience to identify the past.

The Antique Store contained a wide variety of knick-knacks. The space more closely resembled a hoarder’s garage than a place of business. There was a grandfather clock in one corner, a lamp with a tattered shade in another. There were fancy plates and teacups, exotic-looking vases, iron irons, and even a phonograph. The students kept bumping into statues of Greek gods and kept tripping over marble fountains. There was no dust on the merchandise, however, so everything was in a well-maintained order.

After looking at everything for a few seconds, boredom harshly seized Austin once more. It was one thing not to do anything; it was another to be forced into doing nothing. His mind began to wander. Then he realized something.

“You don’t smell bad anymore,” the Idle said in Jordan’s direction.

Jordan narrowed her eyes at Austin. He lacked certain social inhibitions, and she didn’t much care for that. “It’s amazing what a shower can do for your hygiene,” she replied, deadpan.

“I know, right? Sometimes when I have to do something—which isn’t often—I’ll take a shower to warm myself up, but then I lose track of time under the water and miss whatever I was supposed to do.”

Theo picked his head up upon hearing that. “You can spend that much time in the shower?”

“Yeah, doesn’t everybody?”

Theo was confused. “The longest shower I ever took was ten minutes long.”

Austin gasped. “Why would you ever do something like that?”

Jordan casually added, “I can do fifteen minutes, tops.”

Austin looked even more shocked. “I average at least half an hour.”

“That long is a waste of water,” said Jordan.

“You should really try to conserve the planet’s resources,” said Theo.

“Yawn, I’ve never been able to take a quick shower. It just seems…unnatural…”

Jordan returned to her pile of paraphernalia. “There’s a first time for everything.”

Austin had an idea. “Theo, won’t you show me how to take a quick shower?”

Theo blushed a fearsome shade of red; he was more embarrassed than when Markus had approached him a few days earlier. “Th-that’s a bit personal, don’t you think?”
“Is it?” Austin asked innocently.

“Dude, yeah. Showers tend to have stalls for a reason.”

“But you’re Mr. Rugged-Macho-Explorer-Man; surely you’ve found yourself in more compromising situations.”

“S-so what if I have? You’re asking a lot, here.”

“Don’t be such a spoil sport. Jordan…”

“Forget it. Besides, you’re not allowed in my bathroom, and vice versa.”

“C’mon, Theo, you’re already helping me with my yearbook.”

“Hey, you don’t think what you’re asking is weird at all?”

“Not really, no.”

Jordan brought herself back into the discussion. “Yearbook?”

Theo was relieved to be able to change the topic; maybe there was a reason he hadn’t gotten overly close to these people yet.

Austin cocked his head to the side. “Oh, I guess you haven’t heard. I’m starting a yearbook project so we don’t forget about everyone who’s here.”

Jordan raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That’s a lot of work for one person.”

Theo looked away. “I agreed to help him out with it.”

Jordan smirked knowingly. “I see now. Austin’s just supervising.”

Austin smiled. “I was born to supervise. Hey, would you be interested in working on the yearbook, too?”

Jordan resisted the urge to scoff. “No.”

Theo was surprised, and Austin was slightly confused. “How come?” asked the Idle.

“I think it’s a waste of time. Hmm…I guess I told Randolph this, but I don’t see any point in laboring over the fallen; the dead should stay dead.”

Austin gasped. “That’s terrible.”

Theo shook his head. “It’s a practical coping mechanism, and we’re all going to have to develop it. If we spend too much time mourning, then we’ll never accomplish anything.”

“But…we can’t just forget about our friends.”

Jordan brushed her hair out of her eyes. “We don’t have to forget them; we should just let the memory of them rest. Give them peace in the afterlife.”

Theo nodded approvingly. “That’s a very noble ideal; you’re a very thoughtful girl.”

“Someone has to be.”
Theo was starting to see Jordan in a new light. Up until she had been poisoned, she remained coherent, and there was no doubt that she was intelligent. She was down to Earth, and he could appreciate that. He’d been neutral for long enough; maybe it was time for him to make a power move.

Jordan was curious why Theo was staring at her. She had been stared at before for various reasons, but the Cartographer’s eyes did not relay that familiar sentiment. She didn’t have a good read on him, but he seemed decent enough. He had performed well in the trials, and he had done nothing to warrant negative attention.

Austin casually watched the Golfer and Cartographer studying each other. He smelled love in the air. Not the dopey romantic love in which the star-crossed lovers are snogging each other mercilessly, but a subtler, more sincere love that arose from genuine feelings of affection. Either that, or he was hungry.

“Well I can’t just forget about people,” Austin said semi-assertively. “It would be a shame to leave everyone behind, so I’ll carry all their spirits myself if I have to.”

Austin’s proclamation drove Jordan and Theo out of their thoughts. “Whatever you say,” offered Jordan, and Theo commented, “If that’s what must be done.”

Cody was excited when he first discovered that the mall had a Party Store, but his excitement quickly faded. Cody expected strobe lights, fog machines, coolers filled with wicked elixirs, and stereos that were more bass than anything else. Instead, he found streamers, matching plasticware and tablecloths, and pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey kits. The vibrant colors of the store gave off an almost childish flair; Cody’s idea of a party and the mall’s idea were very different ideas.

Rico thought the place was great. He was disappointed that the store didn’t have any piñatas in stock, but there were more than enough bags of balloons to initiate a good time. The meals in the food court were getting better, so there’d be plenty of grub for a party. But what’s a party without proper music. Rico lamented that he didn’t have his trademark maracas, but he would just have to use the instrument of his voice to give the theoretical party the right ambiance.

Jenny did not understand the Party Store. She was far from being a party animal. Loud festivities did not excite her. She enjoyed the quiet complacency of settling down for the evening with a nice book or a sweet movie. She had gone to work parties before, but she misunderstood that sentiment; everyone was talking and eating and nobody was actually working.

Cody kicked a box full of party hats. “Man, this place is lame.”

Rico quickly contested. “Yo-o, this place is rad! Think of how much fun we can have with all this stuff. We could have a party everyday and never run out of supplies!”

Jenny was not so sure. “That seems like an awful lot of work.”

“Dude, this is all kids’ stuff. Where’s all the cool stuff at? This place doesn’t even have ping-pong balls.”

There were no table tennis apparatuses in the mall as far as Jenny knew. “What would you need ping-pong balls for?”

“For playing ping-pong,” said Rico, sure of himself.
“I’ll tell you kids when you’re older,” replied Cody.

Rico didn’t like being talked down to. “Hey, we’re the same age! You can’t call me a kid; I could even be older than you.”

“Oh yeah, then when’s your birthday? Mine is the twenty-second of July.”

“I was born on March fifteenth.”

“Well what year? Cuz I was born in 1994.”

“He-ey, so was I! So that means I’m older.”

“No, dude, it depends on what today’s date is. If it’s after my birthday, then we’re the same age; we’d both be fifteen.”

That logic didn’t sound sound to Jenny, but she kept her mouth shut.

“Yo-o, we start school in the fall, so that means we must be the same age.”

“Dude, I’m sorry I called you a kid, then.”

“Yo-o, no biggie.”

Jenny was puzzled. One second ago the two boys had been yelling at each other, but now they were perfectly amiable. She did not understand their sudden change in temperament.

“But look at all the junk in here!” Cody exclaimed. “What are we supposed to do with this crud?”

“We’ll just have to use our imaginations some,” said Rico.

“We cannot be picky about what we have,” said Jenny quietly.

The Sandwich Artist caught the Waterskier’s notice. “Jenny, you don’t say much, do you?”

Jenny was put off by the sudden accusation. “Umm, no, I do not tend to say much.”

Cody laughed. “Ha, you’re practically the opposite of me! I can’t stop myself from blabbing whatever thought pops into my head.”

“I am sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize.”

“Yeah, you’ve done nothing wrong,” added Rico.

“Oh…would you like me to stop speaking?”

“Dudette, no way. That would be totally rude. If anything, we want you to talk more.”

“Talk…more…?” What was there even to say?

“Take it from me,” said Rico, “you have to be vocal with your feelings. If you don’t tell people how you feel, they’ll never understand what you’re thinking.” The Marathon Runner had a good point.
“But, what should I be saying?” asked Jenny.

Cody laughed again. “Whatever comes to mind! I once talked to a girl for fifteen minutes about water slides because that was the first thought that popped into my head.”

Rico asked, “Is there that much to talk about about water slides?”

Cody rubbed the back of his head. “Not really, but she must have enjoyed it because we made out a lot afterward.”

“You made what out?” asked Jenny.

“Hu-uh? Even I know what that means.”

“Haven’t you ever made out with someone?”

“I do not understand what you mean by this ‘made out.’”

“Shoot, dawg, how do I explain this? When you make out with someone, it’s like kissing them, but a lot more, uhh, physical?”

Jenny’s innocent ears flared red at the idea of such a lascivious act. “Oh dear, and people do that a lot?”

Rico averted his gaze. “Some people do it more than others.”

“While others of us do it a lot! What about you, Jenny? Have you ever made out with someone before?”

“I am sorry, but I do not feel comfortable answering that question.” Where were these questions coming from? Jenny hoped that Cody did not want to ‘make out’ with her, because she certainly did not wish to ‘make-out’ with him. Boys were confusing.

Cody defensively put his hands up; he didn’t want Jenny to get the wrong impression. “No, sorry, that’s totally cool. I didn’t mean to overstep my boundaries.”

Rico chimed in. “You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t feel like answering!”

Jenny decided to be vocal about her current feelings. “Why are you asking me all these questions anyway?”

Both of the boys were stunned as they searched for an answer. Rico worked up a good reply first. “Because we’re friends. It’s only natural that we get to know each other better.”

Jenny was taken aback by their friendliness. Lily had been overbearingly nice, and Elizabeth was downright unpleasant. Jordan was nice enough, but Jenny had felt trapped by her current “friends;” she had not anticipated an agreeable medium. Maybe it was time for her to be more vocal.

Cody slapped Rico on the back. “Yeah, we’re all in this together, so there’s no point in being strangers to one another.”

Jenny liked that sentiment. There was not need to be a stranger in the mall. There were no subdivisions, just one large group. Jenny let herself smile. “I am supposing that you are right.” Jenny could feel herself opening up a little bit, and she laughed and joked with the boys as they continued touring the Party Store.
Chapter 3--The Selfish and the Selfless--Part 3

Old habits were hard to break, so the students reconvened to discuss their finds over lunch. In case the salads and sandwiches were not enough for the growing boys and girls, soup had been added to the midday menu. After everyone had waited for Elizabeth to finish eating, Markus, with his newfound aggression, took control.

Markus: “Now that we’re all back, let’s begin discussing what clues we found to aid in our escape from this mall. We found nothing of interest inside the Gym.”

Taylor: “Unless you count exercise equipment as something of interest.”

Markus: “Which we don’t!”

Cody: “Wait, like legit equipment? I’ve been itching for a decent workout.”

Elizabeth: “I would go as far as to say you could even build some more muscle mass with what we have.”

Rico: “Please tell me there are treadmills!”

Taylor: “Yes, Rico, there are treadmills for you to run on.”

Theo: “I don’t suppose there would be anything like a rock wall?”

Elizabeth: “Sorry, no.”

Markus: “That’s enough laboring on the point. The point is actually that there is no point. There’s nothing interesting about the Gym, so let’s move on. Rufus, what do you have to report?”

Rufus: “Nothing.”

Markus: “What? Didn’t you explore the East Sector like I told you to?”

Rufus: “Ita, but I didn’t find anything worth noting.”

Austin: “At least tell us about the store you went to.”

Rufus: “I’ll leave that to my cohort; he knows more about those technologies than I do.”

James: “How gracious of you.”

Lily: “I found a radio, desu!”

James: “Oh my God it doesn’t even work.”

Lily: “But…I found it…”

James: “Whatever. The Electronics Store has some pretty jazzy shit, but nothing that’ll help us get out of here.”

Elizabeth: “Could you be more specific? I’d love a little taste of the outside world.”

Lily: “There’s a whole bunch of radios!”
James: “Tch. Digital cameras, cell phones, PDAs, et cetera, et cetera.”

Taylor: “Cell phones!?! We can call for help!”

James: “You think we didn’t try that? They’re just the phones; there’s no contract, so there’s no service.”

Jenny: “Oh…I thought we might be able to leave for a moment there….”

Lily: “Retasu, we’ll get out soon enough.”

Markus: “I’ll have to double check the store to make sure you didn’t miss anything. Theo, your report.”

Theo: “The Antiques Store was rather mundane. We searched through a menagerie of paraphernalia, but there didn’t seem to be anything overly exciting.”

Austin: “The entire store nearly put me to sleep.”

Taylor: “What doesn’t put you to sleep?”

Austin: “Potatoes.”

Jenny: “Potatoes…keep people awake?”

Taylor: “Don’t listen; he’s just being stupid or sarcastic.”

Rufus: “If anyone’s going to be sarcastic, it should be me.”

Jordan: “You can say that again.”

Rufus: “Why, Jennifer, you’re looking better.”

Jenny: “Are you talking to me?”

Rufus: “Quid? Why would I be talking to you when I’m looking at Jennifer?”

Jordan: “And you think you’re so smart.”

Markus: “That’s enough lollygagging! Jordan, do you have anything to add?”

Jordan: “No, Theo and Austin explained things very accurately.”

Markus: “That leaves Cody. What did you find?”

Cody: “We got the Party Store—”

Lily: “THERE’S A PARTY STORE!?!”

Jenny: “Y-yes—”

Lily: “WE NEED TO THROW A PARTY, LIKE, RIGHT NOW!”

Cody: “Jeez, calm down. It was just a regular old party store. No cool smoke machines or outrageous stereo systems or anything.”

Rico: “Mostly we found balloon kits and party games for young kids like pin-the-tail-on-the-
Lily: “I FLIPPING LOVE PIN-THE-TAIL-ON-THE-DONKEY!!! XD”

Jenny: “How are you making that sound…?”

Markus: “Lily, control yourself!”

Lily: “SQUEEEEEE!!!!”

Elizabeth: “Please lower your voice; you’re damaging my ear drums with your shrill voice.”

Lily: “NI-FLIPPING-PAH!”

Markus: “Did you find anything of importance in the store, at least?”

Rico: “Not really. I don’t think our kidnapper would leave us any tools for escaping.”

Jenny: “Yes, it does appear to be that way.”

Markus: “You people just weren’t looking hard enough. Don’t worry, I’ll go back and do an exhaustive search of the East Sector.”

James: “How noble of you.”

The PA system kicked on.

Monobear: “Attention, you scum of society, I have graciously found more movies for you to enjoy. So get your lazy butts over to the Movie Store pronto! That is all. NOW MOVE!”

Rico: “Not again…”

Austin: “What do you think it is?”

Taylor: “Are you serious?”

Cody: “It’s those weird tapes again, right?”

Theo: “Probably.”

Lily: “But… I don’t want to watch those!”

Jordan: “We don’t have much of a choice; I wouldn’t want to see what happens if we ignore Monobear’s request.”

James: “Tch, let’s just get this over with.”

Jenny: “Still…”

Elizabeth: “This is going to put me in a bad mood, I just know it.”

Markus: “Let’s stop wasting time! Everybody, follow me!”

The Movie Store looked exactly the same, and Monobear was still giggling to himself uncontrollably. The students took their seats on the couches, and Monobear ostentatiously popped
the first tape into the VCR.

The familiar blank room appeared on camera, except sitting on the chair was the smiling figure of Melissa Davis, All-Star Politician. She was brimming with her usual abundance of energy. She was obviously nervous about being on camera, but she maintained her composure excellently.

“Should I start now?” she asked conscientiously. The students felt a pang of grief in their hearts as they heard the voice of their departed leader again. “I should? Alright, then. My name is Melissa Davis, Success Summit’s All-Star Politician, and I am being recorded for Markus’s and James’s project.” All heads turned to the two named individuals, but as Melissa resumed her speech, all eyes were glued to the screen.

“Ever since I first heard about Success Summit when I was in the fourth grade, I had aspired to join the ranks of the other All-Stars. So when I received that invitation letter, there was no hesitation whatsoever. And then I got so tickled when I found out that there’d be a legacy of Davises! But this is supposed to be about us, so I’ll try to stay on topic.

“I used to think being a leader meant telling others what to do, but I soon realized that was wrong. I came into Success Summit with the intent of taking over this school and using the All-Stars to perpetuate my own influence. But when people are this special, you can’t try to confine them through jussive orders; they shone when left to their own devices. Instead of commanding them, I relied on them; instead of underlings or followers, I got friends.”

Melissa continued smiling as the film was brought to an end. The students barely had enough time to digest Melissa’s soliloquy before Monobear started up the second movie. As everyone expected, Randolph appeared before them. He wore his naturally calm demeanor, and, in light of recent events, that made him appear all the more sinister. When he spoke, his tone was as neutral and sincere as it ever had been.

“I must say that I am impressed with the ingenuity of your idea. You know better than me how these things work, so I’ll just follow your lead. As much as I laud oblivion, I do hope that this piece perseveres through time so that others may know of our story.

“I had to meditate for a full week before I made the decision to come to Success Summit. School life was just so different than monastic life. And these people with their strange ideals…I did not know what to make of it. But then it came to me like a vision: all these students were All-Stars, and there is no doubt that they would go on to do great things, and so if I could show them the truth of the universe, then they would be able to spread this marvelous truth across the globe.

“I will say that I am disappointed that no one has realized the scope of my philosophy yet. But I’m sure they’ll come around eventually; they always do. In the meantime, I don’t mind getting to know them. We’ll all be reduced to stardust someday, and it would be nice if my particles were scattered amongst theirs. Completion through absolution: that is the Zerostrian way.”

Randolph’s logic was faulty even in death. Despite his strange thoughts, he still appeared to be a caring individual. But Delilah had appeared to be a sweetheart in her video as well—whatever these videos meant.

“Upu, upupupu. Since that broad Melissa let the cat out of the bag, you have Markus and James to thank for those despair-inducing movies; they were truly masterpieces. In fact, I want to watch another right away! A little known fact is that bears are incredibly impatient. I can’t even wait to go the dentist, that’s how impatient I am. So I’m giving you your next murder incentive right now!”
“Not so fast, Monobear!” yelled Markus. He was fully embracing his new leadership role and standing up to the most sinister creature in the mall. “We’re under a new direction now, so there’ll be no more murders from this point on. Watch yourself, because we are making preparations to bust out of this place; we’re coming for you!”

“I’m right here. You don’t have to “go” anywhere to get to me. In fact, if you just call my name, I’d be more than happy to engage you in a titillating conversation. That’s just how great I am.”

“Don’t try to change the subject; you know exactly what I meant.”

“Upupu, you really are annoying. Maybe I’ll get to show your tape next. But enough of that! The incentive; I almost forgot! I bet you bums are just dying to know what it is! Will it be jewels? Or maybe a convertible? How about an endless supply of the finest food money can buy? Or better yet, an endless supply of Monobear merchandise? Or the best of all, retreating to a beautiful island paradise with none other than yours truly to live in blissful happiness for the rest of our years? Well it’s none of those! You see, I’m going in a new direction now. Malls in America are typically set at seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit for the optimum shopping experience, and it just so happens that that is what you brats have been experiencing. But not anymore, upupu! Starting at Night Time tonight, I’ll be turning the thermostat down ten degrees, and I’ll keep doing that every night until one of you murders one of your classmates!”

“That’s it? You’re going to make it cold at night? That’s pretty weak, especially for you,” commented Taylor.

“You misunderstand. I’ll keep turning the heat down, but I won’t be turning it back up. We’re going to create our own ice age within the Mall of Monomerica! Remember: you can make things spicy again through some simple murder. Or better yet, complex murder; that way you can stump the others and get out of here scot-free. Are there any other stupid questions? Good, because I wasn’t going to answer them anyway. Now enjoy your last few hours of warmth!”

Monobear dashed away and left the students alone to ponder what had just happened. Their thoughts should have been concerned with analyzing Melissa’s and Randolph’s cryptic messages, but instead they couldn’t get Monobear’s incentive out of their heads. With their singular clothing option, the students wondered how long it would take to fall from hypothermic exposure, or worse yet, from someone’s will.
The students milled about for the rest of the day trying to make sense of what had happened. The minutes waned into hours, and the hours would wane into the advent of a new day. Night fell, and the students retired for the evening. Upon waking the next morning, the air in the mall was a cool sixty-two degrees Fahrenheit. It was slightly chilly, but it wasn’t yet cold.

Jenny was by herself. She had managed to give the BFFs the slip, and Jordan didn’t feel like talking today. There wasn’t anyone else in particular she wished to hang out with, so she took the chance to explore the mall on her own time and of her own accord.

The Electronics Store had piqued her interest. She knew that people liked to diddle around on their machines, but she had never experienced the affair herself. As she stepped over the threshold of the store, she realized that she had been sorely mistaken. It was like being abducted onto an alien spacecraft; the technology was cold and unfamiliar. She didn’t let her ignorance defeat her! She spied a sparkly red phone, and she was determined to understand how it worked. She examined the object intently, but alas, she could make neither heads nor tails of the item.

As she left the Electronics Store, she looked mysteriously at the Party Store. A loud, boisterous event did not sound like an enjoyable experience, and yet individuals could build a career off selling products specially designed for this one thing. She tore her gaze away from the Party Store and wandered over the Antique Store. This store was simply quieter in nature, and that was nice. It quickly became too placid, though, and Jenny grew bored with the store’s inventory; chairs and lamps could only be so exciting. The Sandwich Artist did stumble into the store’s jewelry collection. Amidst the gems and jewels, Jenny found the most hideous necklace she had ever seen: a dark green stone hung limply off a gaudily-gold chain that could have circled Jenny’s entire body. She picked the piece up to get a better look at it; she may not have the greatest fashion sense, but she knew what was ugly.

She left the Antique Store and again glanced at the Party Store. The ridiculous mystery had not solved itself yet. Now she wandered over to the Gym. Surprisingly, Jenny was acquainted with gym machinery. She did not have much of a need for weight training, but she enjoyed a good cardio workout. Jenny walked over to one of the treadmills and stepped lightly onto its track. She decided to go for a relaxing walk to take her mind off the cool air.

From behind two large stacks of party hats, Elizabeth and Lily spied on their compatriot. They had secretly been watching Jenny all afternoon, and every time Jenny had looked over at the Party Store, their hearts leapt into their throats out of fear of having been caught. They felt compromising levels of morality; on the one hand, they wanted to learn things about Jenny to surprise her with something great to rekindle their friendship, but on the other hand, they were spying on their “friend.”

“Elizabeth-chan, can you still see what she’s doing?” asked Lily.

“I can. She’s just walking casually on the treadmill.”

“I can’t hardly see from my angle!”

“As long as one of us can see, we’ll be fine. And what was with that ‘Elizabeth-chan’ thing?”

“Nani? It’s an honorific; it’s how the Japanese show respect to one another.”
Ooh, that is most interesting. Make a note to tell me more about these ‘honorifics’ at a later date.”

“I could tell you about them now if you wanted! I know all about them!”

“Hmm… I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“Ryoukai! Okay, so first we have ‘-san.’ That’s a pretty standard one and could be used for just about anyone.”

“And you just add it onto the end of someone’s name?”

“Desu, that’s right.”

“You used ‘-chan’ with me.”

“You use ‘-chan’ for female friends, and ‘-kun’ for male friends. But only for real friends, you know? Like I would say Austin-kun, but I probably would still say James-san.”

“Ooh, this really is interesting. Why did you wait so long to bust these out?”

“Desu, I’m not sure. I guess I just wanted to make sure I was really comfortable around everyone before I started using them. Using honorifics says a lot about how you view other people, and I didn’t want anyone to get the wrong impression of me. But now…I wish I had shown Melissa how I thought of her…”

“There’s no point in dwelling on the items of the past. Are those the only honorifics?”

“No way! There’s a ton more! Like, umm, lemme think, oh! Okay, so ‘-sama’ is used for someone that you really really respect, like, big time. I would use ‘-san’ for a teacher, that’s how important it is.”

“Hmm… ‘-sama’… I like the sound of that one. Hmm… Elizabeth-sama… that has a nice ring to it, wouldn’t you agree?”

“It’s usually inappropriate to give yourself an honorific.”

“Oh, hush. It’s all play, anyway. What harm can there be?”

“It’s not a game, Elizabeth-chan! Honorifics are a very serious business.”

“Hmph, if you’re going to insist on playing your little charade, then I have to put in some rules of my own, okay. If you’re going to use your honorifics, then you must give me the most fitting one, and that’s obviously ‘-sama.’”

Elizabeth had become so absorbed in Lily’s lecture that she had stopped spying on Jenny. Jenny finished her walk, and she noticed rustling movements coming from the Party Store’s windows. She narrowed her eyes, and she could just make out Lily’s ostentatious hair hiding behind a pile of party hats. There was no doubt that they would be able to see her, and so they would know if she were avoiding them if she walked away; she should just face the music and pretend to notice them by chance.

“Umm, hello my friends,” said Jenny sheepishly to the piles of hats.

Upon hearing the Sandwich Artist’s voice, Elizabeth indignantly rose to her feet, accidentally knocking over an entire stack of hats. Lily was also taken aback, but she somehow
made less of a fuss.

“Why, Jenny, how nice to see you,” said Elizabeth overtly pleasantly.

“Jenny! You! Are a person! Who is here!” cried Lily trying not to give away her surprise.

“Umm, yes. May I ask why it is that you are playing in hat piles?”

Elizabeth brushed the hair out of her face. “I was just showing Lily here how to properly accessorize no matter what you’re given.”

“Umm, but we were actually talking about—”

“Hats! So many hats! Too many hats, if you ask me. Isn’t that right, Lily?”

“Ohhhhhhh, yeahhhhh. I love wearing hats.”

Jenny thought Elizabeth and Lily were acting strange, but then again, they normally acted strange. “I have never seen you wearing a hat,” said Jenny. “If you really like hats, then I will be willing to let you wear mine.”

Lily’s eyes dazzled; Jenny was so nice! “Sugoi, really? You would let me do that?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Be reasonable, Lily-chan; you could never get a hat to cover that mess of hair of yours.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that. I would never be able to sacrifice my pigtails just for a hat. Thanks, though, Jenny-chan.”

“Why are you two adding ‘-chan’ to the end of what you say, umm, if you do not mind my asking?”

“Desu, it’s all to do with—”

“It’s just something we do now, Jenny-chan.”

“Umm…okay…”

Elizabeth leaned in close to Jenny. “You know, Jenny-chan, you look really tired. Did you get enough sleep last night? You look just terrible.”

“Nani? I think Jenny-chan looks—”

“Dreadful! As your friend, I must insist that you march yourself back to your room and take yourself a nap!”

Jenny was slightly offended that Elizabeth was insulting her appearance, and she didn’t feel tired, but maybe a little rest would do her good. After all, Elizabeth was her friend, and she did say that she was looking out for her. Either way, it would mean less time that she would have to spend with the BFFs.

“Well if you insist, then I do not think that I am in a position of arguing. I shall see you all later then.”

As Jenny turned to head back to the dorms, Lily called out, “We’ll wake you for dinner if you oversleep!”
Once Jenny was out of earshot, Elizabeth breathed a heavy sigh of relief and collapsed onto the floor. “That was a close one, Lily-chan.”

“Huh? Why was it close?”

“Jenny-chan almost found out that we were spying on her. Although she’s so out of it sometimes that I doubt she would have figured it out anyway.”

“I don’t like that we’re spying on her…I think we should just approach her straight-up.”

“Oh, no, that would never work. Besides, it’s the surprise that we’re really after.”

“Eeee! I’m so excite! I can’t wait to see the look on her face, desu!”

“Yes, it will truly be a time to remember. Now come, we have much planning to do.”

Jordan was by herself, but she was not being followed by any of her classmates. For her own isolation, she purposefully went to the West Sector of the mall. She stood resolutely in the center of the space. A slight shiver crawled down her spine; it was quiet.

“Oy, Monobear,” she called out, “I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

As if by magic, the robot appeared before the student, annoyance written on his metallic face. “You better have a good reason for disturbing me! I’m a very busy bear!”

Jordan raised an eyebrow. “What sort of business could you possibly have?”

“If it gets any colder in here, I’ll have to go into hibernation. So now I’m trying to pack on the pounds as fast as possible.”

“It doesn’t sound like you have much faith in another murder being committed, then.”

“Upupu, Monobear is just conscientious and prepares for every possibility.”

“Aren’t you taking this charade a little too far now?”

“Charades? I only play spin the bottle when I attend parties.”

“You are so obnoxious. I’m talking to our kidnapper, right?”

“You are talking to Monobear.”

“Stop that. You’re a robot, and you’re in no way autonomous, so someone’s controlling you. Why am I acting like you’re a real person? You are controlling the Monobear robot from some secret location.”

“How could I be controlling myself from someplace when I’m right here? One person cannot be in two places at the same time! That’s Physics 101.”

“You have nothing to gain from hiding your identity from us. Odds are we wouldn’t know who you were, unless you were someone prominent in society.”

“Have you ever seen Monobear anywhere but this mall? You could probably say I’m this mall’s mascot.”
“Why are you being so stubborn?”

“Let’s play a game of hypotheticals: suppose I am being controlled by someone—even though no one can control a bear—then what would prompt you to think I’d divulge any information to you anyway.”

“Because you like to play fun games, and what’s a game without a bit of risk? The deck is stacked in your favor, so it could hardly be any fun for you.”

“First you talk about charades, and now you only talk about games! Do you want to play games with Monobear because none of your ‘friends’ like you enough to play games with you?”

Jordan felt her face flushing, but she maintained her composure. “You’re trying to change the subject again.”

“Upu, you’re such a party pooper. Then what game are we—supposedly—playing?”

“The Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. Your goal is to cause despair by having us kill each other.”

“I do like to win the games I do play.”

“Was that the controller or the robot talking?”

“No one is controlling me!”

“Shut up; that’s a lie, and you know it.”

“Then indulge me in another one of your fantasies. How have I tried to make the game more interesting for myself?”

“During the last trial, you let slip that the world had been destroyed.”

“Did I? I can be such a silly bear, sometimes.”

“Obviously, you’re an intelligent person if you could kidnap us all, so you would never be so careless to let a morsel of information like that go free.”

“You are so boring when you talk; you should enroll in Monobear’s Interesting Stories Lecture Series. I’ll even give you a discount price since you’re such a hopeless case.”

“Are you going to tell me anything I want to know, or are you just going to be your usually obstinate self?”

“Ugh, if you’ll leave me alone, I’ll answer anything you ask. I’d do anything to get away from you now.”

“First, who are you?”

“I am Monobear.”

“No, tell me who you are.”

“I. Am. Monobear.”

“Hmph, what then are you?”
“I am a bear.”

“Do you want this game to be boring?”

“No.”

“You stupid bear...what did you mean when you said that the world had been destroyed?”

“That information is reserved only for those who really need it, and I’m afraid you’re not even deserving of it.”

“Don’t you waste my time; I want answers.”

“Then ask the right questions you moron!”

“Insult me all you want, I won’t give up my inquiry.”

“Upupupu. It’s still early in this game, so I’ll only be able to give you a hint. You don’t know me, and you’ve never known me, but you do know of me, well, you know of us.”

“Hmph. What in the world is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s all the more I can tell you at the moment. If you want to know more, then let’s strike a deal.”

“What sort of deal?”

“If you kill someone, then I’ll tell you everything you want to know; nothing’s off-limits.”

“Don’t test me. In that case, you will still come out as the ultimate victor, and I can’t let you taste any bite of success.”

“You bore me with your long-winded speeches! Leave the soliloquies to the more interesting characters! You’ve wasted enough of my time already, so I’m going to go eat double my weight in honey.”

Monobear quickly turned on his heel and sprinted away from Jordan. The Golfer stood in her place for a second to fully digest their conversation. She calmly walked back to her room.

Rico and Cody had been the first individuals to use the new Gym facilities. Feeling full of himself, Rico challenged Cody to a workout competition. They started by lifting weights until their arms couldn’t move, they did sit-ups until it hurt to bend over, and they finished by running on the treadmills until their legs gave out and they fell off the machines. Sore and beaten, they retreated to the Lounge to recuperate. On the way, they ran into Jenny, and then Elizabeth and Lily.

Rufus had been reading in the Lounge when the athletes entered, and it quickly became clear to the Latinist that neither of his guests had showered after their regimen. Overwhelmed by the stench of boy, Rufus sought solace elsewhere in the mall.

Cody was sprawled out on one of the couches. “Dude, I can’t feel my body.”

Rico was face down on another couch. “Mmph th mmpf thmpf th mphf.”

“Uhh, what?”
Rico painfully moved his head to the side. “I said that I can’t either. I haven’t hurt this bad since I ran that double marathon in the snow.”

“Sick. I haven’t felt this trashed since I wiped out in Strawberry River right by the rocks at the bottom of the waterfall.”

“Yo-o, that’s a rough one.”

“Totally. My right arm was in a cast for like two months.”

“I wasn’t looking where I was running once, and I ran straight into a hornet’s nest. That was worse than the time I ran into a cactus.”

“Dude, you did not run into a cactus.”

“I got distracted! It happens!”

“Man, I know, right? Like you just get into the moment, and everything else just kind of blacks out.”

“Ahh, that is my favorite feeling ever. You’re just running your body, but your mind is completely free.”

“That is the kind of release I live for!”

“There’s nothing quite like the painful sting of a worn-out body to make you feel alive.”

“Dude! I felt like I was wasting away being cooped up in this mall, but now I feel so reinvigorated! I feel like I could take on the world!”

“I can’t even believe I used to feel despair now; it just seems so-o ridiculous.”

“Hey, what if we got everybody to feel like this?”

“Huh? You want everyone to feel like they’ve gotten plowed over by a steamroller?”

“Yeah, no, but yeah. Get everyone to feel alive again. That’s cool, right.”

“Yea-ah, definitely.”

“Then it’s settled. We get everybody to go to the Gym together, and we have a massive workout session!”

“What good will that do?”

“Use your head, man. If we’ve all got our energy back, then our spirits will be renewed as well, and then nobody will murder anyone anymore.”

“Yo-o! I hadn’t thought about it like that! I wish I’d come up with an idea like that.”

“Hey, I’m not all muscles; I’ve been known to have a deep revelation every now and then.”

“Then how are we going to make this happen?”

“Trust me, I’ll convince everyone that it’s in their best interest.”

“This is going to be great. I’m already getting goosebumps!”
“Uhh, I think that’s because it’s getting cool and you aren’t wearing pants.”

“Yo-o, I’ve got shorts on.”

“Emphasis on the short.”

“Runners can’t have anything restricting their leg muscles! At least I’m wearing shoes.”

“I specialize in barefoot waterskiing, so I got to keep my feet rough and strong to brave those waters.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

“Hey, dude, I do have a question though.”

“Shoot.”

“Can you move at all? Because I keep trying to sit up, but my body won’t.”

“Uhh, now that you mention it, I really can’t feel my arms and legs.”

“And my stomach is starting to growl up a storm.”

“Let’s just hope someone comes by soon.”

“It would suck if we got stuck here.”

“HEY! IS ANYWHERE OUT THERE?”

“Dude, nobody heard you.”

“They’re totally gonna notice we’re missing, right?”

“Totally, yeah, sure, totally.”

Rico and Cody spent a few more hours immobilized in the Lounge before Taylor would find them and bring them muscle relaxer.
James still couldn’t quite put his finger on why Monobear’s videos bothered him, but he had other problems to deal with first. During Melissa’s soliloquy, she hinted at the Movie Producer working in tandem with Markus. This didn’t make sense; James hadn’t set eyes on the kid until nine days ago. There was something strange going on in the mall.

He got a different—albeit equally as weird—vibe from Randolph’s video. Over the past week, the Monk had hidden his ties to his cult, but in the video he announced them as if his allegiance was common knowledge. Why such a difference? If this was all some elaborate joke being played on the Movie Producer, then his lawyers would demolish the prankster who came up with such a ludicrous idea.

As much as he hated buying into fabricated authority, James admitted that he needed to bounce ideas off another human being, and Melissa had connected him with Markus. He could at least honor her memory by listening to her words; it was the least he could do.

James was in the Movie Store when Markus finally came to meet him. James sneered at his guest. “What took you so long?” he asked.

“That is no way to address your leader!” retorted Markus. “I had important management items to attend to!”

“Tch, we’re still trapped here, so I don’t know what important business you could have possibly had.”

“I’m trying to pick up where our previous leader failed! It would be decent of you to give me some room to work.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, your Excellency. My apologies for upsetting you.”

“It’s that kind of attitude that makes people dislike you!”

“Have you looked in a mirror lately?”

“I’m here because earlier you intimated that you said you wanted to talk. Are you going to offer anything worthwhile, or am I wasting my time on a hopeless case?”

“Pft, no. I do need to talk to you about something.”

“Then just speak your mind already!”

“Fine. It’s about those videos…what do you think Melissa meant when she said ‘our project’?”

“Does it matter? She’s dead now.”

“Hey, man, too harsh. Show a little respect.”

“I’m sorry, I was under the impression that you hated Melissa’s guts.”

“I did, but that’s no reason to speak ill of the dead. Have a heart.”

“As your consummate leader, I shall attempt to have more heart from here on out.”
“But you seriously don’t think anything of it?”

“I do not. The videos are simply manifestations of Monobear’s design; he’s just trying to spread despair, but we won’t let him!”

“I’m not so sure…something bugs me about them, and I bet something about them bugs you too.”

“Err, no! Nothing about them bothers me! They are simply digital lies!”

“Bullshit! You’re lying and you know it. Now own up and tell me what you think.”

“Urgh, fine. If you absolutely must know, I do find the videos to be slightly uncanny.”

“Damnit, I knew you would say that.”

“Did you really expect anything different?”

“Then what the hell are those stupid films?”

“I don’t know.”

“But they’ve got to be something, yeah? I feel like I know the answer, like I can see it in my head, but I can’t quite make out all of it; there’s just one piece missing to the puzzle.”

“Let me ask a question, then: what do you make of Melissa’s statement?”

“I don’t know either. If I had to guess, I’d say it implies that we did know each other before coming to the mall, but you and I both know that’s a load of horseshit.”

“Hmm…”

“‘Hmm?’”

“As a leader, I have to think things through from every possible angle, so what if that wasn’t a load of horseshit?”

“What’s the point in discussing hypotheticals? Then you’ll be the one wasting time.”

“Hear me out! The students in the videos always seem to talk about their time at Success Summit, but we’ve never set foot inside the school.”

“Yeah, I’m aware.”

“But think back to when we first got here; how did we get here.”

“Uhh…nobody remembers.”

“So what if something traumatic happened that caused us all to block how we got here out of our memories?”

“And make us forget about going to the most prestigious school in the country? Yeah right.”

“It fits, though.”

“And what, may I ask, was such a disaster and catastrophe that we all shut down our brains
“Were you not paying attention during the last trial!? Monobear said that the world had been destroyed; that sounds pretty traumatic to me.”

“But that sort of thing can’t be real; the world can’t really be destroyed.”

“I’m not so sure you’re right. In the past nine days, we have had no contact with the outside ‘world,’ and there’s something else. Have you been observing the skylight at all lately?”

“Why would I stare up at the sky? There’s nothing going on there!”

“But it gives us sunlight.”

“Yeah, so.”

“When do you recall a cloud passing over the sun and putting the food court in shade?”

“Huh? That’s—wait. I don’t. It’s been nonstop sunny for the past nine days.”

“That’s not normal.”

“So something weird has happened…”

“The evidence suggests so.”

“Tch, in that case, we have to take what the videos said as facts. Then what the hell did that lousy politician mean by ‘our project?’”

“I don’t think there’s a singular answer, but I know we can gleam some information from it.”

“Like what? If we were heading a project, then that means that we liked working with each other, and that would suggest that we are friends.”

“Eww. No. Even if all these hypotheticals turn out to be true, I never would have been friends with any of you.”

“Say what you will; I know the truth—that we’re friends—and that’s all that matters. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go make sure everyone else is alive.”

Without any more of a goodbye, Markus left James alone in the Video Store. As antagonistic as he had been, James enjoyed their discussion. He wanted to call out for Markus to wait up, but the Movie Producer’s inhibitions overpowered him. He cursed his inhibitions and returned to his thoughts.

Rufus left the Lounge in a huff. He had been trying to read peacefully, but those hooligans were intent on disrupting his tranquility. Some people just had no manners! Since he had been so rudely ousted from his place, he had to carry his large menagerie of literature with him.

The Latinist figured he would retire to the Bookstore once again. His load was too cumbersome for him to steal through the dorms—he would never be able to navigate the doors—so he climbed the escalators to the food court. He intended to ease through the eating area as quickly as possible, but Austin caught his attention.
The child was lying face down on a table in the center of the food court, legs together and arms tight to his side. It wasn’t abnormal to see Austin lying in some strange position in some strange place, but he had never been on a table before. Rufus walked past and tried to ignore him, but Austin was unmoving. Eerily unmoving. It would not look good if he were the one to first find a dead body.

Rufus approached the prostrate Idle. “Alexander, are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, I think so,” replied the unmoving body.

Rufus breathed a sigh of relief. “Are you…comfortable? I almost mistook you for a corpus mortuum.”

“Oh yes, this table is actually very relaxing.”

“Is that so? Sic, I must get going. It has been a pleasure chatting with you.”

“Ditto.”

Rufus turned to leave. He approached the escalators heading into the North Sector. Before he made his descent, he looked back toward the Idle; Austin still had not moved. Rufus shuffled his feet back to the human log. His arms were starting to grow sore from holding the large stack of books.

“Do you plan on staying there all day?” asked Rufus, hoping to get an animated response from Austin.

“Probably,” responded Austin flatly.

“You’re not going to do something more constructive with your time?”

“I guess not.”

“I’m surprised they even let someone of your…talent, into a school like Success Summit.”

“And I’m surprised they let someone as pointless as you in as well.”

“Ignosce mihi! At least my talent is a reflection of my ability to work; whereas, yours is indicative of your unwillingness to do just that.”

“Yeah, but no one speaks Latin anymore. My talent says that I don’t waste my time on pointless things; whereas, your talent shows that you like to dedicate yourself to trivialities.”

“I’d give you a lecture on why Classics studies are important, but I wouldn’t want to waste my breath.”

“I’m not saying they’re not important.”

“Quid? Then what are you saying?”

“I’m just saying that our associated titles give people certain impressions of us before they even get the chance to meet us.”

“Hmm…you have a point there…”

“Our personalities don’t revolve around our titles; our titles revolve around our
personalities.”

“That was a surprisingly deep thing to say. Have you been hiding your potential from us?”

“You’re left a lot of time to think when you’re not actively doing anything; it’s very cathartic.”

Rufus finally set down his tower of tomes. “So what is it that you think about?”

“Murder.” Rufus blanched; he couldn’t tell if Austin was being serious or not. “Kidding,” added Austin in his usual, mundane way.

“And you have a sense of humor.”

“What can I say? I’m a jack of all trades, master of absolutely nothing.”

“Literally.”

“Huh? Oh, I get it, it was a joke.”

“I fear that that quip would have been lost on most of our classmates…”

“They’re a lot smarter than you give them credit for.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, but until then, I’ll have to walk the path of the genius alone.”

“You don’t need to be afraid of them; if you’re genuine with them, they’ll accept you as one of their own.”

“Nonne dicis? I thought the general consensus was that the public hated me for insulting their intelligence.”

“Oh, they do hate you, but you should ignore that.”

“What an easy thing to do.”

“Nobody’s perfect, so you don’t have to act like you’re from the heavens.” Austin had struck a nerve.

“I—you have no right to imply such a thing! Only the best of the best get into Success Summit, and I’ll come out on top nonetheless!”

“That’s the attitude that people find off-putting. Just take a chill pill and relax.”

“Hmph. Why am I letting the words of a boy resembling a piece of plywood get under my skin?”

“Yawn. Taylor told me about it.”

“About what?”

“It’s the latest fad. It’s called planking. I’m pretty sure I’ve mastered the concept.”

“It’s stupid, is what it is. I’ll laugh when the table crumbles from underneath of you.”

“Hmm…I hope that doesn’t happen…that might hurt.”
“What even possessed you to hop on the table in the first place?”

“What would you believe me if I said ‘the thrill of adventure?’”

“Minime.”

“Uhh…give me a few hours and I’m sure I’ll come up with a good answer.”

Rufus rolled his eyes. “I can’t say with any veracity that this conversation has gone swimmingly.”

“Sometimes that happens. Messy conversations are often the most fun.”

Rufus turned his face away, even though Austin was still staring at the table. “Despite your less-than-harmonious analysis of my character, you’re not as dull a conversationalist as I had thought.”

“Neither are you,” replied Austin without missing a beat.

“I’m taking that as a compliment.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Eheu. I’m going to read now.”

“I’ll be here, doing my thing…you don’t have to leave, though. You can read here.”

“Hmm…if I read here, then I won’t have to lug my literature anywhere…alright, you’ve talked me into it.”

“Yay, company.”

“Should I read aloud for you? Or shall I remain silent?”

“Do whatever you think would be best.”

Rufus cracked open a novel and began reading aloud; Austin smiled faintly as he listened to the story.

Taylor prided herself on her thin image. She had been offered the job of being a part-time model, but she had to turn it down to explore her other interests, viz. not doing anything stressful. Nevertheless, she was careful of what she ate, and she had her own healthy exercise regime. She was stably in her appropriate weight class, but she made sure that she looked good. And so she wore clothing that accented her figure: tight tops and short shorts. Now, however, her fashion sense was becoming a hindrance.

At only sixty-two degrees, Taylor was beset by an antagonism of shivers. Normally, she would have adorned herself in a tasteful sweater and cute skinny jeans, but that stupid Monobear only left her with her summer line. She would have to adapt, though. She tried to tan under the skylight in the food court, but the rays of the sun could not warm her up enough. She begged Austin for his jacket, but he was too enthralled in planking to bother to move; she’d suggested the activity as a joke, but the Idle had greatly warmed up to it.

The Lucky was too extroverted to hide in her room under her blankets all day, so she would
have to apply her ingenuity. If she could get close to someone, then she would be able to share their body heat. Naturally, her cuddle body would have to be big and strong in order to supply the warmth she needed. She needed to hug a volcano as brilliant as the sun; she needed Cody.

With her mind set, Taylor began to search the mall for the Waterskier. The mall had felt cramped when the students had been relegated to a single Sector, but now that there were less students and more areas to explore, the mall almost felt too large. She could no longer tell at a glance who was where; it was a strange revelation.

Taylor began her search in the Gym, of course. She and Cody were a match made in heaven; she would supply the tan and laundry if he brought the gym. Taylor marched happily into the Gym, but the only person in the place was Jenny. Taylor awkwardly waved and went on her way.

There was no reason for her boy toy to be in any of the other East Sector stores, and there was little to do in the South Sector anyway. Taylor turned to the North Sector, but that seemed unlikely as well. She could hear James and Markus bickering from the Video Store, which left the Bookstore, Hobby Shop, and Pharmacy. None of them seemed like a likely place for Cody to be. On a whim, she entered the Hobby Shop, and she found that she was not alone.

Theo had been browsing the Hobby Shop for some proper map-making supplies. He figured that if he could draw an expert map of the mall, then that might impress Jordan. He could tell that the Golfer was a connoisseur of the finer things in life. She wouldn’t be won over with simple trinkets or shoddy poetry; he would have to work on something grand to garner her attention.

Taylor was having thoughts along a similar line. Cody was big and strong, but so was Theo; all those expeditions had toned his body nicely. He was intelligent, as well. As someone who experienced vast quantities of luck, Taylor never had to consider what would happen if things went awry, but in this case, she might make an exception. If Cody didn’t work out, then Theo would make a fine backup.

“Oh, Theo, fancy meeting you here,” said Taylor coyly.

“Hey,” replied Theo. There was nothing wrong with Taylor—she was a lovely young woman—but she was superficially shallow. The two of them wouldn’t be able to carry on an in-depth conversation for more than a few minutes. “Can I help you find something?”

“Oh, no, I was just looking for somebody, but they don’t appear to be here right now.”

“Who are you looking for? I might know where they are.”

“Well, if you must know, I’m trying to hunt Cody down.”

“Hmm…I think I saw him and Rico in the Gym earlier.”

“Uhh, I think you need to get your eyes checked, cuz I was just there, and the only other person was Jenny.”

“They must have left, then.”

“Unless they were kidnapped again!” Taylor feigned fright to see how Theo would react. Would he yell at her and tell her she’s being moronic, or would he sweep her off her feet like a gallant knight to ease her worries?
“A second kidnapping would be unusual, especially since we’re still stuck in the mall.” Theo was as impassive as ever.

“Oh, this place is really starting to wear down my spirit…” Taylor was determined to get a rise out of Theo, even if she needed to turn on the waterworks to do so.

“It is a less-than-ideal circumstance. We just have to take things one day at a time.”

Taylor turned her face to mask her frustration; Theo wasn’t picking up on any of her cues. She sniffled once, twice, getting ready to cry.

“Do you need a tissue? I might have one in my satchel. I hope the colder weather doesn’t give everyone a head-cold.”

And the moment was gone. Hands clenched into fists at her side, Taylor angrily turned back to Theo. “Are you really, like, that oblivious?”

Theo was shocked by Taylor’s sudden attitude change; to him, she was just a confusing person. “Oblivious to what?”

“Here I am, putting all the damsel-in-distress moves on you, and you haven’t even pretended to be interested. I don’t understand how dumb you boys can be!”

“Why would you put your ‘moves’ on me?”

“Seriously? Are you that dense? It’s cold, and it’d be nice to have a big, strong guy to have hold me and keep me warm.”

“And you want me to keep you warm? I would have given you my vest if you asked for it.”

“Forget it, I’m not even that cold. Go back to whatever it was you were doing.”

Theo sighed. “I wish you girls would just say what you’re thinking; it would make things a lot simpler.”

“Omigod. You did not just say that. You don’t know a thing about women. We don’t tell you what we’re thinking, because if you’re willing to go through the trouble of figuring out what we mean, then we know that you’re committed.”

“That…actually makes sense.”

“I know, right? There’s actually a method to the madness.”

“Well, uhh, what else do you do? Things like that, I mean.”

“Have you ever known a girl to go to the bathroom by herself when out in public? Of course not! Ninety percent of the time, girls will go to the bathrooms to talk about the boys they’re with without the boys’ knowing.”

“That’s ingenious. I never would have thought to do that. What else is there?”

“Dude, back off. This is choice Girl Code info I’m dishing out; I could get excommunicated for divulging all our secrets.”

“My apologies; I got carried away.”
“Why are you so interested in this? Wait, no. Oh, don’t tell me. You like someone, don’t you, Theo?”

“I, uhh, err, no, I mean—”

“Aha! You do! That is so cute! Tell me: who are they?”

“They’re…no one…”

“Aww, you want to keep your crush a secret! That is so adorable! Omigosh, I like, can’t handle things right now.”

“If you could keep this low key, I would really appreciate it.”

“Teehee, my lips are sealed. But you know, if you’re going to woo a pretty lady, then you’ve still got a lot to learn. Luckily for you, I happen to know an excellent dating coach.”

“Really? Who?”

“Me! If you do everything I tell you, then you’ll be beating the women off you with a stick!”

Theo felt nauseated from Taylor’s metaphor. “That’s…a little too violent for my taste…”

“Whatever. The sentiment is still there, and that’s what really matters. First, we’re going to need to work on your personality.”

“What’s wrong with my personality?”

“You’re really boring! You’re so neutral and complacent all the time; it puts me to sleep!”

“But that’s just who I am.”

“Listen, if you really want to make someone fall head over heels for you, then you have to be brimming with life. Make the world light up when you enter the room!”

“How do I go about doing that?”

“Oh, that’s not something you can just do; you have to acquire the ability through intense training.”

“Do you know any techniques to guide my focus?”

“It’s questions like those that make you so dull, all that technical language. Let loose once and a while.”

“This is just a very new concept for me.”

“Boy, you are in for some rude awakenings. Okay, first, if you want to succeed, you gotta tear down that mask hiding who you really are. What makes Theo Cook tick?”

“What makes me tick? I don’t…really know. I don’t usually think about myself…”

“Oh brother. I’ve got my work cut out for me. Before you can even think about connecting with another human being on a deep, emotional level, you have to get in touch with and understand your own physiological status.”
“You berate me for using technical language, but then you use words like ‘physiological.’”

“Don’t correct people; it’s unbecoming. Ugh, my legs are getting tired. We’re going to be here for a long time, so we might as well make ourselves comfortable.” Taylor sat down and crossed her legs, with Theo following her lead. The two sat and discussed—Taylor mostly talked while Theo listened—the proper ways to win someone over. The hours passed by, and Taylor realized that she had never actually found Cody. Eventually, her search would take her to the Lounge, where she would bail the boys out of their anguish.
At ten o’clock, the ventilation system of the mall unleashed a cacophonous caw as the temperature decreased to a brisk fifty-two degrees. At this time, the students were warmly wrapped up in their blankets, and so they didn’t perceive the change until the following morning. Throughout breakfast, the students were shivering and trying to warm their hands. They felt uncomfortable, but they would survive.

Rico and Cody gave each other knowing looks, and then Cody announced their idea for a group workout. The majority of the students was skeptical about having an enjoyable experience from this, but the boys’ endearing personalities won over the masses. If anything, the “party” would get blood pumping through everyone’s bodies to warm them up.

Once at the Gym, the students split up into exercise groups, but the space was intimate enough that they could talk to each other easily. Taylor, Jordan, and Jenny took to the treadmills, and Lily made herself comfortable on the trampoline. Still sore from the previous day’s workout, Cody and Rico elected to focus on aerobics today, and Elizabeth joined them. Markus was insistent on mastering the bench press, and so Theo spotted him to make sure the Thespian didn’t hurt himself. James idly and disdainfully lifted small weights. Rufus and Austin, however, chose to watch and subsequently exercise vicariously.

Cody: “Is everybody feeling the burn?”

Taylor: “Eww, feeling the burn is for weirdos.”

Jordan: “It’s only walking; we’re not sprinting.”

Markus: “Oh yeah! Feel it, baby! Rahhh!”

Cody: “That’s the spirit! Oh yeah! Let’s get pumped!”

Theo: “But be careful not to overdo it, everybody. Drink plenty of water.”

Rico: “Yo-o! Go all out! Push yourselves to the limit!”

Theo: “But be careful!”

James: “Tch, if they want to exhaust their bodies, then let them. Why bother?”

Lily: “WeeeEEEEeeeeeEEEeee!”

Elizabeth: “One of the few times I wish I weren’t wearing a dress. This material can be so constricting.”

Jenny: “Umm, Jordan, umm, you are walking at a rather fast speed.”

Jordan: “Am I?”

Taylor: “You’re like power-walking, girl.”

Jordan: “This is a normal walking speed to me.”

Elizabeth: “You shouldn’t rush yourself; take your time and enjoy your environment.”
Jordan: “If I have a place to go, I intend to get there as quickly as possible.”

Markus: “Hee-yah! Hurrurk! Mmm! Feel that!”

Theo: “Take it easy; that’s a lot of weight.”

Markus: “Nonsense! As a leader, I have to be able to handle anything, so I can take whatever weight you throw at me!”

James: “In that case, leader, let’s see how much you can handle.”

Theo: “I’ll take care of that, if you don’t mind.”

Lily: “YaaaaAAAhooooOOOo0o0o!”

Austin: (“Why aren’t you exercising with everyone else?”)

Rufus: (“I could ask you the same question.”)

Austin: (“I’m the Idle, remember? Yawn. Not exercising is my specialty.”)

Rufus: (“And what a prestigious title you hold.”)

Elizabeth: “How do you boys feel about yoga?”

Rico: “Yoga’s great! It really helps to loosen up all those tight muscles.”

Cody: “Uhh, yeah, yoga. It’s…an exercise…”

James: “That pretend exercise all the actresses pretend to enjoy? I couldn’t think of something less contrite.”

Elizabeth: “Well I happen to like it. Your muscles can get stiff while you’re studying, so it’s the perfect way to stretch those muscles.”

Taylor: “I’d love to join your group, but I’m not exactly dressed for the occasion.”

Jordan: “I still have a few more miles to go.”

Jenny: “I am content walking on the treadmills as well.”

Elizabeth: “It’s your loss. Lily?”

Lily: “YaaaaAAAttaaaaAAAAaaa!”

Elizabeth: “Alright, boys, follow my lead.”

Cody: “Ugh, do we have to?”

Rico: “C’mon! It’ll be fun!”

Austin: (“They say exercising keeps you healthy.”)

Rufus: (“They also say that UFOs abduct cows.”)

Austin: (“That’s because aliens don’t have beef where they’re from; no hamburger is safe anymore.”)
Rufus: (“Esne sanus?”)

Elizabeth: “Stand on your right leg, and bring your left foot up to your right knee. Relax. That’s it, nice and slow. And breathe.”

Rico: “A-ah, this does feel nice.”

Cody: “E-easy for y-you to s-say.”

Elizabeth: “Close your mind off to the distracting world around you, and focus on feeling your center.”

Rico: “I feel it, I feel it.”

Cody: “I-I’m feeling something, b-but I don’t think i-it’s my center.”

James: “Bahaha, you should see how ridiculous you simpletons look!”

Cody: “OOF!”

Rico: “Yo-o! Are you okay?”

Elizabeth: “What did I say about ignoring distractions?”

Cody: “I just lost my balance.”

Austin: (“If I go get an exercise ball, will you help me balance on it?”)

Rufus: (“Minime.”)

Austin: (“Why not? All I want to do is lay on it.”)

Rufus: (“Because balancing you would require energy, and I am rather opposed to doing such a thing.”)

Taylor: “Phew, I could use a break!”

Jordan: “You’ve barely walked a quarter of a mile.”

Taylor: “Oh, and how far have you gone?”

Jordan: “I am starting my third mile.”

Jenny: “How are you able to go so fast? I can hardly keep up without running.”

Jordan: “Golf courses can be a pain to traverse, and when you just want to find your ball for the next swing, you adopt a quicker pace of movement.”

Lily: “WoooOOOOo000OOOOooah!”

Markus: “Gack! Cough! Sputter! Welch!”

Theo: “I warned you about putting too much weight on.”


James: “Why are you idiots so intent on trying to be impressive?”
Markus: “As…your leader…I need to show…how aggressive I can…be.”

Theo: “There is such a thing as too aggressive, though.”

Markus: “We’ll agree to disagree!”

Austin: (“Are you as bored as I am?”)

Rufus: (“What do you mean? This is a thrilling experience.”)

Austin: (“But it’s monotonous; everybody’s doing the same thing.”)

Rufus: (“Then let’s shake things up a little.”)

Cody: “Hey! Who’s having a good time?”

Lily: “MeeEEEeeeeeEEEEEeeeee!”

Markus: “I feel great!”

Jordan: “This might be just what I needed.”

Jenny: “I too am enjoying myself most thoroughly.”

James: “Tch, I guess it could be worse…”

Rico: “Woohoo! Gym party!”

Rufus: “So who here is the Liar?”

The air in the Gym instantly changed.

Rico: “Who’s the what now?”

Rufus: “You all were getting so carried away with your silly exercises. Have you forgotten this is a game? Have you forgotten that there is someone among is who is hiding a prospectively dire detail about him or herself from us?”

Taylor: “Would it kill you to lighten up? Sorry, bad example.”

Cody: “I thought a little break from all that doom and gloom would do everyone some good.”

Jordan: “As much as I hate to admit it, Rufus has a point.”

Lily: “Aww, I was having so much fun, desu. Does this mean the party’s over now?”

Rico: “No-o! No way! We can still have a great time.”

Elizabeth: “I don’t feel much like working out now…”

James: “Wow. I can’t believe I got caught up in all of this.”

Rufus: “But while we’re here, we may as well be productive.”

Markus: “Hey! I’m the leader here, so I’ll decide how we spend our time!”

Jenny: “So, umm, what are we going to be doing?”
Markus: “For sure, we will *not* be singling out the Liar; that is not our top priority.”
Austin: “That’s a suspicious thing to say.”
Markus: “Did I ask for your opinion!?”
Taylor: “Don’t you yell at Austin! You might hurt his precious feelings.”
Cody: “Don’t make me have to knock you out, too!”
Markus: “Violence against the leader is irrefutably uncouth!”
Jordan: “That didn’t stop Randolph.”
Lily: “Oh, I has a sad, now…”
Theo: “Let Markus finish. We’re too quick to jump on each other. If we’re going to accomplish something, we need to be civil about it.”
Jordan: “Well said.”
Theo: “R-really?”
Markus: “Anyway! Our top priority is finding a way out of this mall, not uncovering the Liar.”
Rufus: “I beg to differ.”
Rico: “Rufus…”
Cody: “What now?”
Rufus: “The Liar has to be dangerous, don’t you agree?”
Jenny: “Yes.”
Elizabeth: “But of course.”
James: “Duh.”
Theo: “That would be logical.”
Rufus: “Then what if their goal is different than ours?”
Jordan: “How do you mean?”
Austin: “Yeah, I’m not quite sure I follow.”
Markus: “I’ll allow you to elaborate.”
Rufus: “Consider the possibilities. All-Star Saboteur. All-Star Serial Killer. All-Star Assassin. All-Star Impersonator. The list goes on, but I have a sinking feeling that our mystery title is actually All-Star Despair.”
Jenny: “All-Star Despair?”
James: “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!”
Austin: “What kind of talent would ‘Despair’ be anyway?”
Rico: “What kind of talent is ‘Idle,’ really?”
Cody: “What would that mean for us?”
Markus: “You’re just jumping to conclusions!”
Theo: “I don’t know…it sounds too convenient…”
Jordan: “What proof might you have?”
Rufus: “It’s not my own proof; it’s Loraine’s.”
Rufus: “It’s Lily’s.”
Lily: “Nani? Me? What proof do I have?”
Theo: “You mean the mystery document.”
Rufus: “That’s correct. Lily found the word ‘zetsubou’ in the document. Well, I found an English-Japanese dictionary in the Bookstore, and you’ll never guess what ‘zetsubou’ translates to. I have it with me if you don’t believe me.”
Jordan: “Let me see that.”
Lily: “And me next! With that I’ll be able to finish translating everything, desu.”
Jordan: “It checks out.”
Markus: “Isn’t it a little suspicious that you just happened to find it? The Bookstore’s been open for over a week.”
Rufus: “I thought I had an inventory of the store, but when I went to put my books away last night, the dictionary was out in the open.”
Jordan: “Hmm…I wonder…”
Jenny: “What are you thinking?”
Jordan: “I’m not sure yet; I’ll tell you later.”
James: “So now we’re on the lookout for All-Star Despair…”
Taylor: “Well, it’s obviously not me since I’m such an upbeat and positive person.”
Rico: “I think I’m clear too, then.”
Cody: “You’re dead wrong if you think I’m into that despair shit!”
Markus: “If you’ll allow me a leap of faith, it’s safe to assume that All-Star Despair is working with Monobear to spread the despair.”
Rufus: “You took the words out of my mouth.”

Elizabeth: “I must say that this line of discussion is making me feel rather depressed.”

Lily: “I don’t really like it either…”

Austin: “All this excitement is making me sleepy…I think I’m going to go take a nap…I’ll see you guys later…”

Elizabeth: “I’m feeling a bit chilly, you know, so I think I’ll take my leave as well.”

Lily: “Wait for me!”

Taylor: “Well this is lame. I’m not going to work out if no one else is.”

Jenny: “I think that I will be departing as well.”

Markus: “This opens up some questions. I’m going to need some alone time to pull my thoughts together.”

Theo: “It appears that the party is over.”

Rufus: “What a shame; I was having such a good time.”

Rico: “Did James really leave without saying goodbye?”

Cody: “I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Jordan: “Later, then.”

Rico: “Well this sucks.”

Cody: “I thought this would be a great time, but look what’s happened.”

Rico: “We’ll just have to have a better party next time.”

Cody: “It’s all Rufus’s fault for tearing everyone down.”

Rico: “Aww, c’mon, it wasn’t that bad.”

Cody: “That kid gives me the creeps with those cold, dead eyes of his. He always looks like he’s plotting something.”

Rico: “That’s just who he is. Trust me, once you get to know him, he’s a great guy.”

Cody: “I don’t know. If you ask me, he’s the dangerous one in the group. I’d be careful around him if I were you; you never know when he’ll snap.”

Rico: “Yo-o…”

Rico and Cody lingered at the Gym for a moment more, but then they too abandoned the Gym like everyone else.

It was almost Night Time, and Lily was getting ready for bed. She and Elizabeth had been busy for the remainder of the day putting the finishing touches on their project. They had slipped
invitations under everyone’s doors, and it didn’t take much to persuade these people to do something, so tomorrow was bound to be thrilling.

Before getting under the covers of her bed, Lily decided to play with her radio one more time. Even if it didn’t work, it was still an endearing object to her. The sound of static filled her room. The reception in the mall was abysmal, but she didn’t have very many other options available to her. For no reason, she kept adjusting the station.

It didn’t sound like static; it sounded like an actual radio station. Somewhere in the middle of the radio’s spectrum of wavelengths, an actual signal had been picked up. Lily wasn’t sure what to make of it, but she strained her ears to hear anything else. She turned the radio up as loud as it would go so that the strange frequencies filled her small room.

As the weird sound continued, Lily was able to pinpoint the exact station. Her heart grew heavy as she heard the voice on the radio.

“…bzzt…lo…hear me…is Spark…out there…there’s…of us…crzzt…we’re trapped…don’t know…got here…killing…bzcrtz…anyone…help us…ten now…Monobe…crzzt…crzzt…running out…if you…hope…please…bzzt…bzzzt…bzzzzt…”

The voice, which had belonged to a young male, faded as the static overwhelmed their position. In the back of Lily’s brain, she recognized the voice, but she didn’t know how, and she didn’t even know who. But the broadcast had to mean something! There were other people out there!

Lily ran out of her room, clutching the radio tight to her chest. She had to tell somebody about what she heard, but she didn’t know who. Elizabeth wouldn’t want to be disturbed at this hour, and she didn’t want to accidentally leak anything to Jenny. The Kawaii started running down the hall unsure of her destination. By chance, Jordan’s door opened as she drew near, and Theo stealthily slipped out. Lily was so caught up in her excitement that she didn’t bother to question why Theo had been in Jordan’s room.

“Theo!” Lily screeched.

As Theo turned to see who had called his name, his face turned a bright shade of red; he was a deer caught in headlights. “Uh, Lily, hey,” Theo stammered.

“I have a thing to tell you!”

“Umm, okay?”

“This! See!” Lily ostensibly held out the radio to Theo. “It talked to me!”

“Radios are supposed to make noise.”

“But it was someone talking! Like a real person!”

“Oh, that is important. What did they say?”

“It was really garbled and hard to make out…”

“I can’t imagine reception would be very good since we’re caked in under everything in the dorms.”

“So where would be the best spot?”
“I don’t know. It was probably just a stray signal; we probably won’t hear anything of it again.”

“But what if someone is out there? What if it’s possible for us to actually get out of here?”

“It’s great to have hope, but don’t get yourself carried away. It’s probably nothing.”

“Uso da! I won’t believe you!”

“Just…keep the radio thing to yourself. It’s something suspicious, and I wouldn’t want you to have any unwanted attention drawn to you.”

“Aww! You’re so sweet, desu!” A chill air blew through the corridor; it was Night Time, and the atmosphere fell to forty-two degrees. “Brr! I’m going back to bed before I freeze!”

Lily ran back down the hall to her room. She just needed to tell somebody about the radio, and now that she had, she felt ready for slumber. She slept soundly that night, but her thoughts kept returning to that weird message.

Theo should have been more interested in the development, but he was more stunned at being caught in the girls’ side of the dorm than he was interested in the broadcast. The students probably should discuss what exactly had happened, but then he would have to admit that he was seeing Jordan, and that made him feel even more uncomfortable. In addition, Lily was so capricious that she probably wouldn’t broach the subject again, thus leaving the mystery of the message to fade from thought.
Chapter 3--The Selfish and the Selfless--Part 7

Early in the morning of the twelfth day, Lily and Elizabeth began to take down the Party Store. The students did not have a single open area, and so they were going to create one. All the displays were pushed to the walls, and any loose merchandise was tossed into boxes and shoved in a corner. The work was harrowing, but it was a good distraction from the cold.

The two attended breakfast as if nothing was out of the ordinary, and after that they began decorating the Party Store with the nicest decorations they could find—i.e. the ones Elizabeth found the most tasteful. They decked the store out with streamers and posters, and lots of balloons. Once that was finished, the Historian and Kawaii had to make face at lunch. Everything was going swimmingly.

In the afternoon, they returned to the Party Store to finish wrapping up their gifts. From their spying, they had learned that Jenny liked a certain red phone, a necklace in the Antique store, and that she enjoyed going for walks. They had procured the former two objects, but they were puzzled how to show the third. After scouring the General Store, they found a pair of running shoes that looked like they would fit Jenny.

After all that they had unwittingly done to the girl, they had decided to throw her a party. They sent invitations to everyone to tell them to be there early, and so they would surprise Jenny with a party just for her. No one could have asked for better friends.

Rico was the first of the party guests to arrive, and he was horrendously early.

Rico: “Yo-o! Where’s the party at?”
Elizabeth: “Rico-kun? What are you doing here?”
Rico: “I’m here for the par-tay. I’ve been looking forward to this ever since I got the invite.”
Lily: “Yay! I’m glad you share my excitement!”
Rico: “Where’s everybody at?”
Elizabeth: “You’re horrendously early.”
Rico: “Better early than late.”
Elizabeth: “Have you never been to a party? It’s only ever fashionable to come late.”
Rico: “But what if Jenny comes early? This is her party, isn’t it?”
Lily: “Elizabeth-sama already thought of that. We told everyone the party started half an hour earlier than Jenny so everyone would be here.”
Markus: “I’m horrendously early, but I wanted to see if I could help set up for the festivities!”
Lily: “Yatta! The more the merrier, desu.”
Jordan: “Since this is all for Jenny, I thought I’d come earlier as well to assist.”
Elizabeth: “That’s very sweet of you, but Lily-chan and I have everything under control.”
Lily: “All we need now are the party people!”
Markus: “Shall I go and round them up, then?”
Elizabeth: “No, you’re already here; I don’t want you wandering about.”
Jordan: “So I came early for no reason…”
Rico: “It’s not for nothing! You just get to spend more time with me!”
Jordan: “I jump for joy.”
Theo: “Hey, everybody.”
Elizabeth: “Why are all you people coming early?”
Theo: “In some cultures, being on time more closely translates to being early; I wouldn’t want to offend anyone.”
Jordan: “I doubt you could offend anyone.”
Theo: “R-really? Thanks!”
Lily: “Huh? Theo, you’re acting weird. Why are you so smiley all of a sudden?”
Theo: “Uhh, I just like parties, you know.”
Rico: “Woot! This is going to be so tight!”
Markus: “This shall be an enjoyable afternoon full of merriment!”
Lily: “Jenny is going to be so surprised! I can’t wait to see the look on her face!”
Theo: “Why are you having a party for Jenny, anyway?”
Jordan: “Hmm…I guess I came without questioning why…”
Elizabeth: “After some heartfelt reflection, Lily-chan and I realized that some of the things we’ve done and said to Jenny weren’t the nicest, so we’re throwing a party in her honor to make up for that.”
Markus: “I’m impressed by how big of a person you’re being. There’s no doubt we’ll get through this yet based on the moral merit of our classmates!”
Rico: “I don’t think it matters why we have the party, just so long as we have it!”
James: “You call this a party? This is just sad.”
Rufus: “Not exactly the decoration scheme I would have gone with…”
Elizabeth: “Ahh, people who actually arrive on time.”
Rico: “James, I’m surprised you came early.”
James: “I figured that the sooner I came, the sooner I could jet and not be chewed out for it.”
Lily: “But why would you ever want to leave a party?”
James: “You and me need to have another conversation about naïveté.”

Rufus: “So where is Jenny at? This is her party, after all.”

Theo: “Lily and Elizabeth told her to come later.”

Jordan: “Apparently it’s a surprise party.”

Rufus: “I’m not a big fan of surprises.”

Markus: “The trick to overcoming surprises is to expect the unexpected.”

James: “You did not just say that.”

Elizabeth: “Well, the others are officially late now.”

Lily: “We’re only missing Taylor, Austin, and Cody.”

Rufus: “If it’s any consolation, I didn’t plan on being on time, but my chapter ended earlier than I had anticipated.”

Theo: “If we are surprising Jenny, should we get into hiding positions?”

Elizabeth: “Oh, yes, I had completely forgotten about that part.”

Rico: “But everything’s pushed away; where are we supposed to hide?”

Lily: “Oh no! Rico-kun’s right! What are we going to do?”

Elizabeth: “It’s a good thing you all got here early, after all. Quickly, let’s push some displays together in the back to hide behind.”

Markus: “I’m on it!”

Theo: “I’ll help too.”

Jordan: “I guess I’ll join you.”

Rico: “Yo-o! Wait for me!”

Elizabeth: “Phew, this was almost a disaster.”

James: “Don’t speak too soon, you never know what’ll happen!”

Taylor: “Hel-lo! Now the party can actually start!”

Cody: “Wassup!? Cody’s in the house now, so all you chicks better watch out!”

Elizabeth: “Good. More muscle. Go hope them move the displays.”

Cody: “Heh, so it’s that kind of party.”

Taylor: “I don’t want to know what you mean by that.”

Lily: “Rufus-san, James-kun, aren’t you going to help?”

James: “I’m not in the business of helping those who can help themselves.”
Rufus: “Eheu, I would only get in the way.”

Taylor: “Where’s Austin? He isn’t here yet?”

Elizabeth: “He will be the last to arrive. Before our esteemed guest, I mean.”

James: “Can I go yet?”

Lily: “No! Jenny’s not here yet!”

James: “Bingo. So once she’s here, then I can leave.”

Lily: “No…I didn’t say that…”

Rufus: “Be nice to her; can’t you see she’s trying.”


Lily: “Arigatou. Elizabeth-sama let me put them up myself.”

Markus: “We have finished moving the displays! We should be able to successfully hide all our bodies behind them.”

Elizabeth: “Splendid! Once Austin gets here, then we’ll take our positions.”

Jordan: “And speaking of the devil…”

Austin: “Yawn, I didn’t miss the party, did I? This cold weather is making me sleepier than usual.”

Taylor: “Don’t talk to me about the cold; I haven’t stopped shivering since I woke up.”

Theo: “I wonder just how cold Monobear will be able to make the mall.”

Rico: “This is a lot colder than what I’m used to, that’s for sure.”

Cody: “This? This is nothing! You should experience one of the winters on Lake Michigan sometime, then we can talk.”

Rufus: “I don’t mind the cold so much. Tempus frigidum me delectat. It keeps one’s mind sharp and focused.”

Lily: “Brr! I hate it! But it does let me snuggle up under a bunch of blankets when I’m sleeping.”

James: “All I know is that it sucks. I’m not going to kill anyone over some cold weather. I don’t gain anything from it! I should’ve killed earlier when I had the chance…”

Austin: “I think I’d rather go from hypothermia than have someone kill me”

Jordan: “You wouldn’t kill first? You’d give up so easily?”

Austin: “If I killed someone, I could never live with myself afterward.”

Cody: “I never thought of how it might affect me after leaving…”

Rico: “You mean you’ve thought about killing someone?”

Theo: “It would be foolish to think that everyone hasn’t already considered the possibility. We
can’t know what everyone’s thinking at all times.”

Taylor: “This is some party, alright.”

Elizabeth: “Let’s stop this morbid discussion and get into positions! Jenny could be here any second.”

The students shuffled back behind the line of displays. Feet were stepped on, and elbows landed in ribs, but the collective warmth of everyone huddled so closely together made up for the discomfort. Before long, Jenny, wearing confusion on her perplexed face, walked into the seemingly empty Party Store. On Elizabeth’s signal, the eleven students in waiting jumped out and yelled “Surprise!” Jenny was frightened and cried out in terror.

Lily: “Surprise! Surprise surprise surprise!”

Jenny: “What…what is this?”

Elizabeth: “Jenny-chan, it’s a party. For you.”

Jenny: “A party for me?”

Elizabeth: “Don’t act so shocked; everybody’s here just for you.”

Jordan: “It’s true, actually.”

Rufus: “Diem felicem tibi.”

Austin: “This is the whole reason why I got out of bed today.”

James: “Whoop-dee-doo.”

Cody: “Oh yeah! A party just for our own little Jenny!”

Rico: “Yahoo! Woot! Woot!”

Markus: “Let the festivities begin!”

Jenny: “You did this all…for me?”

Elizabeth: “Yes, silly. Don’t you like it?”

Jenny: “I am not understanding your reasoning behind this matter.”

Lily: “We felt bad! We haven’t been very good friends to you lately, and we wanted to surprise you with something nice to show how much we really care about you, desu.”

Jenny: “I…umm…”

Jordan: “Go ahead, say whatever you want.”

Jenny: “I…I wish you had told me earlier…I am not fond of surprises…”

James: “Strike one.”

Taylor: “Shut up, James!”

James: “I call them as I see them.”
Elizabeth: “Don’t worry, we have a lot planned, so I’m sure you’ll have a great time.”

Lily: “I know! Why don’t we go to the gifts part! Everyone loves receiving presents.”

Elizabeth: “Good idea. Wait here and I’ll go get your presents.”

Jenny: “No, wait, oh…I do not want any presents…”

Jordan: “I have a bad feeling about this…”

Rufus: “You have a bad feeling about everything.”

Theo: “What exactly are you trying to say?”

Jordan: “Theo, it’s nothing. Rufus is just an asshole; don’t pay him any attention.”

Elizabeth: “Alright, this first one is a present from me, the second is from Lily-chan, and the last is from both of us.”

Rico: “Ooh! What is it? What is it?”

Jenny: “It is a red cellular phone.”

James: “What’s the point of something like that? None of them work in the mall.”

Taylor: “Every girl should have a cell phone. Duh.”

Austin: “It’s very fashionable; I think it brings out your eyes, Jenny.”

Jenny: “It looks that nice? I-I am thanking you.”

Elizabeth: “We saw you looking at it, and, of course, we knew that you were too humble to take it for yourself, so we’re letting you have it as a gift.”

Jenny: “But…I was alone when I was looking at it.”

Rufus: “Oh, I think Jordan’s intuition was on to something.”

Elizabeth: “Well, you see, about that…”

Lily: “It’s not like we were spying on you or anything…”

James: “Strike two for spying.”

Rico: “But you’re friends. Why would you have to spy on each other?”

Cody: “Maybe they’re not as good of friends as we thought.”

Jenny: “I do not know if I want this if you only got it for me since I looked at it. I did not really even want it in the first place.”

Elizabeth: “Then why on earth did you spend so much time examining it?”

Jenny: “I have never had a cellular phone before, so I was curious as to how it worked. I still am not quite sure…”

Lily: “Oh no, I wonder if you’ll like your next gift, now.”
Elizabeth: “Umm, it’s probably best to skip to the last one.”

James: “Tch, you’re not changing anything. We’re going to see each and every one of these ‘presents.’”

Markus: “I don’t want to see any antagonizing going on today!”

Taylor: “It can’t possibly be that bad.”

Jenny: “I think that I would like to see Lily’s gift.”

Lily: “Desu, here you go.”

Austin: “I’m sorry, but that thing is hideous. Did you find it in the trash?”

Jenny: “Why would you get me this necklace?”

Elizabeth: “Again, we saw you looking at it, and we thought you would like it.”

Jenny: “I did not even like it when I was looking at it in the Antiques Store.”

Rico: “I don’t get it; what’s the big deal about it?”

Cody: “Yeah, I don’t get it either.”

Jordan: “They got her an ugly necklace. On purpose.”

Lily: “Accidentally on purpose!”

James: “And strike three for terrible gifts. Can I leave now?”

Markus: “Nobody is going anywhere until Jenny lets them go! This is her party after all.”

Taylor: “And yet she’s having the least amount of fun.”

Jenny: “Everyone, if you do not want to stay, then I do not want to keep you against your will.”

Rufus: “What an indefatigable humanist.”

James: “I’m out of here.”

Rufus: “You don’t want to watch the fireworks?”

James: “Tch, now that you mention it, maybe I will stay for the show.”

Austin: “There’s going to be fireworks?”

Jordan: “Rufus is just being an asshole and saying that the worst present is yet to come.”

Taylor: “I can hardly watch, but I can’t take my eyes off it, either.”

Elizabeth: “Well, Lily-chan, shall we face the music and give the last gift?”

Lily: “I…I guess so, desu.”

Rico: “What do you think it is this time?”
Cody: “Are those…?”

Theo: “That’s different.”

Jenny: “Shoes. You got me shoes.”

Elizabeth: “They’re running shoes, you know, for when you’re on the treadmill.”

James: “Insinuating that she needs to exercise more, I’m going to call that strike four.”

Austin: “Does that mean they’ve struck out yet?”

Jordan: “They were out on the last pitch.”

Austin: “Oh…ouch…”

Lily: “Try them on! See how they fit.”

Jenny: “I, umm, I cannot get my feet in them. They are too small…”

Taylor: “You got her clothes without knowing if they’d fit first? Have you never been shopping before?”

Cody: “To be honest, this party kind of blows.”

James: “I’m having a good time.”

Markus: “For all the wrong reasons!”

Jordan: “Jenny, are you alright?”

Elizabeth: “We did this all for you, to show you that we’re sorry.”

Rufus: “The execution was rather lacking, in my opinion.”

Lily: “We are really gomen, desu. Please believe us.”

Markus: “Jenny! How are you feeling?”

Jenny lowered her hat to cover her eyes and looked down at the ground. She couldn’t bear to make eye-contact with any of her classmates.

Jenny: “I…I…”

Jordan: “Go ahead, use your words.”

Jenny: “I…I hate it! I am sorry, no, I am not, but I am sorry. I do not like these presents. I do not like this party. I am unhappy; you are making me feel very bad.”

Jordan: “There, there, let it out.”

Jenny: “And it is cold, and everyone is so nice, and I do not want to ruin anyone’s fun, but I am not having a good time. I want to leave.”

Rico: “But you can’t just leave your own party.”

Theo: “I think she has the right to do whatever she wants.”
Taylor: “Hell, it’s her party and she can cry if she wants to.”

Jenny: “You all…are too nice…”

Elizabeth: “Jenny-chan, have we upset you? Tell us what’s wrong.”

Lily: “We’re your friends, you can tell us anything.”

Jenny: “I…I…I am so sorry…”

Elizabeth: “Jenny-chan, look at me and tell me what’s wrong.”

Elizabeth reached forward, grabbed Jenny’s hat, and raised her face up. Tears were rolling down Jenny’s face as she confronted Elizabeth. The Sandwich Artist was feeling emotions she neither wanted to acknowledge nor could afford to keep inside any longer.

Jenny: “You are what is wrong!”

Elizabeth: “Wh-what?”

Jenny: “You are what is wrong! You are bossy, and self-centered, and you never listen to me. You use me and abuse me and never let me do what I want to do. You did not throw this party for me; you threw it for yourself! Sniffle.”

Elizabeth: “That’s ludicrous! We are doing all of this for you. Tell her, Lily-chan.”

Lily: “Please, Jenny-chan.”

Jenny: “You only want to feel better about yourselves. You do not actually care what I think! I am sorry, but I am tired of it. I have put up with it too long, I think. I…I…I do not want to be your friend anymore!”

Jenny’s declaration reverberated like a shockwave throughout the student body. Not even James’s vituperations had caused more dissension among the group.

Elizabeth: “Jenny-chan, you’re clearly mistaken. If you would just listen to reason—”

Jordan: “There’s no reason for her to listen to you anymore. Please respect her wishes.”

Elizabeth: “Why, I never!”

Markus: “I think it would be best if you two left.”

Lily: “B-b-but I…I…”

Cody: “Yeah, party over.”

Austin: “This was even more exhausting than I thought it would be.”

Elizabeth: “If that’s how you feel, then you’ve give me no choice. I’ll take what dignity I have left and leave. Come along, Lily-chan. I can tell when we’re not wanted.”

Lily: “I’m…I’m gomen…sniffle…”

Jenny: “Gah hah, sniffle, hah.”

Jordan: “It’s okay, you’re alright. You don’t have to pretend anymore.”
Cody: “If you were so unhappy, you should have just said something. I totally would have hung out with you more.”

Rico: “Ditto for me! I’m always down for something fun!”

Taylor: “I’ve got dozens of great tanning techniques if you’re ever interested.”

Rufus: “What’s your taste in literature like? Maybe I could find you something.”

James: “There might be a halfway decent romantic comedy or something in the Video Store for you…”

Austin: “Or if you want to do nothing, we can do nothing together.”

Theo: “I’m not sure what to offer, but I’m here as well.”

Markus: “As your leader, I am always available whenever you need anything!”

Jenny: “I… I do not understand…”

Jordan: “We’re your friends. This is just how it is.”

Jenny: “You are all… my friends?”

Taylor: “Like, yeah.”

Austin: “Of course.”

James: “Speak for yourself.”

Markus: “James agrees as well.”

Rufus: “Amici sumus.”

Rico: “Anywhere and anytime!”

Jenny: “Everyone… thank you…”
The party eventually disbanded. With mixed feelings, the students waited out the rest of the day. When the clock struck ten, the temperature decreased once more, and now liquid water would freeze to ice if left in the open. Shivering was just a way of life now; no one had been able to feel their fingers for some time now. Everyone grew pale as their bodies focused energy into keeping them warm.

On the thirteenth day of their imprisonment, the students still had the will to fight, and so they tried to ignore the frosty air and get on as well as they had in the past.

Elizabeth, covered head to toe in a shroud of blankets, sat opposite Austin, completely exposed to the elements. Austin had finally gotten around to asking Elizabeth for her assistance in creating the class yearbook. The Idle didn’t care much to interact with Elizabeth after her failure of a party, but he should at least try to be civil.

Elizabeth herself was glad for some form of companionship. The party had not only compromised her relationship with Jenny, but it had hurt her standing with Lily as well. No one wanted to talk to her, and so she felt alone. Whenever she felt alone, she would pour herself into her studies; now she had only her History to work on. She had been keeping extensive notes of the goings-ons of the mall, and the cathartic process of objectively chronicling the past helped her to find her center.

“I’m sure word has gotten around by now about my little project,” said Austin.

“Actually,” said Elizabeth, “I haven’t heard a thing about it.”

“Yawn, really? I thought I had Theo on top of things. Oh well. I guess I’ll just have to talk to him sometime about it.”

“So, what is your project? It better not have anything to do with parties…”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort. I thought it might be cool if we made a yearbook for all of us.”

“I hope not to commemorate or time being here. The sooner I can forget about this place, the better.”

“I thought you were writing a history of the mall. Don’t you need to remember things for that?”

“I can remember them now, and make note of them, so that I may never have to re-imagine my predicament.”

“But some things we shouldn’t forget about.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Like our friends. Like Delilah and Melissa. I don’t think they should be forgotten.”

“No, I don’t think they should either. I wish I had been able to spend more time with them and get to know them better now.”

“Sigh, I think we all do.”
"In any case, what do you need me for?"

"Since you’re a Historian, you must be good at recalling things, right?"

"My memory is rather photographic."

"Then you can help write about everyone who has…passed away."

"I…I don’t know if I can be considered an expert on assessing people anymore."

"Don’t beat yourself up. Your heart was in the right place, but the connection just didn’t quite make it all the way to the brain."

"If my heart was in the right place, then that’s all that matters, right? Everyone know how big a person I am, right?"

"The fact remains, though, that you hurt Jenny; that part’s difficult to overlook."

"Hmph. Sometimes I feel like I was born in the wrong time. I wasn’t meant to live such a life as this…"

"You’re not the only one who feels that way."

"Excuse me?"

"Most of us don’t feel like we should be here. I mean, if anyone does feel like they should be here, then they probably have some affiliation with that All-Star Despair title."

"I suppose you raise a valid point…"

"If you try more to think about how other people are feeling, instead of how you think you want them to be feeling, then you won’t run into issues like Jenny’s party."

"For someone who doesn’t like to do very much, you sure do say some wise things."

"Yawn, I do a lot of thinking in my spare time."

"You truly live the life I want."

"Don’t say that. You should be happy with your life. Things might be crummy now, but they’ll get better."

"How can you be so optimistic?"

"It beats being pessimistic. Whenever I start to feel sad, I just decide to feel happy instead."

"You can’t just ‘feel happy’ at the flip of a switch."

"Sure you can. You just have to make sure you do something that makes you happy."

"Do something that makes you happy…ooh, I like the sound of that. I think I really will work on my History more seriously now. Oh! I have so many ideas of what I can do with it!"

"Yawn, that’s the spirit. So about the yearbook?"

"Yes! I would be honored to contribute to your project. Just tell me what you want, and I’ll do it."
“Neat. I just wanted to get you on board for the time being. I’m still working out the fine
details of everything.”

“Well, as soon as you have something concrete for me, don’t hesitate whatsoever.”

“Don’t worry; I won’t.”

“Unless you have anything else for me, I’ll be on my way. I have some thoughts of my own
that I need to put on paper.”

“By all means, be my guest.”

“Thank you, Austin-kun. You have such a way with people.” With a new spring in her step,
the mound of blankets known as Elizabeth went skipping back to her dorm. Austin felt pleased with
himself. Not only had he obtained a new ally for his project, but also he had cheered up one of his
despondent classmates.

One blanket was not enough to keep Taylor warm. She needed to find another blanket, and
fast. Her search brought her to the Lounge, and, to her dismay, the only other inhabitant of the
space was Rufus. Concealed under his own blankets, Rufus was busy reading his books again. Oh
how she envied his blanket, and his turtleneck, and his pants, and his shoes. As she thought about
it, Rufus would have to be very warm under all those layers. How selfish of him not to share that
heat.

She saddled up to him on the couch and sat right down next to him. She would have to be
coy, but she was sure that she could achieve her goal.

“Hey, there, Rufus. Whatcha reading?”

“A book, Tristan. Do you need to get your eyes checked?”

“First of all, ‘Tristan’ is a boy’s name; you should know better. And second, I can see
perfectly fine.” She inched slightly closer to him.

“Sic, you should have been able to see what I was reading. Is the cold weather messing with
your brain, Trevor?”

“I know you messed that one up on purpose. And my brain is functioning as well as it ever
has.”

“So, not great, then.”

“Rude.” She slid a little closer to him.

“There is more than one couch in this room; you don’t have to sit so close to me.”

“But maybe I wanted to get to know you better, huh. Did you ever think of that?”

“The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

“Well I do!” She was lying. “Let me into your life; tell me about yourself.”

Rufus closed his book and looked disdainfully into Taylor’s eyes. “Alright, then. If you
insist. My parents were blah blah blah and so when I was six blah blah blah without a trace blah
Taylor nodded her head in mock interest as Rufus continued to talk. It felt good to have one’s ego stroked every now and then, and so Taylor was indulging Rufus. She didn’t care for a word he said; she just wanted his body heat. The further he got into his narration, the less he paid attention to his surroundings. Carefully, slyly, Taylor slipped the corner of Rufus’s blanket over her own. She continued to slide closer to him, and she could start to feel the combined effect of two blankets absorbing heat.

“Blah blah blah *te salutamus* blah blah blah as a gladiator blah blah blah one of my crowning achievements. My, I’ve talked for quite a while, haven’t I? *Mea culpa*, I haven’t asked you a thing about yourself.”

“What’s that?” Why had he stopped talking? What was going on?

“If you want to get to know me, then it’s only natural that I get to know you as well. Tell me more about who Taylor Erzen is.”

“Well, if you insist. I grew up blah blah blah in a household of boys blah blah blah had to hold my own blah blah blah most popular girl in school blah blah blah face full of mud blah blah blah diamond earring blah blah blah third-degree sunburns blah blah blah too much tanning lotion blah blah blah happy birthday blah blah blah a cursed *piñata* blah blah blah never playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey again blah blah blah seven stitches blah blah blah…”

Rufus actually did listen to everything Taylor had to say. The two of them were polar opposites. He was the introverted, nerdy boy, and she was the extroverted, prima donna girl. Back home, a girl like her would never have given a boy like him the time of day. He could tell that she was only using him for his blanket, but he was pleased to have the chance to pick her brain.

“Blah blah blah she got what she deserved blah blah blah fourteen flavors blah blah blah a sad turtle now blah blah blah before the tower fell blah blah blah like, can you not blah blah blah and anyhoo, that was only one of our Fourth of July picnics.”

“That sounds like an utterly exhausting lifestyle.”

“It is, but it’s also very rewarding. There’s no point in looking this good if I don’t do anything with it.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about fashion.”

“Oh, honey, I can tell.”

*Gratias tibi ago.*

“And what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It translates to ‘I acknowledge that you are a superior opponent in this particular arena.’ The gladiators used it.”

“That is so cool. You should tell me more about them.”

“Well, for instance, did you know that the feathers on their helmets were made from dodo birds?”
“No way.”

“And that’s why dodos went extinct. Or did you know that the Colosseum was based on the design of the Globe Theatre in London.”

“That is so crazy!”

“My favorite bit of trivia is that Disatrous Caesar once killed a man for not looking left before crossing the road.”

“You learn something new everyday.”

“And if you want to share blankets, you can just ask.”

“What’s what now?”

“The temperature is literally freezing; we can share blankets to keep warm.”

“Oh sweet Jesus yes. Let me get closer to you so we can wrap these around us.”

“Do you really have to be that close?”

“Do you want to freeze?”

“About as much as you do.”

“Then we stay like this. Just, no telling anyone else about this, okay? I’ve got a reputation to maintain.”

“I was just about to ask if we could stop pretending to like each other.”

“It was getting kind of exhausting.”

“I’m going to return to reading my book now.”

“I think I’ll take a nap. Wake me when it’s time for dinner.”

“If you say so.”

Taylor and Rufus then proceeded to spend a quiet—albeit awkward—afternoon together under the same blankets.

Jordan was minding her own business in the Antique Store when Markus intruded upon her serenity. In a last ditch effort of vanity, Jordan sought some sort of warming device in the Antique Store. She would have been content with a wood stove for how cold she was. She could deal with humid, and she could deal with blistering heat, but she did not enjoy the cold.

Markus was making his usual rounds, and it was time for him to get in the head of Jordan. Heretofore, she had not been a major team player, but that was about to change. Markus could tell that she was a clever girl, and he would like to use her intelligence to his advantage. If someone could figure a way out of here, it might be her.

“Hello there, Jordan! What goes on?”
Jordan was not fond of Markus’s outrageously high energy level. She knew that she was irritable, and so she wanted to be left alone. The cold was not letting her sleep easily. Theo had offered her his blankets, but she would feel bad leaving him in the cold; he was such a thoughtful person. “Hello, Markus.”

“Staying warm?”

“I’m doing my best.”

“It’s important to keep warm in these cold temperatures. It seems like such an obvious thing, but it’s an important thing to remember nonetheless.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“So what do you think?”

“What do I think? About what?”

“About the mall. About getting out of here. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Probably the same as yours. I’m just trying to get by.”

“I don’t believe that for a second! You’re too smart not to be thinking about your next big move!”

“Markus, not everyone sees the world as you do. I don’t believe in making ‘big moves.’”

“Then you need to change your way of thinking! This world is only for the doers, and so you need to do if you want to succeed.”

“It’s great if that’s how you feel and that’s the mantra you chant, but I’ve had a fairly successful golfing career until now, so I’ll follow my own path.”

“Sometimes you have to change your path! You need to be able to adapt to changes in your immediate surroundings and circumstances! Life isn’t static, so you can’t expect the same strategy to be poignant for all your days.”

“And you can’t expect to change the minds of others with some hollow words!”

“There’s the feisty attitude I’m looking for. Channel that emotion! Use that feeling to your advantage!”

“I’ll show that feeling all over your face if you don’t back off.”

“Come on! Show me what you got!”

“I’m warning you; don’t test me. I’m not in the mood.”

“Do as the actors do! Tap into your spirit and unleash your hidden potential! Let your being overflow with your soul!”

“Please. Leave me be.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you agree to lend your abilities to my cause!”

“I’ll do as I please, thank you very much.”
“I won’t accept ‘no’ for an answer! Join me! Let’s get out of here!”

“Don’t pressure me into anything; you’re making me very uncomfortable right now.”

“Nevertheless, understand that emotion and fully utilize it!”

“Do you really want me to use my power?”

“Yes! Show me what you got!”

“This is the last time I’ll ask: are you sure?”

“Without a shadow of a doubt!”

“Well then, consider yourself warned.” As fast as a bullet, Jordan launched herself forward and punched Markus square in the jaw. Time seemed to slow down upon the point of impact. Once the temporal laws of the universe reinstated themselves, Markus fell back from the force of Jordan’s fist. Jordan stretched her hand out and turned away. “I’m sorry, but I told you not to test me.”

Markus lay on the ground massaging his jaw. “But I see now what you’re really made of.”

“I was provoked; that’s all that was.”

“No, you showed me your soul, just like I wanted. You might try to be calm, cool, and collected, but there’s something darker going on inside. And I want that power on my side.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Feign ignorance all you want, but we both know what your real nature is like. Remember that. It’ll be our little secret. As well, remember that if you’re not with me, then you’re against me.”

“I thought we were all in this together to escape; I didn’t think there could be sides.”

“Well, we’re all trying to get out of here, but All-Star Despair probably has other plans. I just have to wonder where your allegiance truly lies.”

Jordan said nothing. Not because Markus was onto something, but that she felt offended by his comment. She knew that she was a member of the class, and it hurt to have her loyalty insinuated otherwise. Already she was feeling remorse for striking him, but she stood by her actions.

“Well, the day is still young,” continued Markus. “I’m going to go check on the others. I’m sure I’ll see you around.” Full of himself, Markus left the Antique Store.

Jordan stood in silence for a moment before collapsing to the ground. She felt disgusting and disgusted; she wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn’t come. She would have to talk to Theo later.
Cody was dragging his feet, both literally and metaphorically. He had meant to seriously apologize to James for knocking him out during the previous trial, and then almost getting him framed because of it. In the heat of the moment, he had felt completely justified, but now that he had had a few days to reflect on his actions, he realized how impetuous he had been. It was time to make amends.

James spent all his time in the Video Store nowadays, so there was no doubt in Cody’s mind that that’s where he would find the Movie Producer. Despite his feelings of remorse, Cody was not looking forward to the confrontation. James was such an unpleasant person to be around. He felt big by tearing others down instead of building them up, and Cody just hated that. He could only do what was right in his own mind, so he had no choice but to do the deed.

“Wassup?” asked Cody as he sauntered into the Video Store.

James was indeed in the store, still making his catalogue of films. When he heard Cody’s voice, his reaction was simply to roll his eyes. “Whatever,” he responded.

“So dude, I’ve been putting this off for a while, and I wanted to apologize.” The words came out easier than Cody had anticipated.

“Apologize for what? For soaking up my precious oxygen on a daily basis?”

“No, man. For knocking your lights out before Melissa’s trial.”

“That? I had completely forgotten about it.”

“What? No way!”

“Honestly, it was a thing that happened, and I’m over it.”

“But aren’t you still mad about it?” James seemed like the kind of person who could hold a grudge for an indefinite amount of time.

“I was sore for maybe fifteen minutes, but there was no sense in staying angry.”

“Uhh, pardon my assertion, but you’re always angry.”

“Because stupid people like you are always bothering me! If you would let me live how I want, then we’ll get along fine.”

“So…do you accept my apology then?”

“Tch, I guess so, I mean, if you really want me to. It doesn’t make a difference to me either way. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Dude, I sent you unconscious with my fist! That doesn’t just tick you off?”

“Listen, I work in the movie business. I know it’s a lofty principle that’s hard to grasp, but bear with me. Where I come from, people will chew you up and spit you out whether you’ve known them for five minutes or five years. The trick is to not take things personally.”

“So that means…I get it! You’re not a dick; you just act like one because that’s how you
have to act to get ahead.”

“If that’s how you choose to look at it, sure.”

“I guess I’m still confused.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“How can you not take such hurtful things personally?”

“I’ve had to develop a tough shell to get by. The remarkable thing about humans is that we adapt to our various situations. We do what we need to get by. In that regard—and that one only—we are similar.”

“Duuuude! I thought you were some kind of cynical asshole, but you’re a regular person like the rest of us.”

“Don’t drag me down to your level.”

“Hey, you were there at Jenny’s party. We’re all friends, right? You even said so to Jenny at the party.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Maybe you didn’t say it in those words, but you totally implied it.”

“Tch!”

“It’s the same with everyone, dude! We’re all your friends, as well. You can take off that mean shell; this isn’t Hollywood. You don’t have to act like an asshole if you don’t want to.”

“Tch, you guys are so simple-minded. I don’t need to change who I am!”

“Nah, we’re not asking you to change who you are, we’re just letting you know you can be who you really are.”

“How are you so sure that this isn’t who I really am?”

“Dude, no one can be as depressing as you act.”

“You know…Markus keeps saying things about how we are friends, and that I just choose to ignore this fact…hell, maybe it is time I tried to be a little nicer.”

“Aww, bro-hug?”

“Get away from me.”

“Bro-fist?”

“How about, bro-get-away-from-me?”

“Nah, man, that’s no fun.”

“Bro-friendly-wave? Handshake?”

“BRO-HUG!” Cody rushed forward and seized James in an encapsulating bear hug. All on his own, Cody had managed to bring James back from the dark side. “Welcome to the family,
James could hardly breathe since Cody was pressing their bodies so tightly together. What had he gotten himself into?

No secret is able to escape from All-Star Wannabe Detective Rico de Naranjas! He had had enough fruitless crushes to know what it’s like to feel love unrequited, and now he could see that same feeling in the look of Theo Cook. It was so obvious that he was falling for someone in a hard way. Rico was also aware of how embarrassing crushes could be; nevertheless, he felt that he could lend his expert advice to those in need.

Theo had established a formal cartography station in the Pharmacy. It was a strange place to work, but it was quiet, and he wouldn’t have to worry about anyone intruding. Jordan had told him that she didn’t need any gifts from him, but he still felt the need to impress her with something. She had practically told him straight to his face that she liked him back, but Theo had to convince himself first. If anything, he still believed in chivalry.

Using his super sleuth skills, Rico tracked Theo down to the Pharmacy. Rico could see that he was drawing something on a table in the back; Rico was sure that it wasn’t important. Rico walked right up and took a seat on the edge of the table.

“Yo-o, Theo-o, how’s it going?”

Theo had been in the zone, and he was oblivious to Rico’s bombastic entrance. The sudden alarm caused him to make a mis-strike on his paper; all his careful work had now been marred. His right eye twitched. “Hello, Rico.”

“So-o, how’s it going?”

“It’s going.”

“Uh huh, uh huh. But how’s it really going?”

“Rico, do you need something?”

“Alright, bud, I’ll cut to the chase. Rico is here to bail you out of your pathetic love life.”

“My love life?”

“It’s written all over your face; you’re in love. And I’ve got all the know-how you’ll ever need.”

“Rico, I appreciate your wanting to help, but I don’t think I need your help.”

“Don’t be so silly. When you’re blinded by the allure of love, it’s hard to see things clearly.”

“Listen, Rico—”

“I’ve had my fair share of romantic escapades, and I know how confusing they can be. You need somebody by your side to tell you which way is up, and that’s where I come in.”

“Rico, that’s very—”
“Now, I might not have all the answers, but I can definitely steer you in the right direction. So tell me, who’s the lucky lady?”

“Rico, are you going to listen to me?”

“Of course, man. I’m here for you, friend.”

“Then please butt out of my relationship. I’ve already got others trying to tell me how to behave; I don’t need more people interfering.”

“O-oh, I totally understand. No, that’s cool, that’s totally cool. Forget I ever intruded.”

“I appreciate your wanting to help, but I appreciate the room even more.”

“Yeah, of course, whatever you say.”

“Sometimes you have to figure things out for yourself, you know?”

“Hey man, I’mma let you be now. If you ever need to talk about anything, I can keep a secret like a hound.”

“Thanks, Rico, that means a lot. As a point of curiosity, what advice were you going to give me anyway?”

“Well, since you asked, I have quite the choice selection of information for you to gleam. For instance, never toss pebbles at a girl’s window to get her attention, because she’ll open the window mid-throw and you’ll hit her in the eye.”

“I, uhh, I don’t think I need to worry about doing that here.”

“Good point. Lemme see…make sure you know what your girl’s allergies are so you don’t accidentally buy her flowers full of bees and then spend the next seven hours in the hospital’s emergency room.”

“That sounds rather brutal. I’m not sure where I would find those flowers, though.”

“I will say that one of the most important tidbits of information I have uncovered is that girls love chocolate. If you give a girl chocolate, she will love you forever, unless there’s peanuts in the chocolate and she happens to be allergic to nuts, but that harks back to the previous example.”

“Okay, that one actually sounds useful. You mean that all girls like chocolate?”

“I’ve never met one who would turn it down.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, how did you learn all these things?”

“I’ve actually been trying to market my particular dating techniques for years now, but no one’s been interested in the idea. I think it’s a natural money-maker, but others disagree.”

“Well, what exactly is your system?”

“It’s called the ‘Don’t Do What Rico Does’ strategy. Basically, it’s a list of things that I have either done or have thought about doing in relation to a dating situation. You simply don’t do those things. Solid, right?”
“Rico, you are too much sometimes.”

“That’s what Gabriela said right before—”

“Before you went to hospital because you upset her allergies?”

“Yea-ah! How did you know?”

“Call it intuition.”

“If that’s your intuition, then I think you’ll be fine with whatever lady you’ve got your eyes set on.”

“Thanks, Rico.”

“Speaking of which, who is she?”

“I’ll tell you some other time, okay?”

“Ah-ah, you want to keep it a secret. Well don’t worry, I’ve got your back! Now, I’ll leave you to your drawing. If you ever need anything, just hit me up.” Rico pointed finger guns at Theo, made a clicking noise, and wandered off.

Theo sat in a daze for a moment, wondering what had just transpired. Sometimes that Rico really was just too much.

Lily was having trouble finding the energy to leave her bed. Her relationship with Jenny was in shambles, and she felt ostracized from the other students by her and Elizabeth’s exceptional blunder. The oppressive chill in the air was weighing heavy on her spirit, and now, more than ever, she wanted to go home. The Kawaii just wanted to go back to a time when everyone was friends, when nobody felt sad.

Lily’s stomach growled; she should probably eat. Wrapping her blanket around her, Lily left her bed and headed for the door. She opened the door, and the sudden swinging of the door nearly smacked Jenny in the face. Jenny had been passing through the dorm area—she was curious to know what everyone was doing and if she could join them—and so she hadn’t been paying close attention to her surroundings.

It took Lily a moment to realize that she had almost caused serious facial damage to one of her classmates. Once she saw who it was, an awkward silence filled the hallway. The two should have just gone on their ways, but some ineffable tie that had previously developed between them insisted itself and forced them to interact.

“Oh, hey, Jenny-san…”

“Hello, Lily.”

“How are you?”

“I am feeling fine today, I thank you for asking.”

“It’s cold.”

“Yes.”
“Does it bother you?”

“I think that I have more experience with colder climates than most of my fellow classmates.”

“You must have thick skin, then, desu.”

“Maybe. Umm. What is it that you are up to?”

“I’m going to get something to eat; I’m a little hungry.”

“Yes, we missed you at breakfast. You just came, got food, and left. Usually you are one of the last to leave the table.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Lily looked down; there was a pregnant pause in their conversation.

“Well, I will see you around, okay?” asked Jenny.

Eyes fixed on the floor, Lily responded, “Do you hate me?”

“I—no, I do not hate you.”

“But you do not like me. You hate me, just as you hate Lizzie-sama.”

“I do not hate anybody!”

“But we’re not friends, are we?”

“I…I do not know…things are strange right now…”

“I don’t like it when things are strange. Why can’t things just be simple?”

“Again, I do not know.”

“I…I miss you, desu. I miss being friends with everyone. I miss having fun. Now I only ever feel cold…”

“The others have not stopped being your friend. It took me so long to realize that they were my friends in the first place—”

“But they like you! After our mistake, they won’t even look at me and Lizzie-sama! I was alone for so long before, and I thought I finally found people, but now I’m just alone again. I…I don’t like it…”

“I am sorry. I am sure that this feeling will pass soon enough; you cannot be sad forever.”

“You can’t know that…something could happen…things always happen…”

“Then I hope that they do not happen to you.”

“Do you really mean that, desu?”

“I do.”

Lily stared into Jenny’s eyes. “What happened?”
“I do not know. It seems that I do not know a lot of things, but I just do not know.”

“If you ever find out, please let me know.”

“Of course.” There was nothing more for the girls to discuss. The air seemed to grow colder; the two shivered simultaneously. “I should go now,” said Jenny.

“Me too…”

“Goodbye, Lily.”

“Goodbye, Jenny-san…”

The two girls went their separate ways.
Chapter 3--The Selfish and the Selfless--Part 10

There was a loud, rapturous knock on Lily’s door. She didn’t know what time it was, but she hadn’t heard the air conditioners explode with a frenzy of frigidity, so it must not be ten yet. She solemnly crept out of bed and answered her door. Rufus stood in front of her. The thought passed through her head that she had opened her door without a thought to who was behind it; someone could have easily murdered her right now for her carelessness. A part of her didn’t care about her foolishness.

Rufus had his arms crossed and was tapping his foot impatiently. “Well?” he insinuated harshly.

“Well what?” Lily asked in an even tone.

“I have been looking for you all day, but you’ve been hiding yourself away from everyone. Have you finished translating the document yet?”

“What document?”

“The one entirely in Japanese! That document.”

“Oh, yeah, I did actually.”

“And what did it say?”

“I don’t know off the top of my head, desu. I wrote down a translation, though.”

“Well go get it! It’s cold out, and I don’t feel like standing here all day.”

“Alright, one moment. Hold your horses. Here.”

“I can’t read this! Did you never learn proper penmanship?”

“Sorry I’m not perfect like you. Is it fine if I just read it to you?”

“If you must, yes.”

“Here goes nothing. ‘To my esteemed colleague:

‘We have felt despair that we have never felt before, and how wonderful that is. But I fear that our despair will remain stagnant if we do not take action soon. Preparation has long been in the work, as you know, and we will build our vision on the shoulders of giants.’ That’s not exactly what it says there, but it’s the right sentiment.

‘The time has come now for All-Star Despair to manifest itself. Below is a list of what you will have to manage. We shall watch as these hope-filled youths fall into sweet, sweet despair.’ The rest of the document is a list of our class with all our titles. There’s a little P.S. at the bottom that says ‘As much as it would make me despair to have you fail, greater will be your success.’ And that’s it.”

Rufus took a moment to himself to cogitate. “Hmm…that’s not nearly as interesting as I thought it would be. It’s obviously a letter to our All-Star Despair, a.k.a. the All-Star Liar, from whoever helped set everything up.”
“Then why isn’t their title listed as such? The document lines up with everything that we have said ourselves.”

“That tells All-Star Despair who they need to pretend to be.”

Lily was suddenly suspicious of Rufus. He had arrived out of nowhere to talk to her at an ungodly hour. “Why are you so interested in this right now?”

“This is a game, no? You had an advantage in that document that I wanted, and I grew impatient of waiting for it. Sometimes you have to make big moves to get what you want.”

“Now what?”

“Now you’re on your own. Since you’ve given me this next-to-useless translation, there’s no reason to keep you under a no-kill protection. You’re just as vulnerable as the rest of us. I’d lock your door tonight if I were you.” Without so much as a goodbye, Rufus turned on his heel and left for his own room.

Unfazed, Lily went fully back into her own room and crawled back into bed. She did not bother to relock her door.

The twelve students went to bed early so that they could warm up their beds more before the temperature dropped to a frigid twenty-two degrees. As hypothermia crept closer and closer, the students’ feelings were mixed. Some held onto the vestiges of hope, while some now adhered to the persuasions of despair.

All-Star Lucky, Taylor Erzen, was not acclimated to cold weather. She needed lots of sun and the heat that came with it. The only things she liked cold were her low-fat frozen fruit bars, and she could only ever stomach those sparingly. She was constantly shivering, and her teeth were chattering. Her skin was starting to dry out, and she couldn’t moisturize fast enough. Something would have to change soon, for she would not be able to put up with these hideous conditions much longer.

Rico de Naranjas, All-Star Marathon Runner, had never experienced temperatures as low as this before. Even running through a sandy desert in the middle of the night, Rico had never had to worry about finding liquid water. Despite being able to warm up in the Gym, Rico’s body was not taking kindly to the new lows. He might have to do something lest the situation grow more dire.

All-Star Sandwich Artist, Jenny Zemenovski, had the warmth of cordiality to keep her sustained through the harsh chill of the mall. For most of her life, she had felt cold, but now she finally felt warm. She could withstand any onslaught of the weather so long as she had her companions by her side. In fact, she didn’t even mind the possibility of spending the rest of her life in the mall if her friends were always with her.

Austin Fitzpatrick, All-Star Idle, didn’t mind the cold. He also didn’t mind the warm. He didn’t mind a lot of things. He certainly didn’t want it to get any colder, but he wondered how much of a strain Monobear could put on the air conditioners. Eventually, there would have to be a limit to how cold it could get. All they had to do was wait out to this temperature and then adapt to the chill. Simple.

James Beck, All-Star Movie Producer, had been in worse situations. Some of those Hollywood actors were so idiosyncratic that trying to persuade them to be in one of his films was
an ordeal in and of itself. To put up with some cold weather was more tolerable than being subject
to deafening operas sung by women who should have had their vocal chords removed. He would
protest his situation, but he would be able to weather it.

Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian, wouldn’t let a little cold weather dampen his spirits.
More time had passed now without a murder than before, and so he was sure that no more murders
would ever occur. It just went to show that he was a more natural leader than Melissa. He was the
greatest thing to happen to this class, and as long as he was around, nothing tragic would happen.

All-Star Kawaii, Lily Smith, was embittered by the cold. Her relationships with those
around her had crumbled. She had translated the mystery document, and so there was nothing left
for her to do. It appeared that her stay had drawn to an end. There was nothing left for her, so what
risks were left for her to take? She could live in misery, or she could create her own happiness.

Cody Cameron, All-Star Waterskier, was fine with temperatures on either extreme. He’d
been spending more time in his room building models once it got too cold to work out all the time.
His bare feet were starting to get a little cold, but it was nothing to having them skate across chilly
autumn waters. He was more worried how the cold would affect the weaker and scrawnier
members of the class, namely Taylor and Austin. He felt like a big brother to them, and he hated
seeing them suffer.

All-Star Golfer, Jordan Koulibagh, detested the cold. She couldn’t feel her fingers, and the
numbness was starting to fade into pain. Every time she had to grab or hold something, a wave of
discomfo t shot through her body, masked between the incessant shivers. If her fingers were
damaged by the cold, she may have trouble holding onto a golf club properly, and if that happened,
then she might have to kiss her career goodbye. She had worked too hard for something like that to
happen.

Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist, enjoyed the cold—to a degree. Once the various parts of his
body went numb from the cold, those nerve endings no longer relayed messages to the brain, and
this meant that the brain didn’t need to focus on so many inputs, thus leaving his mind open to
focus on other thoughts. For this reason, he would always study in the coldest environment he
could find. He did have his limits to the temperature, though, but he could find ways to avoid
having the air quality overwhelm him.

Theo Cook, All-Star Cartographer, had been to Antarctica on an expedition with his
mother, and he had braved the northern oceans looking for his father. A cold mall was nothing
compared to those adventures. Granted, then he had been dressed more appropriately for the
conditions. He was more worried about how Jordan was faring in the cold, but she wouldn’t let
him alleviate her discomfort; that bothered him the most.

All-Star Historian, Elizabeth Barrington, never cared for the cold. Whenever the weather
grew less-than-pleasant, Elizabeth would curl up in front of the fireplace with a hearty text. She
didn’t have that luxury now, but she did have her own coping mechanisms. Almost all her thoughts
were directed at her History or what she could write for Austin’s yearbook. In the days ahead, she
would be too busy to worry about being cold.

Cody decided to get up early for a workout before breakfast. He hadn’t slept well that
night, and so he walked in a daze to the Gym. He didn’t even realize that it was warm again. When
he got to the Gym, he still felt tired, so he figured that splashing some cold water onto his face
would wake him up. He opened the door to the boys’ changing room, and the sight before him
brought him back to his senses.
Cody rushed out of the Gym and ran back to the dorm. He began screaming for everyone to wake up, and he started banging on random people’s doors in an effort to get them awake. Theo peeked his head out to see what was the matter, as did Rico. Cody quickly grabbed both of them and led them to the Gym.

When they got there, they saw what had gotten Cody so riled up this early in the morning.

The PA system cackled. “Attention, you late risers, a dead body has been found. Begin your investigations, because the school trial will be held shortly.”

The announcement roused the rest of the students from their slumber, and soon the whole class was looking at the same sight. Lying in a pool of diluted blood in the middle of the boys’ changing room, wearing nothing but his boxers, was the dead body of Success Summit’s All-Star Movie Producer, James Beck.
Chapter 3--The Selfish and the Selfless--Part 11

Abnormal Days

James’s body was haphazardly thrown onto the floor of the changing room. His shirt, pants, and shoes had all been removed. The murderer was kind enough to let him keep his signature sunglasses with him on his way to the afterlife. The foolish liked to believe that there was a certain dignity associated with death, but there was no honor in dying.

Elizabeth looked over the shoulders of her peers trying to get a good glimpse of the dearly departed. She had been one of the last to arrive, and so she was stuck at the back of the gawking circle. She spied the body, and her heart let out a sigh of relief. She scanned the crowd, tears welling up in her eyes. She saw Jenny, ran up to her, and embraced the Sandwich Artist.

“Jenny-chan!” cried Elizabeth. “W-when I heard the announcement, I-I was so worried. But you’re alive! I’m so h-h-happy!” Tears rolled down Elizabeth’s cheeks; she was so glad to see that Jenny was unhurt. The Historian had a strange way of showing it, but she cared for her friends.

Jenny was incredibly uncomfortable in Elizabeth’s grasp. She wanted very little to do with the Historian, but emotion was just pouring out of Elizabeth; it would be rude to deny her the cathartic release. “There, there,” said Jenny. “I am fine. There is no need to be worrying.”

“I-I-I can’t help it!”

Lily was emotional just from seeing the body, let alone being subject to the massive release of feelings going on around her. “J-Jenny-san…Elizabeth-sama…”

Elizabeth grabbed Lily and held her close as well. “I don’t care what anyone says; we are friends, and I won’t let anything bad happen to either of you!”

“Do you mind having your heartfelt reunion elsewhere? We’re in the middle of a very important investigation,” said Rufus to break up the feels session.

Elizabeth had made a show of finding Jenny, and now she was blocking the entrance to the changing room. Theo moved forward so that he could examine the body as usual. “Elizabeth, would you please step aside so I can examine James’s body?”

Elizabeth’s face turned red. “Excuse me? Can’t you see I’m in the middle of something?”

Jordan stepped forward. “As are we. If we don’t start investigating, then we’re all doomed.”

A light bulb blinked on above Elizabeth’s head. “We’re doomed? That’s it! Jenny-chan, I know how I can make things up to you!” Jenny instantly became even more uncomfortable. “I’ll solve this mystery myself! That way I can save you—and everyone else. So it’s settled, then; I’m calling the shots in this investigation.”

Austin cocked his head to the side. “If James were here, he would probably object to anyone taking charge…”

Taylor looked over at Markus, confused that he hadn’t told everyone what to do yet. The look of despair had enveloped Markus. The Thespian’s skin paled, his eyes looked sunken in, and his shoulders sagged forward. His gaze was cast toward the ground, and he looked at nothing in
“Uhh, Markus?” asked the Lucky. Markus made no inclination to react.

“Dude, are you alright?” asked Cody. Markus again gave no response.

“Yo-o, did we break him?” queried Rico.

Markus, his gaze still cast downward, finally spoke. “I’ll be fine. Just give me my space.”

“So he speaks…” said Taylor in no distinct manner.

“But more importantly,” stated Elizabeth, “he doesn’t object. It’s about time this mall became Elizabethan!”

Rufus rolled his eyes. “Then what do you propose, your majesty?”

“Myself, Lily-chan, and Jenny-chan will stay here and investigate James’s body while the rest of you hunt for clues elsewhere in the mall. Simple.”

Theo was uncomfortable letting someone else examine the body; without a doubt, he had the most experience analyzing forensic evidence, and so he should be the one to carry out that particular portion of the investigation. “Elizabeth, are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Oh, please, don’t be silly. I watched you work your magic with Melissa; all I have to do is get up close and personal with the corpse.”

Jordan took a step back. “Is that…really what you do…?”

Theo turned away. “Yeah…we can’t afford to look anything over.”

“Besides, it’s not like I won’t be by myself; I’ll have other eyes with me.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” Monobear exploded into the room in a fume of irate energy. “Do you have any idea where this body is located? Girls are not allowed in the boys’ bathrooms, NOR the boys’ changing rooms! And vice versa! Don’t you have any respect for the school rules?”

“Oh, piffle,” replied Elizabeth. “History is full of examples of people breaking stupid rules, and I’ll be damned if my name isn’t passed down into posterity!”

“Wh-what are you trying to say?”

“I am investigating that body! And if you have any objections, then it’ll have to be over my dead body.”

“Don’t tempt me! Upupu…fine. In this case, I’ll make an exception. But don’t think I’ll do this again for you!”

“You’re such a sweetie, Mono-san!”

“Upupupu. Well, isn’t someone going to ask me for the Monobear File 3?”

Taylor put her hands on her hips. “We don’t have time for your stupid self-indulgent semantics; just give us the files already.”
“Upu? Someone’s being pushy today. Looks like you lot aren’t morning people. Fine, again. Here is the prized and coveted Monobear File 3. I suggest laminating it and hanging it up in your room. That way, when people come over, you’ll be the life of the party.” The robot distributed the evidential packet of documents to the students.

Lily was too anxious to open the file herself. “Mou, what’s it say?”

Rufus scanned the document then read aloud: “Cause of death: external forces acted upon the body. Signs of blunt trauma to the back of the head. Circular wound in stomach. Long gashes along both legs. Excessive blood loss. Victim found without clothes.”

Cody said, “Monobear gave us a lot of information this time around.”

“Usually he gives us very little to go on,” added Austin.

“So-o, is that important?” asked Rico.

“It’s too early to say,” replied Theo. “We should focus on gathering as much information as possible before jumping to any conclusions.”

“Then why are we still wasting time?” asked Elizabeth in a huff. “Go! Scurry!”

Not wanting to contest Elizabeth’s stalwart determination, Rufus, Rico, Taylor, Theo, Jordan, Austin, and Markus moved out of the Gym. Elizabeth, followed by Lily and Jenny, wandered into the changing room, while Cody hung back to inspect the rest of the Gym.

Jenny was feeling faint from the sight of blood, but the blood wasn’t as vibrant as it usually is, and for that reason she could keep to her senses, albeit feeling slightly impaired. The Sandwich Artist braced herself against the wall of the changing room and breathed deeply to maintain her composure.

“Jenny-san, are you daijoubu?” asked Lily.

“I…I will be okay, I think. I just do not like blood, but I want to do my part to help.”

“I don’t like it, either, but we need to be strong.”

“Then let us try our best.”

“Girls, come look at this,” said Elizabeth. The Historian had wasted no time in examining the body. For starters, James was much more impressive with his clothes actually on; naked, his physical weakness became exceptionally apparent.

“What is it?” asked Jenny.

Elizabeth pointed to James’s back. “The Monobear File didn’t say anything about a wound on his back, so why is there so much blood on his back?”

Lily had to look at James’s positioning more closely now. For the most part, he was in a half-sitting position; his feet and legs were underneath him, but his body was horribly slouched to the one side. His head hung down heavy, and his ears barely kept his sunglasses in check.

“He is sitting in a pool of…blood…” offered Jenny.

“And wasn’t there a hit to the back of his head? Maybe the blood trickled down his body,” said Lily.
Elizabeth shook her head; she wasn’t so sure. “There was trauma to the back of the head. He wasn’t cut to where he would be overly bleeding.”

“So it is like Francesca’s death,” said Jenny to herself.

“What’s even more interesting is this wound in his side. Look, it looks like he was stabbed with something.”

Jenny could not bring herself to look, so Lily had to inspect it for them. There was indeed a round hole in his abdomen. Lily got uncomfortably close to the wound, and she could see that the attack had pierced his stomach and gone through his body and out his back, but the light coming from the other side was no bigger than a pinprick.

“If I had to venture a guess, I’d say that we’re looking for a knife of some sort,” ventured the Historian. “What else would have a sharp point that would ever so slightly pierce through his body?”

Neither the Sandwich Artist nor the Kawaii could offer a counterargument. “So is that wound what killed him?” asked Lily.

“The file says he died from exposure,” said Jenny.

“I’m sure the gaping hole in his stomach didn’t help though,” added Elizabeth.

“Then what was the point of stabbing him?” asked Lily again.

Jenny opened her mouth to offer her opinion, but Elizabeth butted in. “We can save the questions for the trial. Right now, we should focus on gaining as much information as possible.” It was difficult to fight with that logic. “Now look at his legs, if you will. Those would be the cuts the file talks about.”

There were long gashes running down the length of both the Movie Producer’s legs. They were hard to see since his legs were folded underneath him, but they were there. They were also difficult to see since his legs and feet had been stained a soft red from the pool of blood in which he sat.

This made Lily pause. She looked back at the wound in the stomach; it looked like it had barely bled, and for as deep as it was, it seemed strange. She would have raised a question about this, but she decided it was best to wait until the trial.

Jenny tried to focus on anything but the bloody body, but it was hard to ignore the focal point of the room. The blood should have bothered her more, but it just didn’t seem to look that real to her. It was too light a hue. She forced herself to look more at the body, and she almost instantly felt nauseated; there was something different about the blood on the body than the blood on the floor.

“Lily, can you see if there’s any blood on James’s chest?” asked Jenny.

Lily looked at James’s bare torso, and there was barely a drop of blood above the wound on his stomach. “No, there’s not,” replied Lily. Now Lily realized that there was something strange about the blood surrounding the body. She walked around the body, and she found that the concentration of blood was heaviest on the side of his back closest to the changing room door, even though there were no signs of harm on the body in these spots.

Elizabeth watched Lily warily; the small girl seemed too interested in the body now.
hadn’t been able to stand the sight of Melissa’s body which had nothing physically done to it, but now she was ogling James’s mutilated form. Despite their friendship, Elizabeth felt a pang of suspicion for the Kawaii. Jenny, too, was acting out-of-character. Elizabeth wanted to get them away from the body now before they tamper with the evidence. “Let’s see if there’s anything else in this room, eh girls?”

Jenny was thankful to be able to cast her gaze elsewhere, but the changing room was small, and there was not much to look at. Lily felt the same way, but each knew better than to argue with Elizabeth’s indomitable spirit.

In the rest of the Gym, Cody had been searching frantically for evidence of what had happened. If James had been killed in the changing room, then there had to be some proof of the murderer’s involvement hidden somewhere in the Gym; he could find nothing. The Gym looked as it did every day. He had all but given up on finding clues in the Gym when he literally tripped over his clue.

In the one corner of the Gym, a bucket had been carelessly thrown. Cody knew the Gym like the back of his hand, and he knew that the bucket was out-of-place. The bucket was on its side, so Cody was careful to pick it up without disturbing it. On the inside, the bucket was dry as a bone. On the bottom of the bucket, however, there was a ring of dried blood. The killer had hidden the bucket well since even Cody had difficulty finding it. The file said that there was blunt trauma to the back of James’s head, and so Cody surmised from the blood on the bucket that its blunt underside had been used in the murderous caper.

Markus felt the loss of his friend deeply. He had failed as a leader, and, more importantly, he had failed James. Markus thought that he was finally curbing the Movie Producer’s contrary personality, but all his efforts had been in vain. Now he felt himself drawn to the Video Store, the one place in which James was most likely to smile.

Markus was overwhelmed with emotion. All those years of acting had put him in such close relation with his emotions, but his strong feelings even now surprised him. He wanted to charge through the mall and find out what had happened to his friend, but his body wouldn’t listen to him. He could do nothing but drag his feet slowly forward. What was even the point in trying? They would all be doomed to die at some point anyway. The Thespian wanted to cry, but he couldn’t even muster the energy to bring forth tears.

His head was in a perpetual state of looking down, and his eyes trailed the ground. As he meandered through the store, his downward gaze ended up aiding him. The couches had been moved ever so slightly, and underneath one of them were splotches of blood. Something bad had happened in this space. At least Markus wasn’t completely useless; maybe he would be able to help his friend yet, although the negative was still a real possibility.

Jordan began her investigation in the Antique Store. If James had been struck by a weapon, then it wasn’t there at the crime scene, and what better place to hide it than in a place full of strange artifacts? The Golfer wasn’t sure if she would have enough time to properly inspect the store for clues, but her search proved easier than she thought.

Propped against an ancient wardrobe was an aluminum bat with blood on the end of it. It was clever of the murderer to hide the murder weapon, but they could have chosen a better hiding place; the bat stood out like a sore thumb. There was no doubt in Jordan’s mind that this was the
blunt object that enacted trauma upon James’s scalp. The murderer just wasn’t clever enough to outwit Jordan.

Theo didn’t like being kicked away from the crime scene, but he would investigate to the best of his ability regardless. As dangerous as it was, Theo tried to get into the head of the murderer. If he were a killer, where would he hide his clues? The Cartographer figured that the last place anyone would look during an investigation was the Salon.

Barely anyone had set foot in the place since Francesca’s death, and the dust that lingered on every surface attested to this. It truly was a haunted place; the perfect place to hide a murder weapon. Theo spotted it quickly: a bloody bucket. The outside of the bucket was relatively clean, but there were dark red bloodstains on the inside. Obviously, the bucket was a clue, but Theo wasn’t sure to what extent. The blood on the inside of the container implied that it was in close proximity to the deceased as he bled, but the entire inside was stained, not just a few drops here and there. Theo felt upset that he had uncovered so little by himself; he would have to wait to hear what the others had found before he could make sense of the situation.

Rufus entered the Electronics Store on a whim, and there he found a bloody knife. It shone among the other bright gadgets, but the blood on the sharp end of the blade gave away its location. It was a short dagger, maybe five inches in length. More than likely, it came from the food court. There was no blood on the hilt, so the murderer must be adept at handling knives. The Latinist searched his brain for who he knew was good with knives. He could recall a face, but he had trouble with their name.

Taylor had no idea where to start her search, so she just followed Theo to wherever he was going. She pursued him as far as the South Sector, but then she decided that it would be best if they covered separate ground. Since Theo was in the Salon, she could go to the Laundromat, General Store, or Lounge. She decided upon the Laundromat first.

The Lucky’s intuition did her well, for she found James’s dry clothes in one of the dryers in the room. Normally, unclaimed clothes would be tossed into a pile in the corner of the Laundromat until their owner finally came to retrieve them, but no one would be taking these clothes back now. Taylor hadn’t cared much for the kid, but it was still sad to be handling a dead person’s items. Nevertheless, Taylor could deduce a few things from the clothes: James never would have been caught wearing only his skivvies, so there’s no way he would have left his clothes there; the murderer had to have come to the Laundromat at some point during the night.

The note read, “Meet me in the Lounge. I think I figured something out about the movies. I might have figured a way out.” It was written in such a messy scrawl that it wouldn’t be recognizable as anyone’s specific handwriting.

Austin’s intuition told him to check James’s room for clues, and it was a good thing he did so. The note was folded in half and laying on the Movie Producer’s bed. At once, Austin casually walked to the Lounge to investigate. He did his best, he searched high and low for like five minutes, but he couldn’t find anything interesting. Eventually, Theo and then Taylor joined him in the Lounge; they found no clues either. As far as they could tell, nothing had transpired inside the
It was Rico’s worst nightmare: the Pharmacy was destroyed beyond recognition. Since the Pharmacy had provided him with a crucial clue last time, the Marathon Runner figured he should check the place out again, but he could make neither heads nor tails of the scene before him.

Every rack of every aisle had been overturned and toppled over. Opened bottles of cosmetic supplies and multi-vitamins littered the floor. The Monobear-themed display of various poisons had been completely obliterated. It looked like a tornado had swept through the Pharmacy. If he had the time, Rico would have taken an inventory of the space to see what—if any—items were missing; if the killer had gotten something out of here, it would be impossible to know exactly what that item had been.

“You miscreants have had enough time investigating! Now move yourselves to the food court and let’s get this party started!”

Elizabeth sighed. “Well, you heard him, girls. We’ve done all that we can, so now it’s time to face the music.” The Historian began to make her way out of the changing room. She turned back to see Lily and Jenny, but the two hadn’t moved. “Come on, girls, we can’t waste any more time. I don’t want to know what happens if we’re late to the trial.”

Staring at the floor, Lily said, “I’m scared. I feel like the trial’s going to be resting on us since we investigated the body, but I don’t feel like we really learned anything.”

“I am of a similar opinion,” added Jenny.

Elizabeth took a step toward her friends. “Jenny-chan, Lily-chan, I understand that you’re scared right now, but we can’t let that fear overwhelm us. If we persevere, I’m sure we’ll come through this!” The Historian felt inspired, but in her heart of hearts, she had her own doubts; now was not the time to show that, though.

Lily took a step toward the door. “Elizabeth-sama, I think you’re right, desu. We…we can do this, yeah, definitely. Alright, I’m right behind you.”

“Jenny-chan?”

Jenny looked back at Elizabeth; the Sandwich Artist was still battling her nerves. “You two can go ahead; I will catch up in a moment. I just need to settle myself.”

Elizabeth nodded in acceptance. “Alright, I won’t rush you. Take your time, but try not to take too long.”

“Come soon, Jenny-san.” Elizabeth and Lily left the changing room and headed toward the food court. Cody had left ahead of them, and so Jenny was alone in the entire space. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She calmed herself, collected her thoughts, and tried to focus her mind. She opened her eyes and walked out of the changing room.

To preserve what little dignity James’s spirit may have had left, Jenny went to shut the door to the room behind her. As she did so, she noticed something rolling on the ground. She peered down and found a little plastic vial that had gotten stuck behind the changing room door. She, Lily, and Elizabeth had been in the room all during the investigation, and they had never thought to
check behind the door for clues. If she hadn’t thought to shut the door, she never would have found
the small container. She shook it, and it sounded like there was some sort of liquid inside of it.
Jenny quickly deposited the vial in her apron pocket and ran to meet the other students at the food
court.

No one had found anything interesting in the General Store, Bookstore, Hobby Shop, and
Party Store. No single student felt they had a good handle on the situation, and so they would just
have to rely on each other to overcome this obstacle. With a raucous laugh, Monobear greeted the
students and ushered them into the elevator underneath the fountain.

This was the third time that the students were undergoing such a strange activity, and they
were still not used to it in its entirety. They were nervous and anxious, but they had no choice for
the actions they would have to take; it was do or die.

The now eleven students marched into the elevator, and the vehicle of despair made its dark
descent into the pit of the mall. Like usual, no one talked. Somebody had murdered their friend—
sometimes “friend”—James, and that person was residing in this elevator with them.

Before their thoughts could consume them any longer, the elevator halted to a stop, and the
doors unceremoniously swung forward. The trial room once again was decorated in a gaudy
fashion unbefitting the task at hand. The students took their spots in the circle of podiums and
stared each other down. In addition to Francesca’s, Delilah’s, and Melissa’s portraits standing in
their spots, effigies had been erected for Randolph and James. The “X” over Randolph’s face had
been cleverly made in the image of crossed hands, almost in prayer.

Monobear took his seat, and beat a gavel off his throne. “I commence this school trial under
way!”
Elizabeth: “Alright, everyone, here goes nothing. Umm…where do we begin?”

Rufus: “The beginning is usually a safe place.”

Taylor: “You don’t say?”

Jordan: “Now’s not the time for bickering; we have to get down to business.”

Austin: “I agree. I missed breakfast because of this.”

Cody: “How can you think of food at a time like this?”

Austin: “Rather easily, actually.”

Rico: “Uhh, I think that was a rhetorical question.”

Austin: “I always have trouble with those.”

Jenny: “I think we need to focus.”

Rufus: “Right. I say we start with the material from the Monobear File. And objections?”

Jordan: “Stop looking at me like that.”

Rufus: “Well then, it appears that there are none. First matter: blunt trauma to the back of the head.”

Lily: “Doesn’t the file say something about the cause of death first, though.”

Markus: “…Lily’s right…”

Rufus: “It says he died of exposure. The temperature would have dropped to twenty-two degrees last night. I think it’s fairly obvious what the cause of death entails.”

Lily: “But if we know how he died, then why do we have to discuss the other things?”

Jordan: “Because there might be a clue hidden in the actions of the murderer that will reveal their identity to us.”

Theo: “Only once we understand the minute details can we hope to understand the whole picture.”

Jenny: “The trauma, then. What caused it?”

Jordan: “In the Antique Store, I found an aluminum bat with blood on it. It was hidden away, so I’m sure it’s the weapon we’re looking for.”

Cody: “Hey, that’s cool and all, but you’re dead wrong. I found a bucket with blood on it in the Gym. That one’s totally got to be our weapon.”

Rico: “Wait, so there are two murder weapons?”

Rufus: “I’ve said it before, but let’s not be hasty.”
Elizabeth: “If I recall correctly, the wound on the back of James’s head was not overly large, so I think it’s only possible that one of those items is the weapon we’re looking for.”

Lily: “But how can we tell which one is real and which one isn’t?”

Markus: “…we may never be able to know…”

Taylor: “Hey, Markus, we really don’t need Mr. Doom-and-Gloom right now. Get with it.”

Markus: “What’s the point? Even if we get through this trial, we’ll still have to go through another one and another until we’re all dead.”

Theo: “Don’t say things like that! This will be the last trial, so let’s just focus on getting through it.”

Elizabeth: “There’s nothing we can’t do if we put our minds to it! So we have a bat and a bucket for possible murder weapons; did anyone find anything else?”

Theo: “Actually, I found a bucket of my own in the Salon.”

Austin: “Why are there so many lewd buckets sitting out in the open…?”

Cody: “Does yours have blood on it like mine?”

Theo: “I don’t think mine’s the murder weapon because the blood in mine is covered in the inside.”

Rico: “Like it was filled with blood? That’s kind of gross.”

Rufus: “The existence of two buckets would suggest that they were purposefully used.”

Jenny: “Then Cody’s bucket is the murder weapon?”

Rufus: “Not necessarily. I just mean that it’s not coincidental that we have two buckets; the killer used them for a reason.”

Jordan: “Back to square one.”

Taylor: “Ugh, we’re not getting anywhere with this.”

Austin: “Patience, we can’t rush into these things.”

Rufus: “Finally someone who understands where I’m coming from.”

Theo: “Shall we move on to the next portion of the file?”

Lily: “That’s the part about the wound in his stomach, right? There was a really nasty hole in his side…it was really icky…”

Elizabeth: “There was a point on his back as if something had gone clean through his body. I can only imagine that a knife would be able to make such a precise cut.”

Rufus: “A knife, you say? Why, I found one ostentatiously being displayed in the Electronics Store.”

Elizabeth: “Ta-dah! I told you that I would solve this case yet!”
Rico: “The killer used two weapons, then, right? The one for the head trauma, and then the other for the stomach shank.”

Markus: “…it would appear that way…”

Taylor: “Ahem, it would appear that way!”

Jenny: “If there were multiple items for the trauma, are there multiple items for the stabbing instrument?”

Austin: “Sigh, I didn’t find anything.”

Cody: “All I got was the bucket.”

Jordan: “And my search only proved a bat.”

Jenny: “That is a ‘no,’ then?”

Lily: “I think it is.”

Rufus: “Hmm…that was simple enough…”

Taylor: “Next would be the cuts on his legs. Since we didn’t find any other weapons, I’m going to assume they used the knife again.”

Rufus: “That’s the most intelligent thing you’ve said in the past two weeks.”

Taylor: “I do have my moments.”

Cody: “You guys saw the body; was there anything interesting about his legs?”

Jenny: “It was hard to tell. His legs were reddish from the blood he was sitting in, so it was difficult to assess the damage to his shins.”

Theo: “Why didn’t you move him to get a better look?”

Elizabeth: “And touch his bloody body? No thank you. Besides, we didn’t want to disturb the crime scene.”

Rico: “Yo-o, when you say his body was bloody, what do you mean by that? Like, bloody where he had been hit, right?”

Lily: “Hen, no. There was a bunch of blood on his back.”

Jenny: “But not on his chest.”

Rufus: “Ahh, I see.”

Jordan: “Care to share your revelation with the rest of us?”

Rufus: “Now is not the time. We’ll be discussing the relevant material shortly, I’m sure, though.”

Elizabeth: “No! If you’ve got something to say, then you’re going to say it now!”

Rufus: “Eheu, fine. This murder is set up similar to Melissa’s, wherein we have a space that only a select few can access; no girl would have been allowed to set foot in the boys’ changing room.”
Lily: “And therefore the murderer is a boy!”

Taylor: “No, if the murder’s like Melissa’s, then the murderer’s actually a girl.”

Jordan: “Unless a smart boy kept that in mind, and tried to get us to think along that line.”

Rufus: “As such, we can view the murderer’s actions in two separate cases. If male, then their actions were done to add to the charade, whereas if female, their actions were done out of necessity.”

Theo: “If we can figure out the right spin to the scene, then we can narrow our field of interest.”

Cody: “Sorry to butt in, but how did you get all that from a bloody back?”

Jenny: “I am also curious in regard to this.”

Rufus: “Think about where the body was. From the doorway, the killer threw blood onto the body.”

Taylor: “Why?”

Jordan: “Are you asking why a murderer did something weird?”

Taylor: “Excuse me for trying to understand the circumstances.”

Markus: “…then Theo’s bucket…”

Rico: “Hey, yeah, Theo’s bucket must have been the one holding in all the blood.”

Elizabeth: “And the killer ditched it in the Salon where they thought nobody would look.”

Jenny: “There is one thing that bothers me about that, though.”

Austin: “Huh? What’s that?”

Jenny: “The blood on James’s back was, err, darker, than the blood on the floor.”

Rico: “Could you really tell such a thing?”

Jenny: “I could stomach the blood on the floor, but not the blood on his body…”

Lily: “So what caused the discrepancy?”

Cody: “Don’t look at me! I’m not an expert on blood.”

Jordan: “Hmm…none of us are, really.”

Theo: “Let’s take a break from that now and finish with Monobear’s report. James was found, uhh, naked.”

Lily: “He was still wearing underwear, so it wasn’t that inappropriate.”

Jenny: “He had sunglasses on too, if that helps.”

Rico: “Now, I enjoy clothes as much as the next person, but what’s the point in stripping a dude down?”
Rufus: “One word: exposure.”

Jordan: “Make sure he dies faster.”

Cody: “Is that all this comes down to? Tormenting the kid so he would die faster? I’m sorry, but one of you guys is seriously messed up. Wait, no, I’m not sorry. You killed him! You don’t deserve my pity!”

Taylor: “Cody, calm down, we’ll nab them soon enough.”

Cody: “It just…makes me so angry that one of my friends would throw away the life of another of my friends for their own personal gain.”

Theo: “It’s unfortunate, but we can’t let our feelings consume us.”

Rico: “Now what do we do?”

Markus: “I think a recap of the trial so far would be useful…”

Rufus: “Ecce. At some point, James was struck in the back of the head, stabbed, cut, and disrobed before being left out to die in the cold.”

Taylor: “That’s it? That’s all the more we’ve seriously uncovered?”

Jordan: “There’s more to it. Think about how the actions would have had to fit together. There are no signs of struggle in the Gym, so he must have been knocked out by the blow to the head.”

Rico: “And then the stab and cuts came afterward.”

Elizabeth: “Are you sure? Couldn’t he have been attacked before being hit?”

Jordan: “Like I said, there are no signs of a struggle in the Gym.”

Rico: “But there could be signs of a struggle in the Pharmacy.”

Austin: “In the…Pharmacy…?”

Rico: “The entire place was like a battlefield! I tell you, it was an OCD’s nightmare. There was merchandise just scattered everywhere.”

Rufus: “This brings us to a new line of discussion: where did the murder take place?”

Lily: “You mean it didn’t occur in the Gym?”

Jenny: “The changing room, you mean.”

Elizabeth: “But if there was a confrontation in the Pharmacy, then isn’t it likely that that’s where the murder took place?”

Markus: “Actually…I found blood on the floor of the Video Store…”

Austin: “And I found a note in James’s room that told James to meet someone in the Lounge.”

Taylor: “I found James’s clothes in the Laundromat, so that proves that the murderer went there.”

Rufus: “And the knife in the Electronics Store, the bat in the Antique Store, and the bucket in the Salon. Where didn’t the murderer go?”
Elizabeth: “Wah! Wah hah hah!”

Lily: “Elizabeth-sama, are you daijoubu?”

Elizabeth: “I…I…Wah! I just want to save everyone and figure out this murder, but…but…but it’s just so confusing! I don’t want to lose any of you!”

Jordan: “Would everyone just calm down so we can discuss things logically?”

Theo: “Tears aren’t going to help anything right now.”

Elizabeth: “Uwah…hah hah…”

Austin: “Oh, don’t wipe your tears on your dress, you’ll ruin the material.”

Jenny: “Let us continue the discussion.”

Cody: “So the murderer used a ton of weapons and went to every store in the mall.”

Rico: “There’s too many clues to deal with!”

Monobear: “Tick tock tick tock. If you don’t keep this discussion moving, I’ll be forced to preempt the vote.”

Rufus: “That won’t be necessary. Rico’s right; there are too many clues.”

Jordan: “I feel like you’re leading up to something.”

Lily: “How could there be too many clues? Don’t we want lots of clues to help us out?”

Theo: “Some of these clues are red herrings, aren’t they?”

Cody: “Someone found a fish?”

Taylor: “Even I’ve heard of a red herring!”

Austin: “It means that the clue isn’t actually a clue, but something disguised to look like a clue.”

Cody: “Then in that case, Jordan’s bat is a red snapper.”

Rico: “Red herring.”

Jordan: “My bat’s not the fake; your bucket is.”

Cody: “We’ll just see about that!”

Elizabeth: “Then what else could be a fake? The knife was definitely used, right?”

Rufus: “I can’t see a way around that one. A stab wound and cuts. It fits nicely.”

Taylor: “This sounds stupid in my head, but could any of the places be red drums?”

Rico: “Uhh, they’re called red herrings.”

Markus: “The blood in the Video Store is hard to dismiss…”

Theo: “But the Pharmacy could be something to distract us.”
Lily: “And the Antique Store?”

Jordan: “Almost definitely a fake spot. You wouldn’t have the room to knock someone out in there.”

Taylor: “And the Laundromat?”

Elizabeth: “It’s just like Francesca’s murder: the clothes were cleaned after the murder.”

Theo: “That raises a new question. The stab and cuts would have made a bloody mess, so they must have gotten all over his clothes, thus the murderer had to clean the clothes afterward to try to cover their tracks.”

Taylor: “That’s great reasoning and all, but when I found his clothes, his white shirt was dry and, well, white.”

Austin: “And we all learned what happens when you mix white and red together.”

Rico: “So he was stripped down, and then attacked.”

Jordan: “Which means he was knocked out first.”

Markus: “But was there that much blood in the Gym…?”

Lily: “Actually, there really wasn’t…”

Elizabeth: “Then where did it all go?”

Cody: “Into Theo’s bucket, of course.”

Taylor: “That’s, like, a little gross.”

Cody: “This murder just makes me so angry…”

Markus: “What’s the point in getting angry…?”

Monobear: “TICK TOCK TICK TOCK!”

Austin: “Since we’re still talking about red lobsters—”

Rico: “Red herrings! It’s a detective term! Not that hard to learn!”

Austin: “Since we’re still talking about blue herons, can I venture the Lounge as one of them? There was nothing there, despite the note that would have led James there.”

Rufus: “That practically clears the place from suspicion.”

Elizabeth: “Jenny-chan, you’ve grown awfully quiet. Are you feeling alright?”

Jenny: “Sorry, yes, I am just busy cogitating.”

Austin: “Eww. Do you have to do that now? Can’t you wait until after the trial to do your cogitating.”

Rufus: “Stulte, do you even know what ‘cogitating’ means?”

Austin: “Do you?”
Theo: “What if we take a theoretical approach to the case?”

Taylor: “I’ve never been good with hypotheticals.”

Lily: “Do you have a theory? Do you know who did it?”

Theo: “I mean, let’s see if we can ignore some of the specific details of the case for a moment to figure some things out.”

Jordan: “I’m listening.”

Theo: “O-okay. Let’s forget about what weapons were used how, and where the deeds were done.”

Cody: “Ignore everything we’ve uncovered? How is that supposed to help us?”

Rufus: “It allows us to focus on other matters without being bogged down by the trivial minutiae.”

Rico: “Then what do you want to focus on.”

Theo: “Can we discuss aspects of the body some more since not all of us got to see it.”

Elizabeth: “Certainly, but may I add that if we had all stayed, we wouldn’t have uncovered all these other clues.”

Austin: “If we mistook a red herring for a real clue, then we might’ve been in a sticky bind.”

Rico: “Was it really that hard to say red herring?”

Lily: “I want to talk about the body, too.”

Elizabeth: “Lily-chan, you were there. What do you want to discuss?”

Lily: “I have a weird feeling about the hole in James’s stomach.”

Jenny: “As do I…”

Elizabeth: “His stab wound, yes. What about it?”

Rico: “Lily, why do you keep saying ‘hole’ if he was stabbed?”

Lily: “Because the wound was round.”

Rufus: “The knife I found was most certainly not round.”

Taylor: “So he got stabbed with something round?”

Cody: “But didn’t you say it looked like the wound went all the way through his body?”

Elizabeth: “The killer could have easily twisted the knife after plunging it into his body.”

Rufus: “Now that I think of it, there wasn’t any blood on the hilt of the knife. And the knife is short enough that the hilt would have had to go into his abdomen if he were stabbed the whole way through.”

Jordan: “Then the knife is just another fake clue.”

Austin: “It could still have been used for the cuts on his legs.”
Rufus: “That’s probably the only way it was used.”

Jenny: “While we are discussing the body, can we talk about the difference in the blood colors?”

Theo: “I imagine the blood on the floor was just diluted somehow.”

Rico: “So with water.”

Taylor: “Then where did the water come from?”

Jordan: “Cody, I think this is where your bucket comes into play.”

Cody: “That’s totally unrighteous. The inside of my bucket was dry as a bone.”

Elizabeth: “But there was such a large puddle underneath the body.”

Austin: “Hey, I spaced out for a moment. Did we figure out what caused the stab wound?”

Taylor: “Yeah it was…umm…no, I don’t think we did.”

Lily: “I have an idea, but it’s kinda silly.”

Markus: “…I think we’ll take anything at this point…”

Lily: “I’ve been thinking a lot about that pool of blood. What if the murder weapon melted?”

Taylor: “Murder weapons don’t just melt!”

Lily: “They do if they’re made of ice!”

Rufus: “You are not saying what I think you’re saying.”

Rico: “Hey-ey, I get it!”

Rufus: “Don’t you dare say it.”

Theo: “If the weapon was made of ice…”

Rufus: “I swear to the gods if you vocalize this…”

Austin: “James was stabbed with an icicle.”

Rufus: “Vos stulti hominess…”

Jordan: “It is a little silly…but it fits…”

Theo: “It got cold enough; it’s certainly possible.”

Jenny: “I have finished cogitating.”

Austin: “Already? That’s so gross.”

Rico: “What’s that supposed to mean, Jenny?”

Jenny: “I have one question, first.”

Markus: “…please…don’t keep us waiting…”
Jenny: “Elizabeth, can I see your sleeve?”

Elizabeth: “My…sleeve? Can’t you use your own?”

Jenny: “Can I please see it?”

Elizabeth: “I don’t know what you’re trying to prove, but okay.”

Jenny: “Just as I thought…”

Cody: “Does anyone actually understand what Jenny’s after?”

Rufus: “Tace. Dicat.”

Jordan: “Jenny, speak.”

Jenny: “I found this in the changing room on my way to the food court. It was stuck behind the door, so none of us saw it while we were investigating.”

Taylor: “But, uhh, what is it?”

Lily: “Jenny-san…?”

Jordan: “Based on the shape of it, I’d say it’s a bottle of eye drops.”

Elizabeth: “Eye drops? The killer was suffering from eye strain?”

Jenny: “Can you stop?”

Elizabeth: “Excuse me?”

Jenny: “You killed James.”

Elizabeth: “Hmph! Why, I never!”

Jenny: “She has been orchestrating the event all morning. She kept the details of the body from everyone on purpose. She dragged Lily and me with her because neither of us like the sights of the dead bodies. For good measure, she collected blood, probably from James’s legs, and then dumped that on him to make it even more nauseous for me. She saw the hole in his abdomen just as much as we had, but she never let on that it was from an icicle—”

Rufus: “Or icicle-like object.”

Jenny: “And so she tried to convince everyone that it was from the knife, to get us to buy into the red herring. She tried to confuse everyone into believing things that are not true! She’s been
playing us this entire trial."

Elizabeth: “I have never been so insulted in my life!”

Rufus: “I’d like to see some physical proof, not just hypothetical speculation.”

Jenny: “I…already showed you the proof…”

Elizabeth: “That little bottle? How was that proof?”

Jordan: “One more push, Jenny.”

Jenny: “She had eye drops to fake tears! She pretended to be emotional over our well-being, but it was just an act.”

Elizabeth: “How dare you undermine my feelings! You’re a girl; you should know what it’s like to get emotional for seemingly random reasons.”

Jenny: “But your sleeve was dry.”

Elizabeth: “What does that have to do with anything!?”

Jenny: “You cried in the middle of the trial. You wiped your tears with your sleeve. But your sleeve is dry. So there were no tears; you were faking it.”

Austin: “She’s right. Elizabeth did ruin her sleeve.”

Taylor: “Austin, no. Elizabeth didn’t actually cry.”

Rico: “Then she was faking it!”

Theo: “If she was faking that, then what else was she faking?”

Cody: “Uncool, dudette, uncool.”

Elizabeth: “Some eye drops? That’s what you’re basing your decision on? I thought you people were smarter than that!”

Jordan: “So much for caring for all of us.”

Markus: “Oh…so this is happening…”

Jenny: “And don’t forget about the misdirect with the knife.”

Rufus: “It’s not much to base a vote off, but it’s better than nothing.”

Elizabeth: “I can’t believe my ears…”

Lily: “No, Jenny-san, you must be wrong.”

Elizabeth: “Finally, someone who gets it.”

Lily: “I know Elizabeth can be bossy, and mean, and inconsiderate, and really scary when she loses her temper, but she’s a good person inside, I know it.”

Elizabeth: “You’re as bad as the rest of them.”
Lily: “H-huh?”

Elizabeth: “Would you quit with the nice routine already? It’s exhausting to put up with!”

Rico: “Gee, Lizzie doesn’t seem like she cares about us at all anymore.”

Elizabeth: “THE FUCK DID YOU JUST CALL ME? MY NAME IS ELIZABETH FUCKING BARRINGTON-SAMA!”

Austin: “Whoa, that is scary.”

Lily: “Bakemono!”

Markus: “…ahh…”

Jenny: “See, it was all an act. Elizabeth killed James.”

Taylor: “Run it by me real quick, one more time.”

Jenny: “I will do my best. Elizabeth lured James somewhere and hit him on the head to knock him unconscious. Then she bled him and stabbed him in the stomach, but after she removed all his clothing. This way he would die faster from the cold. Then she made a mess of the mall by hiding the real clues with fake clues everywhere. To ensure that no one discovered her ploy, she made sure that everyone had limited access to the most crucial clues: those regarding the body. To persuade everyone into giving into her, she used her emotions to make it look like she really cared for all of us. Her alligator tears prove her dishonesty.”

Elizabeth: “First, you mean crocodile tears, you foreign interloper. And second, there’s a major flaw in your reasoning: why would I have fake-cried during the trial if I didn’t have the eye drops in my possession?”

Jenny: “I’m guessing you dropped it by accident, and didn’t realize it until you started to cry. You did cover your face exceedingly well during that time.”

Taylor: “Alright, I can buy that.”

Theo: “Does anyone have any counterarguments?”

Jordan: “I’ll believe in Jenny.”

Cody: “It makes sense to me.”

Lily: “But…but…”

Rufus: “I’ll join the majority with this one.”

Rico: “There doesn’t seem to be a better choice.”

Markus: “…whatever…”

Elizabeth: “This is ridiculous.”

Monobear: “Tick tock tick tock. Ding ding ding! I’ve had enough! It’s voting time!”

Uncertainty was present in the hearts of each of the students as they had to make their choices. The facts were ambiguous and misleading, but the human quality of their spirit helped to
guide their decision. If they didn’t commit to their guts and to their feelings, then they would never be able to survive.

Monobear: “I’ve been waiting forever for that vote, and now that’s it done and gone, I can’t help but miss the suspense a little. It was nice, in a despair-inducing kind of way. But what’s even more despair-inducing is the result of this vote! Luckily for me, since there are less of you, I don’t have to spend as much time analyzing the data. So, without any further ado, allow me to tell you, without a shadow of a doubt, that Elizabeth Barrington is GUILTY!”

Taylor: “Phew, I can breathe again.”

Jenny: “I… I did it…”

Lily: “I still feel sad…”

Markus: “…we’re just postponing the inevitable…”

Jordan: “It’s over now.”

Rufus: “Hmm… that seemed almost anti-climactic.”

Rico: “I still haven’t gotten comfortable with this.”

Cody: “Grr, I wish I could give you the punishment myself.”

Austin: “If you still need to de-stress later, I’ve been said to give good back massages.”

Theo: “Elizabeth, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Elizabeth: “The fuck I do! Where do you all get off accusing such a person like myself!”

Jenny: “But… you did kill James.”

Elizabeth: “That’s beside the point! Do you have any idea who I am? I AM ELIZABETH FUCKING BARRINGTON-SAMA! I have so much money, I could buy each and every one of you twice over!”

Lily: “How can you say that about your friends?”

Elizabeth: “Friends? Pretending to like you scum has been the worst torment of my life! Every day I’ve spent here has been utter hell! And when it started getting cold… that was enough! I come from a higher echelon of society; I’m not made for this sort of peasant life! It’s great for you common folk, but I was meant to live a more sophisticated existence!”

Jordan: “Why James?”

Elizabeth: “Why the fuck not? The little worm had it coming! Out of all you disgusting vermin, he was the most rotten! I couldn’t stand that guy!”

Rufus: “Indulge us. What did you actually do?”

Elizabeth: “If you have to know, then fine! I asked him to meet me in the Video Store because I told him I wanted to discuss what the movies might mean. Then I hit him on the head with the bat. Took his clothes off, cut his legs, and dumped him in the changing room. I threw the icicle at him like a javelin, dumped the excess blood on him, and then rampaged through the mall. Good enough for you?”
Rufus: “Satisfactory.”

Lily: “But…but…how…?”

Elizabeth: “Get over yourself! Actually, don’t get over yourself. You idiots just piss me off so much! I hope one of you does murder another, and that they get away with it so that the rest of you die as well!”

Cody: “Shut your mouth! Murderers don’t get to speak!”

Elizabeth: “Be quiet, swine! I have nothing more to say to any of you!”

Monobear: “Upupupu. Are you sure? This is your last chance to say anything; is there nothing more you want to say? Don’t you want your last words to be famous? This is what you’ll be remembered by!”

Elizabeth: “Fuck. You.”

Monobear: “Truly despair-inducing words if I ever heard them. Alrighty then! For Success Summit’s All-Star Historian Elizabeth Barrington, I have devised a special punishment: Doomed Repetition of Historical Inaccuracy! Now, let’s get to it!”

Elizabeth would not go down willingly, and so Monobear had to employ the chains he used to take Delilah to drag Elizabeth into the execution chamber. She stood on a stage decorated to look like an open history book; she was positioned on one page, while the backdrop was the corresponding page on the other side of the book. Monobear placed her in a set of stocks, only her arms and head able to move within the confines of the machine.

Monobear, dressed as an irate peasant, began to pummel her face with rotten fruit. A look of pure and detestable hatred burned behind her eyes. It was one thing to be executed; it was another to be humiliated. Tomato after tomato, cabbage after cabbage, Elizabeth’s dignified demeanor was reduced to rubbish.

After the crops were depleted, Monobear moved onto phase two. The bear donned a dark hood and wheeled a guillotine over to the stocks. Tying the rest of her body up, Monobear moved Elizabeth to under the blade of the killing machine. With a dark laugh, Monobear pulled the lever, and the heavy blade swung down. It stopped right before it landed on the Historian’s neck.

Monobear jumped off the stage in a hurry. Elizabeth was left alone, the sword of Damocles hovering directly over her. There was a loud creak, and then a groan. The stage began to shake. There was another groan, and then the sound of something setting. Then there was silence.

All at once, there was a cacophonous blast, and the backdrop, the other half of the textbook, fell onto the page that contained Elizabeth. The book shut flat, and thus ended that chapter of Elizabeth’s life.

“Upupupu! A truly fitting end for our fair Historian! That just goes to show what happens when you pretend to like people! You should all just take after me and despise every human on the planet!”

“No! We will never be like you!” cried Taylor.

“You say that now, but just wait until you are brought back to this very room by your own hands. Upupupu!”
Everything had now happened so fast; Jenny was having trouble processing all the information and coming to grips with reality. “It’s finally over.”

“No! Go away! It’s still early in the morning, and I haven’t gotten to eat my breakfast yet!”

Upon Monobear’s insistence, the ten remaining students entered the elevator and returned to the mall above, hoping to return to some sense of normalcy, and vowing to never go to that accursed trial room again. Only time would tell how well they would fail or succeed.

End of Chapter Three

Surviving Students: 10

Markus Aslanius—All-Star Thespian
Cody Cameron—All-Star Waterskier
Theo Cook—All-Star Cartographer
Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner
Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky
Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle
Jordan Koulibagh—All-Star Golfer
Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist
Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii
Jenny Zemenovski—All-Star Sandwich Artist
(Ab)Normal Days

The day was still young for the ten students left to wander the halls of the Mall of Monomerica. The lives of those whom they had gotten to know over the past two weeks had been snuffed out before their eyes. Every day that ended in a peaceful lull made the inevitable turns of life’s knife cut even sharper. What airs would they put on until the façade of friendship would crumble once more?

Since the events of the morning had interrupted the tranquility of the quotidian, Monobear was gracious enough to let the students eat breakfast if they so chose, or have lunch if they preferred. As a reward for such an invigorating trial, cereal, both hot and cold, was now available for the early eaters, while the midday munchers could indulge in veggie platters, thus adding greens to their diets that the simple salads of the past didn’t offer.

Once again, the murderer’s final decree left a sour taste in the mouths of the living students. Even though only two people were now absent from the usual group number, their loss was still evident. In a way, the students seemed to miss James’s contrary interjections or Elizabeth’s egotistical musings; the mall was growing emptier, quieter, and more sinister.

Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist, was growing tired of this detested game. Francesca’s murder had been fun to solve, it was unfair that he was unable to participate fully in Melissa’s, and James’s murder was so pettily conceived that the case itself was mundane to behold. He thought that the game would be interesting, but no one was making moves that excited him or piqued his interest. Judging by the remaining players, a spectacular murder was far from possible. Perhaps he would have to invent a new game to pass the time.

Lily Smith, All-Star Kawaii, deeply mourned the death of Elizabeth Barrington. Even if the broad had been a horrendously self-centered narcissist who only used her relationship with Lily to further her own gains, the Kawaii couldn’t help but feel a pang of longing to see her friend again. Every time that Elizabeth faked enjoying spending time with her, Lily knew that deep down, there was a part of the Historian that did enjoy her company; it was that part that Lily was sad for.

Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian, couldn’t care less about anything anymore. Francesca had been taken from him, and now James had been taken from him. Next the lovable Rico or the affable Lily would be stolen from him; it was all a matter of time. He surmised that there would have been less pain if he had just taken James’s place. Why should he be left to face the torment of living? The All-Star Despair was probably jealous of how terrible Markus felt.

Austin Fitzpatrick, All-Star Idle, yawned. He yawned a lot. They say people yawn to get more oxygen to their muscles, but Austin was far from exhausted. They also say that yawns are contagious because they show that there is no danger present, and that the environment is safe to relax in. No matter how much he yawned—even if on purpose—he could not get anyone to join in his oscitance. Sure, the circumstances of life were less than favorable at the moment, but there was no use in getting worked up by them.

Jordan Koulibagh, All-Star Golfer, was thankful to have made it through the trial unscathed. She had been fine with living communally with her fifteen classmates, but they had other plans; she would have to adjust her decisions accordingly. If Francesca’s trial had gone
sourly, Jordan would have fatalistically accepted the outcome, but she would have fought tooth and nail if Elizabeth had managed to win. There was a new vigor in her, and she wasn’t about to lose it now.

Jenny Zemenovski, All-Star Sandwich Artist, was still coming to grips with what had happened. Her “BFF” would have killed her had she gotten away with her crime. If Jenny hadn’t found that bottle of eye drops, then she might not be standing right now. It was a cold thought, and Jenny did not enjoy being cold anymore. With everyone’s wonderful proclamations of friendship, Jenny had found how to be warm, and she was damned if anyone was going to try to freeze her again.

Rico de Naranjas, All-Star Marathon Runner, hated going to those trials. He was alive, but at the cost of someone else’s life—not that he had much of a say in the matter. All he knew was that there would be no more murders from here on out. He believed in the inner goodness of his peers, and he was sure that after three trials, they would see that nothing was worth taking another’s life for.

Theo Cook, All-Star Cartographer, felt differently after this last trial. He had been going through the motions for the first two, accepting the outcome as it came. But he felt that he had a reason to fight now. He wasn’t just living for himself; he was living for others, namely Jordan. Theo realized just how much these people meant to him—namely Jordan—and he wasn’t about to let anything happen to them again.

Taylor Erzen, All-Star Lucky, wondered how much weight she had put on over the past few days. It was only natural to eat more when the weather turned cold to promote body fat, but now that she was back in a temperate climate, her eating habits would have to revert back to normal. She’d actually be spending some time in the gym, now, to work off her excess weight (dieting was for weirdos). Shame about what happened to James and Elizabeth, but that’s the way the world works. It was their fault for being naïve or being murderous. Lamenting James would only dampen her own spirits, and grieving Elizabeth would only fill her with bitterness; the only thing to do was move on, and that’s what Taylor was determined to do.

Cody Cameron, All-Star Waterskier, was still burning with a righteously irate fury. How dare anyone disturb the sanctity of the Mall! Nevertheless, all these people were friends—for real—and they would do nothing to harm each other. If the case demanded it, Cody could play “bad cop,” but he would much rather prefer to be “good cop.” He just wanted to go back to an easy-going life, chilling with everyone, and having a good time. He just had to get everyone on board with that idea, and then he’d be set.

As always, another murder meant more areas for the students to explore. With no one to dictate how the students should organize themselves, they formed their own groups. Before, the students explored in groups of three at the smallest, but their current numbers would not allow them to do that; there would have to be at least two groups of two. Theo and Jordan would go together, while Jenny and Lily would keep each other company. Taylor and Austin wanted to stay with Cody, so that left Rufus and Rico to babysit Markus.

The West Sector, the last sector, was aesthetically similar to the other three. Now that this area was lit up, there were no more inherently dark spots in the mall. Two distinct shops lined either side of the main promenade, and the exit along the most western wall was harshly gated off. Unsure what they would encounter this time, the teams split off to investigate the premises. They agreed to reconvene later to discuss their findings.
Rufus and Rico found it strange that the mall was able to hold a furniture store within its walls—Markus was indifferent. There was no warehouse to pull stock from, and what furniture was available was smashed together in close quarters. An entire home could be furnished with the store’s inventory: beds, couches, chairs, cabinets, tables, desks, lamps, rugs, tapestries, and an entire section dedicated to obscure paintings of various fruits. A single path made a loop throughout the store for patrons to walk along. The space more closely resembled a museum of exotic furniture than it did an actual furniture store.

Rufus and Rico walked through the store together, investigating the store for any possible clues that may give them answers to the myriad of questions surrounding their imprisonment. Markus got distracted, hung back, and moved significantly slower through the store. He was eyeing everything indistinctly, and he moved ghastly, as if in a trance.

“Yo-o, Rufus, I don’t get it.”

“Oh? What don’t you get, exactly?”

“This store! You can’t put a furniture store in a mall; people don’t carry beds through malls.”

“You have a good point. Let’s consider this a new riddle to solve. What facts do we have?”

“Well, it’s a small store, there’s no inventory space in the back, and there’s only one way out of the store.”

“And from that you deduce…?”

“That any goods purchased from this store must be taken through the front entrance, and then through the mall, but that’s not a thing that ever happens.”

“A logical deduction. But you’re missing a significant clue.”

“I am? But how?”

“Look closely at one of the desks. There’s a tag that says ‘Display Model Only.’”

“But what would that have to do with anything?”

“Ecce, think about it.”

“Umm…then…uhh…oh! Then that means that you can’t buy the desk!”

“Bonus est. Nunc go one step further.”

“But if you wanted that desk…you couldn’t take it out of the store. So if you really wanted it in your home…you’d have to order it and have it delivered!”

“That’s exactly the conclusion I had reached.”

“I guess that’s not so strange after all.”

Markus silently, listlessly manifested behind the Latinist and Marathon Runner. “There is no point in wallowing in our earthly dwellings when they’ll be taken from us in due time.”

Rico jumped out of his skin. “Ai-yeee! Markus, you scared the crap out of me!”
“My apologies. I am sorry to remind you of our inevitable demise. Return to your blissful state of abject ignorance.”

Rufus rolled his eyes. “Martin, this mall is big enough for only one morbidly morose person at a time, and I have already claimed that title.”

“I apologize again. But in this instance, I believe that you are in the wrong. You do not feel the same dread that I do on an existential level.”

“And you expect me to believe that you’re being genuine? Your emotions flip more than a Roman politician.”

“I assure you, what I feel is real.”

“You’ll have to try harder to convince me. Just look at me. That dead look in my eye, pale skin drawn taut and gaunt over my skeletal figure. If anyone should have a relationship with Mors, it is I.”

Rico did not understand the strange banter ensuing between the Latinist and Thespian.

“Uhh, Rufus, I think that you’re the one in the wrong here.”

“Rico, what are you talking about?”

“Concede to my point,” mumbled Markus.

Rico stood his ground. “I don’t think you’re as gloomy as you think you are.”

“At…at…that doesn’t make any sense…”

Markus stared off into the distance. “This world doesn’t make any sense…nothing makes any sense…nothing at all…”

Rufus glared at the Thespian. “Be quiet, Matthew. We don’t need your negativity right now.”

As silently as he appeared, Markus sunk back to the depths of his mind and the annals of the furniture store. Now Rufus was staring off at nothing; Rico was concerned.

“Yo-o, Rufus, you alright?”

“Quid? Ita, yes, nescioquid. Let’s just…get back to investigating…”

Rufus wandered off by himself, lost in thought. Markus was just lost, and Rico wasn’t sure what to make of things at the moment.

There was an awkward tension in the air of the arcade. Jenny and Lily both had been greatly hurt by Elizabeth, and the “BFFs” were no more. Still, the two couldn’t act as if they were total strangers; they had been living together for two weeks. It felt like a wall had been constructed between them.

The arcade itself was dimly lit, but the electronic glows emanating from the various machines made the space buzz with an ethereal vibrancy. Each energetic machine pinged and ponged with 8-bit tones to attract young customers with their dazzling spectacle.
Jenny had no idea what she was looking at, but Lily’s eyes grew larger and larger as she turned from one game to the next. There were old-fashioned beat-em-ups, shooting ranges, simple and addictive platformers, skill games, and, best of all, dance games. There was nothing more kawaii than being able to step in rhythm with “PonPonPon.”

Lily jumped onto the dancing platform. In the make of a compass rose, arrows on the ground dictated where she would have to step. She cycled through the songs until she found what she was looking for. The world seemed to slow down around her, and then that beautiful J-pop was blasting through the arcade. This was the perfect thing to get her mind off everything in the mall. It hadn’t occurred to her that she didn’t have to pay any quarters to operate the machine.

Jenny meandered through the arcade, just looking at the various technology. She found a machine that looked interesting enough: a slab filled with holes, and every now and then a small woodland creature would poke its head out of the hole. There was a mallet nearby, and so Jenny surmised that she was supposed to use that to put the animals back in their habitats. Lightly, she picked up the mallet, and the game buzzed to life. A fox poked its mechanical head up, Jenny swung lightly, but the fox dodged back before she could hit it. Next an owl came up, but Jenny missed that one too. Then a squirrel, and then a deer, but Jenny had yet to score a point. Channeling her inner fighter, Jenny swung her mallet swiftly and smacked the groundhog which popped up to meet her. There was a soft bonk, and the machine screeched her accumulation of points. Jenny jumped at the machine’s instantaneous burst of excitement; she didn’t like this game.

Jenny walked back to check on Lily; the Kawaii was working up a sweat dancing. Jenny was impressed by Lily’s fervor. She knew that Lily had energy, but she never expected her to devote so much focus and attention to one thing. It was mesmerizing.

Lily finished her song, and jumped back to watch as the screen in front of her tallied her score. The numbers kept climbing higher and higher! The results were in: she got one good step, all the rest had been perfect. Well, she would just have to play the song again until she got a flawless score.

“That was very impressive,” said Jenny.

Lily turned around. In her frenzy, she had completely forgotten that Jenny was still with her. “Oh, that? That wasn’t very good at all, desu. I mistimed one of the steps! I guess I am a little rusty, though.”

“It was certainly better than anything I could do; I am not that coordinated.”

“Pssh, it’s just dancing! Anyone can do it. C’mon, give it a try!”

“But…what exactly do I have to do?”

“See how the arrows pop up on the screen? When they reach the top, you have to step on the arrow that’s at the spot, but on the ground. Easy!”

“If you say so…”

“Let’s start out with an easy song…how about “The World Is Mine?”

“I do not know that one. Who is the singer of it?”

“Nani!?! Hatsune Miku, desu!”

“I bless you.”
“No, *Hatsune Miku!* Only like the bestest vocaloid ever!”

“I am not well versed in these ‘vocaloids.’”

“*Shikata ga nai.* When we get out of here, I’ll just have to show you. I mean, if you would want me too…”

“I…I think that I would find enjoyment in that…”

“Jenny-san, are we okay…?”

“I do not have any physical wounds if that is what you are meaning.”

“No, I mean, you and me, are we *alright?* I…I miss you…”

“Lily…”

“What Elizabeth-san did was really…poopy…and *I’m* really sorry about what we did…but I don’t want to stop hanging out with you…”

“Lily…”

“Because I think you’re really cool and I like you and you’re my friend and I don’t want to have to be stuck here without anyone and—”

“Lily.”

“*Nani?*”

“I think we have a game to play.”

“Desu?”

“We have a song to dance to, and then after that you can tell me about these ‘metalloids.’”

“Y-you mean it…? EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE! *Nipah! Jenny-chan!*”

“Hee, hee. I do not think that we are able to dance properly with your arms wrapped around me.”

“Ahh, but I don’t want to let go of you, Jenny-chan!”
Chapter 4--The Active and the Passive--Part 2

Glitz, glitter, and sparkles. Taylor and Austin were in heaven; Cody was incredibly uncomfortable. If “normal” for the mall was a Laundromat, then a jewelry store should have been out of the ordinary. Accent lights of red and green, blue, and yellow shone down on the precious stones. On the one wall, trinkets of silver; on the other, doodads of gold. A glass table, smooth as crystal, ran along the length of the three walls, under which rubies, sapphires, and emeralds glinted in the subtle lighting. There were earrings of diamonds, strings of pearls, and rings of platinum. Every splendid item contained a multivariate arrangement of hues so that there was no simple black and white aspect to the jewels.

Cody, with his X and Y-chromosomes, found nothing of interest in the store. He had been on enough beaches to know what a shiny rock looked like. At the end of the day, they were just stones. He had only gotten his ear pierced because some chick he used to date wanted him to; he didn’t do it for himself. Cody was a simple waterskier; he thought more about actions than appearances.

Taylor’s eyes turned green with envious greed. She could see the gilded bracelets adorning her wrists. Brilliant chains caressing her neck, elegant rings on every finger, exquisite clasps in her lush hair. All she needed was a dazzling crown and sparkling scepter, and then she would be the queen. Being trapped in a mall wasn’t that bad, after all.

Austin finally had an excuse to do something while doing absolutely nothing at all. The best part about jewelry was how little energy was needed to accessorize; putting on a ring was far less taxing than donning a pair of pants. Since there were so many different combinations, the Idle could waste hours trying out different accessorizations while accomplishing nothing at all. This store was almost as exciting as sleeping.

Cody yawned vehemently; Austin was slightly offended.

“Hey, I’m the only one around here who’s supposed to yawn all the time,” said the Idle.

“Sorry, dude. This just isn’t my scene, that’s all,” replied Cody.

“Sigh, what do you mean? This is one of the swankier stores in the mall. I see myself spending a lot of time here.”

“Pshaw, I know I won’t be.”

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want to accessorize and look really pretty?”

“Nah, man, that’s too girly.”

“Yawn, I don’t necessarily agree with that. I think we can do whatever we want to if it makes us happy.”

“Sure, like, I’m not gonna stop you if that’s your thing; it just ain’t mine.”

“Haven’t you ever had a makeover before? It’s an exciting and compelling process; don’t knock it until you try it.”

“Hey, knock yourself out. I’ll stick to my own stuff for now. Besides, all these rocks, it’s pretty gaudy.”
Taylor’s blue eyes, which had grown green with avarice, burned red with righteous fury. She turned quickly on her heel and gave Cody a death glare. “What did you just say?” asked the Lucky.

“Uhh, I just said that the gems are a little ostentatious.”

“Ooh, nice word,” chimed in Austin.

“Excuse me! I will have you know that each and every one of these ‘gems’ is part of the pathway to beauty!”

“Geez, you guys are totally into this stuff.”

“I’ll have you know that a diamond is a girl’s best friend. You may want to take note of that, you know, in case you need to use that information on someone someday.”

“Taylor, is there something in your eye? You’re winking an awful lot.”

“Be quiet, Austin, there’s nothing in my eye.”

“You sure, dudette? Cuz your eye is twitching up a storm.”

“Omigod! There is nothing wrong with my face! Let’s change the topic of conversation. Alright, boys, tell me: the red earrings or the purple ones?”

Austin had to think about this for a minute; Cody did not. “The red presents a delicate contrast to your cool demeanor, but the purple ones help to accentuate your overall presence,” said the Idle.

Taylor giggled to herself and flipped her hair back. “Cody, what do you think?”

“Man, I really don’t have an opinion. Either one is fine, I guess.”

“God! You’re such a boy!”

“Well, uhh, yeah…”

Austin was slightly—ever so slightly—offended again. “Hey, I’m a boy, too.”

Taylor raised a skeptic eyebrow. “No, you’re not. But you’re not a girl, either. I don’t know what you are.”

“But Taylor, he is a boy; just look at him. Or do you need proof.”

“Ugh, I grew up in a household of men; I don’t need any ‘proof.’ What I mean is that Austin really doesn’t act like a boy or like a girl.”

“Then what do I act like?”

“I just said that I don’t know!”

“If I had to say something, I’d say that Austin acts like Austin. Why does he have to act like anything?”

Taylor had to think about Cody’s statement for a second. He could come across as a simple-minded dude, but sometimes he would say such profound things that made her realize just
how complex he really was. She liked that mystery. “You have a good point,” she said.

“If I may add my two cents,” said Austin, “I believe that gender is a very fluid concept. We don’t have to be one thing or the other; we can be whatever we like.”

Taylor smiled. “I like that.”

“Yeah, it has a nice ring to it, dude, err…dudette?”

“You can keep calling me ‘dude,’ I don’t care. Whatever’s natural for you. I kinda like the way you say ‘dude,’ anyway.”

Taylor giggled to herself. “What’s so funny?” asked Cody.

“Oh, nothing,” said Taylor. “It’s just fun watching you two interact. It reminds me of the way my brothers act.”

“I’ve never had a sister…or any other kind of sibling for that matter…” pontificated Austin.

“Heh, me neither,” added Cody.

Taylor smiled at their simplicity. She continued to maintain an upbeat appearance, but on the inside, her soul shattered like a precious vase dropped from a hotel balcony. In her mind, Austin and Cody were fraternal cohorts, but that could make things awkward. She had spent two weeks in this mall, and the only suitable bachelor was practically her brother. No, that would not do at all.

“Taylor, is there something wrong with your face? You’ve been smiling like that for a while now…”

“Dudette, you’re starting to give me the creeps with that grin of yours.”

Taylor shook her head to alleviate her thoughts. “Hmm? Oh, I’m just super happy. Yeah, that’s it, happy. Whatever. I have jewelry to fawn over.” Still consumed by her thoughts on how to remedy her social situation, Taylor turned her back on the boys and began to inspect the stones with renewed vigor.

Austin sighed and did the same, while Cody added “Whatever you say, sis,” before wandering aimlessly through the store again.

That last comment knocked another vase over the edge.

It was like a scene from a nightmare. Monobear’s egoism knew no bounds, and the final store in the mall made this overtly apparent. Under any other circumstances, this store would have quickly gone bankrupt, but the factors in charge of business had been relegated outside the walls of the mall.

Jordan and Theo stood in the center of a Monobear-themed shop. The walls were dizzyingly monochromatic repetitions interposed with ghastly splottes of red paint. The floor was entirely red, and a large print of Monobear’s face was plastered to the ceiling. As far as merchandise went, if Monobear’s disconcerting façade could be placed on it, it was. Monobear dolls, Monobear posters, Monobear figurines. Umbrellas, jackets, chairs, tables, televisions, towels, bed sheets, cookies, school supplies, movies, vitamins, life-sized cardboard cutouts, romance
novels, dumbbells, balloons, etc. By far, though, the worst piece of merchandise was the Monobear calendar—swimsuit edition.

If any other configuration of the students had been sent to the Monobear Store, then they surely would have been unnerved. But Theo and Jordan held strong constitutions, and they weren’t about to let gaudy ornaments distract them. The entire store was just an ego boost for Monobear, and so there was no reason to fear it. In fact, there was no reason to cower in fear of Monobear himself.

Jordan absently perused the boxes of merchandise. She was having feelings that she had never felt before. During that last trial, she found herself greatly concerned with the outcome of the ordeal. She worried about her own safety, and she worried about the safety of the others. She had made very little attempt to get to know her classmates over the past two weeks, and she could see that that had been a foolish choice to make.

Theo watched Jordan in her pensive state. She smiled rarely, but on those occasions when he had been able to elicit a grin from her, she had the most beautiful countenance he had ever beheld. But now her mouth was set in a taut line, not a frown, but not a smile either. When she wasn’t happy, it made Theo feel less than grand.

“Hey,” said the Cartographer, “you okay?” Jordan, lost in her own mind, didn’t even hear what Theo had said to her. “Jordan.”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah…I’m fine…” Theo must have thought that there was something wrong with her; she hated showing any kind of weakness in front of others—especially Theo.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure, whatever. Can I help you?”

“Err, it’s just, I like it when you smile. You should smile more.”

“I should…smile more…? How will that help?”

“It’ll make me happy.”

“Well, in that case, I guess I’ll just have to try my hardest.”

“You know that if there’s anything on your mind that you can tell me, right?”

“…I know…this doesn’t come naturally to me…”

“How so?”

“Opening up to people. I’ve learned not to do that. Whenever I’ve opened up myself in the past, I’ve just been hurt. I don’t like being hurt…I’m tired of it…so I just keep myself closed off so I don’t risk getting hurt at all.”

“That sounds like such a lonely way to live.”

“It is…but I’ve lived it for so long; it’s practically second nature to me.” She could feel her emotions rising. Jordan had practiced temperance for a myriad of years, keeping her vehement
feelings down inside her where they wouldn’t incite any mal-effects. She could feel them again now, and she knew she should calm herself, but she wanted so badly to unleash her feelings for once in her life. “But then you just had to come along and make everything confusing again!”

“Me? Wh-what did I do?”

“What haven’t you done!? Since day one, you’ve been kind, and thoughtful, and suave… and now…”

“Now…?”

“And now I really like spending time with you…”

“I like spending time with you, too.”

“But this sucks, doesn’t it? This whole Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. It makes everything confusing.”

“Jordan, you don’t have to be so cryptic; just tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Then promise me you won’t judge me.”

“I can only ever think greater of you.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Alright…ugh. Anyone with half a brain knows that you like me, and I mean like me. Which confuses me. Like, why would someone do that? And then I’m like, I kind of like you, too. But there’s those stupid nagging thoughts at the back of my head. ‘He’s just getting close to you to hurt you. He doesn’t actually care about you. It’s the mall; he’s going to kill you.’ I don’t want to be hurt anymore!”

Theo rushed forward and embraced Jordan in a tight bear hug. The two were about the same height, but Jordan felt like he was completely covering her, protecting her. He had his arms wrapped around her, while hers dangled from her sides; she was having too many feels for her body to be able to react to the situation. Finally, her body did react: tears trickled down her cheeks.

Theo, still holding her close, whispered, “Shh, don’t cry, it’s alright.”

Jordan smiled and laughed slightly under her breath. “No, it’s alright. I’m not sad…I’m happy…I’m really happy.”

“Good.”

“Ha, ha…umm…you’re kinda crushing me…”

“Oh! Oh, I’m so sorry!”

“Shh, it was nice.” Theo released Jordan. She took in a deep, calming breath all the way down to her stomach. She felt lighter for some reason. She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand; she had to look so weak right now. “I’m sorry. I’m such a mess right now.”

“Please, you look fine. You’re still as beautiful as ever.”
“Oh, stop it.”

“I’m being serious.”

“I’m sorry—”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“No, I’m sorry, but I’m not very good at this sort of thing. I’ve, uhh, I’ve never really had a boyfriend before…”

“I-is that what you want? I mean, if you want a boyfriend, I-I can totally be your boyfriend.”

“Hmm…umm…yes. I…I think I would like that.” Theo’s face lit up with happiness. “And I guess that would make me your girlfriend.”

“If that’s alright with you.”

“It is. Just promise me one more time that you won’t hurt me.”

“I promise, that as long as I draw breath, that I will never take up an action which causes you harm, either directly or indirectly.”

“Thank you, Theo.”

The Golfer walked over to the Cartographer, grabbed his hand with her own, and together they vacantly walked the aisles of the Monobear Store, paying little attention to their surroundings.

As per usual, after the initial exploration, the students regrouped in the cafeteria to discuss what meager information they had now acquired. There were six empty chairs sitting around the table.

Rufus: “Allow me to call this meeting to order. I have matters of my own to discuss, so let us get through the preliminary exposition as quickly as possible. Honestly, it almost seems as if this recapitulation is redundant, sed eheu, I digress.”

Markus: “All we have to do in life is digress…what could there even be to keep our attention at all…”

Taylor: “Is anyone else as disturbed by Markus’s new personality as I am?”

Rico: “It is a little disconcerting…”

Cody: “I don’t see much of a difference.”

Austin: “Cody, even I can tell there’s a change in demeanor, and I’m oblivious to everything.”

Markus: “Please don’t fight over me…there’s no point to it…”

Lily: “I don’t get what he’s talking about. Does anyone actually understand it, desu?”

Jenny: “It is like something not able to be understood clearly.”
Theo: “He’s been through a lot lately; give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Jordan: “That’s so thoughtful.”

Theo: “Th-thanks!”

Rufus: “Did no one hear my lengthy introduction? Do I need to restate the already superfluous admittance? If you don’t think I will, then you are gravely mistaken.”

Taylor: “Markus, you can stop putting on the act now.”

Markus: “For once in my life, I’m not acting at all.”

Rufus: “Apol, audite me!”

Theo: “Did you say something, Rufus?”

Rufus: “No, not at all!”

Theo: “In that case, why don’t we start discussing what we found in the new stores?”

Rufus: “Iocasne mihi?”

Monobear: “Stop it! Stop it right now!”

Lily: “Eeee! Where did he come from?”

Jenny: “He simply is seen to appear from out of nothingness.”

Cody: “What do you want, you stupid bear?!”

Rico: “It can’t be good, right?”

Monobear: “Upupu. Every single time we follow this same pattern. The trial ends. You sulk about your pathetic feelings. You go in groups to the new stores. You come back here and complain about your lives. It’s so boring! I can’t stand it anymore! So we’re shaking things up now!”

Jordan: “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Austin: “I hope this doesn’t involve running…”

Monobear: “I’m in no mood to listen to your putrid comments today. Get off your lazy posteriors and move it to the video store for today’s feature films! GET THE LEAD OUT!”
Monobear was in a feisty mood, and none of the students felt like fighting him. For the third round of movies, they would be more desensitized to the images on the screen, but it wouldn’t make the event any less trying or confusing. The students followed Monobear to the North Sector. The fact that James had spent so much time in the video store made the place feel all the more cold and unnatural now.

Still in his temper, Monobear viciously popped the VHS into the player and hit the play button. On screen, James Beck, All-Star Movie Producer, sneered playfully at the camera. For a second, the students weren’t sure who they were looking at, for James didn’t have his sunglasses on. Without his sunglasses, he looked, in a way, more vulnerable.

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” said the figure on screen. “I think that’s bullshit about the glare coming from my sunglasses. Is it always this bright in here? How do you people get by? Hey! Don’t roll your eyes at me! Alright, alright, I’ll get on with it, tch.

“The name, for you commoners who have never left your homes in all your years of existence, is James Beck, and I am the All-Star Movie Producer of Success Summit. I came here because, for once in my life, someone was willing to acknowledge how much hard work I put into my endeavors. It would have been an insult to turn down their offer.

“If I’ve learned anything while being here, it’s that there’ll be idiots no matter where I go. But I guess some idiots are more tolerable than others. Without the lowest of the low, society would fall apart, so I guess I’m thankful that they exist. Hell, without them, my movies wouldn’t have enough extras to be realistic. And with this project, even idiots can have interesting stories. Tch, so yeah, there are some cool Neanderthals. Whatever. It’s your turn, now. Yeah, it is! Get in front of that camera so you can make a fool of yourself!”

James got up and walked toward the camera before disappearing; Monobear stopped the video once he was completely off frame. Not in the mood to waste any time, Monobear promptly popped in the second tape. As per custom, Elizabeth now smiled at the congregation of students. Jenny and Lily felt their hearts drop.

Elizabeth cleared her throat, straightened her dress, and made love to the camera with her eyes. “My name is Elizabeth Mary Barrington, from the long line of wealthy Barringtons. My father is a man of business, as was his father before him. While the men have been solely interested in the acquisition of material wealth, we Barrington women have set our sights on more erudite interests. Specifically, I have devoted my time to researching the events of the past. Therefore, it is only natural that I be accepted into Success Summit on the basis of being an All-Star Historian.

“I find it peculiar. Time progresses without our influence on it, but when exactly does the present become the past? How much time must pass before we can objectively look at and study what transpired at a prior instance? Despite my expertise, I have yet to reach a definitive answer to this problem; nevertheless, while studying here, I have reached a conclusion of a different sort: we all think very differently. Nobody thinks quite like I do. So, historically speaking, I may deem something to be important; whereas, someone else may—

“James Beck! Would you quit rolling your eyes at me?! I may be looking at the camera, but I can see your eyes shifting underneath those low-class sunglasses you are insistent on wearing! This is my time to shine, thank you very much, and I intend to make the most of it. Now, where was I…?”
Before Elizabeth has time to pontificate any longer, the video suddenly cut off. Monobear removed the tape and turned, glaring at the students. “Oh no,” he said sarcastically, “they must have run out of tape when filming. Oh well, it’s too late now. Anyway, I’m a very busy bear, so go kill each other some more. And you better not cause me any problems, because I do not want to handle any more stress at the moment!” Monobear dashed out of the Video Store.

Jordan: “You’d think he had fleas with how riled up he is.”

Lily: “Do bears get fleas? I mean, I guess they could. I just never thought about it.”

Cody: “But would a robot bear get fleas?”

Austin: “They could be robot fleas.”

Rico: “I hope robot fleas don’t like humans!”

Jenny: “I do not think we need to worry about robot fleas…”

Taylor: “Even if there were robot fleas, what would their purpose be? What’s the point in making robots that make other robots itchy?”

Markus: “What’s the point in anything…?”

Taylor: “Markus, I swear to God…”

Theo: “I highly doubt that Monobear has fleas of any sort.”

Jordan: “Something must have happened to the man controlling him. Maybe the world’s not as destroyed as we’ve been led to believe.”

Lily: “He must have a rock stuck in his shoe or something. That always puts me in a bad mood, desu.”

Austin: “Yawn, maybe he didn’t get enough sleep last night.”

Rico: “Yo-o, or he woke up on the wrong side of the bed!”

Rufus: “Are we seriously discussing this right now?”

Jordan: “You have a problem with it?”

Rufus: “As a matter of fact, yes. We never finished discussing what we found.”

Cody: “So, what? You want to do this here and now?”

Theo: “The format would suggest that we plan on speaking in a group for some time.”

Jenny: “Format? What format are you talking about?”

Rufus: “It’s a transcendent thing; we can only perceive it, but it’s truly for the benefit of others that ___”

Lily: “But I don’t want to talk right now!”

Jenny: “Lily…”

Taylor: “Ugh, why? What’s the matter?”
Lily: “Umm… I really, really have to pee.”

Rufus: “You’re kidding me.”

Austin: “Girls have to pee…?”

Jordan: “Then go pee and hurry back so we can begin our discussion.”

Rico: “You know, that trial earlier got me pretty whipped. I was hoping for a nap sometime, and I’m starting to feel a little drowsy…”

Jenny: “I… Elizabeth’s tape… I would like to think about her film while it is still fresh in my head.”

Markus: “I would prefer to stand in a corner despondently for a few hours…”

Taylor: “Now that everyone’s talking… my make-up could use a little touch-up.”

Rufus: “You people give me such headaches. Fine. We’ll reconvene at dinner to discuss all that we have found. And you’d better be there, or I’ll excommunicate you from the group.”

Jordan: “Oh? And what group would that be?”

Rufus: “So long as you’re at dinner, you’ll have nothing to worry about. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a date with a certain Roman poet.”

The students dispersed to fulfill whatever mundane activities they felt overly inclined to do, and, as they had agreed, they reconvened for dinner. Now on the dinner menu were delicious tacos—as if the students didn’t have enough garbage to fill their stomachs with. Upon discovering this new decadence, a taco-eating competition quickly arose among Cody, Rico, Theo, and Lily. In the end, with an aching belly, Cody was victorious, but Lily gave the Waterskier a good run for his money.

Rufus: “Now that there’s no more food left, can we finally get down to business?”

Jordan: “Honestly, we’ve wasted so much time today. We each could have easily investigated the stores individually.”

Rufus: “No one’s interested in your sass right now; we need to begin our discussion.”

Theo: “Yes, we have spent far too much time today avoiding it.”

Taylor: “Then let’s stop talking about talking and start talking already!”

Austin: “The Jewelry Store has some very expensive merchandise in it. However, it does make me feel pretty.”

Jenny: “Ooh, a jewelry store.”

Lily: “Jenny-chan, we should get matching friendship bracelets!”

Cody: “That’s all it is, though; just a bunch of fancy rocks.”

Rufus: “How bland. Rico?”

Rico: “Yo-o! We found a Furniture Store. Besides some comfy couches, there isn’t much else to offer. You wanna add anything, Markus?”
Taylor: “(Oh here it comes.)”

Markus: “The store was full of material possessions, the likes of which will fade before our very eyes, just as we fade before the eyes of the universe.”

Jordan: “That was, uhh, poetic.”

Rufus: “Splendid, even.”

Jenny: “Umm, if I may, Lily and I spent our time in the Arcade.”

Lily: “It’s so super rad! They have a dance machine and everything! So sugoi!”

Theo: “Did you find anything interesting inside?”

Jenny: “There was this game where you had to hit woodland creatures…I did not like it very much…”

Rico: “An Arcade, huh? I’m not going to get anything accomplished, now.”

Rufus: “And lastly, Janice and Torvald.”

Theo: “That is nothing close to our actual names.”

Jordan: “For someone who is so smart, you are so stupid. In any case, the two of us happened upon a Monobear Store.”

Cody: “What the heck’s a ‘Monobear Store?’”

Jordan: “I’m sure whatever image pops into your mind is the correct one.”

Austin: “There’s a store that only contains a single bear in the whole place?”

Theo: “Uhh, no. It’s like a souvenir store, except everything has Monobear’s face on it.”

Taylor: “How gawdy. Leave it to that stupid bear to construct something so banal.”

Lily: “I think it’s a kinda kawaii idea!”

Cody: “You think everything’s cute, dudette.”

Lily: “Yeah, I do.”

Rufus: “Every search so far has yielded nothing of interest; please tell me yours breaks the mold.”

Theo: “Sorry, no can do.”

Jordan: “(What is he planning?)”

Rufus: “Is there something you wish to share with the rest of the class?”

Jordan: “Hmm? No, I don’t think so.”

Rico: “Yo-o, so are we all done with discussion finally?”

Taylor: “It’s only taken forever.”
Cody: “Cool. I wanna snag a quick workout before bed.”

Austin: “And I want to see this peculiar Monobear Store.”

Rufus: “Ecce, not so fast, if you please. There is another matter that I feel is imperative for us to discuss.”

Lily: “More talking? But I want to dance!”

Jenny: “Maybe we should listen.”

Rufus: “There are ten of us—”

Jordan: “Yes, that is how math works.”

Rufus: “Tace, sunt ten of us, sed are we just going to let that number dwindle?”

Austin: “Heh, ‘dwindle.’ That’s a funny word.”

Rufus: “It’s apparent that our focus is a little, well, lacking. We’ve been through three trials now. Does anyone honestly want to go through a fourth one? That’s what I thought. We’ve been hoping to find some sorts of clues, anything that will lead us out of here. I think it’s time for us to stop hoping for such a thing to land in our laps; it’s time to take control.”

Theo: “Take control? What do you propose?”

Rufus: “We have to go after our kidnapper. After whoever is controlling Monobear.”

Taylor: “That robot isn’t exactly something we can take down.”

Rufus: “True, but there is one way to get at our conspirator: we must go after the Liar; we must go after All-Star Despair.”

Jenny: “So it is…really true? All-Star Despair?”

Rufus: “There are ten of us, but only one is the Liar. We can’t unify as long as there’s someone who’s not fully committed to this team. Once we’ve isolated our pretty little Liar, then we can move onto the next step.”

Jordan: “And what do we do once we identify the Liar? What then? You don’t propose we kill them, do you?”

Rufus: “So long as no one is strongly affected by their morals, we can tie them up just as we did to James.”

Markus: “He deserved better.”

Taylor: “He speaks!”

Markus: “James did not deserve the lot he received. None of our friends deserved what they got. None of us deserve this. So why are we being punished?”

Lily: “We’re not being punished; we never did anything bad.”

Markus: “The universe must hate us for some reason. Bad things don’t happen to good people.”
Jordan: “The hell they do. The universe doesn’t give a crap about us, or about anyone else. We’re on our own. It doesn’t matter why we’re here, just so much as we are here.”

Markus: “But we struggle to survive, to escape. If it doesn’t matter why we’re here, why would it matter if we left?”

Cody: “Dude, just look around. You want to spend the rest of your life trapped in this dingy, run-down mall?”

Markus: “It contains all the amenities necessary for the continuation of life. Our ancestors would have marveled at such an opportunity.”

Austin: “But it’s no way to live. I know I don’t do a whole lot of it, but that’s no reason for the rest of you not to make the most of the time you’ve been given. There’s a world outside this mall open to us; why would we be comfortable in here?”

Markus: “Living…dying…they’re the same thing. From the moment of conception, we’re good as dead. ‘Life’ is just a brief interval in the course of existence.”

Taylor: “God damnit, Markus! I’ve had it up to here with your attitude! Suck it up! All this talk of death, it’s bogus! If we weren’t meant to live, then we—as human beings—wouldn’t still be here today!”

Rufus: “Precisely. It is our duty to stay alive. That means no killing, and no being killed. Over the next few days, I will be putting in place a plan to oust the Liar from their nest. Then, as a unified collective, we can make this mall our own. Finally, sooner rather than later, the ten of us will walk out of this mall with our heads held high.”

Jordan: “What exactly is this plan?”

Rufus: “I won’t say now, for fear that our Liar preempt what I shall establish. Until this is fulfilled, I need you all to keep your eyes and ears open for anything and everything. Hoc facere possumus.”

Markus: “This will breed a miasma of paranoia that will suffocate us rather than release us.”

Theo: “No, this is what we need to move forward. I…I can feel the end coming, now. Yeah, we can do this.”

Lily: “Okeydokey! So Rufus is our new leader?”

Rico: “I second the motion!”

Rufus: “And I detest it! No more ‘leaders.’ That’s been our biggest problem all along. One person cannot be responsible anymore; we must look out for each other.”

Jenny: “I shall do everything in my power to help out.”

Cody: “Dude, you can totally count on me for whatever.”

Austin: “I guess I can try to be alert.”

Taylor: “It sounds like a pain, and this is a nice mall and all, but I miss sunbathing on the beach so bad. Let’s get out of here already.”

Rufus: “That’s what I like to hear. Iam, we’ve all had a rough day. Let’s take a rest; we deserve it.”
Renewed in resolve in spirit, the students were excited for a new day, a day in which they would finally leave the accursed Mall of Monomerica. The meeting and dinner done with, the students went their separate ways. Except Markus tarried in the food court. He was the only sane one left in the group; the rest of them were crazy. They thought they were moving forward to the beauty of the outside world, but they were only rushing to their graves.
Upon breakfast the following day, the students had lived within the mall for a fortnight, and now they were beginning on their third week. It wasn’t a prominent thought on their minds, but they had indeed spent half a month in isolation. They had no contact with the outside world. Any semblance of reality they once took for granted no longer impressed upon their beings. They lived by a different set of rules—rules that allowed for the destruction of society.

The circumstances were strange, but they refused to give in to the bitter feelings surrounding their predicament. Just as they had every day before, they set out with the intention of living as if nothing had changed; the mall would not break them.

Predictably, Jordan found Taylor in the Jewelry Store. The Lucky was adorned with a sapphire-embedded silver tiara, two platinum necklaces and a golden one, a ring with a different gemstone on each finger, and bracelets that traveled up to her elbows. Taylor was bent over one of the glass counters, scrutinizing every jewel for the perfect accent to her already dazzling ensemble.

Jordan called out to Taylor, and the Lucky spun around on the spot to face the Golfer. As she did, she placed herself perfectly in the line of one of the store’s lights, and the refraction off her accessories nearly blinded Jordan. Jordan took a step back and began blinking furtively to stop seeing spots.

“Jordan!” cried Taylor. “What a surprise! What are you doing here?”

“I…I thought we might just talk.”

“Oh really? What about?”

“Are you alright? You seem overly enthusiastic.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s just that all these accessories put me in such a good mood. There truly is no better feeling than being beautiful!”

“If you say so.”

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to continue trying on some things while we talk.”

“No, go right ahead.”

“This is fabulous! It’s great to have a second set of eyes around. How embarrassing would it be if I walked out of here with an atrocious rock dangling from my throat!”

“I can imagine it would be rather tragic.”

“I would just die! Oh, oh God, I’m sorry, that wasn’t cool of me to say, considering…you know. Gah, I just start talking sometimes and I can’t stop what comes out of my mouth. It’s a real problem.”

“I wish I could talk as much as you. I’m always holding myself back for some reason.”

“Shut up! I wish I could have your sense of self-restraint.”

“No, don’t say that. I’m too stand-offish; I keep too much distance from people.”
“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t be all up in someone’s grille all the time.”

“I guess that’s true…”

“Now, if I know you at all, then you’ve got something specific on your mind you want to talk about.”

“Uhh, no, I really don’t. I just want to talk.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“It’s not…easy to say. I guess…hmm…in light of all that’s happened, we girls have not been doing too well. The mall is very male-oriented at the moment, and so I think we girls need to stick together.”

“You know, Jordan, that I’ve been having similar thoughts.”

“Really? You have? I never would have guessed.”

“I’m all for girl-power, but I do a pretty lousy job of being a spokesperson for it. I mean, I spend all my time with either Cody or Austin. At least you’ve got Jenny.”

“I’m not really so sure of that, actually.”

“You don’t say. I thought you two were good friends.”

“We are, in a way, but we can’t get past that ‘superficial friend’ point. She’s too attached to Lily.”

“That Lily. She is something else. I’ve only known one other girl as sweet as her…”

“Oh? Care to talk about it?”

“N-no, I’d rather not. It’s not a pretty story. I’m rather ashamed of it, actually.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Let’s change the subject. Back to girl-power, back to friendship. I don’t think I know you very well, Jordan.”

“And I you. I’ll take the blame for the lack therein.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself; I’m partially to blame, as well. I should’ve been more approachable.”

“You’re like Theo, in a way; you make everything sound so simple.”

“When you look as good as me, your life gets complicated with so much unnecessary drama, so you have to keep things simple or else you’ll lose your mind!”

“It appears we all have our own problems.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you mentioned Theo. C’mon girl, spill the deets.”

“Oh ho? And what deets might those be?”

“Please, you can’t hide anything from me. You two are falling so hard for each other. It’s
“so cute.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to someone with a lot of experience in the boy department.”

“I don’t know if I feel comfortable talking to you about this.”

“No, I totally get that. It’s like, your business, you know. What can I say, gossip is gossip.”

“Aren’t you the one who wanted to keep things simple?”

“A little gossip never hurt anyone.”

“Tell that to World War One Europe.”

“Jordan, I didn’t know you had a sense of humor. I had no idea there was this fun girl living in the mall with me all this time.”

“I’m flattered.”

“No, I mean it. I had the wrong impression about you. You say we should look out for each other, yeah. Well then, I think it’s about time we figure out who it is we’re looking out for.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Splendid. Ooh! These earrings would bring out your eyes so well! Here, try them on. Oh! You look absolutely stunning! I think I saw a necklace around her earlier that would just be perfect!”

Exhausted from an intense dancing session, Lily retired to the Lounge for a quick siesta. The area had another occupant already, though, but that just meant more company to enjoy. Lily sauntered over to Austin, who was lying face-down on one of the couches.

Lily took a deep breath, and then yelled, “KONNICHIWA, AUSTIN-KUN! SAIKIN DŌ?”

Slowly, Austin turned onto his side and smiled pleasantly at Lily. “Hi, Lily. When did you get here?”

“I just came. I needed a break from some hard-core dancing.”

“Dancing…too strenuous for me.”

“But you should try it; it’s fun!”

“I’m really not one for physical activity. There’s just no appeal.”

“I understand, desu. As much fun as the Internet can be—especially watching anime late at night—sometimes it’s good to get your muscles pumping.”

“It’s certainly a healthier lifestyle than I lead.”

“But only sometimes. There’s a lot of anime that needs watching.”

“Even watching anime seems strenuous. Like, you have to put all that time into just getting

“I do? I never really noticed.”

“Yeah! Like you make these little comments that you think nobody hears, but they’re actually really funny. I know I have a hard time not laughing.”

“I just say what’s on my mind.”

“But other times, you say these really deep, profound things, like you really get to the heart of a person.”

“I never thought of myself as a sophisticate…”

“And it’s cool! It’s super cool how you do your own thing, and how I do my own thing, and how everyone does their own thing. It’s super, super sugoi!”

“We are All-Stars, after all.”

“Ooh! I know, I know! Do me, do me!”

“Huh? But I don’t want to get up.”

“No, silly, say deep things about me! You’re really good at figuring people out, so tell me about me.”

“It doesn’t really work like that. I don’t have a special gift. People don’t like to wear their hearts on their sleeves; I just see where they wear them instead.”

“Well, where is my heart, huh?”

“Oh, your heart is definitely on your sleeve. You’re a sweet, naïve, innocent girl. You only want for everyone to be happy. The world would be better off if there were more Lily Smiths running around.”

“Oh, stop it, you.”

“But the interesting thing isn’t where you wear your heart, but why you wear it there. You’re very open with your personality because you want people to accept you into their lives. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. We close ourselves off a lot, but you intend to break that mold.”

“I feel like there’s another ‘but’ coming.”

“But what caused you to take up this practice in the first place? I can only hazard a guess, but that’s a dangerous thing to do, so I’ll keep my thoughts to myself.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you, if you want to know.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No, it’s no big thing. Okeydokey, so, I don’t know if you could tell, but I don’t come from a very wealthy family. Growing up, we’ve never had much. If I was bored, I didn’t have a game I could play with myself, so I had to find other people to play games. Except no one wants to play
games with the weird girl for some reason. One time, I didn’t get picked last, and I was really confused. But the thing is, if you want something, you have to keep going after it. Playing with other kids made me happy, even if they only let me play for a few minutes. One minute of happiness can brighten up a lifetime of unhappiness, desu.”

“Lily, that’s so tragic.”

“Weren’t you listening, dummy? I said I liked it.”

“So how did the whole ‘Kawaii’ thing come into play?”

“Kawaii doesn’t just happen. I was born kawaii, and I have been kawaii ever since. Lily and Kawaii are interwoven entities; you can’t have one without the other. How did you become an Idle?”

“Hmm…I guess for the same reason. I was born to do very little.”

“That sounds so dull.”

“It’s not so bad. It gives me a lot of time just to think.”

“Is that what you were doing here earlier when I came in?”

“Yawn, I guess so.”

“You guess? You mean you don’t know if you were thinking?”

“Not really. I was trying to come up with an answer to a problem, but I couldn’t think of a good one.”

“Ooh, maybe I can help! What’s the matter?”

“It’s the Yearbook. Elizabeth was going to help me with it, but then she…and now I’m not sure if the project is worth salvaging. I have trouble remembering what Francesca even looked like.”

“Maybe that’s why we have the tapes, so we never have to forget.”

“Maybe…”

“I’m surprised. You were so psyched about this project.”

“I guess. But this isn’t the first time something like this has happened. I just lose interest.”

“You’re unmotivated because it’s something hard to do. You can’t psych yourself out!”

“Hey, now you’re analyzing me.”

“You got a problem with that, punk?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Heehee. I wonder…have you ever done yourself before?”

“Lily, that’s not very appropriate.”

“Stop being so silly! I mean analyze yourself.”
“Umm… I have, once or twice, but then I stopped.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I think… because I didn’t like what I saw?”

“Well, what’d you see?”

“I’m not sure how to put it into words.”

“If you ever figure out how to do that, you let me know, okay?”

“Don’t worry; you’ll be the first to find out.”

“Nipah. Hah, I feel nice and cooled down, so I’m going to go dance some more. See you later, Austin-kun!”

Lily skipped merrily out of the Lounge and back to the Arcade. Austin smiled after her as she left. Such a nice girl. “Bye, Lily,” he said, even though she was well out of earshot. The Idle turned back to the couch cushions and went back into his thoughts.

Rufus had nearly given up his search when he found Theo in the Electronics Store. What on Earth was he doing here? Rufus had been searching for the Cartographer because Theo was probably the closest thing to an intellectual equal Rufus could find in the mall, but here he was wasting his time in a pointless shop. The items within the store were interesting, but they couldn’t actually do anything worthwhile.

“There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you. What could you possibly be doing here?”

Theo was startled by Rufus’s abrupt entrance, but he didn’t let his shock show. He had come to the Electronics Store to investigate the merchandise once more. The new initiative to escape brought forth his earlier encounter with Lily and her radio. If there was someone out there trying to communicate with them, then maybe they could rig the machinery to communicate back; every little bit helps.

“Oh, I was just looking over the tech once more.”

“Why would you even bother? That stuff is junk; it won’t help us any.”

“Well, I ran into Lily and her radio—”

“She’s still carrying that thing around? My, what a deluded child.”

“The thing is, she got her radio to work, and she picked up on some strange signal.”

“This is news to me. What did the broadcast say?”

“She said it was too staticky and jumbled to make out, but it sounded like someone was trying to contact us.”

“So there is someone on the outside… hence you trying to find something now.”

“Precisely.”
“I always knew you were a smart one, Terry.”

“Uh, you too Ralph.”

“It’s Rufus. But because of this obvious level of intelligence we both share, I would like to extend to you an invitation to join the mall’s Executive Committee.”

“Executive Committee? What is that? You’re not working with our kidnapper, are you? Don’t tell me you’re All-Star Despair.”

“Heavens, watch your paranoia. The Executive Committee is my own creation, and its sole purpose is to single out the liar in our midst. I want only the best and brightest in this mall, and you clearly fall into that category. So, *quid dicis*?”

“I’m flattered, but I’m a little wary on the logistics of it. How many people are in it? Who else is in it? And how will we go about identifying our Liar, and couldn’t the Liar be one of the members?”

“As conscientious as ever, I see. You may want to tone down the paranoia or else some of the others may get suspicious. Don’t worry; I’ve taken care of all those pesky little worries. I have a plan, and once it’s executed, we’ll be a united whole.”

“You’re avoiding my questions.”

“There’s no getting around this, is there?”

“Just be straight with me.”

“Fine. How many people? Three, possibly four, including myself. So far, I have you and Carlos in mind. You know, the snowboarder.”

“Cody? I don’t mean to be rude, but you did say you wanted the brightest.”

“He is an excellent judge of character. If this means keeping everyone alive, he’ll undoubtedly put all his energy into the project. Not to mention he’s a very strong ally, if you catch my drift. I’d rather have him closer to me than far away.”

“And the possible fourth?”

“Janice, believe it or not. She did solve the last trial, after all. And now that she’s out from under Elise’s finger, we can use her to her full potential.”

“That’s all well and good, but what is your exact plan?”

“We’ll hold a mini-trial. I imagine with our collective intelligence that we should be able to derive a reasonable conclusion. And if the Liar is in our midst, then they’ll have to handle themselves very well in such an intense environment. Any sort of slip-up will condemn them.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“Don’t underestimate me. My mind’s been turning since day one.”

“Yes, I remember. You swore that you would emerge victorious, that you would kill someone and get away with it. So how does this Executive Committee *actually* function? To what extent does it serve your purpose?”
“You ask a frighteningly astute amount of thoughtfully poignant questions.”

“I’m too grounded for my own good.”

“In any case, it’s been two weeks since day one; the game has changed since then. Let me put it in a way you might understand: there may be someone in this mall whom I’d like to keep alive.”

“You mean Rico.”

“Rico? That little child? What possible reason could I have for wanting to keep him around?”

“Sure, whatever you have to tell yourself. But…why would that be something I would understand.”

“You may be oblivious, but the rest of us are not. You and Jazmyne have been spending a lot of time together; you’re a couple. And in a game like this, an allied couple is a dangerous thing.”

“We’re no different than Jenny and Lily.”

“And look how Elise abused that relationship. Watch yourself, Terry; you never know who’s watching you and why.”

“You admonish me about being paranoid, but is it possible that you’re just projecting onto me?”

“You see, this is why I want you as a member of the Executive Committee: you ask the important questions.”

“You’re dodging my questions again.”

“You ask too many of them. Now, I’ll be happy to answer any and all questions you have in the context of the committee, so, *quid dicis*? Are you in?”

“If it means that we—I, can get out of here, then you can count me in. But don’t think that just because we’re doing this together that I won’t keep my eye off you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

While Lily was taking a break, Jenny was left alone in the Arcade. She had been getting better at dancing, but Lily always got the highest score anyway. Either way, it was a fun way to spend time. The Sandwich Artist could use a break of her own now, but she didn’t want to miss Lily’s return.

While she was wandering through the Arcade looking for something not-too-strenuous to do, Rico entered the Arcade for a similar purpose. Like any teenage boy, Rico had a secret infatuation with video games. But, like other teenage boys, he wouldn’t openly talk about this love lest he be labeled as a nerd. Nevertheless, the allure of the Arcade was too much, and the Marathon Runner could resist no longer.

The neon atmosphere was intoxicating to Rico, and he had no idea where to begin. As his
mind raced through the possibilities, he found Jenny playing a standard racing game. She was leaned back in her seat, hands at 10 and 2. She was smiling faintly, enjoying the ride. Rico took a look at the screen and found that she was in last place. Not only was she in last place, but the other cars were starting to lap her.

Jenny’s instincts kicked into gear, and she suddenly realized that there was someone standing behind her. She looked over her shoulder and instantly became apologetic. “Oh, I am sorry. I have been hogging the game; did you want to go. Please, it is your turn.”

Instead of taking Jenny’s spot, Rico insisted that she remain seated. “Jenny, I’m sorry, but that was horrendous driving; you were just putt-ing along. You’re never going to win that way.”

“I am sorry. I was just trying to have fun.”

“Yo-o, fun is secondary when you’re playing a video game. Your main goal is to win, and the satisfaction you get from winning is so much greater than any fun you were previously having.”

“Oh. I am very new to this. I did not realize that there was a proper way to go about playing games.”

“It’s an art form, really. Okay, let me give you some tips. You can’t be all leaned back like this. You gotta get yourself hunched over that wheel like you mean business. And don’t have such a relaxed grip on the wheel; your knuckles should be white from clutching it so tight. And when that first light turns green, that gas pedal should be on the floor! Don’t even worry about the brake; it’s basically useless. Got all that?”

“I-I think so. Let me give it a shot.” In a horribly uncomfortable position, Jenny prepared herself for yet another race. The start-up light flashed red, then yellow, now green. Jenny’s foot slammed down on the gas pedal and her car flew off. She was quickly passing the other racers, and Rico was loudly cheering her on. She was flying through the course! But she was flying a little too fast. A particularly sharp turn appeared in the road, and Jenny was not in a proper position to curve into the bend. Her car flew off the course and down the cyber mountain. In the blink of an eye, she was once again in last place.

“So maybe racing games aren’t your genre,” said Rico. “We’ll just have to find something you’re better at.” Rico proceeded to lead Jenny through the Arcade, stopping at a machine here and there to gauge her interest level. They ended up at the infamous claw machine. Nothing defines dexterity quite like a game of skill claw. Among the hideous Monobear dolls and pink rabbits, Jenny found a little plush cat that she liked.

“What is the secret that is behind this game?”

“Before I tell you the secret, I want you to know that this is a very difficult game to win, and an even harder one to master. This machine is a test for all experienced gamers. You will fail, but you must persevere if you have any hope of someday succeeding.”

“I will accept the challenge, regardless of the level of difficulty.”

“Alright, then here’s what ya gotta know: that claw won’t wrap itself around any of the dolls. If you want to snag any of those critters, you have to be sneakier. It’s best to try to lock an ear or tag in the claw’s point. Oh, and you have to line it all up perfectly, so sometimes it’s a good idea to peer around the sides of the glass box to make sure everything’s just right.”
“That is very valuable information.”

“The best way to learn is through doing, so let’s see what you got!”

“Okay.” Jenny put her hand on the joystick and placed the claw directly overtop the stuffed feline. The Sandwich Artist pressed the button on top, and the claw began its descent. It inched closer and closer to the cat, but at the apex of its drop, it bumped into a Monobear doll. The claw closed on nothing but air.

“It’s natural to get it that close on the first go. Try again and I’m sure you’ll get it.”

Jenny repeated the technique, but to no more avail. With every successive attempt, success eluded her. Finally, Jenny decided to try to remove the dolls surrounding her precious kitten. She set her aim on a nearby Monobear doll. She positioned the claw with pinpoint accuracy. It descended and landed right on top of the doll. The fangs closed in on Monobear’s outie belly button, and as it did so, the doll sprang to life and began to cackle hideously. It wasn’t the real Monobear, but the facsimile was eerily similar. Thankfully, the other dolls kept that one in place, and the claw came up empty again. Eventually the prize doll quieted, and Rico and Jenny decided that the cat probably wasn’t worth the effort after all.

Rico wasn’t ready to give up; they would find a game that Jenny could excel at. On a whim, Rico brought her to a zombie shooting machine. He took the blue plastic gun in his hand and gave the red one over to Jenny. “O-okay, so this is a two-player game. I’ll let you do most of the killing, but I’ll be here as backup if you need me.”

“K-killing? We have to kill?”

“We’re just shooting zombies. They’re already dead, so you don’t really have to worry about killing them.”

“But this gun…”

“It’s not a real one. It won’t hurt anyone. You just squeeze the little trigger. And when you need to reload, you just shoot off screen.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll have a great time. The trick here is to keep yourself calm. The game’s going to try to scare you and spook you, but you can’t let that get to you. Stay focused and worry about shooting accurately. And remember: I’ll be right here by your side the entire time. Let’s do this!”

To Jenny’s chagrin, Rico started up the machine. Jenny let out a cry when the first zombie appeared on screen. Rico quickly made short work of it. And the next zombie. And the one after that.

“Alright, Jenny, this next one’s yours.”

Jenny nervously gripped the plastic gun in both her hands. She was shaking, and a bead of sweat rolled down her temple. She took a deep breath, but she was still shaking. Suddenly, the undead monster flashed on the screen. Jenny raised her hands, shut her eyes, and pulled the trigger. The victory of the hit rang out from the machine and penetrated her ears. In that instant, she opened her eyes and was at ease.

She shot the next zombie. And the next one. And the one after that. She was a zombie-
killing machine. Her gun ran out of bullets, and without a second thought, she reloaded and was back in the fray. Her accuracy and reflexes were remarkable. Rico tried to assist, but by the time he was ready to pull the trigger, Jenny had beaten him to it. She had found her game.

As the game progressed, the difficulty escalated accordingly. Jenny was finding it troublesome to slay the hordes of the living dead with a single pistol, so in a second of lull, she snatched Rico’s gun from his hand and engaged the onslaught with dual pistols. All her focus was directed on the game. While one gun was reloading, she was using the other to cut through the masses. She was unstoppable.

For the first time since the game had been set up in the Arcade, the final zombie boss appeared on screen. The battle was ruthless and intense, and Jenny’s health meter was nearing depletion. With each shot, though, her resolve just grew stronger; she would not be defeated! Jenny blocked out all other noise from the Arcade and became solely absorbed in destroying the undead. With one last shot, she ended the cemetery terror, may they all rest in pieces.

“Whoa-oa, great job Jenny! You really showed them who’s boss!”

In one swift motion, Jenny stuffed the red gun between her apron straps, grabbed both of Rico’s arms behind his back, and proffered the blue gun against his temple. “What did you just say to me?” she asked, her voice flat and low and with a slightly thicker accent.

Rico didn’t know how to respond. By adjusting his eye focus, he could see Jenny behind him in the reflection off the game’s screen. Her body was locked in place, as if she had performed this maneuver hundreds of times before. Her eyes were dark and full of death. “J-Jenny, you’re scaring me.”

The machine howled “Congratulations!” and the responding fanfare brought Jenny back to her senses. What happened to the game? Why did she have Rico’s arms pressed behind his back? And why did she have a gun resting against his head? She dropped the gun and backed away in a daze. “I…what…I am confused…”

Rico looked at her strangely, unsure what to make of her. She was starting to shake as she had before her first shot. Did she really not know what had happened? The red gun fell out of her apron straps, and she jumped when it hit the ground. She must have gotten too into the game, that’s all. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I do not know…I have such confusion…what happened just now?”

“The game was a little too scary for you. But it’s okay; it’s over now.”

“Oh. Thank goodness.”

“Jenny-chan! I’m back! Where are you?” called Lily from the front of the Arcade.

“I am back here,” replied Jenny, her face pleasantly lighting up once more.

“Are you ready to go dancing some more?”

“Yes, I am.”

Rico didn’t understand how just a moment ago Jenny had been shaken to the core, but now she was back to normal. She turned to him and said, “Rico, will you not come dancing with us?” He agreed to join the girls. Besides, what harm could come from simple dancing? After a few songs, the zombie incident was completely out of Rico’s mind.
Cody was starting to run out of space in his room to store his models, but the Hobby Shop seemed to have a limitless number in supply. The Waterskier figured that one more ship wouldn’t hurt. He nonchalantly walked over to the Hobby Shop, but someone was already occupying the establishment: Markus stood staring intently at one of the shop’s walls.

Markus had been acting strange ever since James’s body had been discovered. The shock had been too much for him, and it compromised his already fragile emotional state. He weirded Cody out now. If it had been anyone else in the store, Cody would have made small talk and joked with them until they left, but there was no way to avoid interacting with Markus if the Waterskier had any hope of acquiring a new model kit. He’d have to bite the bullet and deal with whatever unpleasantness was directed his way.

“Yo, Markus, my man, what’s happening?”

Markus continued to stare at the wall. It was a deathly stare. Cody had seen Austin staring off into the distance, but it had seemed like Austin was trying to picture something in his mind the way his vision trailed off. Markus, however, was peering through the very fabric of reality, and that intent was disconcerting. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Cool, cool. So, uhh, what are you looking at?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Is that all you can say?”

“No.”

“Dude, like, are you okay?”

“I…I do not know. I feel nothing; does that constitute as ‘okay’ to you?”

“Uhh, no, it doesn’t. Now, don’t try to take this the wrong way, but if you need to talk to somebody…”

“Words are empty and meaningless; only actions accomplish anything, but there is an inherent lack in executing motion.”

“I didn’t understand any of that, but I know that talking can help sometimes. I don’t know what to make of the videos, but you and James were definitely onto something; I’m sorry that he’s gone now.”

Cody sensed a slight change in Markus’s demeanor, but the Thespian continued to stare straight ahead. “Why did it have to be him?”

“Huh?”

“Why did it have to be him? Why couldn’t it have been me? It would have been better if it were me. Look at all I can’t do now. If he were here, he’d be making good use of his time.”

“Dude…”

“Or if Francesca were still here…or Melissa…any of them would be able to do more than me…”
“C’mon, cheer up, man. Yeah, it sucks that they’re gone, but we have to keep moving forward. If not for ourselves, then for them. It’s what they would have wanted.”

“I can’t be so sure. I wonder if they were the lucky ones. Maybe living in here is torment, and leaving—by whatever means—is an escape to paradise.”

“Don’t say stupid shit like that! If we weren’t meant to live, then we wouldn’t have been born in the first place!”

“That was our first mistake: being born.”

“Dude, shut up. Not only were we given life, but we were given super awesome talents. Does all that time you’ve spent on stage mean nothing to you?”

“Empty, repeated emotions on a dull, dark stage.”

“Listen up. I’ve got a buddy who once went too fast on his skies. Lost control and slammed into a rock. It wasn’t pretty. He got messed up pretty bad. His recovery wasn’t pretty either, but the day after he got out of therapy, he went right back into the water. Life might throw you a rogue wave every now and then, and it might toss and knock you around, but you gotta get right back into that lake.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but we see things very differently.”

“Nah, you got your sights focused too hard on one little thing; you gotta see the whole picture.”

“But I do see the larger abstraction; I know why we’re here.”

The hairs on the back of Cody’s neck stood up. If Markus had solved one of the mall’s mysteries, then maybe his attitude was justified; Cody did not like that possibility.

“We are here,” said Markus, “because we need to be punished. I know what I’ve done, but I’m sure you know what you’ve done. We may all be talented individuals, but we received that talent at what price? The time has come for us to pay the reaper, so to speak, and I haven’t any change on me.”

“Dude, I’m sorry, but shut the hell up! That’s crazier talk than what was spewing from Randolph’s mouth. There ain’t no way we’re being punished. Have you even met these people? They are good, decent people, and I’m glad to call them my friends.”

“Then why have they murdered each other?”

Cody did not have an answer, but he was damned to let Markus dominate this discussion. “Because Monobear was putting cloudy thoughts in their minds. If it weren’t for him, we’d all still be working to get out of here.”

“You misunderstand his role. He is not our Judas, but our Messiah. Everything will be easier once you all come to this realization.”

“For the last time, man, SHUT UP! I tried to give you the benefit of the doubt, but now I think you’re just crazy. I love these guys more than you can imagine, and hell if I let anything happen to them—including you! So if you try to do anything to stir up trouble, I swear that I will tie you up just like we did to your friend.”
“What a fitting end that would be for me.”

“And if that’s too much to your liking, then maybe we’ll tie you up and force you to come to a party like the one we threw for Jenny. Except not actually terrible.”

“Oh, so you are the All-Star Despair, then. Otherwise you never would have proposed such a gruesome ultimatum.”

“I am the farthest thing from All-Star Despair, and don’t you forget it! Gah! You’ve gotten me all riled up! You know what, I’m going to take this model train kit just to try to vent out my frustrations!”

Slyly, Cody nabbed the nearest kit to himself, and began to march out of the Hobby Shop.

Markus, his face still turned unfathomably toward the wall, called out after him, “Do as you please, but know that none of us can escape from who we are, and thus why we’re here.”
Chapter 4--The Active and the Passive--Part 5

At thirty minutes to Night Time, the students were in various degrees of preparing for the night, thus it was the perfect time for Monobear to force them to the food court. The PA system clicked on, and the robotic voice issued out. “You babies aren’t asleep yet, right? Then get your butts over to the food court pronto! I won’t say it again! Get your butts over to the food court pronto!”

The students, frustrated and annoyed at the inconvenience, did as they had been told. Austin, Jordan, Rufus, and Markus had not made any significant strides toward bedtime, but the others did. Having just stepped out of the shower, Lily’s hair hung flat against her back. During the day, her voluminous hair accentuated her big, bubbly personality, but now wet, her shorter stature was more noticeable. Taylor had also stepped out of the shower recently, but she tried to keep her face hidden from the boys; they should never see her without her make-up. Jenny was retying her apron so that she could look respectable in front of her peers. She had undone her ponytail, but she could not get her hair back together easily, so her hat sat haphazardly on her head. Theo had only removed his hat and vest, but he squinted at everyone after removing his contacts. Cody arrived wearing nothing but his shorts, and he was not abashed in the slightest. In contrast, Rico appeared in zip-up footy pajamas.

As easy as it would have been to comment upon their modified appearances, the students held back out of respect for one another. Monobear, on the other hand, was having a hoot at their expense. Once he got over the sight of them, the bear returned to business.

“Alright you stupid idiots, your garb has made me feel slightly better, but I’m still in one foul mood. You know what will really cheer me up though? Another murder among friends! So now I’m sure you know that you’ve got another motive coming your way, and in this regard, you’re absolutely correct! But it’s a tough business coming up with good reasons for you to murder each other. I think you can forgive my lack of originality this time around, though. After all, I am the great Monobear.

“I’ve decided to revamp an old classic! When you return to your rooms, you’ll find an envelope containing a message, and that message will depict your deepest, darkest secret. Wouldn’t it be terrible if someone else knew what you want nobody to know? I know, it is terrible! So terrible that you won’t have a choice but to kill someone, because there’ll be another envelope in your room as well! In this second one, you will find one of your classmate’s secrets, and you will also be told who has been given yours.

“Now I’m sure you’re all wondering, ‘But Monobear, when someone’s killed, it’ll be obvious that they were killed because of the secret they were holding; it’ll be obvious who the murderer is.’ Ah, you simple-minded nitwits, I have already thought of that! From here on out, I am instituting a new school rule: you can only discuss secrets with people who already know them. So no going around and figuring out who’s got whom; only worry about yourselves!

“I’ll just let all that sink in for now. Upupu. I can see the exasperation on your pointless little faces. I have a good feeling about this one. In any case, it’s almost Night Time, so you better get your butts into bed. Good night, and sweet dreams!”

Monobear disappeared, and the students were once more left alone. They exchanged cursory glances before returning to their rooms. Just as Monobear had predicted, there were two envelopes resting on the dressers of each student. Apprehensively, each student opened their letters; their reactions were mixed.
Rufus was filled with fury; how the hell did Monobear find this out? Lily was incredibly embarrassed that someone knew what she had done, Markus was indifferent, and Austin was ashamed. Jordan had moved past her secret, but she couldn’t stomach the fact of who was also in possession of her secret; Jenny’s reaction was the exact opposite. If the other secrets were of the same scale as Rico’s, then the Marathon Runner couldn’t imagine why anyone would kill over this; whereas, Theo became suspicious of everyone. Cody’s secret really wasn’t a secret anymore, but Taylor’s very well was. Having to remember what darkness hid inside her, the Lucky burst into tears.

The students wished that Monobear had just made the mall cold again.
Despite the new annoyance, mall life continued for the students. Night fell, and somewhere in the interim, it grew into day, and the cycle started all over. There were relationships to build, plans to hatch, and decisions to make.

Rufus didn’t so much trick Cody as he did politely ask him for assistance. It was tiresome to carry all his books from the Bookstore to the Lounge over and over, so Rufus engendered the perfect solution. After much deliberation, the Latinist had found an ideal recliner in the Furniture Store. The only problem was that it was in the Furniture Store and not in the Bookstore. With the aid of the Waterskier, though, that issue could quickly be remedied. This excursion also gave Rufus a chance to recruit Cody for the Executive Committee.

“Are you sure you’ve got a hold of it?” asked Rufus.

“Pshaw, this thing ain’t heavy. I bet even Lily could take care of this thing!” Holding the recliner in a massive bear hug, Cody carefully navigated the labyrinthine Furniture Store.

Regardless, Rufus had no intention of handling the furniture in the slightest. “If you’re sure you don’t need my assistance, then I won’t get in your way.”

Cody was a bit surprised when Rufus first approached him. Throughout their stay, the Latinist had not said much to the Waterskier. It was obvious that they came from different worlds: Rufus represented the mind and Cody the body. But if they had any intention of leaving this place, then they would have to put their differences aside and learn to work together. “Any idea how we’re supposed to get this up to the North Sector?”

“It would be easiest just to cut through the dorms, unless the chair’s too large to fit through the door.”

“And in that case?”

“Up the stairs and through the food court.”

“You want me to carry this thing up those steps?”

“You said you didn’t need any assistance.”

“Dude, what did I even do to deserve such a great friend?”

“Well, that opens up a proper vein of discussion. I am most appreciative for your help in this endeavor. In fact, your performance in this mall has been exemplary, and your kindness has not gone unnoticed.”

“Uhh, why do I feel like you’re going to ask me to do something else once we’re done with this?”

“There’s no need to be suspicious; it doesn’t become you. Let me cut to the chase, so to speak. I’m devising an Executive Committee to find and identify our class’s Liar, and I want you to be one of our leading members.”

“I’m in.”
“Now I’m sure you have a myriad of questions, and I will—quid? Did you say you’re in?”

“Yeah, dude, totally. If I can help in any way to get us out of here, then you can bet your ass I will.”

“Vero? Just like that? You don’t even know anything about the organization yet.”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

“I could be asking you to risk your life for all you know.”

“I’d die a thousand times if it meant just getting one person out of here.”

“Non dicis. This was a frightening ordeal when I was trying to recruit Trevor.”

“Who’s Trevor?”

“Trevor. Scis, the Map-Maker.”

“Dude, that’s Theo. Thee-oh.”

“Whatever, nescioquid.”

“Do you still not know everybody’s names?”

“Nonsense, of course I know all your names. We have been trapped here for an extensive period of time.”

“Prove it.”

“Quid?”

“Tell me the names of the ten people living in this mall.”

“I don’t see how that will accomplish anything.”

“Alright, here’s the dealio: tell me their names or I won’t join your group.”

“Hmm…I knew you would put up some resistance eventually. Eheu, it appears that I have no other option.”

“Waiting.”

“Alright, alright. Obviously, there’s me, and I know my own name. Next would be you, and then there’s—”

“And my name is…?”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“I guess you just don’t want me that badly.”

“Only the foolish wouldn’t want you. Of course I know your name; it’s written across your face. You are, without a doubt, uhh…Christopher.”

“Cody, dude, my name is Cody.”
“Ita, I was just testing you. You’re a sly one, Chrī—Cody.”

“That’s two. You still have eight more.”

“Next would be Tre—Theo. And then there’s Rico. Which leaves Antony and Marcell. That’s all the boys. As far as the girls go, we have Jackie and Josephine. Oh, how could I ever forget about Lucille. And last, but not least, is Trista.”

“Dude, that was bogus.”

“Preposterous.”

“You got Theo, but that’s only cuz we just talked about him. Somehow you got Rico, but the rest were just Wrongsville. The other guys are Austin and Markus, and then the girls are Jordan, Jenny, Lily, and Taylor.”

“Who has time to learn such intimate details about a person?”

“I did. On day one. What’s your excuse?”

“I’ve…I’ve had more important things to do…”

“Like what? Hiding away and reading your books?”

Rufus turned his face and brushed Cody off with a wave of the hand.

“Dude, the reason you haven’t learned our names is because you haven’t bothered to get to know us.”

“Well, you louts haven’t bothered to get to know me any, so why should I be forced to make the first move?”

“You don’t exactly put yourself in a position to be approached, always with your face in a book or glaring at somebody.”

The Latinist scoffed half-heartedly.

“You gotta learn to be a team player or else no one is gonna want to join your committees.”

“Hmm.”

“Well, looks like we’re here. Now where do you want the chair at?”

“Umm, over there, by that stack of books, if you will.”

“Coolio. Anything else?”

“N-no, that was all, gratias.”

“Awesome. I’ll check you later then.”

“Ita. I shall see you around. Perhaps we should talk some other time again, Co-dy.”

“Yeah, dude, definitely.”

Cody left Rufus alone in the Bookstore. The Latinist grabbed the volume he had been translating and sat down on his new throne. His eyes skimmed over the letters and symbols, but his
Theo sat upright on the couch, and Jordan lay across the couch, her thighs on top of his. They had been talking all afternoon, and Jordan’s mouth was beginning to ache from smiling and laughing so much. Her eyes were full of vivacity, and she felt content with the universe. At the moment, she wasn’t concerned in the slightest that someone knew what no one else did.

Theo had also relaxed greatly. The realization that someone knew his secret had shot his nerves, but Jordan was able to calm him back down. In the dark atmosphere surrounding the mall, each illuminated the path of the other. It seemed inappropriate to find such a form of happiness in such an unlucky circumstance, but the beauty of that bliss was difficult to contest.

Theo had his arms wrapped around her knees, and he was absently tracing circles on her Capris. Why had it taken over two weeks and three trials for these two to finally notice each other? “Why has it taken over two weeks and three trials for us to finally notice each other?” asked Theo.

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“It’s just a little queer, don’t you think?”

“Theo, is there something on your mind?”

“W-what? N-no.”

“Theo. I know that face. You’re thinking something. Spit it out.”

“Well…”

“Come on. Be a big boy, use your big-boy words.”

“It’s just…would this have happened out there? On the outside. If we weren’t trapped in here, would we have ever fallen for each other?”

“…you’ve thought about this a lot already. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I really want to think—to believe—that we would have. But I just don’t know.”

“You think too much sometimes, you know that?”

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do. But I think that’s better than the alternative.”

“So…what do you think? Would we have, or am I just going crazy in here?”

“You want to know what I think?”

“Yes.”

“You really want to know what I think?”

“Y-yes.”
“I don’t think it matters.”

“Huh?”

“It doesn’t matter. Who cares about ‘what would have happened?’ We can live in hypotheticals all day, but that won’t have any bearing on reality. The fact of the matter is: we’re here. Why bother ourselves with any other impossible option?”

“You make me feel so stupid sometimes—but in a good way.”

“Oh, honey, it’s not your fault. You’re a boy; you were born stupid.”

“Uhh, ouch.”

“Sorry. Not really, but, whatever. I think I’ve been hanging out with Taylor too much…”

“Yeah, that does sound like something she would say.”

“She’s not exactly the greatest advocate for feminism.”

“Is anyone here?”

“Good point. For as diverse a group as we are, we’re really very uniform.”

“How do you mean?”

“Doesn’t it seem like we’re too similar? Maybe it’s because we’ve been spending so much time together, but it feels like our personalities are all melting into one collective unit, like we’re losing our individualities.”

“I don’t think we’re losing what makes us unique; I think we’re embracing it. We’re finally recognizing that with our combined abilities we can accomplish such great things. We’re going to get out of here, Jordan.”

“That’s reassuring to hear.”

“Yeah, in fact, Rufus is putting together a plan to smoke out All-Star Despair.”

“Oh? I haven’t heard of this plan.”

“You haven’t? He said he only wanted the best and brightest in the Executive Committee; I’m surprised he hasn’t talked to you yet.”

“Oh, I’m not. Who else does he have in this ‘Executive Committee’?”

“Well, for starters, Cody—”

“Cody?! He would ask that meathead before me? The nerve of that guy!”

“Calm down, I’m sure he’ll talk to you soon enough.”

“No, you see, he won’t. I’ve encountered people like Rufus all my life; I know his kind, and I know exactly what he will and will not do.”

“Jordan…”

“He’s self-interested and egotistical; he hasn’t even bothered to learn our names and we’ve
been here for *how long*? If anyone here deserves to be murdered, it’s that asshole!”

“Jordan, don’t say things like that! No one deserves to die.”

“That kid just rubs me in the wrongest way.”

“I’ve never seen you like this. What could he possibly have done to you?”

“Well, you see, it’s—God this is embarrassing. Okay, so maybe in the first few days we got here, I might have had a little crush on Rufus.”

“Oh?”

“Ugh, what was I thinking? That first day, he pulled Melissa and I aside—oh God, Melissa—and he said things. He said he liked how I thought, that he liked me for my brain. That was such a refreshing thing to hear. I thought he was different. But then the thing with Francesca and Delilah happened, and he solved that murder all by himself. I didn’t help enough apparently, so he categorized me as useless, a lost cause. I had never been so insulted in my life.”

“Jordan, do you think you’re maybe blowing things out of proportion?”

“Absolutely not! If we continue to indulge Rufus, it won’t be long before we’re obeying his every whim. I won’t let myself sink to that level.”

“Don’t do anything rash.”

“Me? Rash? You act as if you don’t even know me. No, I’ll act as civil as possible.”

“Now I can see the wheels turning in *your* head.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve decided to invite myself into that little committee meeting of yours.”

“Just promise you’ll be civil.”

“I’ll be the epitome of class and decorum.”

Markus just appeared. He hadn’t been there a moment ago, and now here he was. Poof! Instant Thespian. Lily had no idea that actors had the ability to manifest wherever they chose. Maybe she would pursue an acting career now so that she could travel to the anime world. Maybe Markus would be willing to teach her his secrets!

Lily hopped off the dance machine and ran over to the Thespian. “Markus-kun! What are you doing here?”

Markus thought he could hide in the Arcade. The best hiding place was out in public, and there were no other shops as ostentatious and loud as the Arcade. But solitude would not find him here. “Hello, Lily. I did not realize you were here.”

“Heehee, you silly. I’ve been here ever since the Arcade opened up. Except for a couple of times when I wasn’t. But what about you? Why are you here?”

“I thought I could sink into the shadows of this neon coliseum.”

“Why would you want to do that?”
“So that I could make my external appearance match the chaos swirling in my heart.”

“Omigosh! Me too! There just aren’t enough bows for people to know who I truly am!”

“One day those bows will disintegrate into nothing but dust, forgotten for what they ever were—nothing but superficial accessories.”

“Then I’ll just have to buy some more! Or maybe I’ll get some more pins to put on my clothes. Or maybe I’ll find more dangly bracelets. You know, I don’t think I’ve gotten my belly button pierced yet.”

“You seek a false truth by mutilating your given appearance.”

“Yup! Humans are cute and all, but they can always be cuter, desu!”

“You go against the laws and constraints of nature.”

“Nature’s kinda icky. Too much dirt, not enough Wi-Fi.”

“Does none of this bother you?”

“Why should it?”

“Because we place fictitious images of reality in front of our eyes, but once they are removed, the sight we’re forced to see disturbs us to no end.”

“Nani? There’s something in front of my face? But I can’t see it.”

“Your naïveté offers you meager protection.”

“Arigatou.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“But I’ll take it as one anyway.”

“You poor deluded creature.”

“Hey, Markus, do you wanna dance a couple songs with me? I bet you’re really good since you’re an actor and all.”

“Nothing would fill me with more abject misery.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s jam!”

“I was declining your invitation.”


“It is merely a temporary distraction from the oppression of existence.”

“Blah blah blah. Just dance with me already.”

“No.”

“Aww, c’mon, don’t be such a party-pooper!”
“I will not dance.”

“Pleeeeeease?”

“No.”

“But why not?”

“It is a ridiculous, pointless, mundane, trivial, inconsequential activity…”

“Ugh, you’re so boring.”

“Excuse me?”

“B-O-R-E-I-N-G. Boring! You keep saying dumb stuff, but it doesn’t mean anything. You can talk your silly talk until your lips turn blue, but it won’t mean anything unless you actually do something. Sulking won’t make anyone listen to you; they’ll just think you’re weird.”

“Lily, that was quite a lucid thing to say.”

“Was it? I zoned out about halfway through.”

“How can you be so cheerful?”

“I’m cheerful for the same reason that you like to play in the dark: I know that the world is a bright, happy place, so I embrace that will all my being.”

“You are wrong; the world is a dark, depressing place.”

“Nope, bright and happy.”

“Dark and depressing.”

“Bright and happy, desu.”

“Dark and depressing.”

“Bright and happy!”

“Dark and depressing.”

“Dark and depressing!”

“So you admit it?”

“Oops, nope. I thought I could trick you into admitting that it was bright and happy. I saw that in a cartoon once; it was funny, desu.”

“That’s childish.”

“But it made me smile.”

“Hmm…it is not worth the excessive energy to try to continue this fruitless conversation.”

“So you’re going to dance with me now instead?!”?

“No. I’m going to leave. May you find peace in your desolate delusion.”
“Okeydokey. If you ever want to dance, you know where to find me.”

Without a word more, Markus disappeared into the shadows; Lily danced to the next song.

Jenny was enjoying herself in the mall. Despite the magnitude of her secret, she wasn’t about to let anything drag her mood down. Through the grapevine, she had learned that Austin was putting together a little yearbook of everyone in the mall. Now that she was a tried and true member of the class, she felt a responsibility to contribute what she could to the noble endeavor.

The Sandwich Artist found the Idle in the Laundromat of all places. He was sprawled out on the dryers, watching the spinning machinations of the washers. He was entranced by the cyclical motion of the metallic box, and it took him more than a moment to register Jenny’s presence. He looked toward her and raised an eyebrow.

“Are you doing laundry?” asked Jenny innocently.

“Yawn, nuh-uh.”

“Oh? Then what are you doing?”

“Watching the water go around and around.”

“Is it that interesting?”

“Take a seat and see for yourself.”

Jenny hopped onto an empty dryer and joined Austin in his spectating. After an interlude of comfortable silence, Jenny was bored out of her mind; there was a reason why people dumped their clothes in the machines and walked away. She glanced over at the Idle, but he was as content to stay as ever. “Have you been here long?”

“I don’t know. What time is it?”

“A little after three last I checked.”

“I’ve been here for three hours already? Time just flies by.”

“Oh. Austin, may I ask you a question?”

“You just did.”

“Oh, then may I ask you two questions?”

“Your total number of questions has now reached ‘two.’”

“Umm, is it alright if I ask you four questions?”

“I can’t find a proper reason to object.”

“How is your yearbook coming along? Can I help in any way?”

“Jenny, that’s five questions.”

“I am apologizing. I did not mean to overstep my boundaries.”
“It’s fine, you’re fine, no need to worry.”

“So…”

“Sigh. Yeah…about the yearbook…it hasn’t developed much in recent time.”

“Oh? How come?—if you do not mind my asking.”

“Hmm…a number of reasons, I guess. First, I’m really not much for doing things, if you haven’t noticed.”

“I have.”

“So I asked some people to help out. The first was Melissa, and, well, you know. And I haven’t had a chance to talk to Theo about it since. And I thought Elizabeth might be able to help out, but…”

“I see. So you have given up?”

“I think so.”

“I am sorry to be hearing that.”

“It’s no biggie. These things happen. If we got hung up about every little idea, we’d never get anywhere. Some plans just aren’t meant to come to fruition.”

“That is sad, though. You do not have any regrets?”

“Have you been talking to Lily? Duh, of course you have. But you two have been asking some rather poignant questions of me lately.”

“Umm, I am not sure if I follow correctly.”

“I don’t tend to regret things, as weird as that sounds. One moment just sorta flows into the next.”

“I wish I could get over things that quickly.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. It leaves you feeling numb a lot. When was the last time you saw me really excited?”

“I…I do not recall.”

“Neither do I.”

“I am sorry, that is so sad.”

“Ehh, I’m over it. I’ve accepted that part of me. We’re not all perfect, so we shouldn’t beat ourselves up about every little thing.”

“You say many wise things, just like someone I used to know…”

“You and Lily really have been talking…who’s this other wise person?”

“I-I cannot say. Now is not the time. I am sorry; I misspoke. I should have stayed quiet.”

“No, be yourself. If you say something, own that thing. No regrets, remember?”
“I… I am sorry…”

“You hold yourself back a lot, Jenny. You’re afraid of giving people a reason to dislike you instead of a reason to like you. But we can all see that you have a heart of gold, so there’s no reason for you to feel abashed about yourself.”

“Austin… thank you.”

“Yawn, it’s nothing, don’t mention it.”

“I am glad that I get to know you.”

“And I you, madame.”

“Tehe.”

“Jenny, did you just giggle?”

“Umm, you did not ask for permission before asking that question.”

“There’s that beautiful smile.”

“Austin, if you ever need to talk for real about anything, I will allow you to ask me questions.”

“Thanks, Jenny.”

“I suppose that I shall be going now.”

“Do me a favor and give me another spin cycle before you go?”

“It would be my pleasure.” Jenny selected the most extravagant washing routine she could think of and, with a light skip in her step, she walked out of the Laundromat. Austin kept his eyes glued to the machine. These girls were something else.

When Taylor found Rico, she did not approach him at first. They had not had a pleasant start, but he was willing to look past that unpleasantness. Even though they agreed to put that behind them, Taylor questioned what their relationship was. She was practically siblings with Cody and Austin, and now Jordan was like a sister, but what about the other six students? She and Rufus did not get along, and she had so little in common with Jenny and Lily. Theo was nice enough, but they could never get a conversation to last for an extended period of time. Markus? Eww. Which left her with Rico.

Rico had played enough video games for the day. His eyes were sore from the flashing screens, and he was finding it hard to think clearly. Whenever his mind clouded over like this, he would go for a long run, and thankfully the Gym’s treadmills were sturdy machines. During his marathons, the only thing he would think about was the innate rhythm of his breathing. In, out; in, out. After the first mile or so, his body would realize that it was pointless to send pain signals to his brain, and so he would hit “muscle euphoria;” so long as he didn’t stop, he could go on forever. The only thing that could snap him out of his reverie was the thirst of dehydration.

After watching Rico for a few minutes, Taylor’s legs began to hurt. The Marathon Runner made it look so easy. Taylor always managed to get out of running the mile in Gym class. That
wasn’t to say that she was un-athletic, just that she didn’t feel the need to torture herself with bland running.

Taylor could watch no more, so she called out to Rico. “Hey, Rico.” The Marathon Runner did not respond. “Uhh, Rico? Hello?” Still nothing. “Is anybody home?” Rico’s focus was so definitive that he was completely unaware of Taylor’s attempts to grab his attention. She wasn’t going to stop, though.

“So, Rico, listen. I know we cleared the air earlier and all, but I just want to check in with you. It’s been pretty crazy in here lately. You okay? I’m glad the temperature’s back to normal; this girl does not do cold. But now we’re all mixed up in this ‘secret’ business. It’s so totally lame! I mean, like, really!

“I don’t know about everyone else, but my secret doesn’t define me. If you didn’t know me, but you knew my secret, then you would think I’m someone who I’m not. I can’t stand when people don’t see you for who you are. Like, hello? I’m standing right here? How can you not see me? It’s not that hard to get to know each other.

“But I always worry about what others think of me. I know they always say ‘it doesn’t matter what other people say,’ but it totally does! Like, if someone were a serial killer for instance. Okay, maybe that was a lame example, but you get my point. If you live in your own little world, then you’re not doing yourself any favors.

“I guess what I’m getting at is that I just want everyone to know me, the real me. I’m not just a pretty face. And I’m most certainly not what I once was. I’ve…I’ve come a long way. I couldn’t live with myself if I were still that person. Ugh, am I even making sense anymore? What do you think about me, Rico? What is your impression of who I am?”

Throughout her entire soliloquy, Rico was only focused on his breathing. Taylor was getting frustrated that he kept ignoring her. She walked over to his treadmill and gave it a slight kick to get him to notice her. The impact jostled Rico just enough to bring him back to reality. He was surprised to see Taylor in the Gym; she didn’t look very happy. He was also surprised how thirsty he was.

“Yo-o, Taylor, wassup?”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“What do you think of me?”

What was she asking that for? What did he think of her? Rico thought a lot of things about Taylor. She was easily the prettiest girl in the mall. She could act like a witch sometimes, but she meant well underneath. But for what possible reason could she need Rico’s interpretation of her person? As the possibilities ran through Rico’s mind, he kept coming back to the notion that she had feelings for Rico. That made his face light up red. “I, uhh, I’m not sure…” Boy was he getting nervous; it was a good thing he was already sweaty.

“How are you not sure? We’ve been together for who knows how long. Obviously you have at least some idea about me. So spill it!”

“Err, I, uhh…”

“Rico!”
“I think you’re a pretty swell gal.”

“A swell gal. You think I’m a swell gal.”

“Yeah, you’re easy to get along with. I don’t think anyone here dislikes you—in fact, I can’t even imagine that being a thing.”

“You’re just saying that.”

He was. “I’m not! I mean it. There are so many worse people that we could be trapped with. It’s nice to be able to spend my time with someone cool like you.”

“Oh, Rico. You always know how to cheer me up. You’re, like, such a sweetheart.”

“Thanks! Hey, is there, uhh, anything else you want to ask me?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“You’re sure there’s nothing else on your mind?”

“No, you pretty much cleared it all up for me.”

“Cuz I’ll answer any question you might have, regardless of whatever.”

“Oh, yeah, I do have one.” Rico’s heart began pounding. “Do you know where Cody is? I want to ask him some similar questions.” Rico’s heart dropped.

“I think I saw him carrying some furniture somewhere.”

“Carrying furniture? I’ll never understand him. He can be such a dork sometimes.”

“Yeah…”

“And so can you. But you’re good dorks; it’s what I love about you guys: lovable dorks.” Rico’s heart was jumping up and down again. “Anyway, I gotta get out of here before someone thinks I actually exercise.”

“Alright, I won’t keep you against your will.”

Taylor began to leave the Gym, but she stopped and turned back to Rico. “Thanks, Rico, for what you said. I’d come over there and hug you, but you’re all gross and sweaty. You understand.”

“It’s no prob, Taylor.”

“I’ll see you around.”

Rico watched her go. That pretty girl was like a one-sided enigma, and Rico didn’t even care that that analogy didn’t make any sense.
Chapter 4--The Active and the Passive--Part 7

The students had been through hell, and they were in no hurry to return. Monobear may have threatened them by dispersing their most clandestine secrets, but that would not incite them to murder each other. And so the sixteenth day drew to a peaceful close, and the seventeenth began in a similar manner.

Taylor was a good person. Rico verified this fact himself. Now, Taylor just needed to make sure that everyone remained of this opinion. She was aware that she had been neglecting some of her fellow classmates, so it was time to remedy that situation, starting with Jenny. Jordan was right: the girls needed to stick together.

Poor Jenny was so pale. Granted, they had been shut indoors breathing the same stale air for two and a half weeks, but Taylor somehow found time to keep her complexion in tip-top shape. The Lucky always set aside time for tanning under the huge sky light in the food court. For reasons that Taylor didn’t like to think about, the sun shone so brightly every day. The only time that the sky light did not offer a beneficially solar view was during the last two days of the mall freeze. Regardless, it was one of the few escapes back to the world outside.

Taylor arranged chairs in the middle of the food court so that the girls might recline during their tanning expedition. It felt wrong to use sunglasses after James’s disappearance, and so the girls kept their eyes shut so as not to be blinded by the sun’s rays. Taylor could feel the waves of relaxation roll over her. As her body warmed up and the tension in her muscles abated, her mind began to fade away. As her mental functions were shutting down and she approached sleep, Jenny brought her back with a single question.

“Is there anything special I should be doing?” asked the Sandwich Artist.

“Anything special? We’re just tanning; you don’t have to do anything other than lie still.”

“Should not I, umm, have more of my clothes off?”

“If you really want to, I guess. You only need to tan whatever skin people will end up seeing. Which for me is almost everything, but if you’re gonna keep wearing what you’re wearing, then you don’t need to worry about it.”

“Do you think I should at least take off my hat?”

“Hmm…if it’s causing you discomfort. What you need is the UV rays to tan your skin, so you can still tan if you’re in the shade. Just do whatever makes you feel most comfortable.”

“What about lotion? Should we have some kind of ointment to put on us to expedite the process?”

“Who’s the expert here?”

“Umm, you are.”

“Exactly. So don’t you worry your pretty little head; just leave everything up to me.”

“So then we just tan now?”

“Mmm-hmm.”
“How do we know when we have finished?”

“Oh, you’ll know.”

“Tanning is…umm…kind of boring…”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it’s not so much boring as it is relaxing. Your main goal is to treat your skin, yeah, but the secondary goal is to just relax. Let your mind wander. I love it; it’s a great stress reliever.”

“You do not seem like the stressed type to me.”

“Oh, when you’re as popular as I am, every day is just one stress-fueled thing leading to another. Honestly, if I didn’t tan, I’d’ve had a mental breakdown ages ago.”

“I had no idea.”

“What about you, Jenny? What do you normally do to relax?”

“I cannot say that I feel the need to relax very often.”

“Shut up. No way!”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, I just find that hard to believe. How can you avoid stress?”

“Umm, well, my life is just not very stressful, I think.”

“Surely you must encounter some stress.”

“Sometimes at the sandwich shop we run out of napkins, but that is a problem for the manager to take care of.”

“Hey, tell me about this sandwich shop. I mean, that is your talent after all.”

“There is not too much to tell. I make sandwiches there.”

“C’mon, you can do better than that. You have to be, like, the premier chef at that place.”

“There are just a few other workers and then our managers and the owner. I was very torn about accepting the invite to Success Summit because it meant leaving them.”

“What convinced you?”

“They did, in the end. They said that it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As much as they wanted me to stay and work, they did not want me to waste my life away in the small shop.”

“That’s so sweet of them. They must really care about you.”

“And I care about them. Many people come to the store just so I can make them their lunch. Without me, I thought the shop would not be able to keep business…so I declined the invitation to our school.”

“But wait, you are here now.”

“They…they threatened to fire me if I did not leave. I did not like that they were
threatening to take my job from me, but, looking back, I see that they only did what they did for me.”

“Jenny, this might be a really personal question, so you don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to, but why do you work at the shop anyway? It sounds like you work there a lot, like, way more than a high school student should.”

“Well the owner…he was very kind to me. Very generous. I did not have much—anything, for that matter. And he helped me when no one else would. So working in his shop was the easiest way to pay him back.”

“I think I’m starting to understand. What happened that left you in such a position.”

“Umm…you said that I did not have to answer if I did not want to…”

“I’m sorry, I was just curious. I’m glad you shared what you did with me.”

“It was…nice, to talk about it for once, instead of keeping it to myself.”

“We’re all friends, here, Jenny. We can tell each other anything.”

“But not everything. The secrets…”

“Gah! These stupid secrets! If it weren’t for that new rule, I would’ve fessed up to everyone by now.”

“Oh, m-me too.”

“Ugh. Best not to think about it. Let’s just relax and keep working on our tans.”

“That is sounding like a wonderful idea.”

Only a few more hours were left. In a few more hours, the elite members of the mall would gather to oust the identity of the Liar. The mall was finally on the path toward success. Rufus had taken pains to perfect his plan, and there were only a few loose strings to be tied up. He had successfully convinced Theo and Cody to join him. It hadn’t taken much, but he had also persuaded Jenny to join them—in fact, it was imperative to have her.

Now he just had to deal with Rico. It wouldn’t be fair to ignore him, after all, they were friends. Despite his enthusiasm, Rico wasn’t known for his stellar problem-solving skills. He meant well, but there were others with more expertise than him. Still, the Latinist could use the Marathon Runner to his own advantage.

The four major members would meet at 10:30 in the Furniture Store. Rufus could imagine it perfectly. He was busily arranging the furniture for an ideal discussion in his mind when Rico turned up, just as Rufus had asked him.

“Yo-o, Rufus! What did you wanna see me about?”

“Ahh, Rico, I’m glad you’re here. Ita. I have urgent business to discuss with you.”

“O-oh?”

“Yes. Tonight, in this very room, Success Summit’s Executive Committee will be meeting.
Our goal will be to strip the Liar of their false title. Now, I have asked only the best and the brightest to join this prestigious group.”

Rico’s heart started pounding. He had been waiting his entire life for a moment like this. Rufus, a leader among leaders, was going to extend an invitation to him, Rico, to become a major player in this game. From here on out, everything would fall in Rico’s favor. But he couldn’t let his excitement get the best of him; he would have to play it cool for now. “That’s pretty cool.”

“With regard to this meeting, I have something of incredible import to ask of you.”

“Shoot.”

“I need you, Rico, to not be there.”

That didn’t sound like an invitation. “Wait, huh?”

“I need you to not be there. This project has been in the works for a few days now, and it’s possible that the Liar has caught wind of it. Now that we’re finally meeting, the Liar may do something rash. This is where you come in.”

“But what am I supposed to do? You already said you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want you here. I need you to gather everyone who isn’t in the group and keep a close eye on them. Watch for any suspicious behavior, anything out of the ordinary. If we have two groups focusing intently on the same thing, then our percentage of success is even greater.”

“This feels like a copout…”

“Nonsense. I have gone through the scenarios, and this is our best possible option.”

“Shouldn’t we just have all ten of us come together and talk?”

“It is a strange phenomenon, but it seems that as more of us gather, the worse our sense of focus becomes. I assure you, this is the ideal way of going about this business.”

“So why are you telling me this? I could be the Liar, and then your whole plan would be for nothing. I’m not so sure you’ve thought this through.”

“That was a very calculated thing you said right there, Rico. How many of our classmates have that same level of reasoning?”

“Plenty of them! And if I’m so special, then why aren’t I already in your committee meeting?”

“Because I need your skills elsewhere.”

“No, you just want to pretend that you do so that you don’t hurt my feelings!”

“Rico, I would never do such a thing.” Maybe the Latinist should have recruited Rico over Cody.

“Yeah you would. This is all for your own ego; you just want to feel important.”

“Rico, where is this coming from?”

“It’s what everyone says about you! You care only about yourself. You’re almost as bad as
Elizabeth. At least she *pretended* to like people."

"Rico, that hurts me."

"I try to ignore what everyone says about you because you’re my friend, but I have to wonder if what they say is true. You’re just using me. Geez, I bet I’m the only friend you have because no one could take as much pity on you!"

"You…you pity me…?"

"You have no social skills, Rufus. You’re boring, and mean, and you just have a bad personality. Are you surprised that no one likes you?"

Rufus hung his head and looked at the ground.

"Well, huh, are you?"

"…no. I’m not. I am not surprised in the least. I am acutely aware of how people feel about me, Rico. That is why I wanted to devise this Executive Committee, to show everyone that I did care about them. But I guess it’s too late to change everyone’s minds. If you don’t want to be my friend, I won’t blame you. You can leave now, if you want; I’ll understand."

"Gosh, and I thought I was pathetic! Before I go, answer me just one question: why did you ever pretend to be my friend."

"…because I can’t do this alone…"

"I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you."

"I said ‘Because I can’t do this alone.’"

"Do what alone?"

"This! This mall, this life, this world. I may try to act all aloof and in control on the outside, but I’m a mess on the inside. But I’ll be *damned* if I let anyone see that part of me!

"And then there’s you, Rico. You believe every word that everybody feeds you. You’re fast to trust and fast to make friends. I *envy* you for that. Yes, I am aware all too well that people don’t like me, but you—you stupid idiot—you don’t understand that people *do* like you. You’re completely oblivious to how many friends you have. I am *so* sorry that I ever deluded myself into thinking that I was worthy of being your friend. I apologize, and I apologize again! *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*!"

"…how long did it take you to rehearse that?"

"…you don’t believe me. Why am I not surprised…?"

"How can I be sure that you ever said something genuine to me?"

"…Cody pointed something out to me. I’m sure you’ve noticed that I have issues with remembering names, but never once have I forgotten yours. ‘Rico’ just seems to stick out clear as day in my mind for some reason. If you want that as proof, then take it. If not, then you can leave."

Rico hesitated. "…what do you want me to do?"

"What are you talking about?"
“Tonight, what is it that you need me doing?”

“Umm…gather the others together. Tell them you wanted to discuss the Liar. Make sure you watch them carefully.”

“So who do I need to snag?”

“You’re really asking me to remember their names? Let’s see…all the girls except for the one who solved the last case. You, and then the newly mopey kid and the tired boy.”

“So Taylor, Lily, Jordan, myself, Markus, and Austin?”

“That sounds about right.”

“Awesome.”

“Rico…are we…cool?”

Rico hesitated again. “Yeah, man. We’re cool. I guess I’ll leave you to whatever you were doing before.”

“Oh, I was already finished up. We can just hang for a while if you want, if you don’t mind.”

“Yo-o, that sound pretty chill.”

For some strange reason, Lily’s feet were incredibly sore and were causing her intense amounts of pain. She’d barely done any dancing today on account of it! She couldn’t think of any reason why her feet might be sore. The only logical thing she could imagine was that Monobear snuck into her room last night while she was sleeping and relentlessly tickled her toes. If that hadn’t happened, then she must have gotten abducted by aliens who were trying to figure out what human feet were for. Either way, she was being inconvenienced in a major way.

Not sure what to do with herself, Lily slunk around the mall looking for something to do that didn’t involve much lower body movement. But the available possibilities were endless; the mall was too big! By the time she encountered someone, her feet were too sore to take her any farther, so she had to settle on passing the day in the Video Store. At least Theo was there to keep her company.

With the Executive Committee meeting only a few hours away, Theo was busy analyzing all the data he could muster on his classmates. As a Cartographer, he understood how important the smallest details can be. Throughout their stay in the mall, he had surely noticed many of these things and stored them in the back of his mind; now he had to bring them to the front. That was easier said than done. He couldn’t easily recall someone’s behavior unless they were in front of him displaying said behavior. To get his brain in the right analytical state, he decided to rewatch his deceased classmates’ videos to pick up on their idiosyncratic behavior.

Francesca sat with such purposeful posture. Her entire demeanor suggested that she was paying close attention to whatever was going on, but she didn’t seem to be agitated by her constant vigilance. Delilah was much more relaxed, and she had a tendency to move in such a way that accented her palpably observable upper body. As a Politician, it was obvious that Melissa’s smile was faked the majority of the time, and yet it seemed so sincere all the same. She really must have convinced herself of her purpose. Randolph was as calm and collected as he ever was; his
demeanor hid all his occultist leanings. James was a peculiar case. His video was filled with his venomous speech, but he seemed happier, less stressed even. Perhaps the glimpse of him they had gotten was only a fraction of his entire personality. Lastly, Elizabeth put on such prestigious airs to delude her friends of her internal monologue, but that shell could crack so easily to display her true self.

Elizabeth’s video ended, and Theo still had no real enlightened idea about his fellow classmates. Unbeknownst to him, Lily had wandered in during Elizabeth’s soliloquy. It had only been a few days since the Kawaii had seen her BFF, but the emotional attachment, though disturbed, remained.

“She is a pretty girl,” said Lily flatly. Her words were directed toward Theo, but they fell through the air. “Or, was.”

Theo was surprised to find that he wasn’t alone. “Yes, she was,” he said. What was Lily doing here? She must have heard Elizabeth’s voice and wandered over. “You two were close.”

Lily thought about Theo’s statement. “I don’t know if we were.”

“But you spent so much time together.”

“Spending time with someone doesn’t mean you become close to them. We’ve been in this mall for a while, but sometimes it feels like we’re still strangers.”

“It’s a strange place, one that doesn’t exactly foster friendships.”

Lily was starting to perk up. “It doesn’t have to be, desu. We could make every day in here a party if we wanted to.”

Theo figured he might as well indulge Lily. “Is that so?”

“Definitely! It’s obvious that we’re all super cool human beings, so we should just act like it. Duh. I try to epitomize the epitome of kawaii with every breath I take, and that makes me super cool, desu.”

“Not all of us have such interesting talents. Have you ever seen a map that blew you away?”

“Nope, but that’s just because I’ve never seen one of your maps.”

“No, I’m afraid even my maps are pretty boring.”

“Then you should just make your maps more exciting!”

“Do you have any tips on how I can go about doing this?”

“Pff. I never run out of ideas. First thing: you have to have more cats. Cats are, like, the best animal. They’re super fierce hunters, and then they’re also little kawaii babies.”

“Not every place I go to has cats, though.”

“Then you’ll just have to bring them with you.”

“Duly noted.”

“Okay. Part two: rainbows. Maps are too boring when they’re just black lines of ugly
parchment. You need to spruce them up a little, desu, and the best way to introduce color is with tons and tons of rainbows.”

“Ooh, I like that; that’s a very good idea.”

“Puh-lease. This is just the top of the barrel. After you’ve introduced a substantial amount of rainbows, try adding some glitter. I’ve yet to meet someone who doesn’t like sparkles.”

“Might not the sparkles get in the way of reading the map?”

“Theo, there is a right way and a wrong way to use glitter. I think you’re smart enough to know the difference. Next tip: be more creative with the names. Who wants a map that takes them to Detroit or Ohio? Boring, desu! You need to make maps that take people to places with names like Alakbarbam or Mizziuku or Kawawakawa.”

“It’s kind of hard to make a map for a place that doesn’t actually exist.”

“Consider it to be a challenge to undertake, then.”

Theo continued to listen to Lily speak and speak about whatever popped into her head. Her endless enthusiasm was charming. During one of her lengthier speeches, Theo realized why he had such difficulty remembering things about people: they were too interesting. Whenever he was around the others, he was too absorbed in drinking in his classmates’ personas to pick out every little thing they did. His view of them was subjective, no longer objective. Now more than ever, he wanted to leave the mall, but he wanted to leave with his nine fellow classmates.

“Hey, Lily, how would you like to assist me in making a map?”

“Desu!! *Nipah!* I would be honored, desu! What shall we make it a map of?”

“I have been working on this one map of the mall—”

“Perfect! I’ll start thinking of ideas while you go and get it and fetch some supplies. Ooh… we’re gonna need a lot of glitter.”

“You want to work on it right now?”

“Why not? Have you got anything better to do?”

Theo did, but he didn’t feel like passing up the time to hang out with one of his friends. “Cool. I’ll be back in a flash.”

“Dude, why are we here?”

“Because I need your help.”

“But why me? Why not one of the girls? I bet Taylor would get a kick out of this.”

“*Yawn,* she’d just do what she wanted, not what I wanted.”

“And what do you want?”

“Well, I really like what you’ve got going on.”
“It ain’t much.”

“I think that’s why I like it.”

“Suit yourself, dude.”

It had been seventeen days since Austin had first woken up in the Mall of Monomerica, and he was becoming in desperate need of a haircut. Despite her obvious personality flaws, the Idle wished that Delilah were still around with her masterful skills. Austin liked to keep his hair at a certain length, but it could never be maintained there for long. He regularly went to the Beauty Parlor every two weeks for a touch up. Now his hair was taking on a mind of its own, and he needed that fixed.

Cody wasn’t entirely sure how he got roped into helping Austin with his haircut. As far as he was concerned, Austin looked perfectly presentable. Was a haircut really necessary? Cody never cared much about what his hair looked like. He was in the water so much that there was no point in styling it. The only reason he kept it long was so that the sun wouldn’t burn his forehead on a hot summer day.

“How do you get your hair to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Look so good. I’ll spend hours on my hair, and it’ll never look half as good as yours does.”

“I don’t have a secret; I don’t do anything with me.”

“I find that so hard to believe. Beautiful hair like that just doesn’t occur naturally.”

“I’m telling you, dude, my hair is the same when I wake up as it is when I go to bed.”

“I wish I had your good luck with that.”

“There’s no luck involved; it’s just how it is. You should give it a try.”

“Oh, I’ve tried that before. It was not a good decision.”

“So are we just gonna keep talking or do you want me to chop that hair off?”

“You can’t just chop it off. I need it to be delicately mended.”

“I’m telling you, you have the wrong dude.”

“I believe in you. You’d never do anything that would hurt me; you’re too good of a person.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it’s true. Don’t you like that?”

“Not really, brah. I think it’s weird when people say that kind of stuff to me.”

“It’s all true, though.”

“Whatever, you know. I still don’t like it. I don’t want people to tell me I’m a good person;
I just want to be a good person.”

“Hmm? What’s the difference?”

“I don’t really want people to know about the good things I do, cuz then they’ll think I’m doing it just to make myself look good. I don’t want that.”

“You don’t want to make a huge ordeal about helping others.”

“Exactly! I can’t stand people who say ‘doing service makes me feel good.’ Like, you’re doing crap that usually makes the people doing it feel bad, so you should feel bad. If you feel good, then there’s something wrong with you.”

“I can respect that. Why do we have to make such a big to-do about everything?”

“ Beats me. All that kind of stuff is way beyond me. While everyone’s discussing politics and all that, I’ll be out on the lake skiing.”

“And you’ll look good doing it.”

“That’s another thing: I don’t really care when people compliment me on my appearance. Like, dude, this is just how I look; what’s so special about it?”

“Oh, come on, don’t be preposterous. You are a fine looking young man; you probably have to beat the ladies off with a stick.”

“Dude, you’re coming on a little strong. Why can’t people like me for who I am instead of what I look like or what I do?”

“Because those things are used to define who you are.”

“I think we need to figure out different ways to define people.”

“Oh, I am all for that. I’m always looking for different ways to express myself. One time, I wore a sticker on my cheek all day just because I wanted to.”

“Whoa, man, calm down. Don’t go crazy.”

“I’ll try to control myself. What about you? What do you do to express yourself?”

“I dunno. I ski, I guess.”

“There’s got to be more to it than that. What about your shark-tooth necklace? Or your ear-piercing? Or your tribal tattoo?”

“Alright, alright, I get it. The necklace is for emergencies. You never know when you might need something sharp. Like if you get your foot tangled in some seaweed and need to saw it out. The ear-piercing’s something this girl I used to date had me do. She thought it made me look cute. We didn’t date for much longer after that. And the tat’s a sign of solidarity between me and my bros. Me and my skiing buds are practically family. I can’t wait to see their stupid faces again and hit the waves.”

“See, you do do things to express yourself.”

“I guess I just don’t think much of it.”
“That’s the beauty of it; you never do. It’s so much a part of who you are that you don’t even register it as being a part of you.”

“Alright, whatever. Am I giving you a haircut or not?”

“Well, are you ever going to actually cut my hair?”

“Only if I can use my necklace now.”

“Oh, I never should have said something about it. A shark’s tooth could never provide the accuracy with which my hair must be attended.”

“So you dragged me all the way here for nothing?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I got to get to know you a little better, so I’d say that it was time well spent.”

“Whatsoever you say, dude.”

As the duo walked out of the Salon to go pursue more manly activities, Cody gave Austin’s hair a ceremonious tussling. Austin just laughed and did the same back to the Waterskier.

Jordan had been feeling good over the past couple of days. There weren’t too many unique factors that could affect her in such a way, and so it wouldn’t be difficult to specify what had incited these feelings. A part of her was ashamed that just being in a relationship could make her feel so happy, but a greater part of her simply didn’t care. She never wanted to be one of those people whose entire life revolved around romance, but maybe there really was something behind all those movies and novels.

Markus, on the other hand, was at his wit’s end. Everyone was fighting him so fiercely. No matter how many times he announced that there was no point to anything, his classmates were insistent on doing something. He would try to refuse food, but they would force him to take it. No matter what course of action he took, they would advocate for the opposite. It was tirelessly frustrating.

Markus found Jordan browsing in the Bookstore. All the others were too happy; he may be able to persuade Jordan yet. All he needed was for one person to listen to him, to heed his words, and then the nihilism would spread to the farthest reaches of the mall. If they were lucky, they might even be able to suck Monobear into their Life of Mutual Nothingness. The thought almost put a smile on Markus’s face.

“I have been looking for you, Jordan,” said a voice morose and flat.

Jordan turned to see who had approached her. Markus, with his sunken eyes, pale skin, and vacant expression, nearly made her scream in fright. But she was above such a banal reaction. “Markus. What do you need?”

“I need for you to listen to me.”

“Well, I am talking to you right now.”

“It is one thing to talk, but another to listen. We talk so much in this mall, but do we ever truly say anything? And in that blather, is there anything worth listening to?”
“If you’re going to speak in riddles the entire time, I’m going to start ignoring you.”

“The truth is never straightforward.”

“Markus…”

“My apologies.”

“Just say what you want to already.”

“I want you to join me.”

“Join you in what?”

“You’re different than the others. I can see that, and I can appreciate that in a way that the others will never understand. You’re special.”

These words were familiar. Jordan wasn’t going to fall for any of Markus’s abject blandishments; every boy has an ulterior motive for his action. “Cut to the chase: what do you want from me.”

“I already told you: I want you to listen to me.”

“Then say something already. Stop talking in circles.”

“If that will please you, then here is what I have to say: we pretend that there is this thing called ‘light’ in our world, but it is only a soft, weak shade of darkness, and in that darkness is the essence of despair. Join me in despair, Jordan.”

“Markus, I say this as your classmate, and, by extension, your friend: I think you may be crazy. Not crazy in the sense that Lily is crazy, but crazy in the sense that unbalances in your body chemistry are affecting your brain.”

“The truth always sounds strange at first, but once you embrace it, then it is the greatest thing to ever feel and know.”

“Markus, I am listening to you, but I also want you to listen to me. I don’t think you’re in your right mind. You’re not dealing with the stress of being here in a healthy way; you need help.”

“I do not need help; I am the help. If you people would just listen to me, then you would see that I have only your best interests in mind.”

“How can despair be in our best interests?”

“If you’ll indulge me on a metaphor, I’ll tell you. Imagine that you’re in darkness, surrounded by darkness. You can’t see anything. But slowly, your eyes adjust to the darkness. You can make out the essence of what is around you. You don’t have exact knowledge, but you have real knowledge. Despair is the same way. Despair is the heart of darkness, but once you’re immersed in it long enough, you begin to make out other things, true things. All you have to do is give it a chance.”

“…why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re different. I know that you’ll listen to what I have to say. You know that the world is a dark, sinister place. I can see this truth reflected in your eyes. Embrace it. Join me. We can live in the darkness in bliss.”
“Markus…you’re wrong.”
“Don’t reject what you can see with your eyes.”
“No, you’re wrong.”
“Just accept it.”
“Looks can be deceiving, okay? You’re mistaken; I see no darkness.”
“That is a lie, and you are all too aware of this fact. You have been hurt before. You have been on the precipice of disaster. Do not disgrace and dishonor what you already know.”
“Well maybe I was mistaken too. Maybe I thought I knew what I knew, but it turns out I didn’t.”
“Please, Jordan, listen to reason.”
“Why don’t you listen to reason? I have been on the precipice of disaster, but I’m not there anymore. I’ve moved past that. I’m different now; the past does not define me…whoa…the past does not define me…”
“Our memories of the past are the only concrete things we have, that we can believe. Do not sully their existence by marking them with speciousness.”
“Do not insinuate that the past is better than the future. We can’t change what has happened, we can’t go back and undo what’s been done. We have to keep looking forward.”
“There is nothing in front of us except death and destruction. To move forward means that you will die. Are you willing to accept this? Do you want to die?”
“I want to live, God damnit! I want to live. I want to get out of here and move on with my life. That is what I want.”
“…you disappoint me.”
“Good.”
“I thought you were different.”
“Well, you were wrong.”
“But you’re not different. You’re just like the rest of them. Hopeless. Empty heads on top of empty vessels full of empty words performing empty actions. It’s utterly depressing.”
“Now you know how we feel about your new attitude.”
“I can see that nothing further will come of our conversation.”
“Isn’t that a shame?”
“Just know, I tried to make things right. I tried to show you all the way out. But you shunned me; you ignored me. You have no one to blame but yourselves for your own destruction. I tried to save you. May you have good luck with the path you have chosen.”
“Goodbye, Markus.”
Markus left the Bookstore. Jordan watched him leave with disgust. She was a little angry, a little upset. Markus had gotten underneath her skin. Normally, she would hate herself for getting angry, for losing her cool temperament. But she didn’t really care now. If this was how she felt, then this was how she felt. She would stand by her words and actions. Come hell or high water, Jordan Koulibagh would leave the Mall of Monomerica.
Rufus arrived at the Furniture Store well ahead of the specified time. He arranged four chairs into a perfect cross and put a table in the center. His excitement was growing tremendously. In an hour or so, they all would have solved one of the mall’s many secrets. There was simply no keeping things hidden from the Latinist.

Theo was the first to arrive, and he too was overly punctual. Not far behind him was Jenny who did not want to offend anyone with tardiness. Playing the gracious host, Rufus invited his guests to take a seat. Cody arrived closer to 10:30, and now the discussion could get underway. After showing the Waterskier the way, Rufus took his seat at the table. Everything was set up perfectly.

But then Jordan walked in. With a look of fierce determination on her face and a hand on her hip, the Golfer meant business. Seeing the set-up of the committee, she grabbed a chair and inserted herself into the group, greatly disrupting the symmetry of the design.

Rufus: “What are you doing here?”
Jordan: “Is that any way to greet a fellow executive?”
Rufus: “You were never invited to join this gathering. How did you even find out about this committee in the first place?”
Theo: “Well, uhh, that would be me.”
Jordan: “And it’s a good thing, too. How could you hope to accomplish anything without my being here?”
Rufus: “How can we accomplish anything with you here? This is a closed meeting. Any information we might discuss is privy only to the members of this group.”
Cody: “Dude, lay off. Jordan’s cool. What can it hurt to have her here?”
Jenny: “I think we should let Jordan stay.”
Theo: “As do I.”
Jordan: “Oh look, a majority decision. It’s rather hard to fight against that.”
Rufus: “You’ve forced my hand. You can stay, but don’t think that makes you free from suspicion.”
Jordan: “Of course not. Then let’s get down to business. Who’s the Liar?”
Jenny: “I…I do not know…I am not entirely sure what we are supposed to be doing here.”
Cody: “I’m with Jenny. How is this meeting supposed to go?”
Rufus: “If you’ll let me facilitate the discussion, I’d be happy to elucidate you. Our goal is to figure out which one of us students is the Liar. In order to do that, we’re going to have to put our logical reasoning skills to the test. But I’m confident that this group will figure it all out. However, there is the possibility that the Liar could be in this very room as we speak. Since this is a possibility, we must be alert, not only to the discussion at hand, but also to the temperament of our
peers. It would be easy for the Liar to sabotage discussion and lead us down the false path. Now, with that exposition out of the way, shall we begin?”

Jenny: “I am still not entirely sure what we are actually doing.”

Theo: “We’re just going to be talking, trying to figure things out. Like during one of the trials.”

Jordan: “Except no one’s going to be executed at the end of this discussion.”

Cody: “Alright, then let’s get this baby under gear!”

Rufus: “Let’s be methodical about this and start with those who are not here. What are your thoughts on—oh, what’s his name? Andrew? Anton? Alexander?”

Cody: “Austin?”

Rufus: “Yes, Austin. What are your thoughts on Austin being the Liar?”

Theo: “I have trouble believing that Austin could be anything but an Idle.”

Cody: “Yeah, that kid wouldn’t mean harm to any of us.”

Jordan: “It is a convenient title for a Liar; he doesn’t have to pretend to be anything since he can just be nothing.”

Jenny: “He is a very nice person.”

Rufus: “Most serial killers are.”

Cody: “Are you proposing that Austin is a murderer?”

Rufus: “No, just that looks can be deceiving. Be aware that the Liar has come this far along without giving anything up. They’ve obviously done a good job of fooling us this far.”

Jenny: “I still do not think that it is Austin. He just has a way about him. If he wanted to hurt us, then I think he already would have.”

Cody: “He might not show it like some of us, but he cares about all of us. Shoot, I don’t know what I’d do if something were to happen to him.”

Theo: “He’s like everyone’s little brother.”

Jordan: “The little brother who has to kill the eldest sibling to rise to the throne.”

Rufus: “Are you not convinced of his innocence?”

Jordan: “I think there are better candidates.”

Rufus: “Then who would you like to investigate next?”

Jordan: “Markus has been rubbing me the wrong way recently.”

Jenny: “Markus is…troubled.”

Cody: “You can say that again. He’s so different from when we first got here.”

Theo: “Can you blame him? Out of all of us, he was probably closest to Francesca and James.”
Jordan: “Or is he using their deaths to fake us all out? He is an actor, after all. Who better to put up a false persona?”

Theo: “If that’s the case, then wouldn’t he have just stuck to one identity instead of vacillating between many?”

Jenny: “But the mood swings are suspicious, no? Even if he is not the Liar, he still may be dangerous.”

Cody: “Heh, he’s nothing I can’t handle. Have you looked at him? He doesn’t have the muscle to injure a fly.”

Rufus: “But he certainly has the brain power.”

Jenny: “So Markus could be the Liar?”

Rufus: “Let’s go over the rest of the data before coming to a definite conclusion. Who’s next?”

Theo: “The other guy not here is Rico.”

Jordan: “Rico? Really? I would say that he is one of the second least likely to be the Liar.”

Cody: “What makes you think that?”

Jordan: “This is day seventeen. I don’t think Rico is capable of holding onto a secret for seventeen days. He would have accidentally let it slip by now.”

Jenny: “Unless he is just a very good actor.”

Theo: “Better than Markus, at least.”

Cody: “And if you have to assume a new identity, why a Marathon Runner? You gotta commit to that. I’ve seen him in the Gym, and he could hold onto that pretty well.”

Rufus: “It appears that Rico has a strong case in the negative. Shall we move onto the girls?”

Jordan: “If so, then I think the least likely Liar would be Lily.”

Theo: “Ditto. She’s like a kid, and kids can’t keep secrets very well.”

Cody: “And we can bring up the identity question again. Who would want to commit to that?”

Jenny: “What is wrong with Kawaii? The cute lifestyle has many inherent benefits that are not so obvious at first glance.”

Rufus: “It’s okay, you, we believe you.”

Jenny: “I just…do not believe that Lily is capable of doing anything bad.”

Jordan: “Is everyone comfortable with closing the discussion on Lily?”

Rufus: “I do not object.”

Cody: “Cool with me.”

Theo: “Then we’re left with Taylor.”
Cody: “Seriously? You think she could be the Liar?”
Rufus: “You can’t dismiss that her mind’s constantly turning.”
Cody: “But it’s Taylor.”
Theo: “Cody, we have to remain objective. Don’t let this be more personal than it already is.”
Jenny: “She can be rather venomous at times.”
Jordan: “But she can also be genuinely sweet.”
Rufus: “Changing who she is depending on the circumstances.”
Theo: “But she’s not duplicitous.”
Cody: “Exactly!”
Rufus: “But the talent argument works against her. She could easily be making up her luckiness.”
Jordan: “It certainly does allow her to be flexible.”
Jenny: “Why would we ever question it?”
Theo: “And doesn’t it seem like a strange title considering the circumstances of our stay here?”
Jordan: “I certainly wouldn’t think it to be fortunate to win a vacation in this mall.”
Rufus: “The hour grows later; shall we move to the next phase of our discussion?”
Jenny: “And what will that be?”
Rufus: “We’re going to have to discuss each other in front of each other.”
Cody: “We could always ask that person to leave during their discussion.”
Rufus: “I think it’s better if we have them stay to defend themselves. If the Liar is here, then let’s see what happens when we hold them over the coals.”
Jenny: “I do not feel comfortable saying such things when they are sitting right there…”
Theo: “I’m with Rufus. Jordan, it comes down to you: are we staying or leaving?”
Jordan: “…we’re staying. Let’s hear what the ‘Liar’ has to say for him or herself.”
Rufus: “Do we have any volunteers to go first?”
Cody: “Just do me and get it out of the way.”
Theo: “Like Jordan said earlier, there are better candidates.”
Jordan: “Cody has done nothing to warrant aggression.”
Jenny: “But you did tie up James that one time.”
Rufus: “Yes, your temper has shown through a few times.”
Cody: “We all lose our tempers sometimes. That doesn’t make me the Liar.”

Rufus: “No, and if you were planning something, you’ve easily had the means to have gone about it already.”

Jordan: “I don’t see it.”

Theo: “Then let’s move on. I’ll volunteer to go next.”

Rufus: “It’s a possibility.”

Jordan: “Excuse me!”

Theo: “Jordan, stay objective.”

Jordan: “But it’s ridiculous. Why would you be the Liar?”

Rufus: “Because he’s intelligent. He’s level-headed and doesn’t get flustered by things. He’s got an excellent poker face, and we know that the Liar needs one.”

Jenny: “You do ask a lot of meaningful questions.”

Cody: “Yeah, but if he didn’t ask them, someone else would.”

Rufus: “That type of conscientiousness can be a tad suspicious.”

Jordan: “Theo, tell them they’re wrong.”

Theo: “I can’t refute anything you’ve said. They’re valid points. I still think there are better candidates than myself. My only question is how difficult would it be to pretend to be a Cartographer?”

Jenny: “More difficult than a Waterskier.”

Rufus: “Or a Golfer, for that matter.”

Jordan: “So we’re moving onto me, now.”

Cody: “What do you mean ‘more difficult than a Waterskier?’”

Jenny: “Umm, well, we have never gotten a chance to see you ski on water, so we cannot ascertain how accurate your claim might be.”

Jordan: “Ahh, and the same goes with me. I can accept that.”

Rufus: “It doesn’t help that you spend so much time by yourself.”

Jordan: “I’d like to think I’m coming out of my shell now.”

Rufus: “The fewer of us there are, the more advantageous it is for the Liar to strike.”

Jordan: “It would be more suspicious if I stayed sequestered.”

Theo: “I’ll vouch for her authenticity.”

Rufus: “Of course you will.”
Cody: “Dude, that really doesn’t mean anything coming from you.”

Theo: “I still just want to put it out there.”

Jenny: “But is Jordan really that suspicious in the first place?”

Rufus: “Randolph thought it wise to poison both of us, so the Monk obviously saw something in her.”

Jordan: “If you don’t mind the switch, then what did the Monk see in you.”

Rufus: “Eheu, say your piece.”

Jordan: “You’ve always had some trick card up your sleeve, an ulterior motive to everything you do. From the second we got here.”

Jenny: “You can be a little scary and intimidating.”

Cody: “And you were always saying how you would beat this game.”

Theo: “It’s hard to say that you’re a team player.”

Rufus: “Gratias. That means a lot to me.”

Jordan: “Don’t be so smug. Just give us your rebuttal and let’s move on.”

Rufus: “I won’t deny anything you’ve said, but we have to be in agreement that the Liar is intelligent. Not to belittle my own vast intellect, but if I were the Liar, why would I broadcast my intentions from the start?”

Jenny: “Is the answer reverse psychology?”

Rufus: “I’m a Latinist, not a…psychologist.”

Cody: “So, the only one left is Jenny.”

Jenny: “Me?”

Jordan: “Third least likely.”

Theo: “I can get behind that.”

Jenny: “N-no. I can be suspicious too.”

Rufus: “Says the indefatigable humanist.”

Jenny: “Is not there something that makes me suspicious?”

Cody: “Uhh, you, uhh, make sandwiches that are just okay sometimes?”

Jenny: “They are just okay? Umm, that is because I do not have all my kitchen supplies with me. I can make them better, I swear.”

Rufus: “Jenny, I’m sorry, but you’re too…innocent.”

Cody: “You cried in front of all of us. You can’t fake that kind of emotion.”
Jordan: “You don’t have to be suspicious; we won’t think less of you.”

Jenny: “I just wanted to be like everyone else.”

Theo: “There’s really nothing wrong. I’d rather have people have no suspicion than have some that’s justified.”

Jenny: “I guess you are right. I was just prepared to defend myself.”

Rufus: “Better to be safe than sorry, I guess.”

Cody: “That’s everyone, right?”

Rufus: “Hmm…indeed it is.”

Jenny: “Then who is the Liar?”

Theo: “I have an idea.”

Jordan: “As do I.”

Rufus: “If you think back about everything we’ve discussed, I think it should be fairly obvious who our pretty little Liar is.”
Rico managed to gather the other students with ease. Lily was excited to be a part of anything, and Austin said that he had nothing better to do. Taylor fought him at first, but she quickly relented. And Markus just appeared. Rico couldn’t find Jordan, but there was no point in waiting for her much longer. They needed to stay far away from the Furniture Store where the other meeting was happening, so the Marathon Runner led them to the Party Store. Like for Jenny’s party, they moved the inventory around to give them a nice open space to work in.

Rico: “Alright, we’re all here, so let’s get started.”

Taylor: “And what exactly are we supposed to be doing? Like, I get that we’re figuring out who the Liar is, but are we just going to, like, talk about it?”

Austin: “Talking doesn’t sound so stressful.”

Markus: “Talking can be incredibly stressful.”

Lily: “Ooh, I have an idea! We should play a game to figure it out, desu!”

Taylor: “A game? This is kind of a serious thing. I don’t think a game is that appropriate.”

Rico: “Do you have any better suggestions?”

Markus: “We could turn the lights off and deprive ourselves of our senses until enlightenment begins and we divine the answer.”

Taylor: “How about—no.”

Austin: “A game sounds like a lot of work.”

Lily: “Nuh-uh, it totally isn’t. It’ll be fun, I promise.”

Rico: “Yo-o, what do we have to lose? What’s your idea Lily?”

Lily: “So we want to find out who the Liar is, right? Then I think we should go through and rank everyone in the mall on a scale of least likely to be the Liar to most likely. And then we’ll compare lists.”

Austin: “That doesn’t sound like a game to me.”

Lily: “I haven’t gotten to the good part yet. We’ll put all our lists together and figure out like an average or something.”

Taylor: “Ugh, I didn’t think I’d have to do any math today.”

Lily: “And this is because we’ll make a second list, and that list will be who we think everyone else will rank where. And whoever’s second list is closest to the average list wins! Yatta!”

Taylor: “I guess that doesn’t sound that bad.”

Austin: “As long as someone else does the calculations, I’m fine with it.”

Rico: “It’s settled then. I’ll go get some paper and pencils.”
Markus: “Don’t bother; I already have some.”
Rico: “Wow, Markus, you really came prepared.”
Markus: “I thought we might write down our biggest fears on the paper and laugh at how none of it matters.”
Taylor: “You must just kill at parties.”
Austin: “I don’t think I have any fears. Hmm…I guess I’m not very fond of flan, but it’s not really a fear. Just a minor inconvenience.”
Lily: “Ooh, I really like flan. Austin-kun, you’re making me hungry for flan!”
Rico: “We should all get food together after the meeting.”
Markus: “To rain on your parade, the food court is closed during Night Time.”
Lily: “Oh, that’s disappointing.”
Austin: “Presumably so Monobear can restock the food uninterrupted.”
Lily: “But what if we get really hungry?”
Taylor: “We’ll just have to wait until morning, I guess.”
Lily: “So I’m not getting any flan tonight…”
Rico: “Is everyone finished with their lists?”
Lily: “I need more time!”
Taylor: “I’m done.”
Austin: “Ditto.”
Markus: “As am I.”
Rico: “Cool. So we just need Lily’s.”
Lily: “And then I still have to make the other list.”
Taylor: “Still? What have you been doing?”
Lily: “I’ve been talking with everybody.”
Rico: “Just worry about completing the lists for now. We’ll have plenty of time to talk later.”
Austin: “This is a game, right?”
Markus: “As pointless as games ever are.”
Austin: “Then what do we get for winning?”
Taylor: “I think the winner should get some flan?”
Austin: “Oh…I’ll share with everyone if I win.”
Lily: “Urgh! I really want to win now, but why must lists be so hard to make???”
Rico: “Don’t think so hard about it; just put down whatever pops into your head.”
Taylor: “C’mon, Lily. I haven’t got all night. Some of us need our beauty sleep.”
Markus: “Is there anything better than sinking into uninterrupted oblivion?”
Taylor: “It’s also too late for this existential bologna.”
Markus: “I lament that you do grasp the universe’s innermost thoughts.”
Taylor: “Can I make a motion to ignore everything Markus says?”
Austin: “Yawn, he’s not hurting anyone.”
Rico: “Don’t—yawn—yawn. It’s contagious this late.”
Taylor: “You’re telling—yawn—me.”
Lily: “Yaaaaaaaa—squeek—aaaawn.”
Austin: “That was an impressive yawn.”
Lily: “I’ve been practicing, desu.”
Rico: “Why are yawns contagious anyway?”
Markus: “We yawn to show that we are relaxed, that there is no danger. It is a means of communication. I don’t yawn anymore.”
Taylor: “Lily!”
Lily: “I’m finished!”
Rico: “Alright. Does anyone want to tally the results?”
Markus: “I will do it. It will prove a useful distraction from your vagrant ignorance of the world.”
Austin: “I’d do it, but, you know, math.”
Lily: “Math can be fun, though.”
Rico: “You lost me on that one.”
Taylor: “Math is, like, the opposite of fun, Lily.”
Lily: “Anything can be fun if you let it. Like this Liar business is really gross, but we’re having a fun time, aren’t we? I know I am, desu.”
Austin: “But, math.”
Markus: “I have the results.”
Rico: “That was fast.”
Markus: “Temporary distractions never last that long.”
Taylor: “Stop wasting time and tell me I won already.”

Austin: “If anyone’s going to win, it might be me.”

Rico: “It could be any of us.”

Lily: “I hope it’s me! I want some flan!”

Markus: “Here are the results, from least likely to most likely. Jenny, Cody, Lily, Theo, Austin, Rico, Taylor, Jordan, Rufus, and then me.”

Rico: “Youch, and that’s the average?”

Markus: “Yes.”

Rico: “I’m surprised Rufus is that high up.”

Taylor: “Sorry, Rico, but he’s a total creep.”

Rico: “You just don’t know him as well as I do.”

Austin: “It’s just a list; it doesn’t actually mean anything.”

Lily: “Lists are kinda confusing, desu.”

Taylor: “And the list doesn’t say to what degree everyone is suspicious. Like on the spectrum, some people are really close together and others are not, but the list doesn’t explain that.”

Austin: “Is there anything else on the list that we want to discuss?”

Rico: “Well, Markus here did land on the top.”

Markus: “Neither do I care, nor am I surprised.”

Taylor: “Cut the crap. We all basically said we don’t trust you. That should at least bother you a little.”

Markus: “If you knew what I do, then you wouldn’t mind.”

Lily: “Well, we made the lists, now what? Is it flan time yet?”

Austin: “Yeah, who won the game?”

Markus: “I did.”

Lily: “Oh. Was I close?”

Markus: “Not at all. Your second list was very far off.”

Taylor: “Oh, and yours was perfect?”

Markus: “It was.”

Rico: “So-o, you put yourself on the top of your own list.”

Markus: “That was a requirement for having a perfect score.”
Austin: “It’s depressing that you view yourself in such a way.”

Markus: “No matter how many times I tell you that I see, hear, and know the truth, you won’t believe me.”

Lily: “But when you talk, you sound almost as silly as I do.”

Taylor: “And that’s saying something coming from Lily.”

Rico: “I feel like the fun’s starting to fade away.”

Austin: “Do we have anything else to discuss?”

Rico: “I, uhh, I guess not. The lists were really efficient. Good idea, Lily.”

Lily: “Heehee, I’m just full of good ideas. So, Markus, about that flan…”

Markus: “I have no intention of eating it, nor do I have intentions of giving it to others.”

Taylor: “You really do know how to light up a room with that personality.”

Rico: “Then I guess we’re done here. Good work everybody.”

Taylor: “Good work, and good night!”

Austin: “Time to hit the hay.”

Lily: “See you in the morning.”

Markus: “One can only hope.”

Rico: “Cool.”
Chapter 4--The Active and the Passive--Part 10

The two committees dissolved, and the students returned to their rooms for the night. Big things were happening in the mall, and this excitement kept many of the students awake longer than they were used to. What happened next was all up to them.

All-Star Waterskier Cody Cameron was happy with the current direction of the mall. It had been two days since Monobear’s newest incentive, and every head was still accounted for. It would take more than a silly secret to keep them down! Cody couldn’t care less about his dumb secret. He wished now that he could share his secret with everyone to further break down whatever boundaries remained among the students. They were becoming a unified whole, and nothing would get through their stalwart fortitude.

All-Star Lucky Taylor Erzen ranked seventh on the list of suspicious individuals. That was ridiculously insulting! And the three people above her were the shiftiest members of their entire group. There better have been a large gap between her and Jordan on that spectrum. Just when she thought she was getting along so well with her classmates, BAM! they stab her in the back.

All-Star Cartographer Theo Cook was feeling better about the secrets. He knew his was less-than-pleasant, but his secret’s holder hadn’t confronted him about it. That just proved that the students trusted each other no matter what. With the Liar business settled, the students were in a prime position to take over the mall. Monobear had better watch out, because it was time for Theo and his friends to get out of here.

All-Star Marathon Runner Rico de Naranjas wasn’t sure what to make of the Un-Executive Committee meeting. The average list obviously offered realistic information, but he didn’t gleam anything from their individual actions; no one seemed any different. He didn’t like to think about it, but maybe he was being played. Maybe the secrets some of these people were hiding were things that should never be brought to light.

All-Star Sandwich Artist Jenny Zemenovski wasn’t sure how she should feel. Her secret holder hadn’t felt it necessary to approach her, and that made her feel nervous. If her secret got out…what would everyone think? They wouldn’t mind, of course. They were all her friends, they’d told her as much. But she couldn’t help wondering what would happen if someone had a negative reaction. That was a real possibility. Jenny just hoped that they would get out of the mall before her personal secret was revealed.

All-Star Golfer Jordan Koulibagh was proud of the way she handled herself in the Executive Committee. She had certainly showed Rufus that she was a force to be reckoned with; he should know that better than anyone now. The Golfer had had enough of this stupid mall. If Monobear wasn’t going to let her out of his own volition, then she was going to force her way out.

All-Star Idle Austin Fitzpatrick lay awake for an hour or so, staring at the ceiling of his room. People thought he was moderately suspicious. But he couldn’t hurt a fly. What had he ever done to anybody? Well, Delilah hadn’t liked him. Delilah was a character. As a Cosmetologist, she had to rely heavily on intuition to make people beautiful. Maybe her intuition was right to distrust Austin. After all, he had his secrets as much as everyone else.

All-Star Thespian Markus Aslanius didn’t feel anything. His secret was pointless. The secret he had learned was pointless. The only thing that wouldn’t be pointless would be murder. If he had been in a different state of mind, that reality may have shocked him, but instead he embraced it. To make such a big show would surely garner the attention of his classmates; they
would be forced to listen to him.

All-Star Kawaii Lily Smith was still bummed about that flan. Maybe she could convince Monobear to bring her some tomorrow. The list itself was fun to make, but also really hard to figure out. She didn’t like the idea of singling out any of her friends. Even though she had been the one to translate the document, she hardly thought the Liar was All-Star Despair. She preferred to think that the Liar had a dumb title like All-Star Meteorologist or All-Star Anesthesiologist. None of her friends could have that bad of a secret.

All-Star Latinist Rufus Price could hardly contain his excitement. He did contain it, but it wasn’t the easiest thing to do. The Executive Committee meeting was a success; he had accomplished exactly what he had set out to do. He did plan to win this game. The “game” was no longer mutual killing to Rufus, but rather it was besting Monobear. And the first strike would be to nail the Liar once and for all.

On the dawn of the eighteenth day, ten students were alive in the Mall of Monomerica; by noon, that number would dwindle. All the students gathered for a pleasant breakfast, but not all of them met for lunch. The students waited for their classmates to appear, but after fifteen minutes, those missing still had not arrived. Refusing to believe the worst, the students broke up and began to search the mall for their other friends.

A cry, sharp and loud, echoes throughout the mall. This singular cry brought everyone over to the West Sector, and from there to the Monobear Store. As the students gathered, they found Taylor with tears strolling down her face over Cody’s body. A pole protruded from his chest right where his heart should be. Taylor’s tears fell upon the Waterskier’s face.

As Taylor cried, another student felt the strongest pang of emotion. Jordan cried out and ran over to Theo. He was slouched over against one of the walls, his forehead stained with blood. Unable to control herself, Jordan held onto the Cartographer’s body for dear life. Her heart hurt.

The remaining students went over to console the grieving girls, except Rufus hung back. He walked off in a different direction. “Hey,” he called out, “are we just going to ignore this one?” A few heads looked up and in Rufus’s direction. Sprawled across the floor in another corner was Markus’s body, a small trail of blood surrounding him.

“Attention, you wretched vertebrates, a dead body has been discovered. Start investigating; the school trial will be held shortly. Attention, you lazy ne’er-do-wells, a dead body has been discovered. You are advised to begin investigating the premises before the mall trial.” Monobear had such dreadful timing.

Jenny was feeling faint from the situation. “There’s…three…three bodies…”

Without missing a beat, Monobear appeared before the kids, folders tucked under his arms. “Ta-dah! I can see that you’re all upset, but let me give you some good news first: it is against the rules for one student to murder more than two of his or her classmates. I never said anything about it because it never became relevant. Until now, that is.”

Hearing the bear’s words, a new hope rose within Jordan. She pressed her fingers to Theo’s wrist. A beat. “He’s alive!” she cried. “He’s still alive!”

Rico, who had been standing nearby, put a hand on Theo’s shoulder and shook him. “Yo-o, Theo, wake up.”
With a labored groan, Theo inched his eyes open. “…Jordan…?”

Jordan hushed him and embraced him even tighter. “You’re alive…”

A slight reprieve flowed through the students, but it was short-lived. “Tick-tock, kiddies,” admonished Monobear. It was time for the remaining students to focus on the situation. Before them was the mystery surrounding the dead bodies of Success Summit’s All-Star Waterskier, Cody Cameron, and All-Star Thespian, Markus Aslanius.
Abnormal Days

The pole protruding from Cody’s chest belonged to a Monobear camping tent display. Since it was part of a display, it was firmly rooted into the ground. As Cody’s muscles had begun to relax, his body had slid farther down the pole until his body rested lightly in a semi-crouched position. His lifeless eyes stared up toward the ceiling, his mouth slightly agape. Blood covered the pole, his shirt, his shorts, and the ground around him.

Markus lay in a much less gruesome position. The Thespian lay face down on the ground, his arms at his sides. A light smear of blood was swiped across the floor near his head, and so he looked like he was imitating Austin’s planking style.

Without anyone to urge them on, the students understood what they had to do. Jenny nearly collapsed at the sight of Cody, but with their diminished numbers, the students needed all the help they could get. To keep her eyes off the scene, the Sandwich Artist read the Monobear File to the others.


Rico had to comment on the findings. “Shoot, eleven thirty? They’ve barely been here for an hour!”

Taylor was following this line of logic. “Then the killer hasn’t had much time to deal with the evidence.”

“And judging by all that blood,” said Austin, “they’d really have had something to clean up.”

“Well, none of us are covered in blood, so what are we supposed to think?” asked the Lucky.

Rufus smirked in the face of the unpleasantness. “It means that the killer has taken very mundane plans. Everyone, give Jacky your room keys.”

“Nani? Why, desu?”

“Jacky, I want you to investigate the dorm rooms of everyone living in this room. Look for bloodied clothing. I can’t think of anything more incriminating.”

Jenny was glad to be of assistance without having to see all that blood. “I will do my best. But, umm, does anyone object to this?”

“They won’t,” answered Austin. “It would make them look suspicious.”

“But take Loraine with you, just for safe measure,” ordered Rufus. “That way neither of you can do anything suspicious without the other seeing. We wouldn’t want another Elizabethan trial.”

Not willing to waste another moment, the two BFFs gathered the keys and headed off to the
dorm area.

Jordan joined the congregation. The looks the others gave her said more than words ever could. “He’s okay,” she said. “He’s resting now. I told him to conserve his strength until the trial.”

“What happened?” asked Rico.

“He said he was attacked. He came here with Cody to talk to Markus. But then he was hit on the head by someone and he woke up when we got here. He’s as upset as we are.”

“I imagine he feels responsible…” murmured Austin.

Rufus was less sympathetic. “So he’s in no condition to perform an autopsy. Our killers are getting clever. Who’s going to examine the bodies?”

“Geez, do we really have to?” asked Rico.

“I’ll look over Markus!” volunteered Taylor.

“I can look at Cody,” offered Jordan.

“If Theo was struck, then we have a weapon. Rico, Aiden, go search for our instrument, if you would.”

“Certainly, Rufus!” said Rico. Rico, with Austin in tow, headed out of the Monobear store, thus leaving Taylor, Jordan, Rufus, and Theo inside with Cody and Markus.

While the girls were busy, Rufus decided to check on the third victim. Though he was resting, Theo hardly seemed at peace. The Cartographer looked much more tired than he should. He had a nasty wound on his right temple, and blood trickled from it down his face. Head wounds were no laughing matter. Even if Theo managed to survive this trial, the damage he could have incurred could affect him for the rest of his life. Because of the time of the attack, Theo had not been unconscious for long, but it was still far from fortuitous.

Rufus wanted to hear the story straight from Theo’s mouth. With a gentle hand, Rufus shook Theo’s shoulders to rouse him. The Cartographer laboriously opened his eyes and looked at the Latinist, but did not say a word.

“Travis, tell me what happened.”

“Rufus? I…I was attacked…they came out of nowhere…”

“Quis? Who came out of nowhere?”

“It happened so fast…I never saw them…everything just went black…”

“Try to remember; our lives depend on it.”

“Ugh…my head…”

“Focus! You can rest later.”

“Ugh…”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” yelled Jordan and she marched over to the boys. With a swift jerk, Jordan snatched Rufus’s arm and dragged him away from Theo. “Are you
insane? He needs to rest. Are you trying to kill him?"

“I was trying to get information. Ignosce mihi for trying to save my own skin.”

“I told you everything he told me.”

“I wanted to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

“What? You don’t trust me? You think I’d lie about my boyfriend being attacked within an inch of his life?”

“We’re all suspects, if you hadn’t noticed. Where were you at eleven thirty?”

“If you have to know, I was shopping in the General Store.”

“And can you prove it?”

“You’re asking if I have an alibi. No, no one else knew I was there. What about you, Latin boy?”

“I was in the Bookstore reading until lunch, and I can prove as much as you can.”

“Then you’re in no position to be criticizing.”

“What did you find on the body?”

“I’m not a medical expert.”

“What did you find?”

“Well, for starters, there’s a pole sticking through Cody’s chest. Pretty sure that’s what killed him.”

“Fascinating. Your observation skills are second to none.”

“Take a look at his right wrist, though. It looks swollen. He must have hit it or broken it before, well, you know.”

“Now that is interesting.”

“And on his left hand, there’s some blood on the knuckles.”

“So, literally on the other hand. Looks like our Jetskier didn’t go down without a fight.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

Taylor had had enough of looking at a dead body. Jordan and Rufus seemed to be having a titillating conversation, and the Lucky was damned if she was going to be shut out of the loop. Taylor opened her mouth to speak, but Rufus spoke first.

“And where were you at the time of the murders?”

“Is that any way to greet a lady? I was under the skylight working on my tan. Everyone saw me when they came to lunch.”

“But there’s no telling how long you had actually been lying there,” said Jordan.
“Listen, I respect your right to be suspicious of me, but if you think that I could do…that to C-Cody, then you don’t know me at all.”

“Teresa, did you discover anything on the body?”

“A little, I guess. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be looking for. His throat was red where he was strangled. I mean, the Monobear File said he was strangled, so it just figures, right? Oh, and he had a black eye, too.”

“Which eye?” asked Jordan and Rufus simultaneously.

“The left one. His right one, I guess.”

Jordan turned to Rufus. “Markus was in a fight?”

“It is improbable, isn’t it?”

“Something’s weird, though,” said Taylor. “Look around this place. Besides the bodies, it hardly looks like a crime scene. There’s nothing here!”

Rufus looked into the distance. “Our killer has gotten smart. They’re not giving us much to work with. This isn’t going to be an easy trial.”

“Whose room is next?” asked Lily.

“Next would be Austin’s room.”

“Do you think we’ll find anything in there?”

“I am doubting it.”

“But we haven’t found anything yet! What if we don’t find anything?”

“Is it possible that the killer put their dirty clothing in the Laundromat?”

“Nuh-uh. I was there before lunch, and no one else came in.”

“Then they have to be hidden in someone’s room.”

Cody had created such a mess that there was no way the killer could have escaped without getting a drop of his blood on their clothing. It would be too risky to leave the soiled items out in the open, and since the Laundromat was not a possibility, the clothes had to be stored in the killer’s bedroom. Since the seven were all at lunch, the killer did not have much time to stash their clothes, change, and make face, and so the clothes could not be hidden very well. So far, the girls had gone through their own rooms and those of Jordan and Taylor, but nothing had stood out to them.

“Umm, Jenny-chan, if you don’t mind, what were you doing right before lunch?”

“Before lunch? I was in the Video Store. I think I might have seen every romantic comedy Monobear has given us.”

“So you weren’t near the Monobear Store…”

“I was not.”
“I’m really sad this time, you know.”

“I am too.”

“Like, we’ve lost not only one of our friends, but actually two of them. But… I haven’t cried as many tears this time.”

“I…I did notice that.”

“Does that make me a bad person?”

“Lily, no. This place, this mall…it is doing weird things to our heads. So long as you are questioning if you are okay, then I think that that means you are okay.”

“But if we go to a trial…we’re going to lose another friend. I’m not sure if I can handle that…”

“I do not like it either, but if we do not keep moving forward, then we will lose each other, and I do not want that to happen.”

“I don’t want that to happen, either.”

“Let us keep searching these rooms then. We will have to find something sooner or later.”

Rico and Austin didn’t find any weapons in any of the West Sector shops. Or in the South Sector. Or the East Sector. The Idle and Marathon Runner were in the Bookstore, the last store on their list, and they still had not found anything of interest. Rico did a once-over of the store, but there were no weapons to be found. Austin tried to focus his chi and feel the aura of the weapon, but his spiritual energies were not picking up any particular vibes.

“Shoo-oot, man. We’ve looked everywhere.” Rico was feeling frustrated. The last time his search had failed to yield any information, he had literally stumbled into evidence, but now he was coming up empty.

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure this out. We always manage to survive somehow.”

“But why didn’t we find the weapon? Theo had to have been hit by a bat or something. That kind of thing should stand out.”

“Maybe the killer wiped it clean after they were done.”

“There’s no way they were able to dispose of their clothes and the murder weapon in half an hour. The short time span is definitely a factor here.”

“Yawn, I guess you’re right.”

“How can you be so relaxed at a time like this? These investigations always get my adrenaline pumping, and not in a good way.”

“I just don’t see the point in getting worked up. Being agitated isn’t going to solve anything.”

“Hey, where were you during the time of the, uhh, murders.”
“I was browsing around the Antique Store.”

“Shoo-oot, I knew that.”

“Yes, I could see you from the store. You were in the Gym on one of the running machines.”

“Yeah, you came and got me for lunch. I was watching the mall the entire time I was running. I watched you enter the store, and I watched you leave it.”

“I guess we know we didn’t do it, then.”

“So that narrows it down to five other people. Yo-o, that’s so unreal.”

“You vagabonds seem to enjoy lollygagging, so I can only assume that you’ve done enough investigating. Come on up to the food court and we’ll get this trial underway!”

The three groups converged on the food court at the same time. No one felt that they had uncovered any enlightening piece of information, but they were officially out of time. Theo said that he felt fine, a little dizzy, but fine nonetheless. Jordan wouldn’t hear it, and she insisted on his leaning on her for support.

Without any surprise, the fountain disappeared and the giant elevator came into sight. Eighteen days ago, sixteen students stood around this place, finding out that their lives would change forever. Now, exactly half of those students were preparing themselves for something that they should never have become accustomed to. Eight of their friends had fallen before them, but that was not the end of the despair. If there was any hope of survival, only seven of the eight would be able to ride the elevator back up. Or worse, only one would make the ascent. The students were well aware of this fact as they boarded the elevator.

Wordlessly, they boarded the elevator. The doors shut behind them, and the vehicle sank into the ground. There was a world of light outside the walls of the mall, but it was shut off from the students. The elevator sank deeper and deeper into the dark ground. So far from that bright world, the elevator made its eventual stop, and the doors swung open.

The normally garish trial room had had yet another makeover, but this one was less strident to the eyes. Curtains of cool colors adorned the walls, a reminder that the students musn’t lose their heads.

The students approached the circle of podiums. Three new posts had been erected, one for Elizabeth, Cody, and Markus. While the boys had their faces marked with red Xs, Elizabeth’s cross was marked by two textbooks lying overtop each other. The trial room seemed very small now, but the trial would have to commence regardless.

Monobear was seated upon his usual throne. “Hello, hello, so glad you could make it. You know the drill, take your spots, and we’ll get started. But before we jump right into it, let me remind you of the mall’s newest rules. It is against the rules to discuss secrets with someone unless I’ve written down those secrets for you personally. I don’t care that we’re in a trial; I’ll carry out the rules as is my duty as an honest bear. Now, let’s get started!”
Rufus: “Ita, let’s get started already.”

Jordan: “Lily, Jenny, what did you find?”

Jenny: “We…umm…well, we did not find anything.”

Rico: “N-nothing?”

Lily: “We checked everybody’s rooms, but we couldn’t find any dirty laundry. Well, Rico, you need to do laundry, but there wasn’t anything with blood on it, desu.”

Theo: “Why were you searching through all the rooms?”

Lily: “It’s what Rufus told us to do. We took your key from you, remember?”

Jordan: “Theo, don’t push yourself.”

Theo: “I’ll be fine. We have to get to the bottom of this, so I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Taylor: “You had to have seen Cody’s body. There was so much blood…the killer had to have gotten some of it on their clothes.”

Austin: “But couldn’t they just have washed their clothes?”

Lily: “I was in the Laundromat all morning; no one else came in there.”

Rufus: “Then the clothes were hidden. The safest place to hide evidence would be behind a locked door, hence the dorm search.”

Taylor: “But they just said that they didn’t find anything.”

Rico: “Then what happened to the clothes?”

Lily: “Maybe they were set on fire…”

Jenny: “I think we would have noticed a fire…”

Austin: “There must be more ways to dispose of clothing. A trash compactor? A wood chipper? Or perhaps a shrink ray?”

Jordan: “Have you seen any of those things in this mall?”

Austin: “Let me think…I don’t think I have.”

Taylor: “Austin, sweetie, you’re not helping.”

Theo: “Austin’s making a valid point, though.”

Rico: “He is?”

Theo: “Yes. The measures to dispose of the evidence would have to be extreme, but it’s apparent that those means don’t exist for us.”
Lily: “Then what happened to the clothes?”

Rufus: “We can’t waste all day on this one item. Perhaps further discussion will elicit more clues. Now, boys, tell me where you found the murder weapon.”

Austin: “About that…”

Rico: “Our search got us just as much as Lily’s and Jenny’s.”

Jordan: “You must not have looked hard enough!”

Taylor: “You’re sure you looked over every store?”

Austin: “We did, we really did.”

Jenny: “Umm, what weapon are we supposed to be investigating?”

Jordan: “Theo was hit in the head by something that knocked him out. Rico and Austin went to search for that something.”

Theo: “But they never found it.”

Lily: “Theo was hit in the head? Is that what happened? I’m so gomen for you.”

Rufus: “Ahh, yes. Now would be a great time for Theo to explain to us in his own words what happened in the Monobear Store.”

Theo: “I’ll do my best. My mind’s still a little foggy…I wanted to talk to Markus. I was convinced that he was the Liar, and I wanted to confront him about it, but I was worried about what he might do, so I asked Cody to come with me for protection. Markus was already there when the two of us arrived. Before I could say anything, I felt something powerful hit my forehead, and then everything went dark. When I woke up, you were all there in the store. I’m sorry it’s not much to go on.”

Jordan: “Theo, you did well.”

Taylor: “But what happened after that?”

Theo: “I…I don’t know…”

Taylor: “Then that’s what we have to figure out.”

Rufus: “Let us turn now to the examinations of the body.”

Jordan: “I was looking at Cody, and besides the giant pole, his right wrist was sprained, and there was blood on his left knuckles.”

Austin: “I would be surprised if there wasn’t blood on his knuckles. His entire body was covered in it.”

Rico: “But then it should have been all over his hand, not just his knuckles.”

Lily: “Maybe he tried to wipe the blood off with his hand but couldn’t quite reach.”

Jenny: “I do not think that he was worried about wiping away the blood from where he was at.”
Rico: “And what’s the bit about his wrist being sprained?”

Theo: “If I know—knew Cody, he wouldn’t have gone down without a fight. He probably hurt himself in the skirmish.”

Taylor: “The killer fought my Cody? That’s a pretty ballsy thing to do.”

Lily: “This might be a silly question, but how did Cody end up on the pole in the first place? He didn’t exactly look comfortable.”

Rufus: “He was turned up, facing the ceiling. If that’s how he fell, then he would have had no idea that the pole was placed so precariously.”

Austin: “Something about that seems weird to me. You really think he fell?”

Rico: “If he fell, then it would be an accident; there wouldn’t be a trial if he died on accident, right?”

Jordan: “Hey, Monobear, was it an accident? Are we wasting our time talking about Cody?”

Monobear: “Upupu. I don’t think that’s the question you want to ask me. I’ll only answer the question you really want answered. I won’t give out any hints or spoilers, no way!”

Rufus: “Is Chester’s killer standing among us? No, scratch that. Is the singular killer of both Markus and Chester in our presence?”

Monobear: “Of whom?”

Rico: “Cody and Markus.”

Monobear: “Why didn’t you just say so! Upu! They are!”

Theo: “That settles it; it wasn’t an accident.”

Taylor: “I don’t get it. So they…shoved Cody onto the pole?”

Jenny: “It is more likely that they pushed him into it.”

Jordan: “It would have been a quick death, thus leaving the killer plenty of time to deal with Markus.”

Austin: “Did we find anything out about Markus?”

Taylor: “Well, he was strangled, but we knew that from the Monobear File. He did have a black eye, though.”

Rico: “I find that one hard to believe. You expect me to think that Markus also got in a fight with the killer?”

Taylor: “That’s what the evidence would indicate.”

Lily: “What else?”

Taylor: “What do you mean ‘what else?’”

Lily: “What else did you find? There was more to him than that, right?”
Taylor: “N-no, that was the only other thing I found.”

Jenny: “Then what is our next clue?”

Rufus: “Hmm…there was some blood spread out around that body, but he wasn’t bleeding.”

Rico: “Yeah, the blood would’ve come from the killer’s clothing, but we don’t know where that is.”

Jenny: “Does not anyone have another clue?”

Austin: “I don’t have anything…”

Theo: “I’m sorry I couldn’t be more of a help…”

Jenny: “Surely there is some clue that we are overlooking.”

Jordan: “Jenny, I don’t think there is. This is the opposite of the last case. Last time we had too many clues, and this time we don’t have enough.”

Rufus: “Then we’ll just have to make our own clues.”

Lily: “Desu? How do we do that?”

Rufus: “If we don’t have the evidence to convict someone, perhaps we have the evidence to clear others from blame.”

Jordan: “Process of elimination. What have we got to lose?”

Austin: “A lot, actually.”

Taylor: “Then let’s stop messing around and get to it.”

Rufus: “Firstly, we should all be able to agree that Jeanette is safe.”

Jordan: “Are you talking about me or Jenny?”

Rufus: “Umm, the pale one. Jenny…”

Jenny: “I could not have done it? Why am I not suspicious like everyone else?”

Rufus: “Really? Because you’re a haemophobe—”

Austin: “That is no reason to discredit someone.”

Taylor: “Austin! We’ve already had this conversation; she doesn’t do blood!”

Austin: “Oh, never mind then.”

Theo: “Even if she had killed Cody, she would have passed out from all the blood, and then Markus would have escaped.”

Rico: “Unless she killed Markus first.”

Theo: “But how would the blood have gotten near him? The blood had to have come from Cody, so Cody had to have died first.”
Rufus: “Thus, err, Jen-ny is innocent.”

Theo: “And I was unconscious at the time…”

Jordan: “Then that leaves six of us.”

Rico: “But I can prove it’s actually four! Both me and Austin saw each other in the East Sector during the time of the murder, so there’s no way either of us could have done it.”

Taylor: “Oh God, unless you’re in cahoots and planned the murders together.”

Rufus: “Recall what I asked Monobear. The singular killer is among us. No one was in ‘cahoots,’ lest their partner rat them out.”

Austin: “Then the pool of culprits has diminished by half.”

Jenny: “Either Rufus, Jordan, Taylor, or Lily…”

Rufus: “Let’s see…who’s next…you.”

Jordan: “Jordan.”

Rufus: “Jor-dan. Jordan couldn’t have done it, either.”

Jordan: “I’m appreciative for the vote of confidence, but can I ask why?”

Rufus: “Markus was strangled; Jordan’s gloves would have left noticeable marks on his neck, but there wasn’t anything too unusual about his iugulum.”

Rico: “She could have taken the gloves off.”

Theo: “But then she would have had to take them off before fighting with Cody to keep them from getting blood on them.”

Lily: “It wouldn’t be that hard to wash blood off gloves, desu.”

Jenny: “They are white gloves. I believe that they would have stained.”

Austin: “If there was a confrontation, then that would mean that the battle was not going as planned. She wouldn’t have thought to take them off beforehand.”

Jenny: “Not to mention that we did not find anything unusual in her room.”

Taylor: “By similar logic, I should be clear from suspicion.”

Rufus: “How so?”

Taylor: “Teehee, ever since the Jewelry Store opened up, my fingers have been covered in rings. Those would have left noticeable marks, and it would be even more difficult to take them all off. In fact, I think this one has become fused to my skin.”

Austin: “Ooh, let me see.”

Taylor: “Yowch! Stop yanking on my finger so hard!”

Austin: “I’m just trying to see if the ring will come off.”
Taylor: “No, you’re trying to detach my finger from its socket!”

Rico: “But then…we’re just left with Lily and Rufus.”

Lily: “I…I didn’t do it! I swear, desu!”

Jordan: “I believe you.”

Austin: “I don’t think Lily could hurt anyone even if she wanted to.”

Rufus: “Please offer me some proof before I render my judgment.”

Theo: “The blood-on-clothing argument. I think it’s safe to say that the killer is currently wearing the clothes they murdered in. Even if Lily turned all her clothes inside out, we would be able to see a blood stain somewhere.”

Jordan: “But it would be much easier to hide a bloodstain underneath a black sweater.”

Rufus: “It’s a turtleneck; it keeps me warm.”

Taylor: “So you admit that you’re the killer? You’re the only one left.”

Rufus: “I only admit to wearing a black turtleneck.”

Jordan: “You told me yourself that you don’t have an alibi for that time.”

Rufus: “Do you honestly think I’m stupid enough to leave myself without a defense? Who do you think you’re talking to?”

Jenny: “I think that I would like to hear this defense.”

Austin: “Yeah, yawn, what is it?”

Rufus: “It’s…err…I don’t have one.”

Jordan: “You don’t have one!”

Rufus: “But it’s still insulting to think that I wouldn’t have one.”

Taylor: “Jesus, and you’d been going around saying how ‘clever’ the killer was when it was you the whole time.”

Rico: “I can’t…believe it…”

Rufus: “You don’t have to believe it, because it isn’t true.”

Jordan: “And the miracle defense appears!”

Lily: “Rufus-kun…”

Theo: “Everything fits, Rufus…”

Rufus: “Motive. What was my motive, then? Cogitate!”

Jenny: “You attacked Theo to get him out of the way, and then you killed Cody and Markus.”

Rico: “But why both of them? You only have to kill one person to get to leave.”
Taylor: “To confuse us, to be clever.”

Austin: “I think Rico might have a good point. He could easily have killed Lily in the Laundromat or me in the Antique Store, but he purposefully sought out a dangerous group of three.

Jordan: “Then he already had a premeditated conviction to take out Cody and Markus.”

Lily: “Does that…make sense? Why would he have to kill those two people specifically?”

Taylor: “Because they knew his secret, duh.”

Theo: “That makes even less sense. Only one of them could have known his secret.”

Taylor: “Then he went to kill one for his secret, and the other was collateral.”

Rico: “If that was my plan, I would wait to corner the person when they were alone, not in a group.”

Taylor: “Unless you were trying to confuse us!”

Austin: “It’s too risky, I think. Too many things could go wrong.”

Rufus: “Am I mistaken, or are all of you starting to defend me?”

Taylor: “Fat chance!”

Jordan: “It couldn’t be anyone else!”

Rufus: “You still haven’t gotten to the motive.”

Theo: “Just say what you’re thinking before we make a big mistake.”

Rufus: “The secrets are inconsequential. If anyone was going to kill for those, they would have done it days ago. No, this was spurred by something else. Last night, we all, in our own groups, figured out who we thought the Liar to be. The Liar would have known, then, that we were catching on to them. I can only imagine murders of this magnitude originating from such desperation.”

Rico: “So the Liar is our culprit?”

Theo: “But I…I thought Markus was the Liar…it’s my fault for dragging Cody and Markus together…”

Jordan: “Theo, you couldn’t have known.”

Theo: “It’s all my fault…”

Austin: “Well then, would the Liar kindly out themselves so we can vote?”

Jenny: “I do not think that tactic is going to work.”

Austin: “It was worth a shot.”

Taylor: “So…if Rufus is the Liar, then that would solve all our problems, right?”

Theo: “Why would he have created the Executive Committee if there was any chance of us finding him out? That’s a little counter-productive; too risky for him.”
Lily: “Then Rufus-kun is innocent…just like the rest of us…”

Rufus: “Finally, we’ve proven it all.”

Taylor: “Excuse me? We haven’t proven anything.”

Rufus: “On the contrary. We have proven that none of us could have committed the murders. The one who did was the Liar. So who here has been lying?”

Jenny: “Again, I do not think that anyone will fall for that trick.”

Jordan: “I don’t like where you’re going with this.”

Rico: “Yo-o, how would we know if someone was lying?”

Rufus: “I have convinced you well enough now. Allow me to make everything clear with just one more question. You, umm, oh dear, what is your name again?”

Theo: “Rufus, it’s Theo. What do you want?”

Rufus: “Alright. Theo, who attacked you?”

Theo: “I…I don’t know. I never saw them.”

Rufus: “And, for posterity’s sake, where did they hit you?”

Theo: “On my head.”

Rufus: “And that was the end of that. You were knocked unconscious. Case closed.”

Jordan: “You’re an idiot.”

Rufus: “You understand what I do.”

Jordan: “N-no I don’t! I don’t understand anything you’re trying to say! I think you’re still the Liar!”

Rufus: “Are you willing to sacrifice yourself just so that you can believe in your delusion a moment more?”

Jordan: “…”

Lily: “What are they talking about?”

Jenny: “I do not know.”

Rico: “It seems like we’re supposed to get something, but I’m still not following.”

Taylor: “Beats me.”

Austin: “I’m not sure what exactly they’re bickering about, but I think I understand the consequences. They both understand what happened, and the truth is greatly disturbing Jordan; she doesn’t want to believe it.”

Lily: “What would bother her that badly?”

Rico: “Does that mean she’s the killer?”
Jenny: “I fear that it does not…”

Taylor: “Shit…”

Rufus: “If you’re not going to say it, then I am.”

Jordan: “Over my dead body!”

Theo: “Jordan, please, don’t torture yourself. Use your words.”

Jordan: “DON’T YOU TALK TO ME!”

Taylor: “Shiiiiit…”

Jenny: “I…I think I understand now…”

Lily: “Oh no…”

Rico: “So it’s come to this…”

Rufus: “This has gone on long enough. Allow me say, for everyone’s sake—”

Austin: “Theo’s the killer.”

Rufus: “Hmph. Yes.”

Jordan: “Shut your goddamn mouths! You don’t know what you’re talking about! He was unconscious the entire time!”

Rufus: “No he wasn’t. How could he have incurred a knock-out wound on his forehead without seeing the person who gave it to him? And without a weapon, nonetheless.”

Jordan: “That’s…that’s…”

Rufus: “It was Theo who was involved in the fights. There was no weapon, because he didn’t use one. We never questioned the blood on his clothes since he’d ‘been assaulted,’ but those are the very clothes we’ve been searching for. He lured the two of them away to kill them. It makes the motive nice, too. Desperation. Ladies and gentlemen, may I show you our infamous Liar!”

Jordan: “That’s preposterous! Theo, tell them it isn’t true! Tell them it isn’t true!”

Theo: “Jordan, I’m sorry…”

Jordan: “No, no, don’t you say that, don’t you dare say that.”

Theo: “I won’t bother trying to hide it. Everyone, I am very sorry. Rufus is mostly right. I am the culprit, but I am not the Liar.”

Monobear: “Upupupu! Sounds like a confession to me! And you don’t have anything to gain by lying here, so let’s turn to the voting.”

The students glanced nervously at each other. This vote seemed more clear-cut than the previous ones, but there was still that inherent sense of trepidation. With such a small number of students remaining, every vote really mattered now; there was no room for error.

Monobear: “Eh? This is your worst vote yet! When will you all vote unanimously? I can
understand a mis-click here or there, but this is ridiculous. Today, we only have a three-fourths majority vote. But that’s enough; it is a majority, after all. So, without further ado, I can rightly proclaim, without a shadow of a doubt, that Theo Cook is GUILTY!”

Jordan: “NO!”
Theo: “Jordan…I’m so sorry…”
Lily: “Theo-kun…doshte?”
Rico: “Yeah, man, what happened?”
Taylor: “I can’t believe it was you…”
Austin: “It had to be someone…”
Jenny: “This is…I do not feel good about this…”
Rufus: “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Theo: “It sounds lame, I know, but it was an accident. Here’s what really happened. After our discussions, I really was convinced that Markus was the Liar. Since I don’t have anything else to lose at this point, Markus knew my secret. I was afraid if we ousted him what he would do with that information. I went to talk to him about it. I figured that nobody would notice us in the Monobear Store. He was very understanding and didn’t have any intentions of dismissing my secret. He also said that he wasn’t the Liar. I put my hand on his shoulder in an act of good will, but then Cody happened to be passing through. I don’t know what was on his mind or why he was in the West Sector, but he saw me and Markus. He thought I was attacking him, so, in a rage, he came barreling into the store. He came at me swinging. I-I had to defend myself. I deflected his one wrist pretty well—that must be what sprained it, but he clocked me on the head with his other hand. There was a lot of adrenaline…I wasn’t really thinking…I pushed him, but he landed wrong. He landed on the pole…and Markus…he saw it all happen. He tried to break us up, but he got elbowed right in the eye. But he saw it all…he was a witness. I was already a killer, so I had to follow through with everything. I-I didn’t have a choice! He didn’t put up much of a struggle, but he did beg me to let him live. Despite all that doom and gloom, he really wanted to live. He wanted what the rest of us wanted. I never intended to kill anyone…it just happened. So yeah, I lied about being attacked. I might as well try to play the role of the murderer anyway. I’m sorry I had to put you all through this. I accept whatever punishment is coming my way.”

Jordan: “I can’t believe you would do this to me.”
Theo: “I never meant it, honest. You mean so much to me. I…I’m so glad I got to get to know you, Jordan.”

Jordan: “And I’m sorry I ever got to know you! You promised never to hurt me, but you lied. I can’t even stand to look at you!”

Theo: “Jordan, please! I’m sorry! I don’t want to die without your forgiveness.”

Jordan: “I can never forgive you.”

Theo: “Jordan, Jordan please! I beg you, please don’t let me go like this.”

Jordan: “Monobear, I think you have a punishment to get to.”
Lily: “Jordan-chan, he’s really sorry! Just look at him.”

Taylor: “You mean so much to him! You can’t do this; it isn’t right!”

Austin: “What if you were in his shoes? You’d want his forgiveness. You’re not this heartless.”

Rufus: “Even I think you’re going a tad overboard here.”

Jenny: “Surely you do not really mean this.”

Rico: “For Pete’s sake, Jordan, he’s your boyfriend!”

Jordan: “I have no boyfriend.”

Theo: “JORDAN!”

Monobear: “Upu, upupupu! You’ve all talked long enough. Boy, can you kids just talk and talk and talk! BOR-ING! It’s time for some action, and I have just the thing. For Success Summit’s All-Star Cartographer Theo Cook, I have prepared a special punishment I like to call ‘The Needle Pointing to the Painful Truth.’ Oh! But since this crime had two victims, it’s only fitting that this punishment have two parts to it. For the first part, I’ll inform you of that precious little secret that caused this whole mess.”

Theo: “N-no, you w-wouldn’t. Anything but that!”

Monobear: “Upu? Are you feeling the despair? Listen up, kiddies! This isn’t the first time our little Theo has killed. He was once over in Africa, and he was responsible for the destruction of an entire tribe. He was working with guerilla soldiers to get those tribal idiots out of their sacred land. He befriended the tribe’s elders, and made real good friends with the other villagers. But this was all while reporting to the guerillas. When the guerillas attacked and began their slaughter, Theo had a moment of panic. He feared for his life, so he killed a woman named Naba and hid under her corpse during the raid. Theo the Cartographer has a long history of violence.”

Theo: “No, you’ve got that wrong! They would have…they would have ravaged her! I did her a courtesy! I helped spare her! You have to believe me!”

Lily: “I can’t believe Theo would do something like that…”

Rico: “I guess this trial wasn’t such a surprise after all…”

Jenny: “I am feeling conflicted…”

Austin: “Do the ends really justify the means…?”

Taylor: “I feel like such a fool…”

Rufus: “What’s done is done.”

Jordan: “…"

Theo: “Guys, please, you have to understand—”

Monobear: “Enough chitter-chatter! Time to move on to the main attraction! It’s Punishment Time!”

Trembling, Theo was led into the execution chamber. A large sheet of parchment was
spread across the stage, and Theo was tied down in the center of it all. As he lay there, his cheeks were stained with tears, but he had brought this upon himself. He had to take responsibility for his actions. He didn’t want to go, but he had no other choice.

A giant drafting compass descended from the ceiling. Unlike regular compasses, this one had a razor blade on both edges. The one point wedged into the ground right between Theo’s legs, just barely saving him from emasculation. The angle between the two points was stretched as far as it could go, and the other end landed on the paper. Pivoting on the point between the Cartographer’s legs, the compass began to cut its circles on the large sheet of parchment.

With each cycle of the compass, the angle diminished, and the radii of the circles grew smaller and smaller. Theo could only watch as the sharp edge crept closer and closer to his body. Sweat rolled down where tears had once flowed as fate crept upon him. Closer and closer. The paper was being ripped to shreds, and the confetti fragments were flying in the air around him.

At once, the angle became perfect, the circle a specimen of magnificence. The compass met resistance, and it could not recover well from that. The drawing tool came to a stop, and the strips of paper fell down to the ground, covering the stage in a red mosaic.

The remaining students did not want to believe what they had seen. This was their fourth execution. Nine of their friends had died. It was not an easy thing for a normal student to cope with, even less so under these extraordinary circumstances. For the time, the students were gripped in despair, and Monobear was loving it.

“Upupu. And another chapter draws to an end. We’re moving right along, now. Good job, all of you. I look forward to our next trial!”

Normally, one of the students would have refused Monobear and claimed that this trial would be the last, but that was a difficult thing to say truthfully. A number of them wondered not if another trial would occur, but rather who would be there to debate it.

Monobear led his sheep back onto the elevator, and they returned to their world above. Now, more than ever, the hope of the students would be tested against the ubiquity of the despair of the Mall of Monomerica.

End of Chapter Four
Surviving Students: 7

Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner

Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky

Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle

Jordan Koulibagh—All-Star Golfer

Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist

Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii

Jenny Zemenovski—All-Star Sandwich Artist
Chapter Five—The Loved and the Loathed

(Ab)Normal Days

There was silence as the elevator returned to the food court. Theo had been their friend, but how well had they really known him? It was apparent why he never spoke of his secret, but it was difficult to imagine that the facts behind it were real. Despite how much time the students had spent together, they were still virtually strangers to each other. They had come so close to perfect unity only to have their closeness dashed to pieces.

The elevator stopped, and the students exited into the food court. They were back to their lives, to the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. Home sweet home. Cody and Markus had been discovered shortly after lunch, and the investigation and trial had proceeded in the afternoon. The time was approaching evening, and the ordeal of the day had exhausted the students.

Speaking to no one in particular, Rufus proclaimed, “After all that excitement, I do say I’ve whipped up an appetite. Now that another has been done away with, I can only imagine what cuisine Monobear has in store for us. Hmm…perhaps he’s opened up a new—” The Latinist’s soliloquy was interrupted by one of Jordan’s fists making direct contact with his face.

Jordan’s intention was to give Rufus a black eye, and she succeeded. Now she stood with her head bowed, her face cast in shadow, her arms hanging limply at her sides. No one rushed forward to restrain her.

Rufus, leaning on a chair for support and clasping his sore eye with his hand, glared at Jordan with his good eye. “What in the underworld has gotten into you? Are you mad? Have you gone crazy?”

Jordan looked up at him, her eyes cold but filled with a righteous fury. Her façade sent shivers down Rufus’s back. “This is all your fault,” she said calmly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about; you’ve gone crazy.”

Jordan’s voice cracked and started wavering. The chill from her eyes was melting into tears of anger. “It’s your fault that Theo’s gone. It’s all your fault! Everything here is your fault!”

Rufus turned to the peanut gallery for an appeal. “Do you hear what she’s saying? Someone should detain her.”

Lily and Jenny looked solemnly at the ground, and Rico had his head turned away. Jordan was upset; she needed to figure out her feelings, and they didn’t want to interfere. Taylor was watching adamantly, ready to jump in in case Jordan became a threat to everyone. Austin wasn’t sure what to make of the situation yet.

Reluctantly, Rufus had to face his assailant. “Come now, you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious you stupid boy! You think you’re so smart, but you’re just an idiot.”

“If you’re going to stand there and insult me, I’d like some proof and evidence to back up your claim. Otherwise you might as well go back to punching me.”
Jordan threateningly raised a fist but did not move. “You just had to call that stupid committee meeting. If you hadn’t been so suspicious of Markus, then Theo would have never needed to confront him. And then Cody wouldn’t have walked in on them, and then Theo would still be here! You’re responsible for Theo’s death! You should be punished!”

“You honestly expect me to recognize that as a logical argument? Ha. It’s just hot air coming from a girl with anger management issues!”

Jordan’s expression changed in an instant. First came shock, then embarrassment, but was followed by a look of righteous victory. Jordan savored her words: “How would you possibly know about that?”

Rufus recognized the trap immediately; he had been careless with his words. “Because I was given your secret.”

This time Jordan made an appeal to her classmates. “Did you hear that? He just said he knew my secret. And you heard him. He’s not supposed to tell anyone other than me. Rufus broke the rules! Ooh, just wait until Monobear finds out!”

Quick as a whip, the little bear appeared to assess the instant commotion. “I can’t leave you kids alone for five minutes without you causing some kind of disturbance, can I? Now did I hear that someone was breaking the rules?”

Jordan beamed. “You sure did. Rufus here let my secret slip to everyone else.”

“Upupu…is that true?”

Rufus refused to concede to the bear. “You’ve got security cameras plastered all over this mall; you tell me.”

“Upupu…you just couldn’t make this easy for me, could you? Very well. Yes. Rufus did indeed spill Jordan’s precious secret.”

Jordan laughed in exultation. “Lock him away, Monobear! Do with him what you will! We can’t have hooligans hanging around who keep breaking the rules!”

“Upu? Why would I lock him up?”

“…because he broke the rules.”

“What rules?”

“Th-the rule that said we weren’t allowed to discuss each other’s secret…”

“Upupupu! Bahahahaha! You think that’s a rule?”

“But you said so…”

“That was for the last trial. I had to keep things interesting. If you were allowed to discuss who knew whom, then the trial would have been boring! Nobody wants to sit through a boring trial. But now that the trial’s over, there’s no need for that rule to exist anymore. That incentive has come and gone, just like the other ones. You didn’t still think that you could win that mansion and power by killing, did you? That’s just silly! You’ll have to wait until this next incentive if you want to get anything out of this besides your freedom.”
Jordan was crestfallen. Her one shot at vengeance had dissipated before her eyes. Without lifting a finger, Rufus had bested her once again. It wasn’t fair.

Rufus was faring better and was willing to rub salt in Jordan’s wounds. “Well then, Monobear, what is our next incentive? What other possible reason could you give us for killing one of our own?”

Monobear began to sweat nervously. “Upu…well, uhh, you see…GAH! I don’t know! It took me a long time to come up with that secret thing, so my brain needs some time to recuperate. You’ll get your next incentive when you get your next incentive. There’s still nothing stopping you from offing each other in the meantime, though.” With flourish and flair, the bear left. The food court was silent.

Rufus had his eyes deathly trained on Jordan, but she was staring off behind him, at nothing. None of the other students wished to break the silence; talking just seemed wrong. But they had come too far just to stand around doing nothing.

It was finally Jenny who spoke. “I think that if Elizabeth were here, she would say that she was hungry and that we should all eat.” It was a simple message, but it gave the students something to do.

All food was now available to the students at all times. They could enjoy cereal late at night or start their day with a hearty hot dog. The students grabbed their food and proceeded to sit down at their communal dining table. Ever since the first day, the students had always eaten together at the same table for each meal. But now only seven individuals sat around the table; there were too many empty chairs present.

What was normally a happy, pleasant dining experience tonight was marked with solemnity and quietude. Everyone stared down and played with the food on their plates.

“So-o, uhh, since, you know, shouldn’t there be new places for us to explore now?” asked Rico at one point.

“That has been the pattern so far,” yawned Austin.

“Is there anywhere else to explore, desu?” asked Lily. “I thought we covered all the sectors now.”

“There’s those big gated shops at the end of each sector,” said Taylor matter-of-factly.

“I thought those were exits,” responded Rico.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Rufus mused.

“Yawn, I’m too tired to do any exploring today. Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“Austin-kun, you’re always tired.”

“Ehh, not always.”

Taylor raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? Name one time.”

“Hmm…well, there was this one time…no…but then…hmm…I’ll have to take a rain check on that.”
“That sounds like it may be an actual medical condition,” said Jenny worriedly.

“Oh, it’s no big deal.”

Now it was Taylor’s turn to be worried. “I hadn’t really thought about it, but maybe you do have something up with you. Maybe you should get it checked out.”

“Huh? Where would I go to get it checked out?”

No one could answer the Idle’s question. And so that meant that Rufus had to add his two cents to the conversation. “Just ask Monobear; I’m sure he would love to help you out.”

“You really think so?”

“No, I don’t think so. Fu, don’t you understand sarcasm?”

“Not really, no.”

Lily tilted her head. “You don’t understand sarcasm? It’s just like stretching the truth a little. All you have to do is stretch your voice a little like thiiiis.”

“Honestly, dude, it’s not that difficult,” added Rico.

“You have made it this far in life without being able to recognize sarcasm?” pondered Jenny.

Taylor pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why are we even talking about this? Austin’s tired, I’m tired, we’re all tired. Let’s call it a night and deal with the explorations tomorrow—if there even is anything to explore.”

Austin yawned audibly. “That sounds fine to me.”

“But it’s still so early, desu.”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “You don’t have to go to bed. I’m just saying that we should hold off on any group activities until we’ve all gotten a good night’s sleep.”

Throughout this brief exchange, Jordan had been eerily silent, and Jenny had noticed. “Jordan, umm, are you alright? You have not said anything all evening.”

Jordan did not respond.

Taylor stood up from the table and walked over to Jordan. “Stay with me tonight, Jordan. I don’t think you should be by yourself right now, okay?” Again, Jordan made no response, but she allowed Taylor to lead her away to the dorms.

Austin stretched and pushed his chair back. “I guess this is where I take my leave. See you all tomorrow.”

Rico shuffled out of his seat. “I’m gonna go for a light jog in the Gym if anyone wants to join me.”

Lily looked to Jenny. “I think we might just watch a movie tonight.” Jenny nodded in consensual affirmation.

The three left, and so Rufus sat at the table by himself. His eye still hurt a little. The
Latinist looked about the food court and then pronounced to nobody in particular, “If you think I’m going to clean up all the dirty dishes you left on the table, then you are sadly mistaken.”

As the eighteenth day of their journey drew to a close, the students were left with much to mull over in their heads. All-Star Sandwich Artist Jenny Zemenovski had somehow survived another trial. Jenny had met such wonderful people in this mall, and their friendship meant so much to her. While she was filled with such grand happiness, she was also possessed by crippling fear. Those whom she had grown close to disappeared before her eyes. The pain hurt, and she could only imagine what Jordan must be going through. Nevertheless, she was glad to have gotten to know these people before they were taken away, as opposed to never having known them at all.

Rico de Naranjas, All-Star Marathon Runner, was surprised that he had made it this far. Nine of his friends had perished before his eyes, and yet he was still standing. He certainly wasn’t as strong as Cody, or as clever as Elizabeth, but now he was taking their spots. What made him different? It couldn’t just be luck, but then what else could it be? Rico had to believe that there was a purpose for his survival, and that belief gave him the hope he needed to continue.

All-Star Lucky Taylor Erzen had had enough of people dying. She still had not come to terms with Cody’s death, and she didn’t want to. Both she and Jordan had lost somebody, and the pain ached beyond words. She had been pleasant, she had fostered a warm environment, and yet these deaths kept happening. If anyone else left, then there wouldn’t be enough people around to compliment her! What’s the point in looking nice if there’s no one to admire her? She had been giving it 110%, but now she would have to increase her potential to hold this mall together.

Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist, couldn’t believe how stupid his classmates were. It was the fault of the killers to be caught, and it was the fault of the killed to have put themselves in those positions in the first place. So what if people died? That’s just the way it is. The other students think it’s such a big ordeal when another one of their classmates perish, but it is simply the work of natural selection. Those who had been left behind were the strongest the mall could produce. If they would only stop being so stupid and face the facts, then maybe they could accomplish something productive.

All-Star Kawaii Lily Smith had voted wrong again. Theo was such a nice guy; he was the least likely to be a killer. But the vote had been close. Theo wouldn’t have voted for himself, and Jordan probably didn’t either, so if anyone else had changed their mind, then there would have been a tie. What would happen then? Lily didn’t want to think about it. The simple solution to the issue would be just to stop the killing. Lily was starting to think that it would be better for them to continue living in the mall so long as it meant that they could all survive together.

Austin Fitzpatrick, All-Star Idle, was legitimately tired. For most of his life, he had always felt tired; yawning was just a facet of his life. But these days he felt exhausted, that he could hardly keep his eyes open. He would close his eyes for one second, and after the next, one of his friends would have disappeared. It was all rather overwhelming, and Austin wasn’t sure what to make of it.

All-Star Golfer Jordan Koulibagh felt numb. Everything seemed to be cast in a shade of gray, and the air felt colder. Theo was gone. Gone. In the moment she had been upset and angry. How could he have done this to her? He just had to make her feel so good, and then feel so terrible. She had opened herself up to him, and he had twisted a knife through her heart. But she wasn’t mad at him any longer, she couldn’t be. She missed him. The mall was so empty without him. Why did he have to be so rash? Why couldn’t he just stay there with her? He just left her.
In the morning, the students convened for breakfast. A good night’s sleep did indeed help, but it had not provided a panacea for them. Their minds had not been filled with pleasant thoughts, and rest did not come easily. They needed to break free from their stagnation, and exploring any new areas would provide the perfect reprieve. As it would happen, there were three new areas open, one at the end of the West, East, and North Sectors. There was little discussion, for the kids knew with whom they would be exploring.

Rufus and Rico headed over to the West Sector. The giant gate at the end of the hall had withdrawn, and the duo were free to wander inside. Past the threshold, there was a small box office area with a set of double doors on either side of it. The doors led to a huge auditorium. If the boys had felt small in the mall before, then they certainly felt it now. The ceiling towered above them, and their voices echoed throughout the chamber. At the far end of the hall was a giant wooden stage adorned with gorgeous red curtains. There was another door in either wing, but they were locked.

“Yo-o! Echo-o!” Rico’s voiced boomed throughout the space and bounced off the walls. “Man, this place gets great acoustics. This would be the perfect venue for a show.”

Rufus was scouring the tech behind the stage. Speakers lined the edges of the stage as well as the walls of the auditorium, and yet the Latinist could not find a microphone anywhere. “Oh yes, I can practically hear a virtuoso performing Haydn.”

“I’ve never heard of Haydn. What kind of music do they play?”

“What kind of…? Haydn was a famous composer. Perhaps you’ve heard of Mozart or Beethoven.”

“Oh, yeah, those dudes. They were pretty swank.”

“They say that all modern music is derived from these classical works.”

“No way.”

“I wouldn’t know, though. I hardly listen to music. Too distracting.”

“You can’t be serious! Du-ude, I’ve been music deprived ever since we got here. Just give me a beat and I can run for hours.”

“You can run for hours without music.”

“Yeah, but it helps keep me focused.”

“What is there to focus on? I was under the impression that running was a mindless activity.”

“Ehh, for the most part. But people get exhausted cuz they don’t know what they’re doing. Like, you have to get your breathing down. Once you get into a rhythm, then you’re set.”

“The cross-overs are amazing, aren’t they?”

“What cross-overs?”
“Between everything. Rhythm in music, rhythm in running. When I’m translating, I’ll find the rhythm of the speaker, and then it becomes clear how the sentences go together.”

“So…basically everything is connected.”

“Hmm…essentially, yes.”

“So-o…all us students are connected…”

“I suppose we were…”

“Were? You don’t think we still are?”

“Oh, look at us. You saw us all this morning. We’re a wreck. Troy and Cornelius were our friends, and that’s what makes it so unreal. The first three we could mark off as crazy, but there’s no hiding what happened in that last trial. If it could happen to them, then it really could happen to us.”

“Dude…it sucks…”

“I know…”

“Then what do we do, man? I thought we were taking this mall by storm! What happened?”

“Murder. Murder happened.”

“But so what, man? This shit has happened, now let’s move on.”

“Yes, this is how things are, but, Rico, that sounds too much like me. I don’t like you sounding like me.”

“Huh? Why don’t you like it?”

“Because I don’t want you to be like me. I want you to be like Rico. We are different people, and we need to value what makes us all unique.”

“Yeah, totally, that’s where I was going with it. We don’t need to move on just because that’s the way it is. I think we need to move on because it’s what everybody else would have wanted. Like, I don’t think Theo would want us to mope around. He’d want us to get out of here.”

“Well said, Rico, well said.”

“So are we getting out of here already?”

“Sounds good to me. Now, I have been pouring over this back stage, but I can’t make heads or tails of it. The soundboard has got to be around here somewhere…”

“Soundboard? I think I saw that in the back by the box office.”

“Well, go run back there and see if you can turn it on.”

“Sure. Any real reason you want it on?”

“Mm, curiosity. Just trying to figure out how this mall works. The more we know, the better off we are.”
“Totally. I’ll run up and see what I can find.”

Rufus hardly had a moment of peace to himself when a strident screeching issued from every speaker in the auditorium. Soon Rico’s voice was emitted from these machines. “Yo-o, Rufus, I think I found it! ” The decibels of Rico’s ululations sent vibrations through Rufus’s body.

With his hands clasped over his ears, Rufus called out, “I think you might be right! Now turn that down before I go deaf. And do something about that static.”

There was a harsh squeaking on Rico’s end, followed by his voice at a more tolerable level. “Uhh, I can’t figure out where the static’s coming from. I think something might be interfering with the soundboard’s signal, like someone’s trying to block us out.”

“Oh we’re the ones being blocked out,” Rufus muttered under his breath.

Just then, the mall’s PA system cackled on. “Good morning, you worthless cretins! It’s time for you to head over to the Video Store for some quality movie entertainment. I just know you’re going to love today’s specials.”

Taylor and Austin, along with Jordan, traveled to the North Sector of the mall. To Taylor’s exuberant joy, the hall opened into a spacious Department Store. The students could finally go shopping now! The department store was separated into two floors joined together by an escalator. But like the escalators leading to the food court, these ones were not in service.

The ground floor was split into two sections, a side for boys and a side for girls. Taylor hurried to her respective side and began browsing through the various clothing arrangements. It quickly became apparent to her, though, that there was a common theme to the clothing. One display featured Melissa’s white suit, another Elizabeth’s sky-blue gown. And yet another display carried out their individual accessories: Francesca’s pearls, Jordan’s gloves, and Lily’s everything. There was even a vase full of the flowers that Delilah wore in her hair! Taylor soon found an entire display with her outfit attached to it. And it wasn’t just the one outfit; there were enough clothes that Taylor could wear them all and not have to worry about laundry for a week.

On the opposite side, Austin was having a similar experience. Randolph’s robes hung nicely along the one wall, James’s shirt and tie were ironed to a crisp in their display, and a mannequin was wearing the Idle’s own suit almost as gloriously as he himself did. To make matters more interesting, the various outfits were all of the same size; all of Austin’s suit jackets were the same size, and all of Cody’s tank tops were the same, but they only matched each other, i.e. Austin would not be able to fit into any of the wifebeaters. There were clothes for all sixteen students, but they would only fit their respective candidates.

Jordan had wandered upstairs by herself. This floor was smaller in square footage, but it was still larger than the other stores in the mall. There was new merchandise on this floor, but it wasn’t anything spectacular. Again, one side was designated for the women, and the other for the men. In either section, the students could find basic T-shirts, underwear, sweatpants, hooded sweatshirts, and socks. As on the first floor, there were also fitting rooms on the upper level.

Back on the ground floor, Taylor and Austin had come together to tell each other about the clothing conundrum. “It’s a travesty! An absolute travesty! We’ve been trapped in such a stupid mall, and when we finally get the chance to go clothes shopping, they’re all our own clothes!” Taylor was not pleased with the current state of affairs.
“Well, at least we have clothes. We don’t have to worry about ruining the ones we do have.” Austin was still tired. He had lain awake for far longer than he wanted to last night, and his body was not happy with his sleep deprivation. Though usually complacent, Austin wasn’t in the mood to listen to Taylor’s weightless complaints.

“I’m just saying that it’s a waste. Why ruin a perfectly good mall? This Monobear doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“Uh huh.”

“Oh, if I were in charge, things would be much different. First off, we wouldn’t have that lousy Laundromat, and the Antique Store would have to be hauled out as well.”

“Is that so?”

“We could erect a nice frozen yogurt shop in its place. And we would need more clothing stores, obviously—‘variety is the spice of life’ or something like that. I suppose the Hobby Shop could be sacrificed for that.”

“You don’t say.”

“While we’re at it, we might as well empty out the Party Store. And who’s ever heard of a Pharmacy being in a mall? We’d just put the quaintest music store in its spot.”

“I can hardly imagine it.”

“Austin, for the love of—what has gotten into you?”

Austin stared blankly at Taylor. He wanted to say, “I’m tired,” but instead he asked, “How’s Jordan?”

Taylor sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know. She’s taking it badly. But can you blame her? I told her she can talk to me when she feels ready, but I don’t know how much time she’ll need for that.”

“Did she stay with you last night?”

“She did. I told her to take the bed; I’d sleep in a chair. It was surprisingly comfortable. After some time, she thought I had gone to sleep, but I was too worried about her to drift off. You can’t tell her I told you this, but she started crying. It was soft, so as not to wake me, I guess, but it was there. She cried for a long time. I think…I think she eventually cried herself to sleep…”

“Poor Jordan…”

“I know. I just wish she’d open up to me. There are healthier ways to cope, and crying to herself is not one of them. Honestly! I try to be such a good friend, but nobody ever notices. Do people not realize that I’m here for them? You guys can tell me anything. Why, if—”

Without raising his voice, Austin pointedly interrupted Taylor. “Taylor, you’re the one not coping well.”

“Excuse me?”

“Every time, it’s the same old thing. The world gets smaller, and suddenly you have to make your presence known. You take extra care to be sweet and nice, but in a few days, you revert
“I can’t help it if I take pride in how other people see me.”

“But you put on airs to give everyone an image of who “Taylor” is. Do me a favor and just be yourself; no showy stuff.”

“Ugh, whatever. Let’s just go find Jordan; I’m worried about her.” Turning away from Austin, Taylor led him up to the second floor.

Jordan was still there, idly browsing through a stack of sweatpants. At the sight of her, a lightbulb flashed in Austin’s mind. The Idle sauntered over to the stack, found a pair he liked, and moved over to the hoodie section. There he found a nice gray sweatshirt to match the sweatpants. He turned to Taylor and offered the items in his outstretched hands.

“Here, put these on,” he said.

Taylor stared at him blankly. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Nope. It’s time for the real Taylor to come out. Put these on, that way the only thing we’ll be able to judge you on is your personality.”

“Uhh, what? Like, no. Instead you’ll judge me for wearing sweatpants. Wearing sweatpants is so undignified.”

“If you want people to care, then make them care regardless of what you wear.”

Taylor didn’t have a good comeback. “Fine,” she hissed. Grabbing the clothing from Austin, she marched herself to the fitting rooms. That gave the Idle and the Golfer some time alone. Jordan was still shuffling through the piles of clothes.

“Jordan, how are you?” asked Austin softly.

“I’ve been better,” she replied, not taking her eyes off her task.

“I know it must be rough. I can only imagine—”

“Please!” said Jordan, her hands trembling. “You don’t have to say anything. There’s nothing more to say. I just need some time to clear out my head. I just want to not-think for a while.”

“Okay. That’s okay. If you ever start thinking again, just let me know.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

“Just take care of yourself until then, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Cool. Now let’s go find Taylor; it doesn’t take that long to put on sweatpants.” Austin led Jordan over to the fitting rooms. There were two changing stalls on the girls’ side. One door was open, the other shut. Austin rapped his knuckles on the closed door. “Taylor, are you alright?”

“Umm, one moment, please,” called back the Lucky. Austin and Jordan waited for a few seconds, and then the door handle began to shake, followed by Taylor cursing under her breath. “A little help?” she asked. “The door sticks from this side.”
Austin grabbed hold of the door handle and pushed. The door swung in, and Taylor stepped through the divider. The transformation was palpable. She had taken the clips and hair band out of her hair, so her blonde hair fell down to her shoulders. With relation to her arms and legs, every inch of her skin was covered. The get-up was a little big on her, so her sleeves fell past her wrists, and the cuffs of her pants covered her feet. She may have been physically comfortable, but she took pains to show her displeasure.

“You look wonderful,” said Austin.

“I look ridiculous,” she replied flatly.

“Nonsense, it’s a good look on you.”

“I’m changing back.”

Taylor made a move to return to the dressing room, but just then Monobear’s movie announcement blared over the PA system. Austin smiled and took Taylor by the arm. “Oh, would you look at that, there’s no time to change. Oh well. We better get going.” Not wasting another second, Austin led the girls down the escalators and out of the shop—greatly to Taylor’s chagrin.

It was much warmer here than anywhere else in the mall. A single bead of sweat rolled down the back of Jenny’s neck. The humidity was becoming unpleasant, and she considered untying her apron. But she would be so exposed without her uniform, so for now she would suffer. Lily didn’t seem to mind, though. The Kawaii was running energetically from one thing to the next, just trying to take it all in.

The East Sector opened up into a gorgeous indoor garden. Jenny and Lily had stepped into an enormous greenhouse. With all the various plant life, they were reminded of what the world looked like outside the fluorescent-lighted walls of the mall. Like the skylight above the food court, the entire ceiling was made of glass to let in the sun. Sprinklers were attached to the metal scaffolding holding the panes of glass in place at regular intervals.

As for the garden itself, the biodiversity was astounding. Multifoliate flowers of various hues sat side-by-side in rows on the ground. Vines twisted and wound themselves around columns and statues. In the corners, vivacious trees offered shade to their more delicate brethren. Jenny recognized a few of the plant species, but almost everything was exotic to her.

The best part, by far, of the Garden was the pool in the center. With walls raised just high enough to sit on, the pool’s glassy surface reflected the brilliance of the space itself. A few disparate petals floated lazily on the pristine surface. Jenny idly passed her hand through the shallow pool; the water was cool, but not cold.

Vents where the floor met the walls hummed as they controlled the heat and humidity, but the noise was hardly obtrusive. In fact, the soft humming provided an idyllic amount of white noise. Seated on the edge of the pool, Jenny closed her eyes and took in the space. It was very pleasant, now, in the garden. The Sandwich Artist exhaled a deep breath, and for the first time in a long time, she felt herself relax.

“Jenny-chan! Look at this one!” cried out Lily standing over a box of perky flowers.

Jenny opened her eyes with a start. So much for relaxation. Jenny stood up and walked over to Lily. “What is it?” she asked.
“It’s so pretty, desu!”

“It is. What is it called?”

“The little tag says ‘L. Longiflorum.’”

“Would that be Latin? Rufus might know what it means.”

“We should make sure to ask him the next chance we get.”

“He might know, but he also might not know.”

“Desu? What do you mean? Rufus-kun is the smartest one of us; of course he has to know!”

“I am…not so sure…”

“But why not?”

“I…umm…I got Rufus’s secret during the last exchange…”

“Nani? Ooh, tell me, tell me! Unless it’s really bad. Rufus-kun didn’t kill someone, too, did he?”

“Oh, umm, no, no, nothing like that. It is just…I do not know if I should tell you…it would be rude…”

“Keeping secrets makes for bad friends, I think. If we had all found out about Theo-kun earlier, then he could’ve explained himself more, and then it wouldn’t have been an issue. If we’re honest, then we have nothing to worry about.”

“I suppose that is making sense.”

“How about I tell you my secret, okay?”

“Umm, that is not necessary.”

“No, I don’t want to hide anything. Okeydokey, here goes: when I was younger, I may have killed a cactus.”

“You killed a cactus? But—”

“I know, I know. How hard is it to kill a cactus? They don’t need much attention. But I thought that was sad; I wanted to make my cactus really happy! So I watered it lots every day. Turns out that’s a bad idea.”

“That is not such a bad secret.”

“Compared to some people’s, I guess not. But it’s not something that I’m going to tell people right away. It makes me look silly and foolish. How can I expect people to take me seriously if I can’t even take care of a dumb cactus?”

“It has been my experience that one’s own past actions do not define who they are; rather, what they do in the present is the most important factor.”

“Teehee, sometimes you say funny things, Jenny-chan.”
“I was not trying to be funny…”

“No, it’s okay. What you said wasn’t funny, but the way you said it was. I like when you get all deep and thoughtful.”

“Y-you do? I thought it would be annoying.”

“Nonsense, desu! Just do what you do. We’re friends, Jenny-chan, so I don’t care how you act or what you do. Oh, and I’ll never ever tell anyone your secret unless you say it’s okay—even if I don’t understand what it means. What exactly does it mean?”

“Umm…like I said earlier, our past actions do not define us. It was a phase that I went through. Yes, a phase.”

“Okeydokey! I’ve gone through lots of phases, so I totally understand.”

“Umm…but I do want to share some things with you. L-let me tell you Rufus’s secret.”

“Desu? Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“I do not think your secret could have ever caused any harm, but I am not so sure about his. You see, before Rufus was accepted to Success Summit, Rufus went to a prestigious private school. But he only got in because he cheated on the entrance exams.”

“Rufus-kun cheated? I can’t believe he would do something like that.”

“I was shocked too. It has made me start to question how I really think about him.”

“If he cheated his way into school…how else might he have cheated? Oh, Jenny-chan, what if Rufus is actually the All-Star Despair? He could’ve been trying to trick us all this entire time.”

“He is rather smart after all. Maybe I will talk to him directly about his secret. I am sure that there is a very good reason behind all this.”

“You know what, I’m sure there is. I think you should talk to him. But until you do, I won’t say anything so as not to tip him off.”

“I hope he is understanding.”

Before the girls could deliberate further, Monobear’s announcement rang through the garden, ushering them back to the Video Store.
Chapter 5--The Loved and the Loathed--Part 3

Since Taylor, Austin, and Jordan were already in the North Sector, they were the first to arrive at the Movie Store. Close behind them were Lily and Jenny, and then Rico and Rufus brought up the rear. This time around, there were enough seats for everybody to be sitting during the showing.

Though no one said anything, Taylor could feel the eyes of the others judging her for her new clothing. The second these dumb movies were over, she was going to bolt back to that fitting room and change back into her normal clothes. Monobear was not so discreet and kept looking at the Lucky and snickering.

“Upupu…there’s so few of you. Lucky for you though, that we have a surplus of videos for you today. You should really thank your classmates for leaving you with so much quality visual entertainment to behold. Enough chatter; let’s get right to it!”

Monobear popped in the first tape. If the pattern should hold, then the first video would belong to Cody, and indeed it did. The Waterskier was as relaxed and vivacious as he ever was. Taylor and Austin wanted desperately to look away, but that would have been insulting to Cody’s memory, and so the two strained their eyes to the screen.

“Why do I gotta introduce myself? Everybody knows who I am,” said Cody. “Like, who’s gonna be watching this and not know who I am? Ehh, I’m sure you guys got your reasons, so whatever.

“Anyway, I’m Cody Cameron, All-Star Waterskier. I specialize in skiing barefoot, but I’m sure you already knew that. Give me a line and a boat, and I’m a beast on river or lake. It’s that kind of physical prowess that got me accepted into Success Summit. I wasn’t sure about leaving to go to someplace far away from a shore, but I don’t got much to do in the winter anyway, so I figured why not.

“It’s been a pretty chill experience. The people here are pretty cool, and the food is to die for. I practically eat like a king every day! I mean, that just sounds like little stuff, but this place really is gnarly. I don’t know what I’d do if I got kicked out—not that I’d do anything to get me kicked out. Just, I really like it here, you know? It’s a cool place.”

Taylor was fighting back tears; Austin just stared blankly at the screen. Without a moment to regain their composure, Monobear stuck in the next feature film. Markus was now sitting in the chair on screen. In this depiction, he was still a happy-go-lucky kid. He wasn’t yet full of bravado or aggression or despair. It was strange to see such a genuine expression of the Thespian.

“At last, the time has come for the great Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian, to grace the stage with his presence!” pronounced Markus in a high-pitched voice. “In every batch of coal, there is one piece that stands out: the lone diamond. And we’re are all diamonds; but, alas, I am the diamond that shines the brightest! This is not to underscore the significance of the other gems; I just mean to say that there is a clear distinction between myself and the others.

“Yes, yes, Success Summit. It was only natural that someone of my caliber be accepted into the hallowed halls of such a fine establishment and work my way among the ranks of the elite. The stars have always shone perfectly for Markus Aslanius, and they will continue to do so until the ends of time. Going to Success Summit would simply ensure that these lights won’t be extinguished with ease.
“Has it affected me? …well, you know the answer to that one. The people here…they’re unlike anyone else. I was in such a slump when I got here, but that All-Star Psychologist…she’s amazing. Why, I haven’t had a breakdown in months. I can feel my mental health strengthening in fortitude! Watch out, world, Markus Aslanius is back and better than ever!”

Something was strange about Markus’s video, but the students had very little time to mull it over, because Monobear was eager to arrive at the pièce de résistance. As the final video was slid into the VCR, Jordan’s entire body tensed up. Why had she decided to sit directly in front of the giant television?

On the other side of the screen, Theo sat in his chair, smiling directly back at Jordan. A single tear escaped down the Golfer’s right cheek, but she refused to take her eyes off the screen. “Uhh, hello,” started Theo. “I’ve been with a bunch of documentary crews before, but I’ve always spoken about an expedition, never about myself. I don’t really know what I’m supposed to say. There’s not much to say about me. I’m Theo Cook, All-Star Cartographer.

“My parents are big explorers, and so I started seeing the world at a very young age. When you’re so immersed in the macrocosm, it’s hard to relate to the microcosm. When I got the invitation to attend Success Summit, I thought that I would finally be able to have a normal teenage experience. Don’t get me wrong, rafting down unnamed rivers or scaling giant canyons is great, but it’s not an everyday occurrence for most people. I guess I just want a taste of normal days.

“I’ve never once regretted my decision. I might not be doing much exploring, but I’m doing my own sort of exploration. It sounds so cheesy, but I’m finding myself, who I am. It’s funny; most people have to go on long spiritual journeys to find out who they are, but I just have to go to school to do it. Hey, normal isn’t so bad after all.”

Theo finished, and the screen grew dark. In the past, two videos had been hard enough to swallow, but three was almost unbearable. The students were always unsettled after the viewings, and Monobear just reveled in their discomfort.

“Upu. Well, I suppose you’ve all had enough for now. I’ll leave you to your despair-inducing thoughts. Ta ta!” Monobear disappeared, and the students sat in silence for a moment. Jordan got up to leave—she had had enough of the farce—but Rufus called her to stay.

Rufus: “We need to talk.”

Jordan: “I don’t want to talk to you.”

Rufus: “No, I mean all of us.”

Jordan: “What for?”

Rufus: “The videos.”

Lily: “Nani? What about them?”

Rufus: “We’ve been ignoring them for too long. We need to finally face the facts.”

Taylor: “And what facts are those?”

Rico: “I’ve got an idea. Every video is the same. An introduction, why they came to Success Summit, and then their experience.”

Taylor: “But none of it makes any sense; none of us have ever set foot in Success Summit. The
videos are just some false fabrication of our beloved Monobear.”

Austin: “But what if they’re not?”

Jenny: “I am not following.”

Austin: “What if they’re not weird fabrications? Isn’t there a possibility that they could be genuine?”

Taylor: “Fat chance. We would’ve known if we’d made those videos.”

Jenny: “Unless they filmed the videos because they knew they were going to die.”

Jordan: “How would you know that? How would they know that? This is not some sort of story; this is real life!”

Rico: “Jordan, calm down.”

Jordan: “I’m sorry. I just…didn’t feel like seeing his face again so soon.”

Lily: “We understand, it’s okay. Everything’s daijoubu.”

Jordan: “It doesn’t feel okay…”

Rufus: “But about these videos…let’s work under the assumption that they are real.”

Taylor: “It’s a waste of time, but whatever.”

Jenny: “If they are real…then what is the purpose of them?”

Taylor: “Their purpose is to make us feel bad. Monobear just loves putting us in despair.”

Austin: “I think Jenny means their original purpose. Why were they made in the first place?”

Lily: “Don’t they say in the videos? It’s for some sort of project.”

Jordan: “Markus’s and James’s.”

Taylor: “Omigod, but why?”

Rufus: “Like a video diary. Get everyone’s thoughts and feelings recorded for posterity.”

Rico: “Like a yearbook, but in video format.”

Austin: “Ahh, that sounds nice.”

Jordan: “Then presumably we all have tapes. Monobear just hasn’t shown them to us yet.”

Rico: “Because we’re still alive…”

Lily: “And we’re just going to have to stay that way! No one else is allowed to die, desu.”

Rufus: “We’ll see.”

Taylor: “Great, we solved the mystery. Hooray hooray.”

Jenny: “Umm…but…if they are video diaries, then when were they made? I do not remember ever
sitting down for one.”

Lily: “Me neither. Then they must have been made right before everyone was killed.”

Austin: “So they knew they were going to die…interesting…”

Jenny: “I was not filmed! They were all in it together; if you are playing a joke on me, you can stop because it is not funny.”

Jordan: “No. No one could have known they were going to die. Theo…Theo wouldn’t have done that on purpose.”

Rico: “And Markus, in the end. He said he didn’t want to die; he begged.”

Lily: “Oh no! Unless they were all All-Star Despair. Maybe they were all the Liar, maybe we’re all the Liar. It’s just some big trick by Monobear.”

Jenny: “I do not like this joke.”

Taylor: “Lily, are you All-Star Despair?”

Lily: “No!”

Taylor: “Then there you have it.”

Lily: “But maybe I forgot! I do forget things sometimes…I think…”

Rufus: “I think forgetting is precisely what’s going on.”

Rico: “So…All-Star Despair doesn’t remember that they’re All-Star Despair?”

Rufus: “Oh no, they’re very much aware of it.”

Austin: “My head’s a little fuzzy…”

Rufus: “Let’s go back to an earlier question: when were the videos made?”

Austin: “I was conscious for that. Before their deaths.”

Rufus: “That’s so vague. How soon before their deaths.”

Taylor: “Well, Delilah killed just a few days after we arrived, so it must’ve been pretty quick.”

Rico: “And as long as Markus or James were around, the other videos could’ve been collected at any other time.”

Lily: “So now that both of them are gone, there’ll be no more videos because nobody else will die, desu.”

Rufus: “A few days ago I thought we had the potential to escape this place through our own efforts, but after listening to this squabble, I realize how wrong I was.”

Jordan: “What are you getting at?”

Rufus: “Use your brain’s, for Jove’s sake! There are two fundamental pieces of evidence which you all are just dancing around.”
Taylor: “Care to enlighten us, Mr. Know-It-All?”

Rufus: “The room they were filmed in and Markus’s video.”

Austin: “It’s too early for this strenuous mental activity.”

Rico: “Yo-o, what’s so special about the room?”

Rufus: “Amori Iovis…where is it? Have any of you seen a bare, white room anywhere in this mall?”

Jenny: “I, umm, I have not.”

Austin: “Negative.”

Lily: “Nuh-uh.”

Jordan: “I have not.”

Rico: “Nope.”

Taylor: “Your point?”

Rufus: “Did you not…? Where. Were. They. Filmed?”

Austin: “In that room.”

Rico: “But where’s that room? No one has found it in the mall.”

Jenny: “Oh! Because it is not in the mall. They were not filmed in the mall.”

Lily: “Then Delilah’s video…”

Jordan: “It was filmed before we got here.”

Rico: “Geez.”

Austin: “How can that be?”

Taylor: “Because they were never filmed in the first place! I’ve said it all along; Monobear made those videos just to mess with us; they don’t mean anything!”

Rufus: “Then why would he have changed Markus’s voice?”

Lily: “Nani?”

Jordan: “Now that you mention it, his voice was a little above its usual range.”

Rico: “Yo-o, it sounded like he hadn’t gone through puberty yet.”

Taylor: “(You sound like you haven’t gone through puberty yet.)”

Austin: “Then those videos must have been taken a long time ago.”

Jordan: “But that can’t be…”

Jenny: “I am being serious; this joke is not a funny one. Please stop.”
Austin: “I don’t think anyone’s playing a joke anymore.”

Rico: “I agree with Austin.”

Rufus: “Then let’s face the facts, shall we.”

Taylor: “Sure. You’ve proven so much. But what’s it even supposed to mean, huh?”

Rufus: “It means we’re not strangers.”

Lily: “Of course not, we’re friends!”

Jordan: “He means before we woke up here.”

Lily: “Nani?”

Rufus: “We’ve had these videos for weeks now, but we’re just now listening to their message. We are students of Success Summit, and we have been for some time.”

Jenny: “I…I think I wish this were a joke now…”

Taylor: “Uhh, I think I would remember attending one of the most prestigious schools in our country.”

Rico: “…unless we all forgot we did.”

Rufus: “Precisely.”

Taylor: “So that’s your explanation? Collective amnesia. Do you realize how crazy that sounds?”

Austin: “Crazier than being locked in a mall, forced to murder our classmates to escape? There are certainly crazier ideas.”

Jordan: “Then this is…”

Rufus: “Only the tip of the iceberg.”

Jenny: “What is going on here?”

Lily: “This is making my head spin!”

Rico: “So this…this changes things, doesn’t it?”

Rufus: “I would like to think so.”

Jordan: “There is nothing ‘mutual’ about this killing anymore.”

Austin: “This is putting a bad taste in my mouth.”

Taylor: “God. This place is messed up.”

Lily: “I know what’ll make us feel better: food!”

Austin: “Oh. It is about that time.”

Jenny: “I can eat.”
Jordan: “I guess so.”

Rico: “Wooh! Let’s do it!”

Rufus: “And can we discuss what we’ve found in the other Sectors?”

Lily: “I’m having tacos for lunch!”

Austin: “You had tacos for dinner last night.”

Lily: “I can’t help it if I like tacos, desu.”

Jenny: “The tacos are rather yummy.”

Jordan: “I think I will opt for some soup.”

Taylor: “Soup does sound good about now. Maybe with a side salad.”

Rufus: “Ahem, about the other Sectors—”

Rico: “O-oh, I can’t decide between hot dogs or hamburgers.”

Lily: “Why not just have both?”

Rico: “Lily, you’re a genius!”

Lily: “N-nippah!”

Jenny: “This discussion is starting to make me feel hungry.”

Taylor: “Then why are we still sitting around? Let’s go already!”

Lily: “Last one to the food court’s a rotten egg!”

Rico: “I’ll race you there!”

Jenny: “W-wait for me.”

Taylor: “It’s just food! What’s the use? They can’t hear me. Sigh. Jordan, escort me to the food court?”

Jordan: “That sounds lovely.”

Austin: “And I shall take the other arm.”

Rufus: “And once again everyone leaves before we’ve finished discussing all the pertinent information. And thus I’m left alone to talk to myself. My, it sure would be embarrassing if someone were to overhear this. Oh well. Sometimes it’s good to think aloud, to air out what’s running through my mind. Ahh, this mall just keeps getting more interesting by the minute. We might…we might just be able to make it out of here alive.”

Austin: “Rufus, you’re still here.”

Rufus: “Y-y-you! How long have you been here?”

Austin: “Long enough.”
Rufus: “Vow of silence?”

Austin: “Sure.”

Rufus: “Gratias.”

Following Austin, Rufus met the others in the Food Court for a lively lunch. Somehow, the Latinist managed to calm his classmates long enough to elicit the details of the other Sectors. He would have liked to continue discussing the secrets of the mall, but the others were not as keen. But there was no rush to figure everything out; everything would come in due time.

After lunch, the students still did not feel like talking about the videos further. It was a difficult truth to accept, and they would need time to mull over the facts. Each of the students found their own way to contemplate the afternoon, and before they knew it, one day had melted into the next.
Chapter 5--The Loved and the Loathed--Part 4

The mall felt so empty with only seven students, but they tried to live as normally as they could. They had plenty of time to do whatever they wanted, so they might as well try to pass it in as pleasant a manner as possible.

Much to Taylor’s protest, Jordan wished to be left alone. The Golfer sought the quiet confines of the Lounge. It always seemed that when someone needed a calming place in which to think, the Lounge was the ideal location. Jordan thought about how people were always using the Lounge. It had been one of the first areas to open up, and yet it was still being used. No one went near the Salon, and the Electronics and Antiques Stores were virtually abandoned. It was a stupid thing to think about, but it kept her mind off other issues.

But Jordan was doomed never to receive her respite.

“Ahh, there you are,” called a voice from the entrance. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Jordan turned her head to see Rufus smirking at her. He was the last person she wanted to talk to. She stared idly at him.

“I felt it of the utmost importance to speak with you.” She continued to stare at the Latinist. “It has occurred to me that tensions are running a little high in the mall at the current moment, and that isn’t healthy for any of us.” Jordan tilted her head but made no initiative to indulge him in conversation. Rufus could feel her obstinacy radiating from her; he drew close to where she was sitting. “Ecce. This is really why I came here: I wanted to apologize.”

Jordan raised her eyebrows, and she couldn’t help saying, “Really?”

“Yes, really. I may have done some things that can be construed as rude or offensive, and I wish to make amends for said actions.”

“And why am I supposed to believe you?”

“Because, believe it or not, I want everyone here to escape from this mall, Jordan. If you would stop fighting me—”

“What did you call me?”

“I called you ‘Jordan.’ Don’t tell me that’s not your name.”

“No, it is. I’m surprised you got it right.”

“It’s part of the apologizing. I figure the least I can do is get your name right.”

“Oh? Did Rico put you up to this?”

“No. It was something that Charles had said before he, well…”

“You’ll have to remind me who that is.”

“Err, the big strong one. Never wore shoes.”

“His name is—was—Cody.”
“Eheu, this is why I want to apologize. I say I want us all out, but I don’t even know who everyone is.”

“Hey, don’t insult yourself; that’s my job.”

“Ahh, there’s that dry wit I enjoy.”

“Please don’t.”

“Mea culpa?”

“Don’t compliment me like we’re best friends. I can appreciate your wanting to apologize, but it doesn’t excuse the things you did. You need to take responsibility for your actions.”

“I assumed the swollen eye was responsibility enough.”

“You should know better than to assume.”

“I should, shouldn’t I?”

“This is such a terrible discussion.”

“I agree. It’s not exactly going the way I had anticipated.”

“And what had you anticipated?”

“I suppose I expected you to forgive me without a moment’s hesitation, because, after all, it is in our best interest to work together. But I suppose that was just my own hubris clouding my judgment.”

“Hubris…a fitting word choice.”

“You can’t study a dead language without picking out a choice word here and there.”

“I can only imagine.”

“Eheu, I don’t foresee this conversation going anywhere, so I’ll stop wasting both of—your time and leave you as you were.”

“Before you go, tell me your goal for apologizing? How did you want things to change?”

“In the best case scenario, I was hoping that we could start over. Tabula rasa, if you will. Go back to the beginning and act as if all that nastiness never occurred.”

“You really want all that?”

“I know I don’t deserve that, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“…how about I meet you halfway? We can forget everything, but only until we’re out of here. Don’t expect any courtesies from me beyond these walls.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. A truce, then?”

“Truce.”

Rufus and Jordan both stood up. Looking each other square in the eye, the Golfer and Latinist shook hands to cinch the deal, but Rufus had his fingers crossed behind his back, and
Jordan’s behind hers.

“What the hell do you mean ‘you don’t know!?!’” The yell echoed through every corner of the Department Store. There was raw anger resonating in its tone, mixed with a hint of violence. This level of vituperation had not been witnessed since Elizabeth was called out on her crime.

Jenny ran toward the source of the disturbance. Jenny was not overly fond of loud noises in the first place, but the intensity of the cry greatly unnerved her; someone was in trouble. Jenny hoped that the situation was not too extreme. What if Jenny had to stop a fight? The Sandwich Artist wasn’t sure if she had it in her to prevent an altercation.

Jenny arrived at the scene and found Taylor, her fists clenched at her sides. The Lucky had backed Monobear into a corner, and now she was unleashing her verbal fury upon the robot. There was murder in her eyes.

Monobear frantically pawed at his surroundings, trying to find a way to escape his predicament. “I’m telling you, I only know what I know, and I know that I don’t know where they are.”

“Liar! You see everything that goes on in this mall, so you have to know where they are. I bet you took them, you worthless coward.”

“But I’m just a bear! Why would I take them? I don’t have any need for them.”

“I don’t know why you took them, and I really don’t care. Just give them back!”

“I can’t give back what I don’t have.”

“I swear to God I will bash your stupid animatronic face in if you don’t give them back.”

“Violence against your guardian is strictly forbidden!”

“GIVE THEM BACK!” Taylor raised one of her fists and started closing in on the bear.

Jenny’s instincts kicked in, and she leaped into action. Before Taylor could incite violence on the bear, Jenny grabbed the Lucky’s arm and held her back. Taylor quickly broke free and whirled around to face the one restraining her. With her eyes off him, Monobear took the moment of confusion to escape from his position and dash away into the mall.

Taylor gasped and shouted, “After him! He’s getting away!”

Jenny stood her ground and tried to calm Taylor down. “What is the matter?”

Taylor was exasperated. “What’s the matter? That bear stole my clothes! He even replaced the clothes on my mannequin!”

Jenny was partially confused. “But you are wearing clothes right now, are you not?”

“Ugh, yes, but not the clothes I want to wear. I was not cut out for the sweatpants life. I want my short shorts and thin tops back!”

“They are just clothes. I do not see what the big deal is.”

“Oh, Jenny. Jenny, Jenny, Jenny. Poor, sweet, deluded Jenny. You see, clothes are
“But they are just clothes—”

“There is nothing ‘just’ about clothes. Without clothing, we would be nothing more than… than cavemen! Is that what you want, Jenny? Do you want to be a cavewoman? Do you want to spend your life picking berries and having children?”

“Well, no—”

“Exactly! This is why clothes are so important!”

“But you are wearing clothes. You are not a caveperson, so why does it matter what you wear?”

“Not being a caveperson is only the beginning! We use our clothes to express ourselves. Who I am is reflected directly by what I put on my body; to deny me my shorts is to deny me my identity!”

“That is…rather extreme. Is it really that important?”

“Well, of course it is!”

“But I do not know if that is what you really want. I do not think that I want to be classified so much by what I am wearing than by who I am.”

“Now, Jenny, you raise a good point, but you’re missing a lot of it. Your appearance is the first thing people notice about you; people aren’t going to notice your winning personality at first glance.”

“My…winning personality…?”

“You need to make sure that your very essence is identified by your appearance. Now look at me. What do you see? Do you see a glitzy and glamorous girl? No! You see a slob and a vagabond. Now, I can’t live well enough knowing that people may have the wrong impression of me.”

“Umm, I think that I do not agree with you on this.”

“Excuse me? Who is the fashion expert in this situation?”

“Your appearance. I do not see a slob. I see someone who is comfortable with what they are wearing and does not care what others think of them.”

“Well, while that is a facet of my personality, it is not the specific part that I want people to see and understand.”

“But it is a part of your personality, so why is that such a big deal?”

“Because, like, because it’s important to me, okay?”

“I see, but why is it important. You say you want to express yourself, but no matter what you wear, you are expressing yourself.”

“Jenny, you just don’t get it. Fashion, good looks, it’s not just a way for me to express myself; it’s such a part of who I am that, like, it is who I am.”
“Can physical things really define a person, though? Is it not what is on the inside that counts?”

“God, Jenny, whatever, I don’t know. It’s just, whatever. Let it be. You obviously don’t get it. I just want my clothes back, okay?”

“If it means anything, I think you look fine without your usual clothing.”

“Thanks, Jenny.”

“Perhaps, umm, we can go shopping for new outfits. Would you like that? I have the feeling that you might like that.”

“Jenny, I just—leave me alone for now. I appreciate the offer, but just let me deal with this myself.”

“Umm, okay. But I hope that you will not approach Monobear another time. I do not think that any of us want anything to happen anymore.”

“Yeah, Jenny, whatever. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Oh…okay…”

Dejected, Jenny left Taylor in the Department Store. Taylor didn’t seem herself, and so Jenny didn’t want to leave, but the Lucky didn’t give her many other alternatives.

The minute Jenny left, Taylor swore at herself. Jenny had only wanted to help her, and Taylor had just shoved her away. It was a stupid and selfish thing to do. It was all that stupid Monobear’s fault; once she got her clothes back, then her mind would return to normal and she’d be back to her senses.

There was already someone occupying the stage when Rico arrived at the Auditorium. The house lights had been turned off, but the stage lights were blazing brilliantly. The curtains were drawn back, and dancing center stage was Lily Smith. Her moves were not dissimilar to her dance-machine maneuvers, but she poured her heart into every step. The soundboard wasn’t on, so the only sound in the Auditorium was the pounding of Lily’s feet on the platform.

Rico quietly took a seat in the audience and continued to watch Lily’s performance. Lily normally wore a ubiquitous smile, but now her grin really illuminated her face. No one else could hear it, but the song in her head was fueling a passion for excitement and energy. Finally, the song ran its course, and Lily drew her performance to a close. She bowed to her imaginary audience, and Rico took his cue. The Marathon Runner jumped up and applauded the Kawaii dancer.

Lily thought she had been alone during her dance recital, and so when she heard the applause, her face turned a bright shade of red. She wasn’t so much embarrassed that someone had witnessed her secret dance, but that someone had found it so enjoyable as to applaud boisterously.

“Desu, oh my goshness, who’s here?” asked the Kawaii from the stage.

“Yo-o, it’s just me!” called back Rico.

“Rico-kun! How long have you been there?”
“I just came in!”

“I’m so glad you liked it! Eeeee! Come up on stage where I can see you; it’s so dark in the seats.”

“Alright, alright I’m coming up.” Rico fumbled his way out of the seats and approached the stage. On the platform, he realized how oppressive the stage lights were; he couldn’t see beyond the edge of the stage. With how wild Lily had been gallivanting around the stage, it was a miracle that she hadn’t fallen over the side. “Wo-ow, Lily, how did you learn to dance like that?”

“Oh, I just kinda picked it up, desu.”

“No way. Someone had to have taught you. Do you take dance classes?”

“Nope. The only classes I take are regular schoolgirl classes.”

“Then someone in your family had to have taught you.”

“Nuh-uh. I learned it all myself.”

“I think it’s a hidden talent of yours.”

“Eeee. Don’t say such nice things; you’ll make me blush!”

“No, it’s true, you’re really good. Your parents must be super proud.”

“It’s really just my brothers who approve of me.”

“Oh yeah? Geez, I wish I got along with my bro better.”

“You have a brother?”

“And a sister. Roberto’s older, and Sofia’s younger.”

“I’m the youngest in our family; Ken-nii and Matt-nii pretty much take care of me.”

“I do get along really well with my cousins Jacobo and Samuel. They’re my mom’s sister’s kids. Sofia likes to play with Maria, my uncle Carlos’s youngest daughter, while Roberto often hangs out with Javier, aunt Isabella’s middle child.”

“Oh, wow, it must be so much fun being in a big family.”

“Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t. At the end of the day, though, it’s just me and my two siblings—just like you.”

“Yup, just the three of us!”

“I mean, we have our parents, too, so it’s really the five of us.”

“Desu? Five people in one house? That seems like a lot.”

“But…don’t you have five, too? Or did one of your parents…”

“Nipah, it’s just the three of us. Me, Matt-nii, and Ken-nii.”

“Your parents don’t live with you?”
“No, that would be way too many people. You can’t fight nine people in one apartment, silly!”

“Nine? I might not be the brightest tool in the shed, but I don’t think that math adds up.”

“Sure it does; it would be me and my parents, Ken-nii and his, and then Matt-nii and his.”

“Wait, what?”

“Oh, I am gomen. The thing is, I’m not really related to Ken-nii and Matt-nii. Not by blood, anyway.”

“Then how do you…?”

“How are they my brothers? Because we’re a family, desu. We look out for each other. That’s the important part. You don’t have to be related to someone to be a part of their family.”

“But…what about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“What happened to them? What are they doing?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really remember them much. From most of what I can remember, it’s just been the three of us looking out for each other.”

“But you have to have parents. Like, for school and stuff.”

“When we need a ‘parent,’ Mrs. Wildress pretends to be our mom. She’s the lady who owns the Laundromat and lets us live in the upstairs apartment. She’s a really nice lady, desu.”

“Don’t you miss your parents, though? It must be rough not having a real family there to support you.”

“Ken-nii and Matt-nii are a real enough family for me. I don’t think family has to be defined by who shares whose blood, but by who cares for and loves each other the most. Like, I think all of us here in the mall are a family. I certainly care about you all a lot.”

“I guess that’s true. But if we’re a family, how exactly does that work?”

“Easy! You see, Jordan-chan is the mom and Austin-kun is the dad. You and me are the kids, and Jenny-chan is Jordan’s sister who lives with us instead of living by herself with three cats. Which makes Taylor-chan the next-door neighbor who pretty much lives with us.”

“So what does that make Rufus?”

“He’s the uncle who we have to invite everywhere otherwise he would be sad and lonely by himself.”

“You’ve really thought this through, haven’t you?”

“Like I said, I think we’re all a big family!”

“Well then, sis, why don’t you teach me some of those dance moves of yours?”

“It would be my pleasure, Rico-niichan.”
Since Rufus was always the last to leave the dinner table, the other students had developed
the bad habit of leaving their dirty dishes on the table so that he would be forced to clean them up.
On a matter of principle, Rufus refused to so much as touch these plates. After lunch, the mountain
of china had taken over the entire table, and there was no more avoiding the problem. Someone
would have to dispose of the kitchenware, and no one wanted to volunteer. Upon the Latinist’s
suggestion, the students drew lots to see whose chore it would be, and the lot fell to Austin and
Jordan.

If Jordan had to spend time with anyone, she was glad that it was Austin. The Idle could be
quiet, and he was savvy enough to know when the Golfer wasn’t in the mood to converse. She just
needed time to think, time to sort things out. Theo was dead, she knew that, but accepting it was
another issue. In due time, she would be back to her usual self, but for now she just needed space.
Everyone felt the need to talk to her and comfort her, and she knew they meant well, but they were
just getting on her nerves.

Monobear had let the dishes pile up without cleaning them, so it was unlikely that he would
clean them up now; the kids would have some real chores to perform. Austin and Jordan found a
sink in one of the food stands and got to work. Jordan washed while Austin dried. He gave her her
silence.

Jordan was actually thankful for the menial work. The repetitiveness of the task kept her
mind off other matters. Scrub, rinse, scrub, rinse, scrub, rinse. The only thing that mattered in the
mall was that these dishes be purged of their leftover food stuffs. Jordan’s gloves quickly became
soaked and they made her hands feel heavy, and so she took them off as she continued on her
business.

But Jordan could not hide from her thoughts for long. The physical aspect of the activity
became ingrained in her conscience, and she was able to work without thinking. That meant that
her brain could wander to other areas. She really missed Theo. He had been the only person to see
her for who she was on the inside instead of the outside. He saw a clever, intelligent,
compassionate human being, not an athletic young woman. And a black woman at that. No, he was
different. He was especially different from that Rufus. Why had that asshole survived when Theo
didn’t? Hell, even Markus would have made better company, morbid sermons included. Every little
thing about the Latinist rubbed her the wrong way. And now he had the audacity to apologize to
her! She knew he hadn’t meant any of the things he said to her. He was an arrogant, egotistical,
self-interested, megalomaniacal—

The plate that Jordan had been furiously scrubbing shattered in her hands. She recoiled
from the surprise and noticed that her right palm was now bleeding.

Austin quietly set down the plate he was drying and turned toward the Golfer. “Are you
alright?” his eyes asked?

Jordan couldn’t stand to look at Austin. It was just one bad thing after another. With her
back to him, she breathed, “I’m fine.”

“I’ll go get a broom and dust pan to pick up the shards. Careful where you step.”

“No. It was my fault. I should do it.”

“I’m afraid I have to disagree. Your main priority is to make sure your hand is okay.”
“My hand is fine. Let me get the stupid broom.”

“Jordan, your hand is bleeding; it’s not fine.”

“It’s my hand; I’ll know if it’s fine or not.”

“Yawn, sometimes, you think you’re fine, but it turns out that you were far from fine.”

“Are you trying to say something?”

“I’m saying that your hand is bleeding, and it was just in dirty dish water. You should clean it out with soap.”

“Oh…and that’s all you meant to say?”

“Uhh, yeah, I guess. Why?”

“Nothing. God, I’m such a mess.”

“That’s not true; you dress very well.”

“Oh, shut up, Austin.” Jordan turned herself away from the sink and leaned back against the counter. “What do you know?”

“I know lots. For instance, I know that cats sleep up to eighteen hours a day.”

“…what does that have to do with anything?”

“You asked me what I know, and so I told you what I know.”

Jordan let go and slid down to the floor. “Ugh. Why would I expect any of you to understand?”

“That sounds like a rhetorical question, but I feel like I should answer it anyway.”

“Do whatever the hell you want; it won’t make a difference.”

“You’d expect us to understand because we’re your friends.”

“Well, isn’t that a funny word? What’s that even supposed to mean? That you know me? You don’t know me at all. Only one of you ever saw me for me, and now he’s…”

“Dead.” Jordan flinched. “If you don’t mind my asking, what did he see that the rest of us haven’t?”

“He saw Jordan Koulibagh. He didn’t see the All-Star Golfer. He didn’t see the black girl who worked so hard to do something any white boy could master in an afternoon.”

“I thought you were proud of what you accomplished.”

“The hell I am. But it would be nice if someone else saw beyond that for a change. I am a golfer—and an excellent one at that—but that’s all anyone ever seems interested in seeing.”

“You know, sometimes I say things, and I think now is going to be one of those times.”

“Whatever…”
“Perhaps people only see that one thing because that one thing is the only thing offered to them. If someone tapes a box shut and gives it to me, I will only think it’s a box. But if they untape it, and I can then open it, then I can see what’s really in the box.”

“Goddamnit, Austin, do you think I don’t know that? It’s the same problem; you don’t know who I am! I can’t just open up the box; it’s not that easy. You don’t know what I have had to do with my life. Every day, I have had to fight and fight and fight. And that meant taping up the box, because if I didn’t, then the contents of that box would be destroyed beyond all recognition.”

“But what’s the point in guarding a box if you never open it up? It’s like keeping a toy in its packaging to keep it in mint condition. You never get to play with the toy, so what’s the point?”

“I am not a toy, Austin.”

“I know you’re not. You’re a person, and your name is Jordan.”

“And I’m a fucking mess.”

“No, you’re just a box that’s been bounced around for a while.”

“Just damaged goods.”

“Shush. Don’t talk about yourself like that. Theo wouldn’t want you to.”

“…whatever…”

“Jordan, we’d love to see what’s inside that box, but you have to start peeling the tape off first; we can’t do that. It’s your choice whether you let what’s inside stay hidden. Okay? The dishes can wait until later. Why don’t we get you to the Pharmacy and take care of your hand?”

“No. I’ll go myself. There’s no need for you to follow me there; we’d just be wasting time. I’ll go and clean my cut. On my own. And then I’ll be right back.”

Austin stared at Jordan for a moment. His eyes said, “Please, let us in,” but his mouth said, “Okay.”

Jordan got up, grabbed her gloves, and silently walked out of the kitchen area. Austin found a broom and swept up the mess. He then returned to the stack of dishes and picked up where Jordan left off, letting them air dry. After some time, there was nothing left to wash, and so Austin emptied out the sink and put away the freshly cleaned eating ware. Jordan never came back.
Chapter 5--The Loved and the Loathed--Part 5

Jenny hoped she was on time. It would be rude to be late. But it’s not like there were very many pressing issues demanding the students’ attention. Nevertheless, the Sandwich Artist had given Rufus her word that she would be in the Garden waiting for him. She was starting to get antsy, though, since she had been waiting for a while. Granted, she had left extra early so that she would be on time, so really she was just on time now. Still, she had never had a one-on-one conversation with Rufus before outside of his inviting her to the Executive Committee meeting, and she had no idea what he could be wanting now.

There was a rustling in the bushes near her. Jenny’s heart jumped as she turned toward the sound. From the greens, the Latinist appeared, brushing burs and bristles off his shirt. He looked up at Jenny with mild surprise on his face. “Oh, is it that time already?” he asked. Jenny nodded modestly. “Excellent. Then let’s get started. Rufus offered his arm to Jenny, but she didn’t know what to do with it. Hesitantly, she wrapped her arms around his offered one, and he led them through the garden.

“No, I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you to meet me here,” said the Latinist.

“The idea had gone crossing through my mind.”

“Then I shall dive right in to our discussion topic. Since a new day has dawned upon us, I have decided that hiding things from each other is one of the most dangerous things we can do. It is a part of my knowledge that you are privy to a certain secret of mine.”

“Umm, yes, the secrets. I did receive yours.”

“As I’m sure you can tell, that is not exactly information I want broadcasted publicly.”

“That was the original intention of the secrets, yes.”

“But I feel the need to explain myself on this issue. What you received was only a half-truth, you must understand.”

“A half-truth? I am not sure that I know what that means.”

“It means exactly what it sounds like. Part of it is true, but much of it is false. I will not deny that I cheated my way into preparatory school, but the reality is not as drastic as that sounds.”

“Is…is that so?”

“It is. You see, I had the grades to get in, and I more than passed any exam they sent my way. There was just one little avenue in which I could not quite overcome the obstacle in my path. It may sound absurd, but I had not the ability to succeed in the realm of physical education. Why should I have to be able to pull my chin up over a bar in order to attend an institute of higher learning? Do you understand?”

“I think so. It does seem like a strange qualification prerequisite.”

“Indeed it was.”

“But I do not see how you could cheat on a physical exam. Unless there were strange chemicals involved…”
“Steroids? Heavens no. Jenny, if I am anything, I am resourceful.”

“J-Jenny? Did you call me Jenny?”

“You’re just as surprised as Jordan that I got your name right. We’ve only been living in this mall together for weeks. It would be shameful if I didn’t know your names.”

“I mean, I did not think you knew anyone’s name yesterday…”

“That’s all in the past, as is my cheating.”

“Yes, that. How did that turn out?”

“I paid a boy with my likeness to take the physical portion for me. He passed well enough. I would’ve preferred with flying colors, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I suppose that is true.”

“Now, I have told you this in complete confidence. I respect your discretion in this matter. Like I said, this isn’t exactly information I want made public.”

“But…you said that holding secrets was bad for us. Should we not all reveal our secrets by that logic?”

“Jenny, my dear, they are secrets for a reason. I tell you this so that you have the entire account at your disposal. In this way, you do not have to worry about not having all the facts. Should the situation arise in which your hand is forced, you will have all the information at your disposal. Let us just hope that that situation never arises.”

“So…you just wanted to tell me everything…so that I will not tell anything.”

“Precisely. Ecce, I knew you were a smart girl; I knew you would understand. I trust that you will tell no one about this.”

“Oh, umm, yes, no one. I will tell no one.”

“That’s the Jenny I know. Hmm…we’re only about halfway through the Garden. What shall we talk about on our return?”

“I think anything would be fine. Or we can just enjoy the scenery.”

“It is a lovely garden, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I think I enjoy this space the most in the mall. It is…very calming here. I feel as though no bad things can happen in this spot.”

“That’s the beauty of Nature; it makes us feel at peace.”

“Do you spend much time outdoors?”

“Me? Caelis, no.”

“I try to spend as much time outside as I can.”

“You don’t say? Your complexion would beg to differ.”
“I may not get a chance to go out much, but when I do get the chance, I make the most of it.”

“What else do you like to do, Jenny? I feel as if I hardly know you.”

“I, umm, I work a lot, so I do not have time to do very many other things. Sometimes I read, or I go for a long walk, or just watch a movie.”

“Those are all quiet activities.”

“Umm, I am not a very loud person.”

“I can tell that. But they’re also lonely activities.”

“I do not mind. I can take care of myself well enough.”

“Don’t you have any friends?”

“N-not really. Like I have said, I work a lot, so I never have much time for friends. This sounds strange, but this mall…this situation has been kind of fun since I get to be around people so much. I am sorry, I should not say that.”

“No, you’re fine. I understand what it means to live a secluded life—not very many people study Latin anymore.”

“I see.”

“Listen, if you ever feel lonely…never mind, we’re back at the entrance. I have some other matters which I wish to attend to. I will see you later, Jenny.”

Jenny had greatly enjoyed the pleasant conversation on their way back to the entrance. It wasn’t until Rufus drew his arm back that she remembered she had had hers locked within his. She watched as he deterministically walked away. She turned back to the Garden; it certainly was calm and quiet here.

After lunch, Rico was still in his perpetually cheery mood. No matter what life threw at him, he would find a way to be positive. As it stood, he was living in a mall with six other extraordinary people, four of whom were girls. It would only be a matter of time before the loneliness set in and those ladies would need someone to keep them company. Luckily for Rico, the odds were in his favor.

Aside from the numbers factor, Rico was fortunate in the way of his current competition. The Marathon Runner couldn’t figure out why himself, but all the girls seemed to stray away from Rufus. Rico didn’t think he was that creepy. Nevertheless, that left his main rival as Austin Fitzpatrick. Rico wasn’t worried about Austin making a move on any of his ladies, mostly because “making a move” requires a fairly substantial amount of energy. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to be extra chummy with the Idle; bros before hoes.

As Rico searched for Austin, he realized that he knew very little about the Idle. Rico began his search at the Gym: no Austin. He moved to the Arcade: no Austin. Party Store: no Austin. Rico then realized that he had been searching places that he liked to be at, not necessarily ones that Austin liked to be at. But that begged the question: Where did Austin like to hang out?
The Lounge was the most obvious answer, but it was sparse this afternoon. The Bookstore was empty, and the Furniture Store was bare. How could one guy hide so well in a simple mall? Rico really racked his brain. What did Austin like doing besides nothing? They had been together for close to three weeks, but Rico couldn’t name one of Austin’s hobbies.

Rico had almost given up his search when he spotted movement from within the Laundromat. Lo and behold, Austin Fitzpatrick was doing laundry. Even if he did have multiples of the same jacket, the Idle managed to keep his suit in impeccable shape. Well, the upper part, anyway.

With a grin on his face, Rico sauntered into the Laundromat. “Yo-o, Austin, how’s it hanging?”

With a quizzical look on his face, Austin turned to Rico. “Yawn, Rico. Hi.”

“Doing laundry?”

“Yup.”

“Well, I was just in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d pop on in and see how my main man Austin was doing.”

“That’s very nice.”

“So, dude, what’s new?”

“What is…new? Sigh, not much. We are still trapped in this mall.”

“Yeah, it’s rough, you know? But we’ll make it through, I’m sure of it.”

“Is that so? I have to say, I’m starting to grow tired of this ‘Mutual Killing’ game. I think its novelty has worn off, and now it just feels really stagnant.”

“It’s sick, bro. But we can pull together and get out of this.”

“Dude…bro…why the vernacular all of a sudden? You’ve never called me your ‘main man’ before.”

“I, uhh, well, you see…yo-o, we’re friends, amigos. That’s just how we talk to each other.”

“Yawn, I really don’t care for those kinds of titles.”

“You don’t like being called ‘dude?’ What’s wrong with it?”

“I guess…I just don’t see myself as much of a dude. Too many…implications.”

“What implications come from the word ‘dude?’ It’s like, the most general thing you can call someone.”

“But there’s a certain…feeling, connotation that goes along with it. Like we’re jocks in a sweaty locker room or something. That’s just not my scene.”

“Well, uhh, what is your scene?”

“My scene? Well it would have to be…hmm…now that you mention it, I don’t really know.”
No wonder I couldn’t figure out where he liked to be, thought Rico. “Everybody’s got a scene, man. What did you do before we all came here?”

“Sigh, I wouldn’t be an Idle if I did much of anything, right?”

“I guess, but still. You have to have done something before. You can’t just sit around all day.”

“Well…”

“Dude, no. You weren’t a part of any club or something? Or maybe you were like a movie expert and you watched a lot of films. Or you meditated and were real spiritual—but not like Randolph was. Or you could have had like animals and you watched over them. C’mon, man, you gotta give me something to work with.”

“I’m afraid none of those apply to me…”

“I’m sorry, but…that’s kinda messed up. Like really sad, man.”

“In a way, I suppose…”

“So you’re telling me that your personality essentially boils down to you doing nothing.”

“Essentially, yes, I suppose there’s no falsehood in saying that.”

“I don’t buy that. We’re all such crazy people; there’s no way you can just be something simple like that.”

“In my time doing nothing, I’ve had a lot of time to think. Some people are complex and intricate, and others are not. I fall into the latter category. There’s nothing wrong with being a little flat, I think. Besides, if we were all special, then nobody would stand out from the crowd.”

“But we’re Success Summit students; we are special by nature. There has to be more to you than meets the eye.”

“I’m sorry, Rico, but I think you’re gravely mistaken on this one.”

“No-o, Austin, you’re the one who’s mistaken, and I’m going to prove it!” Rico continued conversing with Austin for a number of spin cycles. The Marathon Runner was bound and determined to find what really made Austin tick. But as the Idle ran out of clothing to launder, Rico was no closer to discovering this hidden gem. As the hours waned, Rico was forced to accept that Austin had been speaking candidly; perhaps what the students knew of Austin was all the more there was to learn.

As much as Lily wanted to dance, her body informed her that this was a bad idea. Ever since the Arcade had opened up, the Kawaii had been a nonstop dancing machine. But machines need to go in for maintenance every once in a while. Reluctantly, Lily decided to postpone her usual routine on the dance machine. In its stead, she would master one of the Arcade’s many other games.

After slight deliberation, Lily decided to test her skill smacking woodland creatures with a fake mallet. Naturally averse to violence, Lily took comfort in knowing that the creatures were indeed fake; she couldn’t bear the thought of harming a poor, defenseless creature. After a few
rounds, Lily realized that this game was no different than her dancing game; there was an inherent rhythm she had to find, and once she found it, she couldn’t be stopped. Lily became so fine-tuned with the game that she could predict where an animal would pop up before it reared its head.

The better she got at the game, the more wildly and passionately she began to play. With flourish and flair, Lily guided the mallet with skill and ease, let alone power. Her mind cleared, and she was no longer conscious of what she was doing. In this state, Lily misjudged a stroke, and the mallet recoiled off the machine and bounced back into her face. The impact jostled one of her hair clips free, thus sending it falling to the floor, which broke upon immediate contact. Oh no! How could Lily maintain her kawaii visage without the proper number of hair clips? She would have to remedy this situation—and fast.

With a skip in her step, Lily bounced over to the Jewelry Store to find the perfect accessory to fix her ensemble. The Kawaii expected to find the store in pristine condition, but it looked as if a tornado had flown through the store. Bracelets and necklaces lay scattered on the floor. Entire displays had been uprooted and toppled over. Gems of various hues were dispersed helter-skelter. And at the epicenter of the chaos was Taylor Erzen.

“Oy, Taylor-chan, what happened in here?” Lily called out.

Taylor was furtively fixing an assortment of jeweled bracelets onto her arms. The sleeves of her sweats had been rolled up, and now her arms were covered in accessories. Multiple necklaces hung around her neck, and one of her pant legs had been rolled up to reveal a myriad of anklets. The Lucky’s hair was at ends, but she somehow managed to fit two tiaras on top of it regardless. She was doubled over a mirror inspecting her own appearance; she hadn’t even heard Lily come in.

Lily edged closer to Taylor. The Kawaii reached out a hand and tapped Taylor on the shoulder. Taylor immediately spun around and stared down Lily. Madness glimmered in her eyes for a moment, but it was quickly replaced by her usual sense of pride. Taylor casually flipped her hair out of her face. “Oh, Lily, I didn’t hear you come in,” said Taylor.

“Umm, I just came in. I called your name.”

“Did you now? You should probably try to be a little louder so people can actually hear you. I swear, sometimes only dolphins are able to hear your high-pitched voice.”

“Huh. Maybe that’s why I was banned from the dog park…but anyway. What happened here? Was it Monobear?”

“Hmm? What do you mean something happened? It’s just the Jewelry Store.”

“Yeah, but all the jewelry is everywhere! It looks like someone tried to burglarize it!”

“Oh. That. I suppose I was a little free while trying on different collections. I have intentions to put everything back the way I found it.”

“Okay, I guess. But…what prompted you to tear through it in the first place?”

Taylor began laughing uncontrollably at Lily’s question. Sometimes Lily just said the darnedest things. Taylor could not physically stop herself from laughing. Her stomach started to ache from the convulsion her laughter was causing, and soon she was bent over with tears running down her cheeks. Lily grew more and more uncomfortable as Taylor continued. Eventually, her last fit of the giggles passed, and Taylor was able to regain her composure. “You are the second person today to ask such a silly question.”
“I don’t get what was so funny, desu…”

“Why did I have to tear this place apart…would you just look at me!”

“You look very nice—”

“Shut up! Don’t lie; trying to think you’re being polite. Look at these hideous sweat clothes. I look like I belong in a trailer park!”

“So the jewelry…”

“Can you blame me for trying to accent my looks somehow? I have a natural beauty that should never be detained.”

“But, you look fine.”

“Again with those blasphemous little lies! I ought to wash your mouth out with soap for spewing such filth. I look atrocious in my current state!”

“No! Don’t say that! Just look at you compared to me; you’re so tall and thin. It’s no wonder Rico-kun has such a big crush on you.”


“But I’m telling you that you are beautiful, desu. And I’m not lying! You look in a mirror enough; you should know that.”

“Being beautiful is a constant battle, Lily. If I let my guard down for a second, then I am reduced to yesterday’s news.”

“Nani? I’ve never seen you fight. I usually see you lounging around, working on your tan. I’m always told I need to exercise and watch what I eat, but you don’t seem to have that problem.”

“Seem.”

“Nani?”

“I don’t seem to have that problem. And you’re right, I don’t exercise or watch what I eat. But there are…other ways of maintaining my figure…” As if on cue, Taylor’s stomach growled audibly enough for Lily to hear it.

“Taylor-chan, you can’t possibly be hungry; we just ate lunch a little bit ago.”

“Well, my stomach is empty, so that’s why it growled.”

“I don’t understand, desu…”

“God…listen, okay? This is just between you and me, got it? These sweats, these…clothes…they just make me feel so hideous, so ugly. And it just makes me sick. So after lunch I wasn’t feeling well, and so I…I did something to make myself feel better. I…God-damnit—I purged, okay? I purged, and then I came here. Happy?”

“Taylor-chan…you have to eat. You didn’t have to do that—”

“Yes I did. God, I shouldn’t have told you; I shouldn’t have expected you to understand.”
“All I know is that you were doing something that’s bad for your body. Come with me and we’ll get you something from the food court.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Now you need to be the one to stop lying.”

“Ugh. You came here for a reason, right? Just do what you have to and get out. I have more necklaces to try and match. And if you try to talk about this anymore, I will personally kick you out of here myself.” Taylor returned to her mad stash of jewels.

Lily didn’t want to test Taylor, so she quietly found a hair clip. Lily didn’t want to leave Taylor by herself for fear of what the Lucky might do to herself if left alone, and so the Kawaii pretended to be studying different accessories while keeping an eye on Taylor. A few minutes after their conversation, however, the Lucky had completely forgotten that there was anyone else in the store with her.
Austin lazily opened one of his eyes. There was a furious pounding on his door. The Idle turned on his side; his clock said that it was just before seven o’clock. Why in the world would someone need him at this hour? Shortly after dinner last night, Austin had decided to head to bed early. He hoped nothing unfortunate had happened. As he began to roll out of his blanket cocoon, a thought occurred to him: which seven o’clock was it? With a shrug of his shoulders, Austin approached the door to find out if he was receiving an early morning or late night call.

Austin opened the door, and an exhausted, panting Lily was standing in front of him. She was breathing very heavily. Maybe something bad did happen. “Uhh…good morning/Evening, Lily.”

Lily took several deep breaths before responding. “Austin-kun. You’re the last one.”

“The last one? I thought I would have heard something first.”

“Well, you were last on my list. Let me explain before I confuse you any further. I’ve been thinking. Everyone seems really run down after the last trial and the videos we watched, so I thought we could use something to cheer us up and raise our spirits. So I was up all night coming up with a solution: the Lily Smith Super Duper Extra Special Kawaii Olympics Extravaganza!”

“Those are a lot of words said in a single breath.”

“Anyways! I’m letting everyone know about it early so you can begin preparations for this afternoon’s activities. And like I said, you’re the last to know, so I’m going to actually sleep until it’s time to do this thing, okeydokey? Okeydokey. I’m really tired. Sayonara!” With a haggard skip, Lily bounced her way back to her room.

As if on cue, Monobear’s morning announcement rang out through the hall, alerting the students that the time was now seven a.m. Austin figured he should go meet everyone for breakfast. At least everyone would understand why Lily wouldn’t be in attendance. At breakfast, the other students had as little an idea of what was to happen as Austin. The last time Lily had tried to do something big for the class, things had not gone so smoothly; this would either be a wonderful or terrible experience.

That afternoon, Lily gathered the other students in the Auditorium. She had them take seats in the front row as she addressed them from the stage. Her excitement levels were through the roof. She had intended to grab some rest before the event, but she had been too excited to settle down. Since it was two in the afternoon, the Kawaii had been awake for thirty-one hours; she didn’t even feel tired. When she had decided to marathon One Piece, she didn’t sleep for about a week, so staying awake this long was child’s play.

Lily cleared her throat and got ready to recite her speech. “Greetings, brave warriors! You should be honored to be standing, err, sitting here today. You are about to undergo a series of grueling trials in order to achieve the ultimate prize: the title of Ultra Kawaii! Sugoi. Now I’m sure you’re asking yourselves, ‘What even is the Ultra Kawaii?’ Well, if you prove successful in the trials, then you’ll find out!

“For this competition—because it is a competition—you will be divided into three teams. At the end of each challenge, one team will be eliminated from the competition, and then the members of the winning team will have to duke it out themselves! So without further ado, let me
announce the teams! Team Ribbon consists of Rico and Jordan. Congratulations! Austin, Jenny, you two will make up Team Bow. And that leaves Rufus and Taylor; you guys are on Team Suspenders!

“For your first challenge, I have hidden Super Secret Kawaii Ornaments in three places throughout the mall. The first two teams to find all three of their ornaments and get back here move on to the next round. Okeydokey, the competition begins…now! *Ganbatte*!”

The other six students weren’t sure what to make of Lily’s announcement. The Kawaii stared at them in earnest interest, waiting. Suddenly, Rico jumped up from his seat. “Yo-o! Let’s do this!” Grabbing Jordan by the arm, the Marathon Runner bolted out of the room. As much as Rufus and Taylor disliked each other, they disliked losing more, and so they set off in close pursuit. Austin and Jenny weren’t sure what to do, but standing around wasn’t going to solve anything.

A silly competition was the last thing that Jordan wanted to do, but Rico was so enthused by the idea. If the roles were reversed, she wouldn’t want a partner who stood around doing nothing; they were a team, after all. She would humor him for now. This particular challenge was right up Rico’s alley, anyway. He would speed from shop to shop in search of these trophies; all she had to do was stay with him.

Rico first ran to the Furniture Store and did a quick sweep of its circuit. He sped through the Monobear Store, quickly followed by the Arcade. He had to creep through the Jewelry Store—it looked like a tempest had unleashed its fury upon the shop—but he still had not found any of the ornaments. As he left the shop, Jordan offered him a consoling word, and together they moved on to another sector of the mall.

Jenny’s heart was beating rapidly as she entered the Laundromat. Jenny never entered competitions; the stress overwhelmed her. As much as she was a team-player, being a part of a team made her nervous. What if she let Austin down? Austin was very kind to her; he suggested they split up to cover more ground. She agreed that it was a good idea, but she wished she had her partner to back her up.

Jenny walked cautiously up to a large pedestal in the middle of the Laundromat. On the table were a ribbon, a bow, and a pair of suspenders. Jenny couldn’t be sure if these were the Kawaii Ornaments Lily spoke of, but the excessive amount of glitter convinced her otherwise. Tentatively, she grabbed the bow. A wave of adrenaline rushed through her. The pang scared her, but in a good way. She just might be able to win this. Hopefully, Austin was having an equal amount of luck.

Austin was indeed having an equal amount of luck. He found the bow in the Pharmacy without a hitch, but he cursed that he was a member of Team Bow. Those glittered suspenders were calling his name. Surely there wouldn’t be any harm in just trying on the suspenders. Scarcely had he touched them when Taylor came barging into the store, Rufus following in her wake.

“Drop the bedazzled torso belts!” yelled Taylor. Austin did as he was told. Taylor rushed forward and grabbed the suspenders off the ground. She turned to face Rufus with a look of righteous indignation on her face. “You see? I told you following him would lead us to one of the Ornaments.”

Rufus rolled his eyes. “Sure, but where are we supposed to go from here?”

“We can just keep following him, duh. What? You can’t run faster than Austin?”
“I’m sure I can, but you’re forgetting about his partner. She’s probably already got an artifact of her own, and that puts them ahead and us behind.”

“Are you suggesting that I’ve made a mistake? Because I know you are not suggesting that.”

As Taylor and Rufus continued to bicker, Austin snuck out of the Pharmacy. It was just a game; some people could be so competitive.

Lily was idly swinging her legs off the edge of the stage. Waiting was so boring! Why couldn’t her friends find the Ornaments faster? She hid a trophy in the Laundromat, in the Pharmacy, and in the Electronics Store; one in each Sector, excepting the West Sector since it was so close to the Auditorium. It really shouldn’t be that hard to find simple presents. The wait was becoming so dull that it made Lily want to yawn.

The Kawaii wouldn’t have to wait much longer. With a resounding “Yooo-ooo,” Rico crashed into the Auditorium with three glittery ribbons in hand. Jordan casually walked in behind him. It had been fun watching him bounce from store to store. His boundless energy was contagious; the Golfer was starting to enjoy herself.

“Congratulations!” Lily called out. “You two are the first to arrive, so that means you’re safe! Team Ribbon moves on to the next round! I wonder who else will make it.” As the minutes passed, the anticipation grew heavier and heavier.

With their heads hung low, Jenny and Austin were the next to return to the Auditorium. When they were about halfway to the stage, Jenny started speaking. “I am sorry we took so long. We did our best, and we had fun. We look forward to watching everyone else in the competition.”

Lily was pleasantly befuddled. “Nani? Jenny-chan, what are you talking about? You and Austin-kun are the second team to make it. Team Bow is still in the competition!”

Jenny’s face lit up. “We…we are still in the competition?” Austin gave her a congratulatory slap on the back.

“So that makes…Taylor and Rufus the losers. And speaking of the devil…”

Still fighting with each other, Rufus and Taylor elbowed their way back into the Auditorium. “If you made us lose, I swear to God!” said Taylor.

“If I made us lose? It would obviously be your fault if we were to lose,” replied Rufus.

Lily had no time for this bickering; she had a competition to officiate! “I am gomen, Team Suspenders, but you are the last to arrive. Please take a seat in the audience as we move into phase two.”

Taylor and Rufus glared at each other. “I can’t believe you made me lose!” cried Taylor.

“Stop blaming me for all of this; you’re just as much to blame as I am!”

“Oh, so you do admit that you are to blame?”

“No, but I do admit that I am partially to blame. We couldn’t communicate well, and that’s why we lost. We have no one to blame but ourselves.”

“Blame…ourselves…but…but…”
“Quiet in the audience!” yelled Lily. “Now, turning my attention to those of you who are still in the competition. The next phase of the competition will take place on this stage. This round is called Extreme Kitty Capture! Everyone knows that the only thing more kawaii than me is kitties! And what are kitties great for? Cuddling of course! Except kitties never seem to want to cuddle with me...so in this challenge, one member of each team must be the ‘kitty,’ and the other will be the ‘chaser.’ The chaser’s goal is to tag the other team’s kitty, while the kitty’s goal is to avoid being tagged. The first chaser to tag their kitty wins that round for their team! I’ll give you a minute to figure out who’s who, and then we’ll get started!”

The two remaining teams huddled to confer. Running was Rico’s forte, so it was obvious that he should be Team Ribbon’s kitty. There was no way that either Jenny or Austin would be able to catch him. Team Bow was having a more difficult time reaching a decision; it seemed that Austin was unfit for either position. After deliberating, they decided that Jenny should be the kitty. If she could evade Jordan long enough, then Austin might have a chance at tagging Rico.

The two teams faced each other on opposite sides of the stage. Lily took her spot on the floor in front of the stage. Until someone was tagged, the competitors were not allowed off the stage. Lily gave the competitors their marks, she made them get set, and then she ordered them to go.

Jordan charged across the stage toward Jenny. Team Bow was on the offensive. Jenny panicked and hid behind Austin. Jordan wasn’t about to let a little boy stand in her way. She reached around his right, but Jenny dodged toward the other direction. The Golfer then made a pass toward that other side, and Jenny dodged appropriately. Austin could see that this would soon form a pattern. It became apparent that before long, Jordan would trick Jenny and finally catch her. He wasn’t about to let that happen.

Austin stepped forward, purposely setting himself off balance. Unable to help himself, Austin fell right on top of Jordan, knocking her down to the ground. Jordan was completely taken by surprise, and she landed directly on her funny bone. Jenny took this chance to put distance between herself and her chaser. Austin quickly picked himself off the Golfer. He expected her to come up after him, but she stayed down nursing her arm.

Rico’s partner was injured. At that moment, the Marathon Runner could care less about the competition; his only concern was Jordan’s safety. Rico quickly rushed over to Jordan to see if she was okay. She said that she was, that she landed on her elbow wrong, but that she would be fine. Rico was relieved. Austin apologized for hurting Jordan, but she said it was an accident, and so it was no one’s fault. Nevertheless, Austin was very sorry. Rico offered his fist for a fist-bump of solidarity to clear the air, and Austin reluctantly accepted. As their knuckles met, the chaser tagged the kitty.

“And that’s the game!” cried Lily. “Austin-kun has tagged Rico-kun, and so Team Bow moves on to the final round! Team Ribbon, please take your seats in the audience for the finale.”

Jenny rejoined Austin and offered a hand for a congratulatory handshake, and the Idle took her hand and brought her in for a congratulatory hug. Rico helped Jordan off the ground and to her seat. “Shucks, I’m sorry I let my guard down, Jordan,” said the Marathon Runner.

“Don’t worry, Rico, it’s okay. Either way, I had fun. Thanks for being my partner.”

“Anytime!”

Lily jumped back on stage. After a brief yawn, she addressed the two remaining competitors. “Austin-kun. Jenny-chan. You two have proven that you have what it takes to be the...
Ultra Kawaii, but unfortunately only one person can claim that title. That means we must move onto our final challenge: the Cutesy-Wutesy Rochambeau of Life and Death! It all comes down to this, a simple game of rock-paper-scissors. Normally, this game is played as a best two-out-of-three, but this is a Cutesy-Wutesy Rochambeau of Life and Death, and so you will only have one chance to win. Any questions before we decide which of you two is the Ultra Kawaii?”

   Jenny gently raised her hand. “Umm, yes, I do have a question. I do not think that I know how to play this rock-paper-scissors…”

   “It’s simple,” said Austin. “We start with our hands behind on our back. On the count of three, we bring one hand out, and that hand either forms rock, paper, or scissors. See? You just pick one and make your hand look how I just showed you. Got it?”

   “I…I think so…oh my…”

   Lily could hardly bear the wait any longer. “Alright! Our competitors are clear, so let’s finish this Super Duper Extra Special Kawaii Olympics Extravaganza with a bang. On my count. Ichi. Ni. San. Draw!”

   Austin chose to lead with the conservative approach by throwing down a rock. For her first time, Jenny took a chance and sent out a paper, and her risk paid off. Without a moment’s delay, Lily grabbed the Sandwich Artist’s arm and raised it high into the air. “We have a winner, ladies and gentlemen! Jenny-chan has emerged from the Cutesy-Wutesy Rochambeau of Life and Death victorious.”

   Austin yawned, offered Jenny his congratulations, and promptly took his seat in the audience. Jenny was feeling a flood of emotions; she had won the competition. Jenny hadn’t won many things before, and so this was a very new thing for her to experience. It felt great, though, and she couldn’t remember a time when she had been happier.

   Lily yawned and cleared her throat. “Jenny-chan Zemenovski, you have passed every trial put before you, and you have rightly earned the title of Ultra Kawaii. HOWEVER! You can’t really think it would be that easy, can you? At the end of any game, there’s always a surprise boss that you have to face, so I’m afraid you haven’t quite become the Ultra Kawaii yet. If you are serious about gaining this title, desu, then you will face me for one final battle. I’ll be waiting for you in the Arcade.” Her speech finished, Lily dashed off the stage and ran out of the Auditorium.

   Austin was completely taken aback by the sudden turn of events, and Rufus and Taylor couldn’t believe that this silly competition was still going on. Jordan found Lily’s dedication to her project to be endearing, and Rico was totally into it. The Marathon Runner leapt from his chair. “Quick, Jenny, after her! You can do this!”

   Jenny nodded; Rico was right, she could do this. She had the power inside herself to win this competition. Lily couldn’t throw anything at her to deter her from her title. Carefully climbing off the stage, Jenny made her way to the Arcade with her peers/fans cheering her on the entire way. When she arrived, Lily was already in position on the dance machine.

   “Ah, so you are foolish enough to challenge me, desu. Very well, then. Let us finish this with a dance-off for the title of Ultra Kawaii. Yawn. Whoever scores the most points to Pon Pon Pon is the winner. Do you accept?”

   Jenny didn’t hesitate. “I do. I intend to win.” Lily was an expert at the dance machine, but Jenny was determined to see this through. The Sandwich Artist recognized that her chances of winning were slim, but she had to try. She stepped up next to Lily. The two BFFs let the music
Jenny blocked out all external stimuli as she started to feel the beat flow through her. She had some experience with this game, but now was the time to be its master. Lily, on the other hand, wasn’t worried about losing in the slightest. She had danced to Pon Pon Pon so many times that she practically had the moves memorized. In fact, she could probably dance the entire song with her eyes closed. She might as well, and her eyelids were starting to feel a little heavy.

Lily closed her eyes, and her dancing started to slow. The onlookers weren’t sure what to make of her performance. Lily began to teeter back and forth, starting to miss steps, before she ultimately sank down to the ground, her back against the bars locking the game in place. Rico rushed forward to see if she was okay, but once she started snoring, his worry disappeared.

Jenny was so focused that she didn’t even notice her competitor falling asleep next to her. The song drew to an end, and the moment of truth was upon them all. Jenny watched as her score rose above Lily’s. Even if she wasn’t as talented as Lily, she could still pull off a victory over a sleeper. It took a moment, and then the reality really struck her. Jenny was the Ultra Kawaii! Despite it being a fluke, Jenny had proven victorious! Watching Lily, the other students moved forward to wish her a job well done. Lily was too passed out to see it, but her Super Duper Extra Special Kawaii Olympics Extravaganza had warmed everyone’s hearts.

But happiness could never live long in the Mall of Monomerica. Almost instantly, a hideously familiar laugh rang out through the Arcade, followed by the unwelcome appearance of Monobear. “Upupupupu! My, haven’t you kiddies been busy today? I’d be laughing with you from such a fun activity if I wasn’t laughing at you for being so utterly ridiculous. You have made such fools of yourselves! Upupu…”

Jordan put her hands on her hips. “Lily did a lot for us. This isn’t something you would ever understand, but friends do things for each other, so this was the perfect way to spend our time.”

Taking a cue from Jordan’s courage, Taylor stepped forward. “Yeah, you’re always trying to drag us down. You have some nerve trying to dis the Kawaii Olympics.”

Rico stepped forward. “Yo-o, you’re just one bad bear. Get over yourself.”

“I’d like to repeat Jordan’s earlier remark about the number of friends you must have—or the lack thereof,” stated Rufus.

“Yawn, even if it was exhausting, I had a lot of fun, so you should rethink your words,” added Austin.

Out of all the students, Jenny was the least in the mood for Monobear’s shenanigans. “Do you want something? Because if you do not, then I must ask that you leave all of us.”

“Upupupupu…do I want something? I want you all to despair! You are doing a lousy job of it today with your ‘Kowai Olympiad’ or whatever smut you call it. I can’t just sit around and watch you hooligans defile the name of Despair in such a blatant manner. Have you forgotten that you’re supposed to kill each other? In case you have, good ol’ Monobear has prepared another incentive for you.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your little discussion in the Video Store the other day. I’ll let you in on a little secret: all those videos are real. The uptight kid and the emotionally unstable one put that little project together, and you all agreed to help. There’s a whole reality hidden behind those videos. You’ve only scratched the surface of what they mean, but there’s so much more I can
tell you. In fact, I will tell you. There are lots of secrets here in this mall, and I know all of them. I’m willing to share my vast wealth of knowledge, but only if you off one of your classmates. Upupu…I can already see that look on your faces. You thought you were safe and happy, but this is not the place to feel either of those things. If you have any questions about this little incentive, I’ll tell you everything you need to know. I look forward to seeing how you react. Ta ta!”

With uproarious laughter, Monobear exited the Arcade. The animatron had been a major buzzkill. The students were reminded that there was a reality they were unaware of, and that they were virtually strangers living together.

Lily’s sleeping body lost its balance and began to slide to the side. The shift in weight woke her up. The Kawaii looked to her friends. “Whoa, did I fall asleep? What happened? Why does everyone look so glum? Did I win?” No one had the heart to tell Lily what had just transpired.
Life in the mall was simple when the students chose to be blissfully ignorant of their circumstances. When they spent their time enjoying each other’s company, the days passed pleasantly. Monobear’s incentive, however, dragged them back into their harsh reality. Before his announcement, they could only speculate what was hidden from them, but now they had the chance to find something concrete. After the Olympics, and despite how much everyone wanted to discuss the incentive, no one dared speak a word of it; it was better to let curiosity rest in the minds of their classmates rather than galvanize it into a dire action. Still choosing to ignore it, the students ate dinner, and before long they retired to their rooms for the night.

As dawn broke the following morning, the students had officially spent three weeks trapped within the mall, and it was no easier to deal with the circumstances than it had been then.

Taylor had had trouble falling asleep the night before. Her mind kept running through the events of the Olympics. She and Rufus had fallen out of the first challenge in disgrace. There was no doubt in her mind that she could have bested every other challenge; she should have been the winner, not Jenny. And yet she watched the entire competition from the sidelines. These past few days had been miserable for the Lucky, ever since Monobear stole her clothes. Her bad mood was all Monobear’s fault. Or really was it?

Jordan, on the other hand, slept better than she had since the last trial. Rico and Lily had really made the Olympics enjoyable with their high-octane energy levels, and she was so happy for Jenny’s victory. Jordan had a good time because she let herself have a good time. She would accomplish nothing by pouting and moping around the mall. Theo’s trial hurt, but there was still more life for the Golfer to live.

Jordan felt that she had been static for too long, so she decided to rejuvenate with a light cardio workout in the Gym. She started out jogging, and just like when she had been on dishes duty, her mind shut off as she focused on her physical activity. Before long, her breathing became regular, and her body switched into autopilot. Now her brain was free to think, and this time it wasn’t consumed by cloudy thoughts.

As Jordan was swimming in her mind, Taylor wandered into the Gym. She needed someone to talk to, and Jordan was a very understanding person. The Lucky made her way over to the treadmill and grabbed Jordan’s attention. “Hey, you got a minute?” asked Taylor.

“Of course,” replied Jordan. “What’s up?” Jordan slowed down to a brisk walking pace.

“I’ve been thinking a lot since the Olympics, and—”

“The Super Duper Extra Special Kawaii Olympics Extravaganza.”

“Don’t even get me started on that name. But anyway, I’ve been thinking. So Rufus and I lost, and that sucks, but I can’t stop thinking about why we lost, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Well, Rufus said something to me right after we got eliminated, and I couldn’t find the right response.”

“Rufus says a lot of things. I’ve learned to dismiss most of the things he says. When he talks now, I see his lips moving, but my ears don’t register a sound.”
“Okay, whatever. But basically, what he said was, like, that we could only blame ourselves for losing, right? Now, I was sure that we lost because he just wouldn’t listen to me. But now I’m not so sure.”

Jordan slowed the treadmill down further. “So who do you think is to blame, then?”

“I don’t want to admit it, but I guess it must be me. Ugh, eww; just saying that gives me the shivers. That totally goes against all my life philosophies.”

“Your life philosophies? I didn’t realize you were a philosopher.”

“I am in my own mind. Like, all my life, I’ve had such good luck with everything—except for my being here. I was always the girl who got the boy, or got voted dance queen, or got chosen to represent something for somebody. Things just go my way, okay; that’s just how it is. But things recently haven’t been going my way, and it’s just…wrong.”

Jordan completely stopped her walk. “Taylor, honey, you have a lot to learn about the way the world works. Take it from me: the universe doesn’t give a shit about you. Life sucks, that’s just the way it is.”

“But not for me! I’m Taylor Erzen. All-Star Lucky! I’m supposed to have an easy life.”

“If you want my opinion, I think you’ve spoiled yourself. Up until now, you’ve been living in a fantasy land, and now you have to adjust to the way things actually are.”

“I don’t like it at all…”

“Hey, there’s not much you can do; you have to play the cards you’re dealt.”

“Easy for you to say. You were dealt all the tools you needed to succeed. You were able to take matters into your own hands, and here I am completely dependent on having good things happen to me.”

“You’re only half-right there. True, I did acquire the skills necessary for success, but I became too possessive of them. I was so afraid that someone would take them away from me, so I only ever let anyone else see them from a distance. I shut myself off from people…”

“I’m sorry, but that doesn’t sound anything like my problem.”

“They’re very similar. Each of us became too obsessed with ourselves…we built our own boxes, just for us, just the way we wanted them, and then we put ourselves inside. I blocked out a world I thought would hurt me, and you blocked out a world that wouldn’t suit your desires. But our boxes broke, and now we’re here.”

“This is a weird metaphor.”

“I…picked it up from Austin.”

“That explains it.”

“So the truth is that the world isn’t out to get me and I should let it in, and that the world doesn’t always revolve around Taylor Erzen.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn’t.”

“Taylor, we can move past this. We’re the problems, so we just have to change us. That’s
the great part; we can be happy if we let ourselves be happy. It’s not going to be easy, but we can do this, we can be great.”

“…I guess…you’re sure the world doesn’t revolve around me? Geez…I guess I can let the Sun be the center of things for a while. Just until I get back on my feet.”

“Hey, we are two strong, independent women. Let’s show the world what we’re made of. C’mon, go for a run with me.”

“Exercise? Eww, no. I think I’m going to tan and just think about things for a while, if that’s alright.”

“Suit yourself.”

“I’ll catch you later, then.” Feeling slightly better than she had earlier, Taylor started walking out of the Gym.

“Hey, Taylor,” Jordan called out. “You’re a very pretty girl.”

Taylor smiled. “You too, Jordan.”

Austin blinked. He had completely forgotten where he was or why he was there. Maybe he sleepwalked again. He only did that when he was fatigued, which was ironic since it consumed so much energy by moving. The Idle gauged his surroundings; there were model train kits on the shelves and a wall dedicated to jigsaw puzzles. He must be in the Hobby Shop. But why was he in the Hobby Shop?

Not many people ever came to the Hobby Shop. It was a quaint shop and altogether quite pleasant. The contents just did not intrigue the students. Austin himself had made very little use of the store; the puzzle he once took from it was still lying unopened on the desk in his room. He’d had that puzzle for quite some time. He had stumbled upon Cody and his secret model hobby that day. But Cody was gone now. Maybe he came here because—

“There you are,” said someone from the doorway. Austin realized that he wasn’t alone in the Hobby Shop. He moved toward the source of the voice. “I have been looking everywhere for you,” said Rufus, walking toward the Idle. Austin yawned in acknowledgment. “I need to talk to you,” said the Latinist. Who didn’t need to talk to Austin nowadays? “I hear you’re a good listener, and that is precisely what I need at the moment.”

“How can I be of service?” asked Austin.

“I am also aware that you offer soul-shattering commentary on our psyches, but that is not what I’m interested in. I just need a face to talk at.”

“I’ll try to keep my wild self under control.”

“I appreciate it.”

“So, yawn, what’s on your mind?”

“I need to complain about Jordan.”

“Did she punch you again? You did have it coming.”
“No, she didn’t punch me again. And I expressly stated that I can do without the commentary.”

“I’ll refrain myself from further interruption. What did she do, then?”

“It’s not what she did do, but what she didn’t do. During the entire Olympics, she didn’t once even look at me. Honestly, where does she get off? And in the off-chance that she does look at me, she’s sneering down her nose at me.”

“That sounds pretty intense.”

“Now, I’ll be civil, I’ll agree to disagree. We’re stuck here together, so we might as well make the most of it. There’s no point in being antagonistic toward each other. I don’t understand why she can’t realize that. What in the world did I ever do to her?”

“Maybe it’s not what you did do, but what you didn’t do.”

“Commentary, Austin, commentary.”

“Sorry. Wait…can I ask you a quick question?”

“You don’t have to ask if you can ask; just ask the question.”

“Why did you call me ‘Austin’?”

“Because that’s your name. *Tibi nomen Austin est.*”

“Ahh, that makes me feel kind of sad. I liked the names you made up for me. I was particularly fond of ‘Alexander.’ I was just waiting for you to call me Alphonse.”

“Ita, well, most people weren’t amused by my butchering of their names.”

“Oh, another quick question…”

“By Jove, just ask it.”

“What made you want to learn everyone’s real names?”

“It was only the most decent thing I could do. Like I said, I’m willing to be civil.”

“So…for clarification purposes, we’re talking about Jordan and not Jenny, right?”

“Yes, Austin. If I meant Jenny, I would have said her name. I am fully aware that they are separate individuals.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all the more you have to say?”

“I thought you didn’t want commentary.”

“I don’t, but something a little more than ‘okay’ would be nice.”

“Then what do you want me to say?”

“Nescio. Tell me I’m right, that Jordan is out of her mind, that I’m the sane one.”
“You’re right, Jordan is out of her mind; you’re the sane one.”

“You’re just saying that because I told you to; there’s no feeling behind it.”

“I’m just doing as you told me to.”

“Hmph. And here I thought talking to you was supposed to be revelatory.”

“I guess not everything is how we expected.”

“You can say that again.”

“I guess not everything is how we expected.”

“Do you always take things so literally?”

“I guess so?”

“Hmm…this conversation did not go at all as I had anticipated. Maybe I’ll go complain to a blank wall for half-an-hour and see if I feel any different. I’ll leave you to…whatever it was you were doing here.”

“YOLO.”

Rufus left, and Austin was once more alone in the store. The Idle scanned the merchandise on the shelves. He still had no idea why he was in the Hobby Shop.

Since Lily had fallen asleep right at Jenny’s crowning moment the day before, she decided to make it up to Jenny first thing in the morning. Right after breakfast, the two girls stole away to the Video Store for a romcom marathon. As Ultra Kawaii, Jenny got to pick which movies the girls watched. Normally, Jenny would have been incredibly uneasy with making the decisions, but if it meant that she got to spend more time with Lily, then she was happy to do it.

After two films, the girls had to take a break. They had been laughing so much that their throats were practically raw from their exultations. Leaving the Video Store, the two made their way to the food court to get some water. Rather than return to the Video Store, the girls chose to slake their thirsts under the skylight.

“Jenny-chan, I’ve never seen you laugh so much before, desu,” said Lily.

“I cannot help it. Those moving pictures are quite humorous,” replied the Sandwich Artist.

“I’m glad you’re having a good time. You have a very pretty smile, desu.”

“I…I do?”

“Hai. You’re a very pretty girl, Jenny-chan.”

“Oh, I do not know about that. I do not think that I ever will be as pretty as someone like Taylor.”

“Everyone is pretty in their own way. Like my ‘pretty’ is enveloped in kawaii-ness, while Taylor’s ‘pretty’ is more like, umm…”
“Like a model?”

“Yes! Exactly! That’s a good way to put it.”

“Then, umm, what is my ‘pretty?’”

“You have a much quieter ‘pretty.’ Like a schoolgirl, kind of. Err, it’s hard to explain. You’re more…reposed? Is that the word? Like, delicate, but not fragile.”

“I think I am understanding…”

“Blerr, this has turned into a fine mess of word vomit.”

“It is fine. Would you rather talk about something else?”

“Sure. I’ll let you know if I think of the right word. Actually, I have a question for you, Jenny-chan.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“Why do you like romantic comedies so much?”

“I just…find them fun to watch.”

“But what about them intrigues you? Why not just watch romance films or comedies, desu?”

“Umm…I think it is because the romantic comedies are the most realistic. I do not really like the fantasy or fiction genres.”

“Anime can be very realistic, I’ll have you know.”

“In the romance films, everyone is concerned about love, but there is more going on than that. And in the comedies, everything is about being funny, and life is not really all about that either. But when they come together, I think, they make something special.”

“I like that explanation. You should become a movie critic when we get out of here!”

“I do not know about that…I would not be very good at it.”

“Sure you would; you’re good at lots of things. You are the Ultra Kawaii, after all.”

“So I am…umm, Lily, why did you think I liked the romantic comedies?”

“Teehee, it’s really silly, desu. Super silly, even.”

“I am sure that it cannot be that outrageous.”

“Well, I thought that there must be something in the movies that attracted you to them, so the most obvious reason I could think of was that you had a dark, romantic past.”

“Me? A dark, romantic past?”

“Hai. The way I figured, there was a man in your past who you cared deeply about. A man shrouded in mystery. And you were really happy together, and you smiled all the time. But now you’re not together anymore, and so you watch the movies to remember when you did used to
“smile all the time.”

“That…well…that is very silly.”

“I told you it was going to be silly!”

“I do not think that I actually believed you, then.”

“So, just to be clear, there was no mystery man?”

“No, Lily, there was not.”

“I suppose that’s alright. I wouldn’t want to compete with him for spending time with you, anyway.”

“Lily, you say such nice things.”

“Of course! I always say nice things about nice people!”

“In that case, umm, what do you say about Rufus?”

“Rufus-kun? Hmm…he is very…he has this air about him that…at times, he can seem to be…he knows a lot of Latin. And, umm, he has a good taste in turtlenecks. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. Just curiosity.”

“Okeydokey. I’m all finished with my water. Are you ready for some more movie magic?”

“Yes, I believe I am.”

“Eeee! Nipah! What are we watching next?”

“I believe it is called ‘The Linguist’s Words.’”

“Ooh, sounds like a good one. What are we still sitting around here for? Let’s go!”

“L-Lily, wait for me.”

Without any explanation, Monobear had just stopped clearing the students’ dishes. The dishes piled up again, and this time the lot fell to Rico and Rufus to clean up. Gathering up the used plates and cups, the Latinist and Marathon Runner ventured to one of the food stores’ kitchens. Without much debate, it was decided that Rufus would wash while Rico dried.

Neither boy was happy with performing the chore, but they couldn’t argue against the luck of the draw. Rufus thought the menial task was beneath him; to him, there was no such thing as a high-class dish-washer. This sort of work was reserved for those without high school diplomas. Rico dreaded the work because it was so painfully boring. He would have problems if the job was interesting, but he just repeated the same motions over and over again.

The conversationalist that he is, Rico figured that they would talk to pass the time. “Yo-o, Rufus, I’ve got something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“So…well…that is very silly.”

“I told you it was going to be silly!”

“I do not think that I actually believed you, then.”

“So, just to be clear, there was no mystery man?”

“No, Lily, there was not.”

“I suppose that’s alright. I wouldn’t want to compete with him for spending time with you, anyway.”

“Lily, you say such nice things.”

“Of course! I always say nice things about nice people!”

“In that case, umm, what do you say about Rufus?”

“Rufus-kun? Hmm…he is very…he has this air about him that…at times, he can seem to be…he knows a lot of Latin. And, umm, he has a good taste in turtlenecks. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. Just curiosity.”

“Okeydokey. I’m all finished with my water. Are you ready for some more movie magic?”

“Yes, I believe I am.”

“Eeee! Nipah! What are we watching next?”

“I believe it is called ‘The Linguist’s Words.’”

“Ooh, sounds like a good one. What are we still sitting around here for? Let’s go!”

“L-Lily, wait for me.”

Without any explanation, Monobear had just stopped clearing the students’ dishes. The dishes piled up again, and this time the lot fell to Rico and Rufus to clean up. Gathering up the used plates and cups, the Latinist and Marathon Runner ventured to one of the food stores’ kitchens. Without much debate, it was decided that Rufus would wash while Rico dried.

Neither boy was happy with performing the chore, but they couldn’t argue against the luck of the draw. Rufus thought the menial task was beneath him; to him, there was no such thing as a high-class dish-washer. This sort of work was reserved for those without high school diplomas. Rico dreaded the work because it was so painfully boring. He would have problems if the job was interesting, but he just repeated the same motions over and over again.

The conversationalist that he is, Rico figured that they would talk to pass the time. “Yo-o, Rufus, I’ve got something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Yes, I believe I am.”

“Eeee! Nipah! What are we watching next?”

“I believe it is called ‘The Linguist’s Words.’”

“Ooh, sounds like a good one. What are we still sitting around here for? Let’s go!”

“L-Lily, wait for me.”
“Uhh, what?”

“Just ask your question, Rico.”

“Alright. So, uhh, what happened to the Executive Committee?”

“Two of its members died.”

“Uhh, yeah, I know, it sucks. But like, didn’t you figure out who the Liar is?”

“We thought we did. You were there for the last trial; we got it wrong. We made a mistake.”

“So what now? The Liar is still among us, right? They’re just one of seven; it should be easy to out them now.”

“If we’ve come this far with everything awful caused by our own hands, then the Liar obviously doesn’t mean us any harm.”

“But the Liar is All-Star Despair! I don’t feel comfortable knowing that such a person is still within our ranks.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it, so it’s best to just forget about it.”

“How can you say that?”

“I believe I said it pretty easily.”

“But the Rufus I know wouldn’t say that. You said that the identity of the Liar was the only thing standing in our way of uniting, that once we figure out who they are we can actually get out of here.”

“And look how well trying to find that out worked for us. It simply isn’t important for us to learn that anymore. Consider it one of the secrets of the mall, at this point. If someone really has to know it, then they’ll do what they have to to learn such a thing. But I doubt anyone will go so far, so it’s best just to forget about it.”

“No, I don’t believe that. The Rufus I know wouldn’t say that. You’ve always been interested in winning this game, and I know you wouldn’t kill anyone, so the only way for you to win is to beat Monobear, and that means escaping from the Mall of Monomerica. You wouldn’t give up so easily.”

“You’re the one who said I’ve changed, Rico. I was obsessed with that before, but I think I’m more complacent now.”

“So-o…you’ve given up?”

“…Ita, I think so…”

“How can you just say that? You’ve always been pushing us to take action, to move forward! You can’t just give up!”

“But is giving up really that bad of a thing? Imagine it. The seven of us. Living here together. Monobear has been more than generous with food, so we don’t have to worry about starving. And we’ve got a strong roof over our head. And with all the books and hobby projects and arcade games, we’ll never go bored. The gender distribution isn’t so bad after all—at least for
us, anyway. We could make this place a utopia if we felt like it.”

“Rufus…I don’t want to live the rest of my days in my own grave. Yeah, I love you guys with all my heart, but we can’t stay here. It’s unhealthy; we have to get out.”

“Rico, I’m tired of fighting. I try to do my best to help, and it just gets people killed. I’m done, I’m done.”

“Then I’ll…I’ll just have to fight twice as hard for you! I won’t let us get stuck here! You’ll see, I’ll be the best leader we’ve had yet. Better than Melissa or Markus or anyone! I swear, the only way Monobear is going to keep us here is over my dead body.”

“Then I wish you all the luck in the world. As your classmate, I hope you do something great, and as your friend, I’m behind you.”

“Thanks, Rufus, that means a lot.”

“My time’s passed; it’s up to you now.”
Jordan lamented that she hadn’t gotten to know her fellow classmates very well. For so long she had been cold, but it was time for her to warm up. The Golfer had Lily to thank for this new outlook on the mall, but she did not know that much about the Kawaii. She was aware of Lily’s perpetual sugar-high personality and the fact that Lily can make extremely high-pitched noises with her mouth, but she didn’t know what really made Lily tick. In any case, she was determined to find out.

There were only a few places that Lily frequented. After perusing the Arcade, Auditorium, and Video Store, Jordan found the Kawaii in the Laundromat. Spending thirty-plus hours in the same outfit had not done any favors for her clothing, and so Lily thought it wise to wash up her ensemble before any sweat stains set in. She had back-up outfits, of course, but she didn’t mind spending time in the Laundromat regardless.

Jordan walked in with a smile on her face. “Lily, there you are.”

“Oh? Jordan-chan, what brings you here?”

“I wanted to hang out with you.”

“R-really? You wanna hang out? Nipah! Sugoi! Ooh, ooh, what should we do, what should we do? We could braid each other’s hair, or we could give each other makeovers, or we could play pirate and wage war against the landlubbers, or we could—”

“I thought it would be nice just to talk and get to know each other a little better.”

“Oh, well that’s cool, too, desu. So what do you want to talk about? Ooh, ooh, we could talk about braiding each other’s hair, or how we would give each other makeovers, or how we could wage war on the landlubbers as pirates, or—”

“You’re very into pirates today. Are you always this fascinated with nautical things?”

“Not usually. So you know how I fell asleep during the competition yesterday, desu? Well, I remembered that I hadn’t stayed awake for so long since I had marathoned one of the best animes of all time, and now I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“And I assume it was about pirates.”

“If you think hard enough, you’ll find that most animes are about pirates.”

“Is that so? Why don’t you tell me more about this one?”

“Umm, well, it’s about pirates, desu. And they go on adventures and stuff. And everyone on the crew has cool abilities that help them on their adventures.”

“Cool abilities…you mean like our All-Star skills?”

“Not exactly…but I never really thought about it that way before…I guess they are kinda like us.”

“Maybe once we get out of here, we can all become pirates together and sail the seven sails.”
“Omigosh! Can we really? That would be so super fun! But we would all have to have specific jobs on our ship. Like, I would be our mascot, desu, and my face would be on the flag. Jenny-chan would be our cook since she’s really good at making sandwiches.”

“What would I be?”

“I think…I think you would be the captain. Yeah, I would totally follow you. And so Rufus would have to be the first mate. No, I take that back, he would steer the ship, and Taylor would be the first mate.”

“Where do we put Austin? I think he should go in the crow’s nest to keep a look out for us.”

“Eeeeee! That is perfect! Which just leaves Rico. I guess he’ll have to be our deckhand—that means he gets to swab the poopdeck, desu.”

“Good. Now that we’ve got that settled, we’ll just have to figure out where we’re going to go on our ship.”

“I’ve always really wanted to go to Japan. Can we go to Japan first?”

“Of course. You’ve never been to Japan? I assumed with how much you emulate their culture that you must’ve been born there.”

“Unfortunately, no. In fact, I’ve never even been on a plane.”

“Then it’s settled. First stop, Japan.”

“Eeeeee! I really want this to be a real thing. Jordan-chan, will you promise to take me there once we get out? Please, desu?”

“I promise, Lily. We have our whole lives ahead of us. There’s so much for us to do. So we’re going to Japan. Where do we go after that?”

“It’s not exactly close by, but I think we should visit Hetalia afterwards.”

“I’m not familiar with that place.”

“I think it’s somewhere in Europe…and after that we can sail to Timbuktu. I’m not sure where Timbuktu is, but I’ve always wanted to go somewhere called ‘Timbuktu.’”

Jordan spent the next hour or so with Lily planning their dream trip. Jordan had spent three weeks getting to know none of her classmates; she simply hadn’t bothered to talk to them. Theo’s death was the first one that really got to her, and she was ashamed that eight other people had to die before she felt something for them. Lily, however, poured her heart into every person she met. Despite all the despair that flooded over the class, Lily never gave up hope. Her imperturbable enthusiasm was remarkable, and Jordan admired her for that.

Once again, Jenny found herself waiting in the Garden for a boy. But that was just the price she had to pay for being the Ultra Kawaii. Rico wanted to speak to her, but he got stuck with dishes duty, so Jenny promised to meet him in the Garden once he was finished. Despite Lily’s insistence that they continue their marathon, a promise was a promise. Besides, they could always finish their marathon later that evening.
Jenny had lost herself in the serenity of the Garden when Rico came in. Jenny’s heart skipped when she realized he was there. She calmed herself; she would have to get used to her newfound popularity soon enough. Something that she learned from Taylor was that popular people never made the first move, and so she waited for Rico to initiate their interaction.

Rico was a bit weirded out. Jenny just kept staring at him, not saying a word. That was highly unorthodox for her. Either she would have said something by now, or she would have cast her gaze elsewhere. Prolonged eye contact was not Jenny’s forte. “So-o, Jenny, what’s happening?”

“Fine, how are you?” Jenny was so wrapped up in how to emulate her prestigious title that she had drafted the beginning of their conversation. Rico was supposed to ask her how she was, and so she responded accordingly. But leave it to Rico to do something out of the ordinary.

“Uh-h, I’m fine too.” Jenny nodded politely. “There’s been something bothering me for a while, and I just couldn’t put my finger on it, but I know what it is now.”

“O-oh? Wh-what is it?” The popularity-bravado wasn’t working, so Jenny would be herself for now. She would have to practice how to be popular with Lily later. Or maybe she could get pointers from Taylor.

“We’ve been together three weeks, but there’s something strange about you.”

“Wh-what do you mean? Have I done something wrong? I…I am very sorry…”

“No, you haven’t done anything. Actually, it’s about something that you haven’t done. In all the time we’ve been here, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you use a contraction.”

Jenny breathed a sigh of release. For a moment, she thought Rico was going to accuse her of something serious. “I was under the impression that contractions were something that pregnant women experienced.”

“Uhh, they are, I guess, but I’m talking about speaking contractions. Like ‘can’t’ and ‘won’t’ and ‘ain’t.’”

“I am…slightly familiar with these words.”

“If you’re familiar with them, why don’t you use them?”

“Umm, I will confess that English is not my first language. I did not grow up using contractions, so saying them now seems…unnatural.”

“Yo-o, there’s nothing unnatural about them! In fact, it becomes a lot more fun to talk when you use a bunch of them. I know, I’m gonna help you to use contractions in conversation.”

“Oh, no, you do not have to.”

“Nah, I insist. I’ll get you speaking like a true American in no time.”

“Oh dear…”

“Okay, so contractions are like…shortened versions of words. Instead of saying ‘cannot,’ we say ‘can’t.’”

“Yes, I have understood when you have used them. I just do not feel the need to utilize these constructions.”
“Once you start, you’ll never stop. See? I used a contraction just then, and I didn’t even think about it. Or just then! It’s so convenient; you’ll love it.”

“I have no issues with my current manner of speaking.”

“Jenny, girl, work with me. Throw me a bone. You can do this; I believe in you.”

“But, umm…”

“What is it?”

“If I start using contractions, I will speak like everyone else.”

“Yeah, you’ll be just like all of us!”

“But I will lose my individuality…”

“Jenny, you can’t just lose your individuality. We’re all unique and special, but it doesn’t mean anything unless you can relate to other people. Jenny is Jenny; changing the way you talk isn’t going to change who you are.”

“…so you are saying that I am different…just like everyone else…”

“Uhh, that’s one way to think about it…listen, I’m sorry, I’ve been really pushy. If you don’t want to do this that badly, then I won’t force you.”

“Umm, no. I think…it might be a good thing to do, after all. Like you said, I am special like everyone else; I should embrace that and start acting like the special person I know I am.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear. Self-esteem looks good on you, Jenny; you might just give Taylor a run for her money.”

“I suppose that is what I get for being the Ultra Kawaii.”

“Damn straight. Now repeat after me: I can’t believe it’s not butter.”

“I…can’t believe…it’s not butter…”

Austin blinked; he was in the Hobby Shop again. The Idle remembered leaving for lunch, but he didn’t remember returning. He couldn’t have fallen asleep and sleepwalked again; twice in one day was a tad extreme. The walls were the same, the merchandise the same, and yet Austin still felt that same allure from earlier.

“Ugh, there you are! I’ve been looking, like, forever for you,” said someone from the entrance. Austin’s déjà vu sensor was activating. He half-expected to see Rufus in the doorway once more, but instead he was approached by Taylor. “I have got a juicy bit of information, and you are just the person I need to talk to about it.”

“Yawn, I’m honored.” Austin had an idea of where this conversation was going to go, and Taylor wouldn’t want him to withhold commentary; she loved when people talked about her—especially to her.

“Okay, well, as you can see, I am wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants.”
“Oh my, I had no idea.”

“But you know what? It doesn’t even bother me. Nope, doesn’t bother me at all.”

“Good for you.”

“For you see, I am a beautiful young woman in her own right. I don’t need clothes or make-up to assert that I am beautiful. I am empowered by my own spirit; the only person I have to impress is myself.”

“Cool.”

“You know, a little encouragement would be assuring. You could at least pretend that you were listening to me.”

“I was listening.”

“So I give you a heartfelt speech about how I’ve become a new, better person, and all you can muster up to say is ‘cool?’”

“I didn’t feel like lying.”

“What are you talking about? Why in the world would you have to lie?”

“Because it’s the same old thing with you, Taylor. Something happens that makes you feel bad about yourself, you grow distraught, and then you claim that you are starting your life over for the better, but two hours later you’re back to your same old self. We had this exact conversation three days ago.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m tired of pretending to care about your vagaries. Do whatever you have to do to make yourself feel better, just don’t drag me into it.”

“Gee, I’m sorry I can’t be such a solid rock like you.”

“Because I’m the most stable person here. Because I’m not constantly wandering back to the same place in the mall like I have some weird connection to it. Because I’m not sleepless because my dreams are plagued by nightmares of my dead friends. Because everyone expects me to listen to their problems, but none of them bother to ask me about mine. Yes, you should be sorry that you can’t be as stable as me.”

“Oh my God…Austin, I had no idea. Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Because of what you said just know.”

“I don’t know what you’re referencing. I kind of zoned out about halfway through my speech.”

“But you said…what were you doing in the Hobby Shop?”

“…I don’t know. I can’t remember why I keep coming here…”

“Did something happen here?”
“Nothing really. I mean, one time I ran into Cody here…”

“Oh Cody…wait, Austin, did you…?”

“…I think I might have…”

“Oh my God, Austin, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. God, I’ve been so selfish! And to think I called myself your friend…do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t think there’s much to say.”

“Austin, I am your friend. We’re all your friends. If something’s bothering you, you can tell us; we’re here for you.”

“But you won’t always be. You could be murdered at any moment. What happens when I need you but you’re not there? What then?”

Taylor was on the verge of tears, and Austin hadn’t looked her in the face in some time. Whether she really intended to change herself, the Lucky’s heart was calling out to Austin. She moved closer to him and enclosed him in a tight embrace. “Austin, I swear to you, I will always be here for you. Always. You…we…I won’t rest until I get you out of here. Everything is going to be okay.”

“If you say so.”

“Everything is going to be okay…”
The afternoon passed and the students came together for dinner. Normally, tensions were high so soon after an incentive was announced, but the students were mostly at ease. After all that they had weathered, it seemed strange to the students to think that one of their classmates would seriously contemplate another murder. None of them put much stock in the possibility of another betrayal, and so the mall was covered in a melancholy milieu. Feeling confident that the worst was behind them, the student retired when Night Time fell.

Jenny Zemenovski, Ultra Kawaii All-Star Sandwich Artist, didn’t care to know the secrets of the mall. The past was behind her, so there was no point in belaboring that point. Despite the horrendous circumstances of their imprisonment, Jenny had changed for the better. She was more confident in herself, and she felt more comfortable around others. She didn’t want to admit it to her peers, but Jenny was enjoying her stay. The thought of escaping and having to face the world at large frightened her; Jenny liked living with her friends, and she didn’t want to leave.

All-Star Marathon Runner Rico de Naranjas had grown sick and tired of the malaise of the students. He wanted his friends to succeed, but they wouldn’t even take the first step. Whether they wanted to or not, they were going to leave this mall. To get them together, he would have to eradicate whatever forces were dragging them down, and that might include the hidden components of their internment. Rico held his friends higher than himself; he would get them out with or without himself.

Taylor Erzen, All-Star Lucky, was emotionally drained. She had jumped off the deep end, and just as she was returning to normal, she was plunged down again. She realized that she needed to stop thinking about herself, but she was unsure what shape the future would now take. She needed to get Austin out of the mall, and learning all she could about the mall would certainly help, but she couldn’t risk her life or—more importantly—his.

All-Star Latinist Rufus Price felt at ease. He was used to thoughts racing through his mind at ninety miles-per-hour, but his brain was just coasting now. He was taking life one day at a time. He wasn’t concerned with overt actions or complex plans; what happened happened now. He might as well make the most of his time by enjoying the company of the others. He was content spending his days learning about his classmates instead of learning the secrets behind some forsaken mall.

Lily Smith, All-Star Kawaii, had basically forgotten about Monobear’s incentive. It didn’t help that she slept through his announcement, either. She didn’t mind, though, since she never had and never would intend to harm her friends. Everyone was in such a poopy mood earlier, but after the Olympics, there was a real shift in the mood of the mall. It put a smile on the Kawaii’s face to see all her friends so happy. She was convinced more than ever that the trials were over, and that she wouldn’t have to say goodbye to any more of her classmates; she trusted them wholeheartedly.

All-Star Idle Austin Fitzpatrick was tired, definitively tired. It was depression. He was aware that it was depression ever since Francesca. It made sense; he was always listless and tired. But not doing anything was his special talent, so the root of his apathy had to be a beneficent source, not a malignant one. There just couldn’t be anything seriously wrong with him; that would be absurd. Monobear and the mall did this to him. If he could rid himself of those two things, then maybe he wouldn’t feel the way he did. And the best way to destroy the monsters in his path was to gain as much information as he could on them.

Jordan Koulibagh, All-Star Golfer, didn’t need to know what the mall’s secrets were. So what if they had made films together before? Jordan didn’t remember that now, and so it didn’t
matter anymore. That was an old Jordan, a Jordan of the past. The current Jordan understood that she couldn’t hide away any longer; she would have to face the world head-on. She would no longer hide behind the facets of the past; instead, she would attack the future with all her might to get what she wanted.

Rico wanted to ignore the pounding on his bedroom door, but the person on the other side was insistent that he come out. Stealing a glance at his clock, he saw that it was just past midnight. *This better be good,* Rico thought. Loath to leave his warm bed, Rico threw on a pair of shorts and staggered to the door.

On the Marathon Runner’s doorstep was Rufus, dressed in his everyday clothes and clutching at his side. “Come with me,” said the Latinist. Rufus turned to head down the hall. Rico grabbed Rufus by the arm to detain him, and that simple action caused Rufus’s hand to slip from his side. He winced from the pain caused by the release of pressure.

“What’s going on?” asked Rico.

“Nothing serious,” replied Rufus tersely. “It won’t take but a moment. Safety in numbers. Now come with me; I’ve wasted enough time already.” Not waiting for Rico’s reply, Rufus turned down the hall toward the North Sector exit.

Rico followed and continued to ask questions. Was someone hurt? Did Rufus find something? Why was he clutching his side like that? Why couldn’t this wait until morning? Rufus purposefully ignored Rico’s questions and stalwartly led the Marathon Runner into the Department Store.

It was dark and eerie in the mall at this time of night. The auxiliary lights offered just enough light to keep the two from bumping into their surroundings and each other. As their number had been decreasing, the students were growing more used to the quietude of the mall, but the silence seemed amplified in the darkness.

The two quickly ascended to the second floor and headed over to the changing area, but they were stopped in their tracks there. Rufus paled, and Rico let out a cry at the sight. Before them, with dried blood on her hands and dried tears on her cheeks, Taylor Erzen was standing over the prone, bloodied body of Success Summit’s All-Star Golfer, Jordan Koulibagh.
Abnormal Days

“Upupupu…wake up you idiots! A body has been discovered in the Department Store! Begin investigating, because the trial will be held shortly!”

Rico and Rufus weren’t sure how to respond to the situation. Had they caught Taylor red-handed, or was there something else at work? “Well, there’s no sense in just standing around waiting. We might as well begin the investigation.” Rufus started toward Jordan’s body, but Rico held him back.

“Dude…I don’t think so,” said the Marathon Runner.

Rufus raised an eyebrow. “Quid? Why not?”

“Yeah, we need to get to the bottom of this. For Jordan,” added Taylor.

“Would you look at you?” asked Rico to the two. “Rufus, you’ve got some kind of wound on your side, not to mention you were the one to drag me here. And Taylor, you’ve got blood on your hands! I don’t know what it is, but you two are obviously involved with this case. I don’t want either of you tampering with the evidence.”

The Latinist and Lucky were taken aback. “Rico, you don’t honestly think I killed Jordan, do you?” asked Rufus.

“I’m offended that you would even think I’d do something like that!” asserted Taylor.

“This isn’t a time to make things personal. Yo-o, we can air our grievances after the trial. But first we gotta get through the trial, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Hello? Is there anybody here? I heard the announcement.” Jenny had entered the Department Store downstairs.

Keeping Rufus and Taylor in his peripheral vision, Rico ran over to the escalators and called down to the Sandwich Artist. “Yo-o, Jenny! We’re up here. But, uhh, you probably shouldn’t come up.”

Jenny made her way over to the stairs. Having been roused from her sleep, she was without her hat and apron, and her hair fell in a mess over her face. “Rico. Is there…much blood?”

“Yes…I’m afraid so…”

“I…I see. But I wish to be helpful.”

Rico had an idea. “I’m gonna send Rufus and Taylor down to you. They’ll explain everything. Don’t let them out of your sight, and don’t let them touch anything. But feel free to send Austin and Lily up when they get here.”

“I will do my best.”

Rico turned back to Rufus and Taylor. The two of them met his gaze, but he would not avert his own. Rufus sighed. “Alright, Rico, I trust you. If you think that this is for the best, then I won’t argue with you.”
Rufus moved away from the crime scene and began his descent to the ground floor. With no grounds to argue, Taylor reluctantly followed suit. Rico turned back to the body. With no one else here, he would have to perform the autopsy. Before he could dive in, Monobear appeared before him. Yawning, Monobear offered Rico the Monobear File. Rubbing his eyes, the bear hopped down the escalator steps to deliver the information packets to the other students.

Rico began scanning the document. By the time he had finished reading, Lily and Austin, in their pajamas, had made their way to the second floor. Both were rubbing their eyes, having been roused from sleep unceremoniously. This investigation and trial was going to be exhausting for all of them.

“Wh-what happened?” asked the Kawaii.

Rico just shook his head. “I don’t know yet.”

“Yawn. What do we do? Sigh. There’s not very many of us to carry out the investigation. Yawn.” Austin was having difficulties keeping his eyes open.

“We’ll have to split up.” said Rico. “I’ll look over the body. Austin, you search up here for clues, and Lily, go scour the ground floor for anything.”

Rico had a commanding air about him, and neither Lily nor Austin felt like trying to contradict him. With everyone set with their job to do, Rico had nothing to stop him from investigating Jordan’s body.

Jordan was lying face down on the ground by the changing rooms. There was so much blood around here. If there weren’t so much blood, Rico would have thought that she was planking or had just passed out. Her clothes were pressed nicely on her body, and her hair was splayed neatly about her face.

The blood was pooled under her stomach, which Rico suspected from the Monobear File. He would have to turn her over at some point, but he wanted to put that off for as long as possible. He noticed that her left hand was open, but her right seemed to be grasping something. Rico tried to see what she had been holding onto so dearly. He had to pry her cold hand open, and he removed a small tag. As she was dying, she must have ripped the tag off something nearby. Rico inspected the tag and found only a red “R” written on one side, presumably with her own blood. Apart from the letter, the tag had no remarkable traits of it. For her respect, Rico put the tag back, but he noticed that her entire hand, glove and fingers, was red with blood.

Still not wanting to turn her over, Rico looked at the trail of blood. Much of it was pooled underneath her, but there was more blood splattered around the scene. From the walkway, Jordan lay in front of the right changing door. There was a sizable pool of blood to her left, and a trail of blood drops leading from in front of her heading to the steps. Behind the pool to Jordan’s left, near the hinge of the right changing room, was yet another sizable puddle of blood. There was blood on her shoes, her clothes; Jenny would have been useless up here.

With no other resort, Rico carefully turned Jordan onto her back. Her entire stomach was stained red, and her pants were coated in it. The blood had stopped flowing by now, and Rico peered at the wound in her stomach. Like the file said, there was one deep, clean incision in the middle of her abdomen. The cut had not gone the entire way through her body, but it had pierced enough to do damage.

Jordan’s upper torso was completely clean, though. There was nothing off about her outfit. Her clothes, her hair, she looked as nice as she ever had, except for the mess from her stomach.
down. Rico knew he needed to keep a level head—the students’ lives were at risk—but he couldn’t help but feel bad for Jordan. She had been through so much pain, but at least she was at rest now.

This was a progressive Department Store. After a short search, Jenny found a bench designated for the husbands and boyfriends of shopaholics. The Sandwich Artist set her prisoners on either side of her and then sat in the middle. They would wait here until told otherwise. If this was how she could help, then this is what she would do.

Taylor was unhappy about being stuck. “C’mon, Jenny,” she pleaded. “Don’t listen to what Rico tells you. For all you know, he could be the killer, and is now tampering with all the evidence.”

“Impossible,” said Rufus. The Latinist had leaned back in the bench and now had his eyes closed. “I got Rico from his room. There’s no way he could have killed Jordan and made it back before I got to him.”

“You sound like you know something. You’re looking a little suspicious, Rufus.”

“Says the pot to the kettle. You’re just as guilty as me at the moment.”

“Umm, when are you going to tell me what happened?” asked Jenny. She didn’t like seeing her friends fight, but she disliked seeing her friends die to a greater extent. She had liked Jordan, but at least she could remember her when she was still alive as opposed to what she was like now.

“Yeah, I’d like to know that, too,” said Taylor with fire in her voice.

Still with his eyes closed, Rufus responded. “Jordan wanted to meet with me. She caught with me after dinner and asked to meet in private. In the Department Store at eleven, once everyone was asleep. She said she wanted to clear the air and start over. That was fine by me. We had tried to make up before, but I don’t think either of us had been sincere.

“I went to meet her on the second floor. We got to talking, and I thought things were going well, but she turned a knife on me. She got me pretty good. At the time I was concerned with preserving my own life. We fought, and I managed to get her into the one changing room. Those doors stick, thankfully. While she was trying to get out, I managed to get away.

“First, I went to the Pharmacy to fix myself up. It was still dark in the mall, and I had trouble finding what I needed. I grabbed some bandages and ointment. It’s enough to provide a temporary solution until all this blows over, but it’s not a permanent fix. After that, I went over to the dorms and grabbed Rico. I had to check on Jordan and bring her to her senses, and I wanted back-up in case she wouldn’t listen to reason. When we got there, she was dead, and Taylor was standing over her body.”

Jenny turned to Taylor for her version of the story. Taylor cleared her throat. “Ha, sure. Jenny, here’s what’s really going on. After dinner, Jordan came up to me. She said that Rufus approached her. He wanted to talk to her in private about something. She was worried that something was going to go wrong. She asked me to come up at about eleven thirty to make sure everything was okay. When I got there, Jordan was already dead. I didn’t want to believe it. I tried to wake her up, I tried to get her to come back, but she was gone…She wasn’t locked up in some changing room; she was lying on the ground in a pool of her own blood—”

“Please, no more,” said Jenny. “You’re making me sick.”
“But anyway. I was panicking and I didn’t know what to do anymore. And then Rufus showed up after dragging Rico up there. Then Rico sent us away, and here we are. There. Happy? Will you let us go now?”

“Umm, I think…I think Rico was right to keep you away. Your stories are very…involved. I’m sure we’ll discuss them during the trial.”

Taylor couldn’t even appeal to Jenny. “What are you talking about? We can settle this all right here, right now!”

Rufus smirked. “Save your energy for the trial. We all have to come to the same conclusion together.”

“What are you lazybones doing? Aren’t you supposed to be investigating?” While Rufus and Taylor were recounting their stories, Monobear had found the warden and her two prisoners. Being woken in the middle of the night seemed to make Monobear crankier than usual.

Without missing a beat, Taylor fired back. “I would, except somebody won’t let me play.”

“Well I worked really hard to make you this Monobear File, so at least read that, you worthless shits!” Monobear handed over the brochures and stormed off. Taylor began to peruse hers, as did Jenny, but Rufus just let his rest on his lap; he had yet to open his eyes.

“Why don’t you read what the folder says to me, Jenny?” asked the Latinist.

“Read it yourself,” harped Taylor.


Rufus sighed. “The poor girl did not go out in dignity.”

Rico was preoccupied with the body, but there was more for Austin to look over near the changing rooms. The thing that stood out the most to the Idle was the knife lying off to the side. It didn’t look familiar to Austin, but that didn’t mean much. It could have easily come from one of the food court kitchens or from the General Store. There wasn’t enough time to figure out where exactly it had come from, and it probably wouldn’t be important anyway. The Idle leaned over the knife; he didn’t want to touch it. The entire knife was coated in blood, from blade to handle.

Rico had rolled over Jordan’s body, and Austin gave her a cursory glance. The knife was the right size to have made the cut in her stomach. The file didn’t mention any other wounds on her body, so Austin didn’t waste time trying to find any other weapons. There was a lot of blood on the crime scene, but there had to be more than just blood splatter.

In most of the cases so far, there had been a struggle between the killer and victim, but this scene seemed rather contained. Austin wanted to be sure that the crime didn’t expand past the changing area, so he went to the closest clothing rack to investigate for any evidence of a struggle. Everything was in order, except the topmost shirt was slightly ruffled. Austin’s OCD kicked in, and he started folding the shirt. It was a really nice shirt. It was almost his size. Austin wondered how much a shirt like that would cost, but it didn’t have a tag on it. He would have to ask a clerk for help after the trial. Oh wait, there weren’t any clerks. But he didn’t just want to take it.
“Yo-o, Austin, you okay? You been staring at the shirt for a while.”

Austin put the shirt down. “Hmm? Yawn, yeah, I guess.”

If there was nothing outside the changing rooms, maybe there was something inside. Austin pushed the left room door open, but there was nothing inside. The right one was open slightly, so he pulled it toward him. The top swung toward him, but the bottom wouldn’t move. Austin wasn’t expecting the resistance, and it set him slightly off balance. After he recovered, he remembered that the door open inward. Austin pushed correctly on the door, but it still offered some resistance. The bottom went in fine, but the top was a little wobbly. Austin peered at the door hinge, and then he understood; the top hinge had been busted. The inside of this changing room was just as bare as the last, sans the blood in the doorway.

Austin pulled the door back into place as best he could and scanned the area once more. It was such a small space. How could Jordan’s death have been confined to such a limited area?

Lily scoured the ground floor, but there was nothing interesting to find. She wanted to be helpful, but there just wasn’t anything for her to investigate. She had checked every clothing display at least three times, but there just weren’t any clues to be found. After making a thoroughly exhaustive run of the Department Store, Lily made an executive decision: she would search for clues elsewhere.

There was a faint trail of blood leading down the escalators, through the store, and then out the entrance. Putting her (imaginary) super sleuth hat on, Lily followed the trail. As it went, the amount of blood did not seem to lessen. Someone had been bleeding and had not been able to stop the flow.

The Kawaii followed the trail to the Pharmacy. The trail seemed to bounce around to various places. There was a larger pool near the bandages section, and that pool flowed into another by a mirror. The trail seemed to end at the mirror, though. Lily hopped over to a nearby trash can and found an empty bandage box and an empty bottle of hydrogen peroxide. Whoever had been bleeding must have patched themselves up.

Just then, the call rang throughout the mall. “U…pu…I’m tired, so I’m calling this investigation to an end. Head over to the food court and we’ll get this stuff started. But put some normal clothes on first. I don’t want to have to stare at your ugly pajamas all night. I’ll graciously give you a few extra minutes to get dressed, but don’t be late! Monobear gets cranky when he’s sleepy, and you don’t want to see a cranky bear.”

After the announcement, Lily looked at her own appearance in the mirror. Her hair was everywhere! It would take a lot longer than five minutes for her to get ready, so she better get started right away.

Rico and Austin headed back to the dorms together to put their normal clothes on. Taylor marched ahead to change out of her blood-stained sweats. Jenny wanted to put on her hat and apron, but Rufus did not seem to have a lot of energy. The Sandwich Artist helped the Latinist to the food court, sat him on a bench, and ran quickly to her room.

As usual, Monobear sat on top of the fountain, but he was dozing off while waiting for the students. Rico and Austin returned first, followed closely behind by Jenny. Taylor, as proud as
ever, came next, and Lily brought up the rear. Monobear snapped awake and ogled the cast before him.

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. You’re all here. Wow, only six this time. Let’s see how that number changes.” The fountain rose and the elevator appeared. The remaining students entered and began the plunge to the bottom. As always, silence pervaded the elevator. Time was at a stand-still as each survivor dreaded the oncoming trial.

The elevator stopped, and the doors opened. The trial room was even more hideously adorned than before. The students approached their stands. There were more signs of their departed friends than there were open spots for the living. Two new signs had been erected. A red X in the shape of compass needles crossed out Theo’s face, and a normal X covered Jordan’s. The faces of the dead more than ever impressed their presence upon the students; Jordan would stare down her killer until the truth came out.

Monobear yawned. “Alright, it is way past Monobear’s bedtime. Let’s try to wrap this up quick. I declare this trial underway or something.”
Chapter 5--The Loved and the Loathed--Part 11

Austin: “So it’s really happening again…”

Jenny: “So…someone in this room killed Jordan…”

Lily: “I don’t want to believe it…”

Taylor: “We don’t have a choice to believe it. Jordan’s dead, and her killer is among us. Let’s settle this and get her justice.”

Rico: “Then let’s start with all the evidence. The Monobear File said that she died from exsanguination. I examined her body, and I think it’s more likely that she died from blood loss.”

Rufus: “…that’s what ‘exsanguination’ means.”

Rico: “O-oh. Why didn’t it just say that? The blood seems to come from a wound in her—”

Taylor: “I know who did it!”

Jenny: “A-already? That’s so fast.”

Austin: “But how can you know?”

Rico: “Who?”

Taylor: “Jordan’s killer can be none other than Rufus!”

Rufus: “Ah.”

Taylor: “‘Ah?’ That’s all the more you have to say for yourself?”

Rufus: “Need I say more? The truth is that I didn’t do it.”

Taylor: “Bullshit. All the evidence points to you!”

Lily: “Lily wants to know what evidence Taylor means since she was busy investigating the ground floor.”

Rico: “We’ll keep Taylor’s accusation on the back-burner for now. I think it’s safer to focus on the evidence and draw our conclusions from there.”

Taylor: “Just you wait. Everything points toward our All-Star Latinist.”

Jenny: “Rico. You were discussing the body?”

Rico: “Yeah. There’s a wound in her stomach, and there’s a lot of blood around there, so I’m saying that’s the exsanguination.”

Lily: “What kind of wound, desu? Did it look like it hurt?”

Austin: “I found a knife nearby. That seems most likely to me.”

Jenny: “Then Jordan was stabbed.”
Taylor: “And the one who stabbed her was Rufus! He’s already admitted to using the knife.”

Lily: “He did? When?”

Rico: “I don’t remember that.”

Jenny: “Yes. He said that he met with Jordan, but that she attacked him with a knife.”

Taylor: “And then he said that he got the better of her and locked her in the changing room. But really he just shanked her with the knife he took from her.”

Rufus: “Again, I assert that I did not kill Jordan Koulibagh.”

Rico: “We can finish the analysis later. I just want to get the facts out of the way.”

Austin: “I don’t know if it means anything, but there was this really neat shirt near the crime scene, and it’s just my size, and I think it might bring out my eyes under the right lighting, and it—”

Taylor: “Is there a point coming?”

Austin: “Well, it was missing a tag. The mall’s pretty meticulously kept, so I’m wondering if that could be involved in any way.”

Rico: “I think I know where that tag went. In Jordan’s one hand, she was clutching a clothing tag. It had a red ‘R’ drawn on it.”

Lily: “An ‘R’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Taylor: “It’s an ‘R’ for ‘Rufus’ of course! Jordan gave us a clue about who her killer was!”

Jenny: “Or it could be an ‘R’ for ‘Rico.’”

Austin: “Or maybe she just likes that particular letter. I’m quite fond of the letter ‘Y.’”

Rufus: “Where did you say that shirt was, Austin?”

Austin: “On a nearby clothes rack. Why do you ask?”

Rufus: “I’m thinking…I’ll have an answer when we get to the analysis portion of the trial. Is there any more evidence?”

Rico: “The body…the knife…I can’t think of any.”

Lily: “Lily has a question. Why were Taylor-chan and Rufus-kun not allowed to partake in the investigation?”

Rico: “It was about midnight when Rufus came knocking on my door and took me to the Department Store. Taylor was already there with blood on her hands. Rufus had been clutching his side like he was hurt. I wondered how he knew to go there. They were both involved, so I didn’t want them hanging around the crime scene.”

Austin: “I would like to hear in their words what was going on.”

Taylor: “Here’s the skinny. Rufus asked Jordan to meet with her late tonight to clear the air. She was nervous about what he wanted, so she asked me to check up on them around eleven thirty to make sure everything was okay. When I arrived, she was dead with a hole in her stomach. I tried to
bring her back, getting her blood on my clothes, but it was too late. Then Rico and Rufus showed up.”

Rufus: “I don’t disagree much with Taylor’s story, except that it was Jordan who approached me. She wanted to clear the air. I got to the Department Store around eleven, and she turned a knife on me. She got me in the side, but I managed to push her into the changing room and closed the door tight behind me. I made my way to the Pharmacy to fix myself up, and then got Rico to have some back-up to confront her. And then it was just like Rico said.”

Jenny: “I listened to these stories earlier, and they do contradict. I think…only one of them can be true.”

Taylor: “And you’ll find that I’m the one telling the truth! We’re done with evidence, right? Well, there’s a knife that Rufus admits using and a death letter from Jordan with a connection to him.”

Rufus: “I never said I used the knife. Jordan attacked me with it, but I never wrestled it from her grasp.”

Taylor: “But you acknowledged the knife!”

Lily: “Because he was stabbed, right?”

Taylor: “In all the other trials, the murderer has tried to hide evidence connecting them to the case. Delilah hid the cloth, Randolph the syringe and rope, Elizabeth and all that shit. If Rufus was stabbed, but there was no knife, it would look suspicious, so he had to leave it there.”

Rufus: “Or the killer didn’t bother to take the knife away, or didn’t have time to dispose of it. You’re just trying to twist the facts to fit your theory. That’s not how these trials are supposed to work.”

Jenny: “Then how do you explain the tag? Jordan was trying to tell us who killed her.”

Rico: “That ‘R’ doesn’t stand solely for ‘Rufus.’ Like Jenny pointed out, it could be for me.”

Jenny: “It doesn’t make sense for it to be Rico since he was sleeping in his room until Rufus got him.”

Austin: “Or was he? Jordan died between eleven fifteen and eleven forty-five. There would have been a time after Rufus and before Taylor when anyone else could have been in the Department Store unnoticed.”

Lily: “So…it’s possible that someone, umm, hurt Jordan and then went back to their room until the announcement.”

Austin: “After all, it’s not difficult to put on pajamas.”

Jenny: “Then we have figured out that any of us could have been the killer.”

Rufus: “And that includes you, Taylor.”

Taylor: “But explain the ‘R’ itself. If Jordan wasn’t singling out Rufus or Rico, then what was the point of it?”

Lily: “It’s got to be a clue for something, right? If it’s not a name, then what is it?”

Austin: “I can’t think of too many things that start with an ‘R…”’
Rufus: “If I may, Rico, how did you make out the letter on the tag in the first place?”

Rico: “Uhh, it was just written on there, so I, uhh, read it.”

Rufus: “But surely a dying girl wouldn’t be concerned with her penmanship.”

Jenny: “Perhaps she wanted to make it clear who the killer was, so she took her time.”

Lily: “I imagine time would be of the essence, though, desu.”

Rufus: “And Austin, you said you were enamored by the shirt. Didn’t the blood on the shirt turn you off?”

Austin: “There wasn’t any blood on the shirt. I know, yawn, I checked it.”

Rufus: “But she was bleeding. How did she manage to rip the tag off the shirt without smearing blood all over it?”

Jenny: “Wait, then you are saying that…”

Rufus: “There’s no way Jordan left that note.”

Lily: “The killer must have put it there to try to confuse us!”

Rico: “To try to frame Rufus.”

Taylor: “Like what Randolph did to James.”

Rufus: “Can we agree that if I was framed that I would have no need to lie in my testimony? That’ll certainly make the sequence of events a little clearer.”

Taylor: “Not so fast. I’ve learned a trick or two from all these trials. Remember all of Lizzie’s red herrings? Rufus could have ‘framed’ himself to make himself look innocent.”

Austin: “That’s a bit much to wrap my head around.”

Taylor: “It would be the greatest trick! Rufus clears his own name by instigating himself.”

Rufus: “Would you care to look at my wound yourself? I assure you it is quite unpleasant.”

Jenny: “N-no thank you. That will not be necessary.”

Taylor: “Lizzie used fake tears; you cut yourself prior to the confrontation. Simple.”

Lily: “Lily feels the need to interject!”

Austin: “Austin is curious why Lily keeps referring to herself in the third person.”

Rico: “Rico would like to solve this case so he doesn’t get executed.”

Lily: “Li—I followed a suspicious trail of blood from the Department Store to the Pharmacy. The trail led to some used bandages and hydrogen peroxide. Someone fixed a booboo in the Pharmacy earlier and didn’t clean up their mess very well.”

Rufus: “I will claim that blood trail as my own.”

Taylor: “Lizzie also gave us some fake blood to believe in.”
Rufus: “You just won’t be satisfied. Assuming I attacked myself, I would have had to do so with care so as not to seriously harm myself. Jenny, I suggest you close your eyes for this part.”

Jenny: “I shall not open them until told otherwise.”

Rufus: “Everyone else, take a look at this.”

Rico: “Yo-o!”

Lily: “Ewwwww!”

Austin: “Oh my.”

Taylor: “Oh God.”

Rufus: “Satisfied? Even in my darkest of times, I never would dream of doing this to myself.”

Lily: “It looks like it hurts so much, desu. Do you want me to kiss it and make it better?”

Rico: “I’m not a doctor, but I don’t think kissing it will help.”

Rufus: “Ita, it hurts very much. I’m tired, and I’m starting to feel a little light-headed, so can we get through this trial while I’m still conscious?”

Jenny: “Does this mean I can open my eyes now?”

Taylor: “Yes, Rufus pulled his shirt back down.”

Lily: “So, this means Rufus is innocent, right? Can we deduce more things like last time?”

Austin: “Rico could still be framed, though. Or he could be framing himself.”

Rico: “I can’t argue with that, but look at what it means if Rufus is innocent.”

Jenny: “His testimony is solid. So Taylor’s…”

Austin: “Taylor was lying…”

Lily: “No…so Taylor killed Jordan?”

Rico: “She has been awfully aggressive this entire trial.”

Taylor: “No, I would never kill Jordan. She was my friend. I swear Rufus killed her!”

Jenny: “I think I’ve remembered something. In the beginning of the discussion, Taylor said all the evidence pointed to Rufus, but we had not yet talked about the evidence.”

Rufus: “That sounds suspicious to me.”

Lily: “But…but…but Taylor and Jordan were really good friends! She couldn’t have hurt her!”

Jenny: “We thought Elizabeth was our friend—”

Lily: “Lizzie-chan was our friend, desu!”

Taylor: “I am your friend, guys! You gotta believe me!”
Rico: “You’ve already lied once. How can we be sure you’re telling the truth now?”

Austin: “Should we just ignore Taylor for the rest of the trial?”

Rufus: “Let’s look at the evidence. Taylor knew where Jordan was; no one else knew about our meeting. Rico and I found her with blood on her hands. That’s very difficult to explain away.”

Taylor: “Shut up! You know you killed her!”

Austin: “Wait, yawn, I have a question. So Rufus’s testimony is true, right? How exactly did you lock Jordan in the changing room?”

Lily: “Oh, he must have had a key!”

Rufus: “Minime, I had no such thing. I just shut the door firmly with her in the room. It stuck fast, so I made my leave.”

Austin: “But her body wasn’t in the room, so Taylor must have gotten her out of the room before she killed her.”

Rico: “She could have killed her and then moved the body.”

Austin: “There would’ve been another blood trail, and there was only the one trail, the one that, yawn, Lily followed.”

Lily: “Straight to the Pharmacy, desu!”

Austin: “Then why was there a struggle in the changing room?”

Jenny: “A struggle? I had not heard about a struggle.”

Rico: “How do you know there was a struggle?”

Austin: “The door was wrong. Sigh. When we got there, the door was splayed outward. Splayed? Is that a word?”

Taylor: “Omigod it was. I hadn’t noticed that.”

Rufus: “So the door was open. What’s so special about that?”

Austin: “No, it was opened out. The changing room doors open in.”

Rico: “How does that even work? The door opening out, I mean.”

Austin: “Simple. The hinge was broken.”

Lily: “Rufus leaves Jordan in the changing room. Taylor might have hurt her outside the changing room. But there was a struggle and fight in between?”

Jenny: “I’m sorry, but that does not make sense to me. Jordan was killed with the knife, but she was in possession of the knife, so the killer had to take it from her. With the way the hinge broke, it’s clear that the killer did not force their way in.”

Lily: “Just when I thought I had it…so this means there was no struggle. Jordan forced her way out.”
Rufus: “No struggle would make more sense…she suspected nothing from Taylor, so there was no fight.”

Taylor: “Now you’re the one making up facts to suit your theories! Guys, he’s trying to trick you!”

Rufus: “Are you still on that? Desperation does not become you.”

Taylor: “I refuse to stand here and be lectured to by a murderer.”

Rufus: “Be my guest; break the rules. I bet Monobear is just waiting for an opportunity to issue one of his punishments.”

Taylor: “Like I would throw away my life so easily! Why don’t you go out with a shred of dignity and admit you did it?”

Rufus: “Have you not been paying attention this entire time? There had not been one ounce of incriminating evidence against me. What has you so convinced of my guilt, puella?”

Taylor: “Because Jordan told me herself that you killed her!”

Rico: “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up there. Jordan did what now?”

Taylor: “She…she told me Rufus killed her…”

Lily: “Jordan is…gone, though. I didn’t think people who passed could talk.”

Austin: “Not unless they’re a ghost.”

Taylor: “Jordan’s not a ghost. Fine. Yeah, I lied. When I got to the Department Store, Jordan was alive.”

Rico: “So you admit you killed her? But if she said—”

Taylor: “Let me finish. When I got there, she was dying. She was leaning against the changing rooms, and she was out of it. I tried to help her, but she said it was too late. I asked her who did it to her, and she said it was Rufus.”

Lily: “We have gone over this enough for me to know that Rufus did not do it, though.”

Taylor: “She said that no one would believe me, that Rufus did it, without proof. I was the one who wrote the ‘R’ on the tag, but I did not kill her.”

Rico: “You tampered with the crime scene.”

Taylor: “I was crying and angry and emotional and I didn’t want to go through another painful trial. It was so obvious in my mind. I knew who the killer was, and I just had to convince everyone else of it.”

Jenny: “So after all of this…do you still think that Rufus did it?”

Taylor: “I do. I refuse to believe that Jordan lied to me.”

Rufus: “Would you get a load of this? She’s lying through her teeth. Have you ever heard a more pathetic story? We can only take you for your word, and we’ve already proved that that’s not worth very much.”
Rico: “I think I can back her story up. Taylor said that she found Jordan leaning against the changing rooms. And since the wound was in her stomach, the blood would have flowed down onto her pants and shoes. I looked over the body, and there was blood there.”

Rufus: “I saw the body. She was lying down; the blood simply flowed out from the wound.”

Rico: “Yeah, but he upper body is clear.”

Austin: “Then how did her body get in that position?”

Lily: “We thought she had been stabbed, so she would have fallen. But that’s not the case, is it, desu?”

Taylor: “She was with me for a while, but she passed. Like Lily said, she would have fallen, so I put her in that position.”

Rufus: “Proof, Taylor, proof. You can’t expect me to believe your words without backup.”

Rico: “I can supply that info again. Her clothes were like wrinkle-free. She looked too nice to have fallen over.”

Taylor: “I fixed her clothes and hair. I wanted her to look nice, you know, since that was how we would see her last.”

Jenny: “So if Rufus didn’t kill her, and Taylor didn’t kill her, then who did?”

Austin: “That’s two. What about the third?”

Rico: “The third what?”

Austin: “The third puddle of blood. The one underneath of her is when Taylor moved her. The one to the side is from when she was resting. Where did the one in the doorway come from?”

Rufus: “Well that’s…hmm…”

Lily: “Lily has this answer!”

Rico: “You do?”

Jenny: “Why do you act so surprised? Go ahead, Lily.”

Lily: “Arigatou. I have been paying tons of attention during this trial. We already said that the killer didn’t force their way into the room, so Jordan must have forced her way out, desu. She pushed too hard and fell, and that caused the blood.”

Taylor: “Then she was bleeding when she got in there, so that means that Rufus attacked her and left her in there to die. She used the last of her energy to escape to tell us he did it. Case closed.”

Austin: “Except there wasn’t any blood in the changing room, just on the, yawn, doorway.”

Jenny: “Excuse me, but she was still in possession of the knife. Is it not possible she fell on it?”

Rufus: “That’s absurd. People don’t just die from falling on a knife.”

Rico: “You have to admit it makes sense, though.”
Rufus: “Theories are theories; give me my proof. Is anyone else feeling warm?”

Jenny: “You look a little pale. Umm, paler than usual.”

Austin: “Sigh, the knife. If someone attacked her with it, then there’d be blood on the blade. If she attacked herself, then she probably pulled the blade out, and I imagine she was bleeding by then. Yawn. So she would have gotten blood on the handle by touching it herself.”

Taylor: “The knife…I never touched the knife…”

Lily: “A suicide? Would we really be here if it were a suicide?”

Jenny: “I think I remember from Francesca’s trial. In the case of a suicide, the murderer is also the victim. Although this does not feel like a suicide to me.”

Austin: “It’s a different take on the term, but the idea is the same. Death by one’s own hand, I guess.”

Taylor: “Can that really be what happened?”

Rufus: “I don’t like it just as much as you, but the proof doesn’t lie—unlike some people.”

Taylor: “Lay off. I was trying to help my friend.”

Monobear: “Gah! Whazzat? I think I dozed off there for a second. What time is it? Is it really that late? Have you hooligans come to a conclusion yet?”

Jenny: “I think we have. Shall we run through the course of events?”

Rufus: “I’d love to, but…did someone turn the lights up?”

Taylor: “I’ll do it. I owe it to her. Okay. So Jordan met with Rufus and me after dinner. I think…she must have asked Rufus to meet her at eleven, but told me that he was instigating it. Whatever. She told me to come by later. Rufus got to the Department Store, but Jordan pulled a knife on him. He managed to get away, but not before sealing her in the changing room. She wasn’t really stuck; the door just didn’t want to move. Rufus went to the Pharmacy to treat his wound, and Jordan tried to get out. She pushed on the door, but she pushed too hard, lost her balance, and then fell on the knife. Seeing what she had done, she removed the knife, but she couldn’t stop the blood. It must have exhausted her, so she went to sit down. Oh God, Jordan…and then I got there and saw her. She was a mess and I was a mess. She told me Rufus killed her, but that was a lie. She convinced me, anyhow, so I spread some evidence to try to frame Rufus. That didn’t work so well. Jordan died while I was there, and I laid her body down and fixed her clothes. Then Rufus and Rico arrived, because after the Pharmacy Rufus went to get back-up to confront Jordan, not knowing that she had fatally wounded herself. Then there was the investigation, and now this.”

Rico: “That’s basically what I was thinking.”

Lily: “But why did Jordan lie to Taylor? Why did she attack Rufus in the first place? She didn’t mean to kill him, desu? Jordan was our friend…we were going to sail around the world together.”

Jenny: “I do-not think we will ever be able to know what was going through her mind at the time.”

Rico: “All we have to go on is what happened. I hate to say this, but I don’t think it really matters why.”
Rufus: “Then we’re all agreeb—agreed. Jordan killed herselv—self.”

Austin: “I can’t think of any other way to make it work.”

Lily: “Me neither.”

Jenny: “I do not object.”

Rico: “It makes sense to me.”

Taylor: “And to me. Monobear, we’re ready to vote.”

Monobear: “Zzz…”

Taylor: “Yo! Stupid bear! I said we’re ready to vote!”

Monobear: “Huzzah? Did I fall asleep again? I’m too tired to keep officiating this farce. It’s voting time, whether you like it or not!”

There was always apprehension when the voting process began, and this time was no different. This trial had hinged on whether or not someone was lying. As each student made their selection, they couldn’t help but wonder if someone had really managed to deceive them.

Monobear: “It should be against the law to have to count things after midnight. Luckily there aren’t very many votes for me to tally this time around. Well then, I can now announce that I have counted up your paltry number of votes, and this allows me to say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jordan Koulibagh is, in fact, the killer of Jordan Koulibagh. Normally this is where I would say that I have a special punishment designed for our killer, but they beat me to it. What a pain. I guess the six of you are free to go.”

Taylor: “Before we go, will you answer Lily’s question? Why did Jordan lie? What was she doing? Why was she doing it?”

Monobear: “Just when I thought you munchkins might have some semblance of intelligence. Isn’t it obvious? Jordan planned on murdering Rufus. She wanted to know the secrets of the mall and of her past life.”

Taylor: “No! You’re lying!”

Monobear: “I never lie. She met with me in private to discuss the particulars of the incentive.”

Austin: “Okay, so that’s why she got Rufus there. But why did she lie to Taylor?”

Monobear: “Because she couldn’t win. Did you know nothing about your ‘friend?’ She was dying. She could have said that it was an accident, and then this trial would have been simple. But if she couldn’t make it out of this mall, then she didn’t want anyone to. Even as she was dying, she was still fueled by so much anger and hatred.”

Jenny: “Would Jordan really act like that? I thought she was better than that…”

Austin: “I guess we didn’t know her as well as we thought.”

Lily: “She was hurting, but she never said anything about it. Maybe it’s our fault that she felt that way…”

Taylor: “No. We can’t think that way. We aren’t the ones to blame. The one who is to blame is in
this room right now, and his name is Monobear. If it weren’t for him, none of this would have happened.”

Monobear: “Upupu. You’re so adorable. Jordan fell to despair, just like so many before her, and just like you guys will.”

Taylor: “I don’t think she completely did. I didn’t understand it until now, but I think she was having second-thoughts at the end. Yeah, she lied and said that Rufus did it, but I think she regretted that. Right before she passed, she looked me in the eyes and asked, ‘Do you think Theo will be angry?’ Those were her last words. She was worried that Theo wouldn’t approve of trying to kill all of us. Jordan was our friend; end of story.”

Monobear: “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Lily: “Yeah, Jordan was our friend, desu. This was all an accident.”

Jenny: “We don’t have to fall to despair; we’re better than that.”

Austin: “We’ve seen enough despair for a lifetime. Yawn. A lot of things make me tired, and these trials are one of them.”

Rico: “We’re All-Stars. We are the best of the best. There’s nothing that can stop us.”

Rufus: “All the more reason for us to… ohhh…”

Rico: “Rufus!”

Lily: “He just collapsed!”

Jenny: “Somebody, please do something.”

Rico: “Oh shit. I think his wound’s opened up.”

Austin: “Is he breathing?”

Taylor: “Monobear, do something!”

Monobear: “You’re telling me to save him? You wanted him dead not too long ago if I remember correctly.”

Taylor: “Yeah, well times have changed. Now save him already! He didn’t break any rules; you can’t let him die like this!”

Monobear: “Ugh, you’re so annoying. Fine. I’ll do my best, but I make no promises.”

Monobear continued to sit on his throne at the head of the circle of podiums. Rico moved away from the collapsed Latinist, and two other Monobears, identical to the one lounging on his throne, appeared. These robots hoisted Rufus onto their shoulders and took him into the execution chamber. The doors shut heavily behind them.

Rico made a move to go after them, but the Monobear presiding over the trial just glared at him. “Let me see him,” demanded Rico. “I have to make sure he’s okay.”

“My robots, my rules,” sneered the bear. “Now what are you miscreants still doing here? Get on that elevator and get out of my sight! I have some beauty rest I need to catch up on. Scram!”
As much as the students detested the bear, they didn’t want to cross him. Feeling as uneasy as they had when they arrived, the five remaining students entered the elevator and rode it to the top, wondering in what way the mall would affect their lives next.

End of Chapter Five

Surviving Students: 6?

Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner

Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky

Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle

Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist?

Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii

Jenny Zemenovski—All-Star Sandwich Artist
Chapter 6—The Tricked and the Deceived--Part 1

(Ab)Normal Days

The elevator stopped, and the five students departed. The skylight above the food court was flooded in the darkness of night; the moon had long since waned away. The trial had come unexpectedly in the middle of the night, and now the students were left in the predawn hours of the morning. The aftermath of every case was sobering, but the lack of light made the atmosphere that much heavier.

Taylor was angry with herself. The entire time, she had let her feelings get in her way. She couldn’t even think that Jordan may have been lying to her, and so she had assaulted Rufus for the entire trial. And he had done nothing wrong. She continuously attacked him while in a weakened state, and she hadn’t gotten the opportunity to apologize before he fainted. She and he weren’t the greatest of friends, but she didn’t want him to go in that way, letting her invective statements being the last things she said to him. With the stress of the trial over, her mind was able to relax, and she was so ashamed of how she had been acting recently. She feared what she would do next if she were trapped in this mall for any longer; she had to get out of this mall one way or another.

Austin thought the trial would rouse him from his stupor, but his eyelids still felt heavy. He hadn’t enjoyed being woken up by Monobear’s announcement, but he hadn’t been in a particularly deep sleep anyway. The reality of Jordan’s ending hadn’t truly hit him yet, but he felt weighed down nonetheless. And now Rufus’s demise may be added to that weight. It had seemed the least likely that anyone would die from Monobear’s last incentive, but despair had still come over the mall’s inhabitants. Austin had tried to be hopeful for so long, but he was struggling in the battle. If he did not get out of the mall soon, then the number of mall inhabitants would slowly dwindle, and it would only be a matter of time before his light was extinguished.

Jenny was saddened by Jordan’s death. She was partially glad that she did not have to see her friend in her final state, but she was partially upset that she had never had a chance to say goodbye. Even if she had had the chance to see the body, she most likely would have passed out. It wasn’t fair to Jenny. Jenny was also a little angry with herself for not helping Rufus. She had been the physically closest to him, but it was Rico who ran to his aid. With his wound opening up, Jenny knew that she wouldn’t be any help if he started bleeding. She cursed her fear of blood. She had passed out more times than she would have liked. Jenny didn’t want to faint anymore; she wanted to leave this mall, and soon.

Rico was incredibly anxious and agitated. He was proud of the way he had handled himself during the investigation and trial. He kept a clear head and removed himself from any biases, and they had solved the case. But if only they had solved it sooner, then Rufus might have been able to join them. Rico was doubtful how well Monobear would take care of the Latinist, or how the bear was able to produce copies of himself in the first place. Rico understood that Rufus wasn’t the most affable person in the mall, but after three weeks, the students were a family, and a loss here hurt just as much. Rico could only hope that Rufus would pull through whatever hell Monobear was putting him through. Once the Latinist was back, then they would all pool their energy into leaving this place.

For the first time, Lily had not voted for herself during the trial, and she wasn’t sure she was proud of doing that. She had helped to solve the case, and that meant that she and her friends were still safe, but she didn’t like thinking badly of her friends. There was no way that any of them
could harbor dark thoughts or secrets. To admit that they were capable would be to admit that Monobear was right about despair, and he was far from that! Lily would show that bear just how wrong he was by escaping from the mall, not only by herself, but with the rest of her friends as well.

The students stood around in silence for a moment, as if waiting for something to happen and give them a place to go. Austin couldn’t hold it back any longer, and so he unleashed a yawn of incredibly high decibel. It was the middle of the night, after all. He sleepily stretched and rubbed his eyes. “I, yawning, think it’s time to go back to bed…” said the Idle.

“That’s probably a good idea,” murmured Taylor in agreement.

“But, umm, what about Rufus?” asked Jenny.

“I’m going to wait here all night if I have to,” replied Rico. “He’s down there somewhere, so he has to come back up at some point. I’m going to be here for him when he does.”

“Rico-kun, no,” chided Lily. “You need to get some sleep. I’m sure Rufus-kun will be fine, desu. He wouldn’t want you worrying on his behalf.”

“But he’s hurt! I have to do something!”

Taylor put a hand on Rico’s shoulder. “Hey, there’s nothing we can do right now. Just take care of yourself for now.”

“But…but…”

Jenny spoke up slightly. “You worked hard, Rico. You deserve a rest.”

“It’s late…we’re all tired…” added Austin.

Rico looked at his friends and he saw the genuine care in their eyes. They were worried about Rufus just as much as him, but the situation was out of their hands now. “I guess, but…but what happens if he doesn’t come back up?”

Taylor looked the Marathon Runner square in the eye. “We don’t think like that now. Rufus will be fine.”

“Realistically, there’d probably be another trial,” yawned Austin. “I guess we already know his killer, though.”

Taylor turned and hissed at Austin, “We don’t think like that now.”

Lily jumped up to grab everyone’s attention. “It’s late, and I think we’re all a little cranky. Everything will be okeydokey in the morning.”

“Yes, I think sleep is the best thing for all of us,” added Jenny.

Taylor let out a sigh and shrugged her shoulders. “Then I have one last thing to say. Can we forget about meeting for breakfast? After a night like this, I’d like to sleep in.”

Austin started to form a big grin, but a yawn escaped from him instead. “Sleeping in is always a good idea.”

“Fine by me,” said Rico. “But let’s make sure we’re up in time for lunch.”
The others nodded in agreement, and together they ventured back to the dorm area. Journeys back to the dorm at the end of the day used to be raucous with everyone talking and joking, but with so few people left, and with their rooms spread so far apart, it was a sobering walk. Each student returned to their rooms, and as much as they wanted to sleep, the sleep did not come as easily as they had hoped. Eventually, they all drifted off, and before long, each woke up to fully face their twenty-third day in the Mall of Monomerica.

The five students gathered in the Food Court when the sun was directly overhead. With another trial successfully completed, crepes had been added to the breakfast menu, prosciutto to the lunch menu, and steak to the dinner menu, not that it mattered since the students could acquire food from any menu at any time. A good night’s rest had been good for the students, but they were still uneasy; Rufus had not yet returned.

The students were joking mildly when Monobear’s movie announcement rang throughout the mall. They had hardly had any time to get over Jordan’s death before being forced to see her again. As much as they loathed the spectacle, at least they would only have to sit through one film since the Golfer had been the killer and victim both.

The five students were able to seat themselves comfortably within the Video Store. Monobear wore a face more mischievous than usual. “What’s the matter, chumps? Don’t want to watch some quality entertainment? Well that’s too bad! Because I have worked hard to bring some culture into your meaningless lives!”

Taylor flipped her hair in annoyance. “Just get on with it.” When she had woken up, she was pleased to find her usual top and shorts, but wearing her normal clothes hadn’t made her feel as good as she had anticipated. She didn’t want to give Monobear the pleasure of being so petty.

“That’s more like it! Keep up the enthusiasm! Without any further delay, I present to you the next winner of the Golden Globes!” Monobear popped the tape into the VCR, and Jordan appeared on the screen before the students. She was smiling faintly as she looked at the camera. Throughout her time in the mall, she had worn stress and tension so palpably, but on the other side of the television, she was truly relaxed.

She laughed quietly before beginning her soliloquy. “Are you filming now? Alright. My name is Jordan Koulibagh, and I am our class’s All-Star Golfer. Is that good enough? I’m sorry, you never ask me to be in your movies, so I don’t know exactly what I’m doing.

“What else did you want? How has Success Summit changed my life. Well… I used to be pretty alone. I’m proud of my extraordinary gift, but it used to feel like a curse. I felt like I was a circus freak; come see the girl who has defied all odds and become an exceptional black, female golfer. But that was such an insidious thought. Some of my classmates have so much more tragic stories than me; I was drowning in my own self-misery. I used to hate people for being so well put-together, but I realize now that no one’s perfect, that we’re all broken, but that brokenness is something we have in common, and so it gives us something to bond over.

“Is that what you wanted? I can do it over if you like, I have the time. Alright, I’ll send the next person in. Maybe you’ll actually think about putting me in one of your films now.”

The screen turned black, but before the students had a chance to react, Monobear ejected the tape and smacked another right in its place. The screen flickered for a second, and then Rufus was sitting in the chair on the other side. He was smirking haughtily; it was in his nature to enjoy the attention.

“First off, let me say that it is not only an honor to be acknowledged for my talent by such a
prestigious school like Success Summit, but that it is beyond magnificent that the essence of my character shall be preserved in film for posterity. I can already see the future generations watching this video and feeling inspiration surging through them.

“I suppose it is only proper that I introduce myself. Salve, mihi nomen Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist. Elizabeth may have a firm understanding of the past, but when it comes to Classics Studies, no one is my superior. Whenever some ancient text needs to be translated, I’m the one consulted.

“Has Success Summit changed my life? What an idiotic question. Of course it has. This school is known for changing lives! I already had the academic portions under my belt, so I suppose this school has aided me in developing my social expertise. Yes, my classmates will prove to be invaluable business connections in the future, but the friendships we’ve forged are real and will remain stronger than even the tightest business contracts.”

It seemed that some videos revealed facets of the students’ personalities which they had kept hidden; others, not so much. Nevertheless, the students were taken aback and unnerved to have had to sit through Rufus’s video. Monobear was laughing at the paralysis of their shocked faces.

Naturally, Rico was the first to react. “Yo-o! Monobear, what’s with the video? Why’d we watch that?” Monobear just continued to giggle. Rico looked at the others; they looked as distraught as he felt. “Stop laughing! This isn’t some kind of game! What the heck’s going on?”

Monobear placed his paws at his sides and spoke calmly and flatly. “A game? This is not a game. This is your lives we’re talking about. It would be insulting to call this a game.”

Taylor wasn’t having any of Monobear’s shenanigans. “Then what’s the big idea? Why’d you show us Rufus’s movie?”

“Upupu…you’re supposed to be the clever ones. Can’t you figure it out yourselves?”

The feeling of courage was spreading in the air, and Jenny was weak to the contagion. “We watch the videos for whoever did not make it through the last trial. Jordan fulfilled the roles of victim and killer, so her video alone should have been shown.”

“You’re dancing around the truth. C’mon, just say it.”

Lily pouted defiantly and stared Monobear straight in the cold, metallic eye. “There was no body and no trial, so it’s not right to make us watch that movie. I’m going to forget everything I just saw, desu.”

“As if that’s even possible! Upu, you know you want to say it!”

Austin wanted to move on, but he didn’t want to indulge Monobear. The longer they could drag this out, the more agitated they could make the bear. “Well, yawn, if we look at the evidence collected from all the other trials, sigh, and back that up against our own experiences, yawn, a pattern starts to emerge that would seem to suggest that, well, in a manner of speaking, collectively, sigh, the end result—”

“You rodents are the absolute worst! I’ve got better things to do today than waste my time listening to your insistent prattle. Priorities, people! So here’s the truth that none of you will admit: the Rufus Price you know and love is no more. Upupupu! Upupupu!”

Rico fell to his knees instantaneously. “No-o…”
“What the hell’s your issue?” shouted Taylor. “You talk such a big game about how spectacular you are, but you can’t even save a kid from a stab wound! Where do you get off acting so high and mighty?”

Jenny was ready to back Taylor up. “You should be ashamed of yourself. If you can’t guarantee our safety, then why are you in a position of power? You’re, umm, pathetic.”

Lily knelt down to console Rico, but she still had words for the bear. “You were supposed to take care of him, desu! You’re a bad, bad bear. I’m not listening to you anymore!”

Austin was just as riled up as the others. “This is a new low, even for you.”

Monobear continued to laugh at the students’ misery. Every chance he could, he would make sure to exploit their potential for despair.
“Ecce, you guys started the party without me?”

At the sound of the voice, Rico lifted his head up. Staggering in the entrance of the Video Store was Rufus Price himself, a goofy grin on his face. Rico leapt to his feet and rushed the Latinist in a tight embrace, tears shamelessly flowing down his face.

Rufus winced from Rico putting pressure on his wound, but he didn’t want to disturb his friend. “Hey, you don’t have to cry, I’m not mad. I was only joking about you guys starting without me.”

“Dude, I thought you were dead!”

The other four students ran toward the Latinist. Their sense of release was not as great as Rico’s, but they were still relieved. Taylor was able to snap out of the reverie first and turn her attention back to Monobear. “Seriously? What is the matter with you? You said he was dead!”

“Upu, upupupu! I said ‘the Rufus you knew and loved is no more.’ Past tense. Allow me to present the new and improved Rufus!”

Jenny looked over Rufus, but he did not seem any different. There may have been a brighter light behind his eyes, but nothing more. “New and improved? How do you mean?”

Rufus chuckled. “Hey, everything’s fine. Monobear did his stuff and now he’s put me on these wicked antibiotics and pain killers.”

Lily’s eyes sparkled. “So you’re super daijoubu? Yatta!”

Even Austin felt the excitement. “I like this Rufus. I think this’ll work out well.”

“Hey, stop ignoring me!” called out Monobear. “I’m not done yet! I’ve got my own business to attend to, and that business involves you! So listen up! Since it’s been taking so long for you ingrates to act on my incentives, I’m giving you your next one right now. This is a new one for me, but I think it’s a good one. It’s also a bit complicated, so hold on. Since you’re all so attached to each other, I’ll ease up a bit on the graduation rules. If you can get away with a murder, I’ll let you take one of your friends with you when you leave, so you can guarantee that you and your best friend both get out of here. But that makes it too easy for accomplices to happen, so whoever you plan on taking with you, that person can’t know at all that you were the killer. How’s that one sound for you? Despair-inducing, right? Upupu…I can already see how the despair is going to grip you.”

“No!” Rico shouted, finally letting go of Rufus. “No. I refuse. No more. I’m not playing your stupid game anymore. I’m not giving in to despair, and I’m not killing any of my friends.”

Monobear’s sunny disposition faded. “Is that so?”

Taylor stepped forward. “Yeah! I’ve had enough of this lame Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. I’m not doing anything until you let me out of here!”

Jenny nodded in agreement. “I do not wish to continue in this way any longer, either. I’m done with these crazy rules.”
Lily struck a pose and pointed a finger at the bear. “I already stopped listening to you, but if I didn’t, then I’d also tell you how I’m not going to partake anymore.”

Austin shrugged his shoulders and yawned. “Yeah, this whole thing is really old hat now. I’m up for something new.”

For the first time since their imprisonment, Rufus looked confused. “It might be the drugs, but I’m not really sure what’s going on. Either way, it sounds like fun, so count me in.”

“Upu…I was afraid of this…six is a strange number…so you all wish to be done with the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing?” There was resounding chorus in the affirmation. “Upu…I suspected as much would happen…alright, I’ll concede. You win. No more Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing.”

Jenny could hardly believe that Monobear would admit to such a thing. “Do you really mean it?”

“I’m a bear of my word. I’ll end the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing, but only on one condition. If you face me in a Final Trial of Ultimate Despair and can make it through said trial, then I will let you all go free.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Rico yelled out, “Agreed.”

“You brats are so impetuous! You don’t even know what you’re agreeing to yet! Here’s the deal with the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair: either you all make it out alive, or none of you do. Interpret that how you see fit. If you want to go through with this, just know that once the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair starts, it can’t be stopped. I can’t let you be getting cold feet. This one will be for all the marbles. It’ll be a test that will shake you to the core. So, do we really have a deal? Remember, your alternative is to stay here and live in the Mall of Monomerica with all its lovely amenities provided just for you.”

Austin tilted his head to the side. “What kind of trial will this Final Trial of Ultimate Despair be? If no one’s going to die, then what we would be discussing?”

“Well, if you have to know, I’ll be your adversary this time around instead of your usual murderer. If you can answer all my questions satisfactorily, then you’ll win. But if you err even once, then it’s game over!”

“Wh-what kind of questions?” asked Lily.

“It’ll be a test! Teachers don’t tell you the questions before a test! You have to study beforehand and prepare for any possibility! Don’t you know anything?”

“Where are we supposed to get our study material then?” probed Rico.

“Hmm…good question…aah, I’ve got it! New rule, just for tonight! At ten o’clock, when Night Time starts, you miscreants are to be in your rooms, and you are not to leave. I’ll place all your evidence around the mall tonight, and tomorrow you’ll have to go around and find it all! So you’ll investigate and gather information all day tomorrow, and then we’ll hold the trial at noon on the day after that. Does that work to your satisfaction?”

The students looked at each other to gauge each other’s feelings. After a moment, Taylor looked at Monobear and stated, “I speak for all of us when I say that we accept your offer for the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair.”
“Upu, upupupu! Very well then! Your fates are sealed! Upupu…I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me, and so do you. Enjoy what little stress-free time you have left!” In a flash, Monobear bounced out of the Video Store and sped away.

At long last, salvation was at the students’ fingertips. They had been through countless ordeals and tribulations, and now they could combine their strength and leave this accursed mall. As anxious as they were to leave this place once and for all, the reality of the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair unnerved them. Monobear would undoubtedly pull every trick in the book to cause them to lose; besting him would not be an easy feat. The future was no longer uncertain: they would either leave or share the fates of their friends.

Time dragged on for the rest of the day. Each student constantly had to fight off those itches of despair-inducing thoughts. What if one of them didn’t do well enough? What if they lost because of one person? What if they were that one person? And every now and then, thoughts would linger back to the identity of the Liar. During crunch time, would the All-Star Despair betray their classmates and throw the trial?

Anxiety permeated the mall, and the students felt thoroughly weighed down. Despite having the most elaborate spread yet, the students merely picked at their dinners. With the naturally high stress levels of the following day, this would be their last potentially enjoyable meal together, but the feast was far from joyous.

The students continued to sit around after they had finished eating, not wanting to leave each other’s company. During this lull, Austin propped his elbow on the table and rested his head in his hand. As he started to drift off, he threw off the delicate balance and slid forward. The jostle was enough to keep him from sinking back into slumber.

Austin: “Yawn, you guys are being so noisy. How do you expect me to get any shut-eye around here with all this raucous?”

Jenny: “I-m sorry; I will try to keep it down.”

Taylor: “He was being facetious.”

Rufus: “Heh, ‘facetious.’ That’s a funny word.”

Lily: “You know what else is a funny word? ‘Ubiquitous!’ Doesn’t that sound so silly, desu?”

Rufus: “Ha ha, I like that one too.”

Rico: “Yo-o, just how strong are those drugs?”

Rufus: “Pfbth. Like, pretty strong.”

Jenny: “Are we sure that Rufus will be okay? He is acting rather…strange.”

Austin: “I think I like the new Rufus.”

Taylor: “Yeah, he’s a lot more agreeable now. Someone should have stabbed him a long time ago.”

Rico: “Yo-o, don’t say things like that.”

Taylor: “Sorry, it just kind of came out.”
Lily: “I get where you’re coming from though, and I don’t think you meant anything bad by it.”

Taylor: “Thanks, Lily.”

Austin: “Yawn! Guys, stop acting so crazy.”

Jenny: “Austin, I am trying.”

Taylor: “He’s still being facetious, Jenny.”

Rufus: “Heh heh.”

Taylor: “And can you really blame us, Austie? We’ve all got a lot on our plates at the moment.”

Rico: “Tomorrow’s going to be something else…”

Lily: “To be honest, I’m kind of scared…”

Jenny: “We’ve been through a lot. I think that we will pull through somehow.”

Rufus: “Pshh, we’ll be fine.”

Taylor: “Yeah…tomorrow will be…something…”

Austin: “Then why, sigh, are we so bummed out right now?”

Taylor: “Because—were you not listening just now?”

Austin: “Yeah, tomorrow will be interesting, and so will the day after that, but that’s like way in the future, so why are we worrying about it now?”

Jenny: “What else are we to think about?”

Austin: “I don’t know. Trains? Grapes? The Fourteenth Century? Anything works really. Do you guys really want me to fall asleep?”

Lily: “I know! We can talk about anime, desu!”

Taylor: “Let me stop you right there. I’m not spending my last dinner talking about cartoons.”

Lily: “See, that’s why we need to talk about it. You see, anime isn’t just cartoons, it’s so much more.”

Jenny: “If it’s alright with everyone else, we could always talk about some movies. For instance, we could discuss what the best romantic comedy is.”

Rufus: “Hey, here’s an idea: why don’t we conjugate some verbs? Fallō, fallere, fefelli, falsum.”

Rico: “I think I speak for us all when I veto that particular suggestion. Maybe we should all hang in the gym?”

Austin: “Or how about we talk about what we’ll do when we get out of here in two days?”

Taylor: “Wow, I hadn’t even thought about what I’m going to do first. I’ll probably rip these old clothes to shreds and pull something else from my closet.”

Jenny: “It would be nice to return to a proper kitchen, I suppose.”
Rico: “After all this time, you want to go back to work? That’s about the last thing I want to do.”

Rufus: “I might look at the clouds for a little bit.”

Lily: “You can already do that here, though. The skylight’s big enough, desu.”

Rufus: “I suppose, but I’d really like to watch them while lying on a grassy knoll. Maybe a slight breeze in the air.”

Jenny: “Oh, that does sound rather lovely.”

Rufus: “You can join me, if you want. Why doesn’t everyone come? We can have one big cloud-watching party together.”

Lily: “Eeeeee! That sound so sugoi!”

Taylor: “What about you, Rico? What are you going to do?”

Rico: “Well…I’ll probably go back home and tell my family how much I’ve missed them.”

Austin: “Oh…that’s right…we’ll get to go home…”

Taylor: “We’ll all get to go home.”

Lily: “Nani? Why does everyone look so sad?”

Jenny: “Lily…we won’t see each other after we leave, will we?”

Lily: “What? Of course we will! We’re friends! Why wouldn’t we see each other?”

Austin: “We all live pretty far away from one another, don’t we?”

Taylor: “California…”

Rico: “New Mexico…”

Rufus: “Massachusetts…”

Jenny: “D.C…”

Austin: “Ohio…”

Lily: “And I…I live in Nebraska. But…but we have to see each other, right? We’ve been through so much together! I don’t know what I’ll do if I can’t see you guys all the time. I love you guys like you’re my family, desu!”

Taylor: “I think we all feel the same way, but I’d really like to go home.”

Jenny: “Safety and security is difficult to disregard…”

Rico: “It really doesn’t make sense for us to stay together once we get out…”

Rufus: “That doesn’t mean we can’t try. There’s not a lot of money in the Latin trade, but between the six of us, we could probably scrounge up enough for a road trip or two.”

Jenny: “Yes, we can regularly meet for reunions.”
Austin: “Not to mention that some of our friends were kind of big deals. Elizabeth’s family might be able to help us out, and I’m sure Hollywood will want to know what happened to James.”

Lily: “Maybe they’ll make a movie about us! How sugoi would that be!?!?”

Jenny: “I’ve never acted before. I’d be so nervous.”

Austin: “You wouldn’t have to worry about anything; they’d find an actor to play you for you.”

Lily: “Not me! I’m going to act the whole thing by myself.”

Taylor: “This has to be a thing, right? Naturally, I’ll be the star. I’ll be on every runway and I’ll be invited to every talk show. To speak about how brave we all are, of course.”

Austin: “Of course.”

Rufus: “Lily will probably get a series of spin-offs and maybe even her own game show.”

Lily: “It’ll be like the Kawaii Olympics all over again. Except better!”

Jenny: “I won’t be relinquishing my title of Ultra Kawaii so easily, I’ll have you know.”

Rico: “Yo-o! I would watch that every night with my family.”

Taylor: “Omigosh we’re going to be big, aren’t we? I hate to say it like this, but we have been through hell. God-damnit, we are strong people. I’m proud of us.”

Rufus: “We are All-Stars for a reason.”

Austin: “So why are we so worried about what’s going to happen tomorrow and the next day? We’ll get through it just like we’ve gotten through everything else, and then we’ll have the rest of our lives ahead of us.”

Rico: “Yeah, we don’t have nothing to worry about! We’re going to show that Monobear who’s boss!”

Taylor: “The hell we are!”

Lily: “Go! Fight! Win!”

Jenny: “I think that we will be victorious.”

Rufus: “‘Facetious’ really is a funny word.”

Austin: “Well, yawn, it’ll be Night Time before we know it, so why don’t we get to bed early? We should be energized to tackle tomorrow.”

Taylor: “Agreed. We got this people, we got this.”
Abnormal Days

In the darkness that night, a lone figure flitted from store to store, depositing the material which endangered its very existence. By doing this, it was arming its enemies with its Kryptonite. This person was setting the stage for the battle that would end the war that had already claimed so many lives. They didn’t have to concede to the students’ desire, but for the sake of despair, this singular entity was willing to risk it all.

The dawn of the twenty-fourth day broke.

The six remaining students met once more in the food court for breakfast. After a quick meal, they decided upon their plan of attack. To maximize their efficiency, they would split into three groups of two and investigate the various stores in that way. They couldn’t divide the number of stores equally by three, so they divvied up all the stores excluding the Video Store; one thing they all wanted to do was rewatch Monobear’s movies. The students would explore half the mall, reconvene for lunch, explore the last half, meet once more for dinner, and then try to make any more sense out of the Video Store. There was little deliberation over who would partner with whom, so the three teams set off to figure out all that they could.

Lily and Jenny began their search in the South Sector’s General Store. The General Store had helped provide all the basic necessities for them during their stay—as well as aiding the murderers in their designs. As more and more shops had opened, there was less of a need for the General Store. Toothpaste could be obtained from the Pharmacy, clothing from either the Department Store or Jewelry Store, and entertainment from a whole slew of places.

The girls expected to have to turn the store upside-down in order to find the evidence they would need in whatever form it would take, but they were mistaken. On the cashier’s counter was a pile of sixteen blue folders. It certainly looked like a clue to Lily and Jenny. They divided the folders between the two of them and began to search the contents of said folders; Lily took the first half and Jenny the second.

Jenny opened up her first folder and was surprised to see a picture of Austin staring at her. She briefly scanned the documents and then began reading them in earnest. The first document consisted of a series of checked boxes correlating to some term. Jenny could venture a guess what “Short Term Memory” could allude to, but ones like “Cognitive Spatial Recognition” stumped her. If the Sandwich Artist had to guess, it appeared that Austin had undergone a variety of tests for some reason. She kept reading to see if she could find what that reason was.

Lily opened up her first folder and was surprised to see a picture of Austin staring at her. She briefly scanned the documents and then began reading them in earnest. The first document consisted of a series of checked boxes correlating to some term. Jenny could venture a guess what “Short Term Memory” could allude to, but ones like “Cognitive Spatial Recognition” stumped her. If the Sandwich Artist had to guess, it appeared that Austin had undergone a variety of tests for some reason. She kept reading to see if she could find what that reason was.

Lily opened her first folder to see Markus’s picture. His folder also began with a checked list. Almost none of the words made sense to Lily, so she started to flip through the other folders. Under Markus’s was Elizabeth’s, and her documents started the same way with that strange checklist. James had the checklist, and so did Cody, and so did Theo. Every student in the pile had the same first sheet, but the amount of other documents seemed to vary. Markus’s folder was very
fat, but Rico’s was pretty bare.

Jenny’s brain was already starting to hurt trying to read through Austin’s other documents. The pages were typed and clear enough to read, but the jargon in them was beyond Jenny’s comprehension; it was like when she first started to learn English. Every now and then she could parse a phrase together, but not often. “Subject is not easily distracted.” “Subject may be predisposed to narcolepsy.” “Dearth of testosterone in subject’s system may account for lack of aggression in stressful situations.” The documents continued on in this fashion until the last page. The final page consisted of a single sentence: “Conclusion: Subject’s psyche is suitable for erasure.” Underneath the sentence was an incredibly messy signature. Jenny squinted her eyes and tilted her head, but she could not make out what letters comprised that signature.

Time was of the essence, so Lily was not able to thoroughly examine each file; instead, she scanned all the documents for any choice phrases she could find. “Schizophrenia” appeared frequently in Markus’s folder, and Lily couldn’t help but giggle when she read “advanced narcissism” in Elizabeth’s. There were a few paragraphs in James’s case related to the trauma of his sister’s suicide and how it impacted him. Lily started reading about Theo’s one infamous expedition, but it was too painful for her to keep reading. Melissa’s file recounted how she had fared after every campaign she had been in; she had lost a fair number of elections, but that never deterred her from her dreams. For some reason, Rico’s file spent a large portion of time discussing his spot in his family. It wasn’t until her last folder that Lily found something that confused her: “Social Anxiety” had been boldfaced and underlined in Taylor’s file.

The girls had each read through their respective stacks, so they swapped piles to see what all they could. To Jenny, every folder was almost the same. That same checklist, some dense commentary, and then that one sentence. With the exception of Markus, that final phrase was printed verbatim on the last page, followed closely by that mysterious signature. The ending of Markus’s differed only slightly; his read “Subject’s psyche is most likely suitable for erasure.” It certainly was like Markus to be different.

Lily started in on Jenny’s stack of folders, and she was anxious to see what her own folder would say. “Depression” featured prominently in Austin’s folder, and “Anger issues” in Jordan’s. After Markus, Randolph probably had the second thickest folder since a large portion of his documents dealt with his interaction with the Zerostri order. Delilah’s file focused on her various make-up styles, but the results of that study did not seem to lead anywhere productive. While “Altruism” permeated Francesca’s file, “Superiority Complex” filled Rufus’s. Lily thought her own file would be interesting to read, but it talked in explicit detail about *kawaii* culture. The file mostly bored Lily since she was already an expert on *kawaii* culture, but at least her psyche was suitable for erasure like everyone else’s. The Kawaii thought it was slightly inappropriate to read Jenny’s file in front of her, but there wasn’t time left for decencies. There was nothing any more interesting in the Sandwich Artist’s folder than in the others, except her special term was the same as Taylor’s.

There was a lot of information hidden in the documents, but the girls couldn’t waste all day in the General Store. Lily and Jenny packed up the folders and headed off for the next store; there would be time for analysis later.

While Lily and Jenny were in the General Store, Austin and Taylor ventured to the Lounge. Whenever things got too stressful in the mall, the Lounge was the ideal place to escape from the harsh negativity. Amidst the endless chaos, it maintained a soft, relaxing spot. Until the Furniture Store offered some variety, Austin found himself spending a lot of time in the Lounge since it
contained the most comfortable furniture—excepting his bed, of course. Taylor saw much less use of the Lounge; it was perfect for relaxing, but she couldn’t tan there, and there was very little else for her to focus her mind on to keep her entertained.

Like the girls, Austin and Taylor expected to have to search every nook and cranny, but the object of their desire lay on the floor in the center of the Lounge. Instead of piles of folders, there was a single document lying on the ground. The paper was fringed on the one side as if it had been torn out of a greater book. Austin picked up the page, and Taylor bent over his shoulder to see it.

It was a photograph of the sixteen students. Some were smiling, while some seemed distracted, but they were all angled toward a uniform focal point. Starting at the left of the photo, Elizabeth was playing with her hair, trying to act aloof. Jenny, looking very uncomfortable, stood next to the Historian, and Lily was by the Sandwich Artist’s side to comfort her. Next to Lily, Taylor was showing off her gorgeous smile, and Austin next to her had been caught mid-yawn. Randolph appeared to be meditating in front of Austin and Taylor, and Rico was stretched out foremost at the bottom of the picture, winking and sporting a finger gun. Delilah was closest to the center, and she was showing off her endowment by leaning over James’s shoulder. The Movie Producer had his arms crossed and did not appear to be enjoying the event, while Melissa on his other side was waving amicably toward the focal point. Markus was situated behind Delilah and James, and Francesca behind James and Melissa; both were smiling pleasantly. Jordan wore a faint smile next to Melissa, and Rufus seemed busy contemplating something behind the two girls. Theo stood at the far right, grinning awkwardly, while Cody was behind him and Jordan, tongue out and the index and pinky finger of his left hand raised.

If Austin had to venture a guess, he’d say that this was their class photo. It was very surreal to see everyone’s faces together again, and—for the most part—to see them in bright spirits. Regardless of what anyone said, they had been a class, not just sixteen strangers brought together.

At Taylor’s urging, Austin flipped the paper over. The backside had been intentionally left blank, but it had then been covered with the signatures of the sixteen students. Rufus, Elizabeth, Markus, and James had the largest, most flamboyant signatures, while Jenny, Francesca, and Jordan had the most humble. Randolph, Austin, and Melissa were tied for the neatest signature, while Cody’s and Rico’s could only be deduced by process of elimination from the other signatures. Lily’s signature had been drawn in gel pen and was flourished with numerous hearts and flowers, whereas Taylor only managed to incorporate one heart into hers. Theo’s signature was very professionally written; in contrast, Delilah’s was highly stylized.

It was weird to Taylor to see her own handwriting. There was no mistaking that she had signed her name on the back of this photo; otherwise, someone was incredibly skilled at Photoshop. The Lucky didn’t remember signing such a thing, but there were probably many things she didn’t remember. Taylor had Austin flip the photo back to the front; something had bothered her about it at first glance, but now she could put her finger on it: each student in the photo was wearing the clothes that had been provided for them in the mall. How long had Taylor been wearing the same outfit? The second they were out of the mall, she would have to burn her pink top.

Austin was caught up on the fringe of the paper. It was so uneven; clearly, the page had not been intended to be removed. Monobear said he was going to give them the clues they’d need, so why just this one page? Why didn’t the bear give them the book or folder from which the photo came? It would have been nice to sit and contemplate these aspects of the class photo, but there were other stores that needed investigating.
Rico took Rufus with him to the Laundromat. Rufus seemed to be much more chill now, but Rico wasn’t sure if he liked that. Relaxed Rufus was fun to be around, but with the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair quickly approaching, it would be advantageous to have Analytical Rufus on their side. Thankfully, Rico wouldn’t need Rufus’s keen wit to locate their offered evidence since the clues were hidden in plain sight.

The Laundromat had been one of the most realistically functional “stores” in the mall. No natural mall would waste space with a Laundromat, but the “shop” had been used quite frequently. Students like Taylor and Rufus were meticulous with their clothing, so they often frequented the spot, but others like Rico and Cody were almost never there. Aside from laundry, the Laundromat seemed to possess a calming aura like the Lounge, providing another quiet space if one needed it. During this investigation period, one thing had been added to the Laundromat’s décor: a large blueprint had been taped to one of the walls.

Neither Rufus nor Rico had any mechanical drawing or drafting experience, but the blueprint was simple enough to make out. The plus-sign set-up of the mall was almost instantly recognizable. The blueprint accounted for every shop in every sector, and there was a section off to the side dedicated to the arrangement of the dorm rooms. Everything had been labeled meticulously; a grand amount of detail had gone into the drawing.

In addition to the material layout, the different sectors were numbered. The South Sector was labeled first, then the North Sector, and then the East and West respectively. The Auditorium, Department Store, and Garden were all numbered with fives. Rufus thought that that numbering system was special. He usually didn’t spend much time with numbers outside of deciding whether a word was singular or plural, but the numbers seemed queer to the Latinist. They seemed to correspond to the order in which the parts of the mall opened up, which is a strange thing to put on a blueprint.

Rico was more concerned with what the blueprint didn’t contain. The Marathon Runner had been to the trial room five times, and he had witnessed the atrocities of the execution chamber four times, but these places appeared nowhere on the blueprint. There was no indication that the fountain itself even retracted into the basement.

Upon closer inspection, Rico started to notice little variations in the connecting lines of the blueprint. The outline of the plus was solidly constructed, but the outlines of the individual shops seemed to have been altered ever so slightly. The Marathon Runner wished he’d had more experience with mechanical drawing, but it seemed that the shop names had been edited from what was originally printed. For a professional blueprint, any editing should have been finalized well-before the final design was submitted, so there shouldn’t have been even the semblance of a change. Hopefully they would have more time to think about why the layout would have needed to be altered, because they still had a loaded schedule ahead of them.

As the girls entered the Salon for the last possible time, Lily couldn’t help wondering when the last time she had gotten her hair cut was. She had been growing it for so long that she had completely lost track of how much time had actually passed. Jenny, on the other hand, was starting to feel the effects of a prolonged time without a trimming. She never put much stock in the length of her hair, except for when she could no longer control it underneath her hat; she had to be able to keep it under her hat for sanitation purposes.

After Francesca’s murder, the Salon had become a cursed spot in the mall. After only being in the mall for three and some weeks, none of the students was in desperate need of a haircut, so
there wasn’t much of a demand for the parlor. Even if the students needed the Salon in a bad way, going to the establishment would conjure up too many bad memories for their liking.

In his ironic fashion, Monobear placed the evidence intended for the students on the chair in which Francesca had passed away. The girls were thankful that they didn’t have to sift through another large stack of folders: their clue this time was a small packet of papers stapled together. Lily’s heart leapt when she first looked at it, for she recognized the characters on the top page: the document was written in Japanese! The entire packet was written in the foreign language, and it seemed to be a report of some kind. Lily had left her dictionary in her room, otherwise she would have set about instantly to translating.

Luckily for Jenny, someone had already gone to the trouble of translating the documents, or at least they had translated the important parts and written their notes in the margins. Underneath the title at the top, the mysterious translator had written “School Life of Mutual Killing.” In the beginning, Monobear had told them that they were locked in the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing. With his flair for naming pointless things, Jenny was sure that there had to be some sort of connection.

After Jenny pointed out the notes in the margins, Lily tried to piece the document together. The notes jumped around and held very little consistency. “Fifteen All-Star Students in Hope’s Peak Academy.” “Graduation requirements.” “All-Star Despair Mastermind.” Lily thought she had encountered the phrase “All-Star Despair” before: the document Rufus had her translate forever ago. But she hadn’t read anything that even remotely looked like the word “Mastermind.” Was the Liar still up to something?

After reading through all the pages, Jenny thought she had a rudimentary understanding of what information the packet held. It seemed that sixteen Japanese students, under the guise of there being only fifteen, were trapped inside a school and forced to play the mutual killing game. They initially took refuge in the school after something with a silly name had occurred. The note called it the “Worst, Most Despair-Inducing Event in the History of Mankind”, but that was such a mouthful. After five trials, six students remained, and they challenged the “Mastermind” to a final trial. After exposing the Mastermind or All-Star Despair or whoever they were, the six students were allowed to leave their prison of a school. The story tugged at Jenny’s heart because it was so similar to her and her classmates’ current struggle. There were six of them, so surely they would all make it out alive as well.

With Jenny and Lily covering the Salon, Taylor and Austin left the South Sector and headed for the North Sector. They began the next round of their searches in the Pharmacy. The South Sector was the first that the students had ever come to know, and so it was a logical progression to venture to the North Sector, even though it felt like they were leaving something behind. Austin and Taylor hadn’t had the time to investigate every part of the South Sector, and so they had to have faith that their friends would pull through and discover all that needed to be discovered.

The use of the Pharmacy fluctuated; sometimes it was an incredibly useful refuge, and other times it sat empty for days on end. The uses varied as well, from Randolph gathering his deadly toxins to Rufus patching himself back up. The designers of the mall probably never anticipated these types of events to happen.

The Lucky and Idle quickly found what they were looking for. Compared to the single photograph they had been given before, the stack of folders in front of them was daunting. Neither
was averse to reading, but they were concerned with missing something crucial and losing the trial on account of it. Time was of the essence, so they delved right into it.

Austin took one pile, while Taylor took the other. Austin opened up his first folder to find Markus’s transcripts. It felt dirty to be reading one of his classmates’ grades, but Austin just thought YOLO and soldiered on. Markus excelled in drama, art, and music classes, but he was by no means failing his others. His class schedule was mostly filled with creative classes; he wasn’t wasting his time with classes that would never be relevant to his future.

Austin wanted to describe the following page as a medical form, but it contained far more than medical information. Height: six foot, one and one half inches. Weight: 129 pounds. Eye color: blue. Hair color: brown. Eyesight: 15-15. Allergies: none. Phobias: None. The list went on and on and contained everything from shoe size to bust size. There was a lot of information to absorb hidden in the documents, and Austin wondered just how much of it would be relevant.

The information of the other folders was all in the same vein. Elizabeth took more history classes than anyone else, and James’s schedule was strikingly similar to Markus’s. Along with two Physical Education classes, Cody was doing well in Calc II and Organic Chemistry. Theo and Melissa focused on social studies classes, he with an emphasis on culture and geography, she with law and ethics. Rico matched Cody with physical classes, but the rest of his studies were pretty general. Out of all her classes, Taylor ironically did the worst in Statistics and Probability.

Taylor didn’t like what the folders held. They had already determined that there had been a large amount of time in between the filming of the videos and their imprisonment, but the documents didn’t indicate anything of the sort. There was one year’s worth of transcripts in the folder; could things have gone so wrong in just one year? Maybe Austin’s pile of folders held more answers.

Austin swapped piles with Taylor and continued reading. The Idle himself had a very relaxed schedule; his toughest class appeared to be either Psychology or Home Economics. Like Cody and Rico, Jordan had a fair number of physical classes, most notably courses in Archery and Martial Arts. While Randolph was understandably taking Theology classes, Delilah took Cosmetology courses. Francesca had a wide range of courses under her belt, but she seemed to be taking a fair amount of English writing classes. Rufus’s transcript was littered with high marks, especially in his advanced Latin courses. Lily’s focus seemed to lie in foreign culture studies; Jenny’s curriculum consisted of general education classes.

As interesting as the transcripts were, none of the information was very surprising. The medical forms, likewise, offered rather mundane facts. The heights and weights made sense, as did the hair colors and eye colors. Delilah had the largest bust, but nothing else stood out from the folders. Even if the information wasn’t interesting to the students, it had been interesting to someone at some point, otherwise it never would have been collected in the first place.
Rufus and Rico followed Austin and Taylor to the North Sector, but they progressed to the Bookstore. Rico hadn’t made much use of the Bookstore, but it had practically become a second home to the Latinist. Rufus wasn’t as extroverted as some of his classmates, and so he could always retire to the Bookstore and find company with the words of past authors. As large as the mall had become, it was easy to get lost in the enormity of the situation, but the books provided a warm home to return to.

Besides Rufus, Jordan occasionally perused the store’s wares, but she had been one of the few. The Bookstore was never a lively place, but that didn’t absolve it from the troubles of the mall. The Salon had been cursed from Francesca’s death, but the Bookstore had initiated the hunt for All-Star Despair. The list of talents one day magically appeared, and anxiety over the Liar’s identity grew to an all-time high. Nothing happened in this mall by chance, though; Monobear would surely continue to treat them with despair-inducing morsels of information.

Rico and Rufus found their second set of blueprints placed on Rufus’s favorite reading chair. These blueprints did not resemble the ones from the Laundromat in the slightest, though; these were for a different building. The first page informed them that these were the building specs for Success Summit. The school consisted of five stories, a large dormitory area off to the side, and numerous specialized classrooms. Rico tried to picture in his head what the building must look like based on the blueprint’s design, but he couldn’t come up with a realistic image.

Rufus was more interested in the markings on the Success Summit blueprints. The Mall’s specs had been pristine and clean, but someone had drawn on these ones. Certain rooms were crossed out in red, and numerous parts of the walls were circled or had arrows pointing at them. In addition, there was another numbering system, but it wasn’t organized into sections or sectors. Arrows leading into the school from the ground floor entrance were marked first, and from there five separate paths were labeled.

Rico noticed the paths as well. Following the markings, the first path led to the principal’s office on the top floor, while the other four paths went to a certain classroom, one on each floor. The paths didn’t progress much farther, for they all seemed to turn around and reconvene at the ground floor entrance.

Now that he had his second set of blueprints, Rico started to wonder how Monobear had gotten his hands on these goods in the first place. It was certainly possible that there were public records of the buildings filed away in some municipal office, but why had one been marred like this? It only made sense that Monobear was complicit in marking this blueprint, but what was his intention in this case? The Marathon Runner had a bad feeling that he should have taken more mechanical drawing classes in school.
the North Sector with them heading to the Hobby Shop. Neither Lily nor Jenny had frequented this particular establishment, and they couldn’t think of anyone who actually had. It was a nice enough shop, but it was very interest-based, and the diversity of the students’ interests just seemed to leave it excluded.

Lily and Jenny anticipated having to pour through more reading material, but their next clue was of a different sort. With a spot cleared away for it on one of the shelves, the girls found a set of blueprints. Neither had seen professional depictions of buildings before, but the schematics seemed straightforward enough. The most puzzling aspect of the specs was that they were for a completely unfamiliar place. The title on the top of the first page said that they were for Camp Monomono, but that name was foreign to the Kawaii and Sandwich Artist.

They studied the layout of the camp. There were two buildings set aside for sleeping, a boys’ cabin and a girls’ cabin. It didn’t appear that the showering area was directly connected to the sleeping cabins. Not far from the cabins was one grand dining hall, both not too far from a large fire pit. In this same vicinity was an administration building and nurse’s station.

The most interesting aspect of the campgrounds’ layout was that the entire area seemed to be enclosed by an electric fence. Not only did the fence encircle the entire camping area, but it divided the camping area into separate areas, each labeled with different numbers. The cabins and surrounding buildings were in the first area; notably, there was a large lake in the second area, a grassy hill in the third, a forested region in the fourth, and a lush meadow in the last.

Lily equated her normal living conditions to camping since most of the time she and her brothers had to fend for themselves, but she didn’t like the idea of staying somewhere named Camp Monomono. Jenny had her own reservations about the outdoors; she wasn’t too fond of having to share space with a wide variety of insects. In any case, it was weird for the layout of a camping area to be in a mall. If Monobear had a reason for this being here, it was currently lost to the girls. They hoped he was being sincere with his clues, but they wouldn’t put it past the megalomaniac to throw some red herrings into the mix.

Taylor was apprehensive to return to the Department Store after all the grief it had caused her, but Austin encouraged her to move forward. Since the students all agreed to revisit the Video Store later, the Department Store was the last place left unchecked in the North Sector. The Lucky took a deep breath and followed the Idle into the store.

On paper, the Department Store probably made a lot of sense, but in practice, it was eerie. The mannequins sporting the clothes of their deceased friends was off-putting. If it had sported different outfits for the students, then it may have come off as a normal place, but when had Monobear ever let anything “normal” happen in the mall? What little variety it had offered only served for practicality, and so the entire space had been practically useless. That didn’t stop it from being host to the death of one of their friends.

The ground floor was bare of any clues. After having the first two handed to them, Austin and Taylor were sure that they wouldn’t have to look hard, and Taylor was almost certain she knew where Monobear would place it. They ascended to the second floor, and tacked to the door of the changing room that had caused them all so much pain was a set of blueprints. First they had found a photograph, then a series of files, and now a blueprint; Monobear certainly held variety in what he considered to be evidence.

The title at the top of the first page told them that they were looking at the specs for Success Summit. The name was all too familiar to the duo, and it was surreal to see something
referencing the school. According to the blueprint, the school had five floors and was attached to a large dormitory area. The dorms themselves seemed to be four stories tall.

The school didn’t resemble a normal academy, mostly because there was a severe lack of classrooms. Granted, Success Summit did not accept many students, but there seemed to be a paucity of teaching spaces for how expansive the building was. It did contain a gymnasium, cafeteria, and pool on the ground floor. On the next floor up, there was a weight room which seemed to overlook the pool, as well as a library. The third floor housed a chemistry lab, a biology lab, and a reserved study area; the fourth floor was home to the art studio, but it also contained a number of soundproof music rooms. The principal’s office was the most exciting room on the top floor. There were other specialized rooms scattered throughout, but it was still very different from Taylor’s and Austin’s usual perception of an institute of learning.

The students had all accepted that they had had a deeper affiliation with Success Summit than they initially suspected, and this blueprint seemed to reinforce the idea. Despite looking at how the halls and rooms connected, neither Austin nor Taylor could picture what the school would have actually looked like. They had spent so much time in awe of the school, but now they wanted nothing to do with it. Besides the general layout, the duo couldn’t gleam any more information from the clean blueprint free of stray markings.

Leaving the Video Store for later, there were no more places for Rufus and Rico to investigate in the North Sector. It would soon be time for lunch, but they should be able to investigate one more shop before then. That being said, the two boys left for the East Sector; the students had now nearly explored half of their mall.

Rico and Rufus came upon the Gym first. Rufus had practically detested the space dedicated to physical well-being, but in his drug-induced state, he was starting to wonder why that was. Rico, on the other hand, had spent a good deal of time in the Gym; extensive thinking exhausted the Marathon Runner far more than any race. Unlike the haunted Salon, the Gym was still useable despite Elizabeth’s tampering. Perhaps it did not feel so marred since Elizabeth had spread her influence all over the mall—or perhaps by the time of her actions, the other students had become numb to their friends’ murders.

Lying on one of the workout benches was a packet of papers stapled together. Rico grabbed the stack and immediately grimaced: the entire thing was written in a foreign language. Rufus ventured that it was probably the same language as the mysterious note Lily translated, i.e. Japanese. That didn’t make Rico feel any better; they would never have enough time to translate it and explore the remaining stores. Rufus took the packet from Rico and began leafing through it. It seemed that someone had translated some of it for them and left notes in the margins; that was nice of them.

The boys started reading the notes; a scribbled note at the top of the front page labeled the contents as “The Vestiges of Ultimate Despair.” It was a strange story, and they often wondered if the translator had made mistakes while transliterating. The tale began in a similar fashion to the students’: sixteen students were left stranded on a deserted island chain and forced to play a game of mutual killing to escape. When there were five students left, they challenged their captor to one final trial. After that, things got strange. During the trial, it was revealed that not only had a group called the Future Foundation trapped them there, but that they were actually trapped within a computer simulation. The students found out that they were the remaining members of some elite Despair group after their leader died, and that they might not actually be students at all, having had their minds set back to before the influence of some mastermind. The Future Foundation was trying
to rehabilitate them when a virus got into the computer and initiated the game. The five students were able to win their trial and leave the simulation, but the shock of dying in the simulation had put their fellow classmates in a near-comatose state. The last that had been heard of this group was that they remained on the physical island chain watching over their sleeping friends.

It sounded like science fiction to Rico. A computer simulation? Those kinds of things were only real in movies. It sounded to him like someone had run out of ideas at the end of a story and just tried to find a way to wrap it all up. Rufus, however, took a very different moral from the story. The group—say, All-Star Despair—had overcome despair with hope, and if those heavily weighed-down individuals could do it, then there was so much hope for the students’ group. But if those kids were the remnants of Despair, then it begged the question: Who was currently in charge of this Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing?
After a busy morning of investigating, the six students gathered in the food court for lunch. They started discussing what they had found, but they didn’t bother extrapolating yet; it was just important that everyone remained in the know. In just a few short hours, they had uncovered a wealth of information, but there was still an entire other half of a mall to study.

As the students prepared to resume their task, Austin offered up a proposition: the investigation teams should reform. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy Taylor’s company, but they had started to develop a report with each other. Austin was too comfortable investigating with Taylor, and vice versa; in this semi-relaxed state, it was more likely that they should overlook some crucial point of evidence. By mixing the groups around, each student would be more alert and on their toes.

Once the new teams were settled, the three groups left the food court for the North Sector. Austin, accompanied by Jenny, proceeded to the Electronics Store. This store was one of the least frequented in the entire mall, sheerly for the fact that none of the merchandise was useful in the mall. There was no Internet, no telecommunications, no radio waves. The biggest impact that this spot had had was providing Jenny with a terrible gift from Elizabeth.

Jenny wished that she were still with Lily, but Austin was easy to get along with. He was also intuitive, so she felt she could relax slightly more; he was likely to pick up something if she missed it. Austin was pleased by the arrangement as well. Jenny thought different than the other students, but not in a bad way. She took her time with her thoughts, and with the gravity of the situation, that trait would certainly come in handy.

It took the duo a moment to realize that their clue was sitting right in front of them for it blended in with its surroundings. One of the mall security cameras was dismantled and displayed for them. During their entire stay, the cameras had watched their every move, and so it was strange to see one left so vulnerable. There was a manual lying next to the recording device. Jenny picked up the manual and began to skim through it while Austin looked over the machine.

If James were here, he would have known what the camera was made of, but Austin could only hazard a guess. It looked simple enough to him, but the simplistic were rarely just that. The camera had a mount upon which it could swivel to gain a wider periphery. The lens itself was a little smaller than the size of Austin’s fist. The Idle expected to find a jumbled mass of wires and cables in the cameras belly, but it was more vacant. There was a small, battery-like object connected to an antenna, but that was it.

Austin voiced his confusion to the Sandwich Artist, and she in turn read a passage from the instruction manual. The mall cameras were equipped with a Bluetooth chip that allowed them to transmit their footage to a foreign location. This made the cameras lighter and cheaper since the video files were not stored on the device itself. Monobear struck them as a frugal animal, and so they didn’t put it past him for taking the cheap route with mall security.

They realized that they were always being watched, but the evidence really made their skin crawl. No matter the circumstances, their kidnapper was able to keep tabs on them. There was one thing that unsettled Austin, however; the videos were being stored elsewhere. The security cameras shouldn’t have needed much storage space. If a theft were reported in the mall, the tapes would only need to go back as far as the incident, probably no more than a day. But if everything was being kept under lock and key in an undisclosed location, then someone could easily be hoarding the footage for some unknown reason.
Lily thought the new Rufus was fun to be around, so she stole him away with her, leaving Rico and Taylor to conquer the Antiques Store by themselves. The Lucky and Marathon Runner had had a rough beginning of their journey in the mall, but after their paths diverged, they each went their separate ways. Rico grew and really found who he was, but Taylor vacillated between change and stagnation, and not even she was sure where she currently was. In her own way, Taylor felt inferior to Rico; he had come so far, and she was proud that he was on her side. Rico, on the other hand, had never stopped caring for Taylor. He had thought she was a pretty girl who needed protecting, but she was so much stronger, and he would be at a loss without her on his side.

The Antique Store felt more like a junkyard than it did a paradise of lost treasures. The merchandise was lovely to look at and appreciate, but it didn't really improve the lives of the students; a hobby horse would not help them effect their escape. Elizabeth had once hidden a red herring—or had it been a legitimate clue?—in the store, but other than that, it had gone virtually unused.

If a clue had been able to blend in in any store, it would have been in this one; nevertheless, Rico and Taylor found their prize soon enough. An old newspaper was folded over on the counter. Someone had circled the main article in yellow highlighter, and they had blacked out any other article, and whoever it was had made sure to black out the date of the newspaper. This clue seemed different than the others they had encountered so far, but nothing was certain with Monobear’s ubiquitous unpredictability. Taylor was more impressed that people still read newspapers in the first place.

Of all the information Monobear had supplied them with, this seemed to be the most arbitrary. The front page article, the main story, revolved around the television debut of a magician! Felicia Faye, or, as she is known on stage, Lady Dazzle, had brokered a deal with a major television broadcaster to have an hour-long Friday night special. The special was apparently so popular that Dazzle was asked to perform a televised show on a weekly basis. She agreed, and her show was quickly becoming one of the most-watched broadcasts across the country, and there was talk of the show going international.

The article's writer had somehow secured an interview with the busy Dazzle, and the writer related that she was just as charming in person as on stage. Dazzle displayed a high level of charisma, and she was playfully charming. Many of her stage tricks involved the use of illusions, and she often referred to herself as an illusionist. She dabbled in misdirection, but her love was making people think what couldn’t happen really did. Like any amateur, the reporter asked her how she did her magic, and she replied, deadpan, that not even she knew how some of her illusions worked.

The article continued on to briefly explain Dazzle’s past and upbringing before diving into her fascination with the magical arts. From a young age, Dazzle knew that she was a performer, and she loved being the center of attention. She never understood stage fright; rather, she loved holding the power of having every eye fixed on her at all times. Without a doubt, Dazzle would surely be a name the current generations would remember and that the future generations would venerate.

There was a single sentence in the middle of the body that alluded to Dazzle having a mental breakdown, but the reporter just attributed that brief occurrence to the stress of maintaining a performer’s busy lifestyle.
Following Lily, Rufus bounced over to the Party Store. The Latinist and Kawaii had seemed to have such polar personalities, but they were getting along swimmingly now. Their immediate future might be unpleasant, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy the interim. Against all odds, they were determined to have an enjoyable afternoon.

The students had made despairingly little use of the Party Store. The shop had all the supplies they would need to have the party to rock the centuries, but they always found other ways to occupy themselves. There had been the debacle of Jenny’s party in the store, but there was ambiguity over how successful that was. Nevertheless, the event had sprung from good intentions, and that was all that truly mattered.

After the morning that each of them had had, Rufus and Lily were virtually blueprint-reading experts. When they found a layout entitled “Base 13,” they didn’t even bat an eye. The two just buckled down and examined the drawing before them.

The document looked like it didn’t belong outside of a secure vault. The paper was marked with many phrases or symbols blacked out, more than likely by redaction. How did Monobear get his hands on such a classified document? For that matter, how did he get his paws on any of the documents they’d seen?

What information they could gleam from it seemed strangely familiar. The compound had an extensive dormitory, spacious cafeteria, and even a self-contained Laundromat. There was one main door that led outside, but that seemed to be on the top floor. Rufus and Lily got the feeling that the compound was designed for autonomy; one room included a hydroponic garden, another housed a massive air purifier, and yet another contained an elaborate water filtration system.

Lily and Rufus were able to make sense of the information provided them, but they didn’t know the grand significance of it. It seemed out of place. Why would a military compound have anything to do with their situation? Monobear never specified what questions he would ultimately ask during the trial; maybe he was creating more mysteries for them to solve than necessary.

Jenny loved the smell of the Garden. It was such a peaceful place. She could easily fall asleep among the delicate flowers. Austin was of a differing opinion; he said that the Garden was simply too busy for any realistic relaxation. Jenny shrugged off his comment; despite it only having been opened up recently, it was a favorite locale of the Sandwich Artist.

A newspaper was draped delicately on the outer rim of the Garden’s fountain. Austin took his shoes off and put his feet in the fountain. He motioned for Jenny to do the same. She hesitated at first, but then removed her shoes. They sat side-by-side on the edge of the fountain and read over the newspaper.

Austin kept yawning as he read, and he was finding the activity rather tedious. His focus was waning. The Idle stretched back and asked Jenny to read the rest of the article out loud to him. Jenny was at peace enough in the Garden to not feel the need to object. She often stumbled through the piece, but, in her defense, the article contained numerous typos, as if it had been written in haste. Upon closer inspection, the entire paper lacked refinement; there were large empty spaces that shouldn’t exist on a published newspaper, and many of the articles ran into each other.

Those reading difficulties aside, Jenny was able to piece together a story. Apparently, there was tumult and turmoil in the country. Public leaders were leaving office, and those who weren’t leaving of their own accord were being forcibly taken out by others. The writer included that this phenomenon was not isolated to America, but that it was occurring on a worldwide scale.
With the great political unrest at home came military unrest. The globe was under a crisis, but the most skilled of soldiers were being called back to maintain peace in the States. The general public did not respond well to this decision, for they felt that they were being babysat by men with guns. The rioting got worse. The President made every effort to reinforce order and justice, but it was all for naught. At the height of the unrest, the President was assassinated.

Anarchy reigned. The world seemed to have been set on fire, but from the ashes rose a new figure, a man by the name of Cimber Tillius. At this point, the writer points out that it is unlikely that “Cimber Tillius” was his real name, but rather an assumed persona. Nevertheless, Cimber took absolute control of the military, and he was able to put some security on the country. It was apparent to Jenny that the writer was choosing their words very carefully. Cimber was not painted as a benevolent leader, but rather one who led by fear tactics.

The article cut out in mid-sentence, and there wasn’t any more information on Cimber or the country in the paper. Jenny wanted more information, and Austin wanted a conclusion to the story, but they were left wondering what the implications of the article actually were.

Lily had really wanted to investigate the Arcade, but both Rico and Taylor felt that the Kawaii would likely get distracted by the games and bright lights. Normally, Rufus would have been able to tame her, but now he would probably join in her merriment. Rico and Taylor were insistent, therefore, that they themselves take charge of the space.

The most avid user of the Arcade was Lily herself, but the others had found uses for it as well. Rico didn’t mind letting go with some video games from time to time, and Jenny had tried very hard to expand her horizons in the shop. Regardless as to who was using the room, the bright lights remained strong, and its luminosity helped to keep the dark thoughts of the students at bay.

Monobear must have anticipated Lily being the one to enter the store because a newspaper was laid on top of her favorite dancing machine. Rico and Taylor were still trying to wrap their minds around the last article, but they would have to carry on regardless. They attempted to read the article, but they had to relocate to a quieter corner of the Arcade in order to focus.

Despite being in a general newspaper, the article was scientifically dense. There were a myriad of words that neither Rico nor Taylor understood, and many—they presumed—that Rufus would be unfamiliar with. They continued reading, though, and muddled through whatever resembled a completely foreign language.

As far as they could tell, a medical professional had engendered a new way for etherizing patients, and his discovery was being heralded as a scientific breakthrough. Jonas Kaducius had dedicated his life to the realm of psychiatry, and he had been a personal therapist for a number of high-society figures. His entire career cemented this fact: skipping undergraduate studies, Kaducius entered medical school after graduating high school, and he completed his studies there in record time.

However, every great doctor has their own dark secrets. Kaducius was treating a particularly high-profile person, and he felt that he was on the verge of curing them. Just as things looked bright, Kaducius’s patient committed suicide. This event marred Kaducius’s otherwise impeccable career. The psychiatrist all but disappeared from the medical scene.

In recent days, Kaducius published a paper detailing his breakthrough. After the incident, Kaducius dedicated his life to finding the panacea for mental distress. The crux of his report focused on the use of hypnotism in a psychiatric setting. Normally, patients submit to hypnosis; the
process only works if the patients are willing to let it work. Under hypnosis, the patients are completely aware of the decisions they’re making; they simply act upon suggestion. Kaducius took this idea and supplanted it with anesthesia. Comatose patients, upon recovering from their catatonic state, relate that they were aware of what was occurring around them, despite not being able to physically participate.

Kaducius’s paper described putting a patient under anesthesia until they were practically in a comatose state. From there, the medical official would hypnotize the patient. Unable to resist physically and mentally, the doctor could dive into the mind of the afflicted and address the causes of mental anguish. Kaducius hypothesized that the technique could be used to erase painful memories completely from the hippocampus, as well as the possible insertion of false memories.

The article grew more technical from there, but Rico and Taylor had read enough. The group had ventured the thought of their memories having been compromised due to what they saw in the videos, but this article told them that that was actually possible. It may have been a difficult read, but the implications of the clue were palpable.
Following Lily, Rufus bounced over to the Party Store. The Latinist and Kawaii had seemed to have such polar personalities, but they were getting along swimmingly now. Their immediate future might be unpleasant, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy the interim. Against all odds, they were determined to have an enjoyable afternoon.

The students had made despairingly little use of the Party Store. The shop had all the supplies they would need to have the party to rock the centuries, but they always found other ways to occupy themselves. There had been the debacle of Jenny’s party in the store, but there was ambiguity over how successful that was. Nevertheless, the event had sprung from good intentions, and that was all that truly mattered.

After the morning that each of them had had, Rufus and Lily were virtually blueprint-reading experts. When they found a layout entitled “Base 13,” they didn’t even bat an eye. The two just buckled down and examined the drawing before them.

The document looked like it didn’t belong outside of a secure vault. The paper was marked with many phrases or symbols blacked out, more than likely by redaction. How did Monobear get his hands on such a classified document? For that matter, how did he get his paws on any of the documents they’d seen?

What information they could glean from it seemed strangely familiar. The compound had an extensive dormitory, spacious cafeteria, and even a self-contained Laundromat. There was one main door that led outside, but that seemed to be on the top floor. Rufus and Lily got the feeling that the compound was designed for autonomy; one room included a hydroponic garden, another housed a massive air purifier, and yet another contained an elaborate water filtration system.

Lily and Rufus were able to make sense of the information provided them, but they didn’t know the grand significance of it. It seemed out of place. Why would a military compound have anything to do with their situation? Monobear never specified what questions he would ultimately ask during the trial; maybe he was creating more mysteries for them to solve than necessary.

Jenny loved the smell of the Garden. It was such a peaceful place. She could easily fall asleep among the delicate flowers. Austin was of a differing opinion; he said that the Garden was simply too busy for any realistic relaxation. Jenny shrugged off his comment; despite it only having been opened up recently, it was a favorite locale of the Sandwich Artist.

A newspaper was draped delicately on the outer rim of the Garden’s fountain. Austin took his shoes off and put his feet in the fountain. He motioned for Jenny to do the same. She hesitated at first, but then removed her shoes. They sat side-by-side on the edge of the fountain and read over the newspaper.

Austin kept yawning as he read, and he was finding the activity rather tedious. His focus was waning. The Idle stretched back and asked Jenny to read the rest of the article out loud to him. Jenny was at peace enough in the Garden to not feel the need to object. She often stumbled through the piece, but, in her defense, the article contained numerous typos, as if it had been written in haste. Upon closer inspection, the entire paper lacked refinement; there were large empty spaces that shouldn’t exist on a published newspaper, and many of the articles ran into each other.
Those reading difficulties aside, Jenny was able to piece together a story. Apparently, there was tumult and turmoil in the country. Public leaders were leaving office, and those who weren’t leaving of their own accord were being forcibly taken out by others. The writer included that this phenomenon was not isolated to America, but that it was occurring on a worldwide scale.

With the great political unrest at home came military unrest. The globe was under a crisis, but the most skilled of soldiers were being called back to maintain peace in the States. The general public did not respond well to this decision, for they felt that they were being babysat by men with guns. The rioting got worse. The President made every effort to reinforce order and justice, but it was all for naught. At the height of the unrest, the President was assassinated.

Anarchy reigned. The world seemed to have been set on fire, but from the ashes rose a new figure, a man by the name of Cimber Tillius. At this point, the writer points out that it is unlikely that “Cimber Tillius” was his real name, but rather an assumed persona. Nevertheless, Cimber took absolute control of the military, and he was able to put some security on the country. It was apparent to Jenny that the writer was choosing their words very carefully. Cimber was not painted as a benevolent leader, but rather one who led by fear tactics.

The article cut out in mid-sentence, and there wasn’t any more information on Cimber or the country in the paper. Jenny wanted more information, and Austin wanted a conclusion to the story, but they were left wondering what the implications of the article actually were.

Lily had really wanted to investigate the Arcade, but both Rico and Taylor felt that the Kawaii would likely get distracted by the games and bright lights. Normally, Rufus would have been able to tame her, but now he would probably join in her merriment. Rico and Taylor were insistent, therefore, that they themselves take charge of the space.

The most avid user of the Arcade was Lily herself, but the others had found uses for it as well. Rico didn’t mind letting go with some video games from time to time, and Jenny had tried very hard to expand her horizons in the shop. Regardless as to who was using the room, the bright lights remained strong, and its luminosity helped to keep the dark thoughts of the students at bay.

Monobear must have anticipated Lily being the one to enter the store because a newspaper was laid on top of her favorite dancing machine. Rico and Taylor were still trying to wrap their minds around the last article, but they would have to carry on regardless. They attempted to read the article, but they had to relocate to a quieter corner of the Arcade in order to focus.

Despite being in a general newspaper, the article was scientifically dense. There were a myriad of words that neither Rico nor Taylor understood, and many—they presumed—that Rufus would be unfamiliar with. They continued reading, though, and muddled through whatever resembled a completely foreign language.

As far as they could tell, a medical professional had engendered a new way for etherizing patients, and his discovery was being heralded as a scientific breakthrough. Jonas Kaducius had dedicated his life to the realm of psychiatry, and he had been a personal therapist for a number of high-society figures. His entire career cemented this fact: skipping undergraduate studies, Kaducius entered medical school after graduating high school, and he completed his studies there in record time.

However, every great doctor has their own dark secrets. Kaducius was treating a particularly high-profile person, and he felt that he was on the verge of curing them. Just as things looked bright, Kaducius’s patient committed suicide. This event marred Kaducius’s otherwise
impeccable career. The psychiatrist all but disappeared from the medical scene.

In recent days, Kaducius published a paper detailing his breakthrough. After the incident, Kaducius dedicated his life to finding the panacea for mental distress. The crux of his report focused on the use of hypnotism in a psychiatric setting. Normally, patients submit to hypnosis; the process only works if the patients are willing to let it work. Under hypnosis, the patients are completely aware of the decisions they’re making; they simply act upon suggestion. Kaducius took this idea and supplanted it with anesthesia. Comatose patients, upon recovering from their catatonic state, relate that they were aware of what was occurring around them, despite not being able to physically participate.

Kaducius’s paper described putting a patient under anesthesia until they were practically in a comatose state. From there, the medical official would hypnotize the patient. Unable to resist physically and mentally, the doctor could dive into the mind of the afflicted and address the causes of mental anguish. Kaducius hypothesized that the technique could be used to erase painful memories completely from the hippocampus, as well as the possible insertion of false memories.

The article grew more technical from there, but Rico and Taylor had read enough. The group had ventured the thought of their memories having been compromised due to what they saw in the videos, but this article told them that that was actually possible. It may have been a difficult read, but the implications of the clue were palpable.

Lily was glad to see that the Jewelry Store was neat and tidy. The last time she had been here, Taylor had ravaged the place, and it had looked like a battlefield. Rufus and Lily hadn’t spent much time in the Jewelry Store, but Taylor and Austin had, her more than him. It was an elegant store, and it reminded everyone that the mall wasn’t as run-down as they were inclined to think.

Among the bright jewels and ornaments, Rufus and Lily found yet another set of blueprints. Of all the times for there not to be an All-Star Architect, this was certainly the most inopportune. This new set shared similar characteristics to the ones found before. The general layout was different, but this building housed laundry facilities, eating facilities, and sleeping arrangements.

Instead of a school, mall, campground, or military base, Rufus and Lily looked over the schematics for a hotel. As far as they could tell, it was a spacious and luxurious establishment. The foyer itself was grand, and there seemed to be an area designated for a chandelier. There was a full lounge with bar and stage, an Olympic-sized swimming pool at one end, and a sauna nearby to boot.

It must have been designed for a remote location; the building was far taller than it was wide. The two speculated that this was due to there only being room to build up and not out. Seeing how elaborate the space was set up, the Latinist and Kawaii did feel a tinge of jealousy that their own accommodations were not as impressive. There didn’t seem to be an arcade, though, so Lily wasn’t too jealous. Nevertheless, they were starting to get anxious about the number of blueprints that had been discovered; why so many, and what were they supposed to be for?

After sitting on the hard stone rim of the Garden’s pool, Austin was thankful to be able to stretch out on some real furniture in the Furniture Store. Jenny was worried that he would become too relaxed and be unable to focus again. The last major use of the Furniture Store that Jenny could remember was the Executive Committee Meeting. She didn’t feel like she really fit in with that group, and the truth they thought they had realized ended up causing more pain than good. The
Sandwich Artist was still delighted that they had thought her worthy of participating in such an elevated arena.

Austin spied the most comfortable looking couch he could find, and on that couch, he found another newspaper article. Monobear must have known just where he would look. But the couch was calling for him. The armrests, so sturdy; the cushions, so plushy; the throw pillows, so delicate. The Idle was about to stretch himself out on the couch when Jenny came over and sat square in the middle of the couch; Austin would have to sit.

Jenny spread the newspaper out before them, and they began to read it together. It was immediately obvious that this article was written under different circumstances. The author’s phrasing was well-edited, and the word choice belied an extensive—but not arcane—vocabulary. All in all, this one seemed to be done much more professionally.

The Furniture Store paper discussed yet another “breakthrough,” but this time in the realm of Meteorology. Television personality Roger Allen, better known by his television character Gus Tuffwynd, had launched a project to provide more accurate weather predictions. Local weather stations analyzed the meteorological data appropriate to them, but Tuffwynd wanted to make the weather game a global game. Over a large expanse of time, Tuffwynd was finally able to raise enough interest for Project Argus.

Project Argus instituted a network of satellites to relay weather information around the globe in the most direct manner possible. Any weather data gathered anywhere would be instantly uploaded to a satellite, from where it would then be distributed to every accepting facility. Critics pushed that Tuffwynd was doing this to provide concrete evidence for global warming, but he assured the public that he just wanted accurate weather predictions for all people, regardless of their circumstance. If a flood-prone area in the third world was in the path of a major storm, then they should have that knowledge. For Tuffwynd, there was nothing greater than knowledge for knowledge’s sake.

Project Argus continued to grow in popularity, and soon the entire world was connected to the weather mainframe. In due time, every meteorologist was trained in how to run computer programs through Argus, and with a little assistance from tech experts, news stations could stream Argus findings straight to its viewers at home. Having been asked to comment on the project, Tuffwynd smiled and said that he was glad he could be a part of something that helped to bring people into a global world and out of a region-locked one.

Jenny nudged Austin to make sure he was still awake; he was—barely. The Furniture Store was their last stop before dinner, and their investigations had been rather draining. Austin pointed out that worrying about things would just agitate them, and that no good would come of it. Jenny took his cue and decided to rest for a few minutes. She tried to relax, but her mind was racing at a hundred miles-per-hour in contemplation of what everything was supposed to amount to.

The last place Taylor and Rico wanted to set foot in was the creepy Monobear Store, but it was not like they had much of a choice. Monobear had left such a negative impression on the minds of the students that they couldn’t easily bear to see his face. Except for the initial investigation of the store and the deaths of Cody and Markus, the Monobear Store had largely been left untouched.

The Lucky and Marathon Runner expected another obscure and arcane item, but all they could find in the store was an inventory sheet for the store’s merchandise. There had to be some import for it, but it was as mundane as it seemed. Taylor began to read out the items, and Rico ran
about the store to confirm that they were there.

As Taylor read, she noticed something peculiar about the sheet. It didn’t just detail what
the current stock was, but it added new items to the current stock, as if the store manager had had
to order more stock. Why in the world would anyone need to reorder stock for such a store? But
really, why would anyone purchase an item from such a store in the first place? Taylor wouldn’t be
cought dead with anything with Monobear’s likeness on it.

Rico didn’t give much thought to the items he was looking at. Posters, cardboard cut-outs,
coffee mugs, snow globes, plush dolls, etc. The store was uninteresting! The Marathon Runner did
pause, though, when he looked at the calendars. If the shop’s inventory was being replaced as
indicated by Taylor’s list, then the merchandise would certainly be the most up-to-date. Rico was
born in 1994, and he was fifteen-years-old, so the calendars should show the year 2009. But every
single calendar he looked at started in January of 2012. He greatly doubted that Monobear would
be so careless to store unusable items in a store marked by his own face.

Rico didn’t give the items a second thought as they continued to regard each item on the
list. He and Taylor didn’t want to miss anything, but the less time they spent in the creepy space,
the better.

The Auditorium was as vast and empty as ever. It seemed strange for there to be so much
unused space inside a mall. Most of the shops had one piece of merchandise piled on top of another
to conserve space, but the Auditorium remained vacant. Lily didn’t mind, though, because it gave
her more room to be the center of attention when she commanded the stage. And the seating gave
her audience such a great view of the Kawaii Olympics. Despite its strange presence, the
Auditorium was a fine space.

Rufus and Lily were ready to face another set of blueprints or more personal files, but they
encountered nothing of the sort. The Auditorium may have been big, but it didn’t have a whole lot
in it. There wasn’t any sort of evidence in the seats or in the aisles. Rufus played around with the
soundboard, but it was just the same as when he had explored the room with Rico. Lily took to the
stage, but there wasn’t anything interesting there either; the speakers were untouched, the curtains
were unmoved, and the backstage doors were still locked.

The Latinist and Kawaii continued to scour the area, but their search came up empty. They
were unnerved; Monobear had meticulously placed evidence in every single store in the mall,
except for this one apparently. Monobear wasn’t the type to willfully forget things so easily. There
must be something they were supposed to find here, but the mysterious evidence continued to
elude them. Hopefully it wasn’t anything important.
Chapter 6--The Tricked and the Deceived--Part 7

There was one store left to investigate, but that would have to wait until after dinner. This would be the students’ final dinner. Instead of spending it in jovial merriment, they glossed over what all they had discovered during the afternoon investigations. There was a lot of information, but they would be able to make sense of it if they all worked together.

After they had cleared their plates, the six students made their way to the Video Store. Kindly displayed on a table for them were every single video for every single student, alive or not. The students were apprehensive to say the least. This was it, this was the last set of clues. The only thing that stood between them and the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair were sixteen measly video tapes. With so many tapes, they needed a logical order in which to watch them. Austin proposed that they watch them in the order in which they received them.

Going back to the very first trial, the students began to rewatch Francesca’s tape. “I’m usually the one telling people what to do; not the other way around. I’m still surprised you were able to convince me to go along with this, but I guess I shouldn’t downplay the abilities of us All-Stars. It’s all for the best I suppose.

“Hmm…where to begin…I actually wavered a lot in deciding to come to Success Summit. The class sizes were very small, and the students were already known for being exceptional. You see, that didn’t leave a lot of room for the skills of an All-Star Tutor. Who would even need a tutor there? But the school has a wonderful reputation, and that would certainly look good on an application.

“Has Success Summit changed my life? Definitely, and for the better, but probably not in the way you’re thinking. The school is supposed to foster our talents and give us the tools to reach the peak of success, but those tools aren’t intangible. What I’m trying to say is that the personal element of the school is the most instructive. I’d be nobody if it weren’t for the people I’ve gotten to know. The relationships we make far transcend the realm of creating a strong business network; these are deep, meaningful friendships that will last a lifetime.”

After Francesca came Delilah. “Howdy! Should I say ‘howdy?’ Is that too cliché? I’ve never been on camera before; how do I look? You know what, can I just start over? Salutations. No, that doesn’t feel right either. I’d expect Rufus—or should I say Rafael—to say something like that. You know, I was talkin’ to him the other day, and I still don’t think he knows my name’s Delilah. Whatever. Just edit somethin’ fancy in for my intro.

“Oh, I love it here at Success Summit. The second I got that letter in the mail, I packed my begs and got on the next train headed to greatness. I didn’t have to give it a second thought! I felt honored that they thought little ol’ me had the potential to truly be somebody. Now, I’ve won my fair share of beauty pageants, believe me, but when you get the chance to practice beauty on a grand scale, you take it.

“Without a doubt this school has changed my life! I used to think I was a pretty face with a good knowledge of how beautification works, and now I know I’m a gorgeous face with a consummate knowledge of how beautification works. Heck, I’ve got salons in Paris already beggin’ me to come work for ’em. I really do like it here, though, otherwise I would’ve jumped on the French Express ages ago. The best part of being here is that everyone’s attractive. There ain’t a bad lookin’ kid in the bunch. And them beautiful people are always successful; that’s a fact!”

It seemed like an eternity had passed since the first trial. The current students had had so
little time to get to know each other. Without the videos, it was difficult to remember what exactly
the two girls were like. It was shameful that they were unable to recall them as they were, but there
was little that could be done about the situation.

Moving on, Melissa’s video came next. “Should I start now? I should? Alright, then. My
name is Melissa Davis, Success Summit’s All-Star Politician, and I am being recorded for
Markus’s and James’s project.

“Ever since I first heard about Success Summit when I was in the fourth grade, I had
aspired to join the ranks of the other All-Stars. So when I received that invitation letter, there was
no hesitation whatsoever. And then I got so tickled when I found out that there’d be a legacy of
Davises! But this is supposed to be about us, so I’ll try to stay on topic.

“I used to think being a leader meant telling others what to do, but I soon realized that was
wrong. I came into Success Summit with the intent of taking over this school and using the All-
Stars to perpetuate my own influence. But when people are this special, you can’t try to confine
them through jussive orders; they shone when left to their own devices. Instead of commanding
them, I relied on them; instead of underlings or followers, I got friends.”

Naturally, Randolph followed Melissa. “I must say that I am impressed with the ingenuity
of your idea. You know better than me how these things work, so I’ll just follow your lead. As
much as I laud oblivion, I do hope that this piece perseveres through time so that others may know
of our story.

“I had to meditate for a full week before I made the decision to come to Success Summit.
School life was just so different than monastic life. And these people with their strange ideals…I
did not know what to make of it. But then it came to me like a vision: all these students were All-
Stars, and there is no doubt that they would go on to do great things, and so if I could show them
the truth of the universe, then they would be able to spread this marvelous truth across the globe.

“I will say that I am disappointed that no one has realized the scope of my philosophy yet.
But I’m sure they’ll come around eventually; they always do. In the meantime, I don’t mind getting
to know them. We’ll all be reduced to stardust someday, and it would be nice if my particles were
scattered amongst theirs. Completion through absolution: that is the Zerostrian way.”

Melissa had certainly made an impression on the students; she was a stable rock for them to
cling to. After Randolph dislodged that rock, the students hadn’t properly recovered. They knew
her as a little bossy, but it was obvious that she cared for the well-being of her classmates.
Randolph had had a much more low-key presence. He was a quiet figure that provided quiet
comfort, but his most notable move was killing Melissa. They knew that it was a terrible thing to
remember him by, but Monobear’s game messed with their heads and their perceptions.

James was next in line. “I can’t believe you’re making me do this. I think that’s bullshit
about the glare coming from my sunglasses. Is it always this bright in here? How do you people
get by? Hey! Don’t roll your eyes at me! Alright, alright, I’ll get on with it, tch.

“The name, for you commoners who have never left your homes in all your years of
existence, is James Beck, and I am the All-Star Movie Producer of Success Summit. I came here
because, for once in my life, someone was willing to acknowledge how much hard work I put into
my endeavors. It would have been an insult to turn down their offer.

“If I’ve learned anything while being here, it’s that there’ll be idiots no matter where I go.
But I guess some idiots are more tolerable than others. Without the lowest of the low, society
would fall apart, so I guess I’m thankful that they exist. Hell, without them, my movies wouldn’t
have enough extras to be realistic. And with this project, even idiots can have interesting stories. Tch, so yeah, there are some cool Neanderthals. Whatever. It’s your turn, now. Yeah, it is! Get in front of that camera so you can make a fool of yourself!”

And then Elizabeth. “My name is Elizabeth Mary Barrington, from the long line of wealthy Barringtons. My father is a man of business, as was his father before him. While the men have been solely interested in the acquisition of material wealth, we Barrington women have set our sights on more erudite interests. Specifically, I have devoted my time to researching the events of the past. Therefore, it is only natural that I be accepted into Success Summit on the basis of being an All-Star Historian.

“I find it peculiar. Time progresses without our influence on it, but when exactly does the present become the past? How much time must pass before we can objectively look at and study what transpired at a prior instance? Despite my expertise, I have yet to reach a definitive answer to this problem; nevertheless, while studying here, I have reached a conclusion of a different sort: we all think very differently. Nobody thinks quite like I do. So, historically speaking, I may deem something to be important; whereas, someone else may—

“James Beck! Would you quit rolling your eyes at me?! I may be looking at the camera, but I can see your eyes shifting underneath those low-class sunglasses you are insistent on wearing! This is my time to shine, thank you very much, and I intend to make the most of it. Now, where was I…?”

James and Elizabeth had quite possibly been the most antagonistic students in the mall, but they were still members of the same class. It would be difficult to forget James’s loud opinions, but he was a lot of talk and not a lot of action. After a while, it became apparent that he did care about his classmates. Elizabeth, on the other hand, soured her image by merely pretending to like everyone. When given one last shot at redemption, she had forsaken the offer, and the students begrudgingly remembered her with impunity.

The students were not looking forward to the next set. Cody began. “Why do I gotta introduce myself? Everybody knows who I am. Like, who’s gonna be watching this and not know who I am? Ehh, I’m sure you guys got your reasons, so whatever.

“Anyway, I’m Cody Cameron, All-Star Waterskier. I specialize in skiing barefoot, but I’m sure you already knew that. Give me a line and a boat, and I’m a beast on river or lake. It’s that kind of physical prowess that got me accepted into Success Summit. I wasn’t sure about leaving to someplace far away from a shore, but I don’t got much to do in the winter anyway, so I figured why not.

“It’s been a pretty chill experience. The people here are pretty cool, and the food is to die for. I practically eat like a king every day! I mean, that just sounds like little stuff, but this place really is gnarly. I don’t know what I’d do if I got kicked out—not that I’d do anything to get me kicked out. Just, I really like it here, you know? It’s a cool place.”

Markus was next. “At last, the time has come for the great Markus Aslanius, All-Star Thespian, to grace the stage with his presence! In every batch of coal, there is one piece that stands out: the lone diamond. And we’re are all diamonds; but, alas, I am the diamond that shines the brightest! This is not to underscore the significance of the other gems; I just mean to say that there is a clear distinction between myself and the others.

“Yes, yes, Success Summit. It was only natural that someone of my caliber be accepted into the hallowed halls of such a fine establishment and work my way among the ranks of the elite. The stars have always shone perfectly for Markus Aslanius, and they will continue to do so until the
ends of time. Going to Success Summit would simply ensure that these lights won’t be extinguished with ease.

“Has it affected me? …well, you know the answer to that one. The people here…they’re unlike anyone else. I was in such a slump when I got here, but that All-Star Psychologist…she’s amazing. Why, I haven’t had a breakdown in months. I can feel my mental health strengthening in fortitude! Watch out, world, Markus Aslanius is back and better than ever!”

And last was Theo. “Uhh, hello. I’ve been with a bunch of documentary crews before, but I’ve always spoken about an expedition, never about myself. I don’t really know what I’m supposed to say. There’s not much to say about me. I’m Theo Cook, All-Star Cartographer.

“My parents are big explorers, and so I started seeing the world at a very young age. When you’re so immersed in the macrocosm, it’s hard to relate to the microcosm. When I got the invitation to attend Success Summit, I thought that I would finally be able to have a normal teenage experience. Don’t get me wrong, rafting down unnamed rivers or scaling giant canyons is great, but it’s not an everyday occurrence for most people. I guess I just want a taste of normal days.

“I’ve never once regretted my decision. I might not be doing much exploring, but I’m doing my own sort of exploration. It sounds so cheesy, but I’m finding myself, who I am. It’s funny; most people have to go on long spiritual journeys to find out who they are, but I just have to go to school to do it. Hey, normal isn’t so bad after all.”

The fourth trial had been hard on everyone. Even during the third trial, the students had become very close to one another, and the pain of having them torn away became excruciating. Cody had especially meant a lot to Taylor and Austin; he acted like their protective older brother, even if they didn’t always want to see him in that way. He was a happy, go-lucky kid, and he was deeply missed. Markus was another figure who brought shame to the students; he had been so obviously hurting during his stay in the mall, but no one had bothered to reach out a hand for help. Their only consolation was that he was no longer in pain. Theo had often been the voice of reason for the students, and it was a hard pill to swallow that he was responsible for the deaths of Cody and Markus. During that trial, Monobear had manipulated the students into criminalizing him, but he was sincerely sorry for his actions; they wished that they had forgiven him then and there.

The last member of the class to leave had been Jordan. “Are you filming now? Alright. My name is Jordan Koulibagh, and I am our class’s All-Star Golfer. Is that good enough? I’m sorry, you never ask me to be in your movies, so I don’t know exactly what I’m doing.

“What else did you want? How has Success Summit changed my life. Well…I used to be pretty alone. I’m proud of my extraordinary gift, but it used to feel like a curse. I felt like a was a circus freak; come see the girl who has defied all odds and become an exceptional black, female golfer. But that was such an insidious thought. Some of my classmates have so much more tragic stories than me; I was drowning in my own self-misery. I used to hate people for being so well put-together, but I realize now that no one’s perfect, that we’re all broken, but that brokenness is something we have in common, and so it gives us something to bond over.

“Is that what you wanted? I can do it over if you like, I have the time. Alright, I’ll send the next person in. Maybe you’ll actually think about putting me in one of your films now.”

Jordan had been quiet through much of her stay, but she began to trust her friends and open up. In her last few days, she was one of the more enjoyable members of the class. The students had had less-than-ideal memories to attribute to their other friends, but they could choose to remember the happy Jordan, the one who had found the hope of love in such a dark, dark place.
That left the videos of the six remaining students. Since they had all seen Rufus’s already—excepting the Latinist—they just decided to watch his after Jordan’s. “First off, let me say that it is not only an honor to be acknowledged for my talent by such a prestigious school like Success Summit, but that it is beyond magnificent that the essence of my character shall be preserved in film for posterity. I can already see the future generations watching this video and feeling inspiration surging through them.

“I suppose it is only proper that I introduce myself. Salve, mihi nomen Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist. Elizabeth may have a firm understanding of the past, but when it comes to Classics Studies, no one is my superior. Whenever some ancient text needs to be translated, I’m the one consulted.

“Has Success Summit changed my life? What an idiotic question. Of course it has. This school is known for changing lives! I already had the academic portions under my belt, so I suppose this school has aided me in developing my social expertise. Yes, my classmates will prove to be invaluable business connections in the future, but the friendships we’ve forged are real and will remain stronger than even the tightest business contract.”

Had Rufus not been drugged out of his mind, he would have commented on how refined he was in that video. As it stood, though, he wondered why he appeared so uptight. That Rufus seemed cold and cynical. The current Rufus thought that it was much more pleasant to be nice and friendly with everyone.

There was no obvious answer as to whose video they should watch next. For one reason or another, most of the students had qualms about watching themselves on screen. Before long, Lily jumped up and exclaimed that she wanted to watch her video next; no one was going to argue with her. With her usual flair, Lily popped her video into the VCR. The second the screen flickered on, Lily’s high-pitched voice came straining through the speakers. The televised Lily forsook the provided chair and instead gesticulated wildly in front of the camera as she spoke.

“Konichiwa! Sugoi! Nipah! Ohayo! Keikakudoori! Itadekimasu!

“Allow me to introduce myself—this is so exciting I can hardly stand it! My name is Lily Smith and I am an All-Star Kawaii! Eeee! It’s like the coolest thing ever! Except it’s actually the cutest! I can certifiably state that I am one of the cutest people to ever exist, desu.

“Living with Matt-nii and Ken-nii above the Laundromat, I didn’t think life could get much better, but then I got here and Eeee! Everyone here is so cool and awesome and rad and kawaii and I love it! I can’t think of a place I’d rather be than right here at Success Summit, desu.

“So has this place changed my life? Well, duh! I’ve only gotten like a bajillion more friends! We stay up late and play games and go to parties and just have so much fun! All the time, desu! ‘But I’m not here to make friends; I’m here to sharpen the talent inside of me.’ Yeah, but by making more friends, I can take parts of them and add them to my own kawaii-ness; someday I’ll be the Ultra Kawaii, I just know it.”

After the video ended, Lily let out a squeal of delight. She had been so cute on camera! Her cute nature made her a perfect candidate for the art of film. Unlike Rufus, there had been no distinction between her camera-self and her corporeal-self. Lily liked who she was, and she was proud that nothing had changed who she was at heart.

Rico didn’t like that Lily had been braver than him about watching themselves on the screen, so he volunteered to go next. Rico’s biggest fear was that he was about to say something stupid on camera. With a deep breath, Rico put his tape in and pressed play. The Rico on screen
was practically bursting out of his seat from excitement.

“That red light means it’s on, right? Yo-o, I’ve been waiting all week for my turn to come up! Not to brag, but I’ve been practicing my intro. Alright, check this.

“Yo, yo, yo-o! My name is Rico-o! De Naranjas! And running’s my game because I am Success Summit’s All-Star Marathon Runner. I might not be the fastest kid on the block, but no one can last longer in the field than me; I’m always up for an endurance challenge!

“I was so psyched when I got the invitation to come to Success Summit! I’m the first person in my family to get even kinda close to higher education, so naturally I jumped and ran at the opportunity. Best decision I ever made. I’ve got so many friends here now, and we’ve all really come into our own.

“So yeah, I guess you can say Success Summit has changed my life. I will say that I wasn’t prepared for the academic level of this place, but Francesca has been working so hard with me to keep me caught up. As a runner, I’ve done a lot of catching up in my life, but I’m catching up for a different reason now. Before, I just wanted to be where everyone else was so I could be like them, but now I want to get to that spot so I can take off and soar so much higher! Ye-eah!”

It wasn’t as embarrassing as Rico had anticipated, but it still made his face feel hot. The Rico he just saw reminded him of himself, but it didn’t remind him of the Rico who had first come to the mall. Though he would never wish the events of the mall on anyone, he felt that the circumstances had shaped him into a better, stronger human being.

Jenny was sensing a boy-girl-boy-girl pattern, so she let her video be watched next. She was having similar qualms as Rico; she was worried that she would say something that would anger her friends or make them upset at her. She knew she didn’t have anything to worry about because she’s always so careful to watch what she says, but the fear was still present. Hesitantly, she popped the video into place; the Jenny on screen was as visibly nervous as the one in the Video Store.

“Umm…umm…d-do I really have to do this? Can you not have Melissa or Francesca introduce me? I should think that they would be very willing to help out.”

Both the onscreen Jenny and the one in the room took a deep breath.

“Umm…okay. My name is Jennifer Zemenovski, b-but people often call me Jenny, and I am fine with it either way. I am the All-Star…umm…oh no. I think I have forgotten my All-Star title. I-I do not think I have one. Oh no. Oh no. I-I cannot remember it.”

The Jenny inside the television was now breathing much more rapidly than her corporeal counterpart.

“Oh, I can handle this. Success Summit has changed my life because…before I came here, I was often scared of people, but I have learned that they are not so scary after all. Except Elizabeth sometimes…”

“W-was that one good enough? I do not think that I will be able to make it through one more shoot.”

The real Jenny understood where the fake Jenny was coming from, but it didn’t make her feel any better. She seemed so weak and flustered in that video, but there was evidence that she was not that weak of a person. She had survived through five trials, and she had even been the leading proponent in solving one of them. Jenny was stronger than she was wont to admit.
Complying with the pattern, Austin got up to play his movie; however, he wasn’t paying accurate attention to which movie he was grabbing, and, much to her sudden chagrin, Taylor saw herself appear on the television. The image on screen was of Taylor fixing her hair. All too clichéd, she turned toward the camera and a look of surprise overtook her face.

“Oh, I didn’t see you there. Don’t mind me, I’ve just been powdering my nose. We celebrity-types have to make sure we look our best at all times.

“Do I really need to introduce myself? I’ve been in enough of your films. Fine, whatever. My name is Taylor Erzen—don’t forget it. I might be the All-Star Lucky, but I’m so much more than the essence of good luck—I’m practically the essence of charm, beauty, allure, and any other fascinating noun or adjective that may pop into your head.

“Everyone dreams of attending Success Summit, right? And it’s not like being perfect is a talent, so my only hope was to get in on the lottery. You gotta be realistic, though; there’s like a billion kids in the U.S. But I guess things just tend to work out for me. So when I got the invitation, I naturally hesitated; I didn’t want to give the faculty the idea that I was over-eager to be here. But here I am.

“Has Success Summit affected my life? Well, I think the answer is quite obvious. I’m finally getting the publicity I deserve; the future generations are bound to remember my face. Alright, then, Beck, I’m ready for my close-up.”

Was Taylor really that pretentious? The Lucky did not recognize the girl on the screen at all. She knew she had a tendency to dabble in the shallow end of the societal pool, but she never thought she was pretentious. She didn’t want people to see her that way, and—more than that—she didn’t want to see herself that way.

After a slight apology, Austin finally loaded the last video into the VCR. The television Idle had the same quiet disposition as the Video Store Idle. Austin knew who he was, so he wasn’t too worried about what he might say. He simply grew a little uneasy since recording a soliloquy could constitute as doing something, and he was typically averse to that.

In the television, Austin opened his mouth wide for a sizeable yawn. “Sigh. Well, you got me. I’m here. I mean, it’s not like you’re going to let me out until I answer your questions. In some states, this kind of behavior is known as torture, or at least I think that’s what the All-Star Lawyer said.

“So what am I supposed to talk about again? Why’d I come to Success Summit? That was a no-brainer. In school, they always expect you to do things, but it is my personal life philosophy that doing things is bad for your health. But the classes are different at Success Summit, and they don’t expect me to do as much, so that’s nice. It’s got a pretty cool vibe going on with it, too.

“Has Success Summit changed my life? I guess so. I mean, that’s a really dumb question. I don’t think a school can change someone’s life. Actually, I don’t think much of anything can change someone’s life. It’s not so much that someone has changed their life but that they have chosen to do a few things differently. They’d still be moving forward, just with a tilt to one side or the other. Yawn. Can I go take a nap now?”

Yup, that was Austin alright. It had looked like him and sounded like him, and that made sense, because it was him. The Idle had been watching himself intently, and now he turned back to his other classmates. After sixteen consecutive videos, their minds were a bit fuzzed. They had had a long day, and the next day would prove to be just as long—if not longer. Sensing the tension in the air, Austin broached the idea that everyone retire early for the night so that they would be well-
rested for the dawn of the twenty-fifth day. It was a good idea.
Rico de Naranjas, All-Star Marathon Runner, was as nervous as his peers. He was no longer the pathetic weakling who had entered the mall. He had high hopes for the outcome of the trial, but he had his qualms. He wasn’t sure how useful Rufus would be under the influence, so he would have to rely more heavily on others. Lily kept morale up, but she wasn’t exactly a case solver. If Taylor’s stubbornness reared its ugly head, then she wouldn’t be a prime contributor. Jenny had proven that she was adept at the logical reasoning in a case; she just had to keep her nerves under control. And Austin was just a wild card. Nevertheless, Rico would have his work cut out for him, but he was up for the challenge. In just twenty-four hours, the six of them would walk out of the mall arm-in-arm.

Jenny Zemenovski, All-Star Sandwich Artist, felt like her heart was going to burst from her chest. She had never had a pure panic attack before, but she imagined that it was very similar to what she was currently feeling. She was worried about what would happen during the trial. She just had to leave with everybody else; there was no way around that. She knew that she was smart, and the others were smart as well; together they could conquer any obstacle Monobear threw their way. And so Jenny knew her fears were not well-placed, but she couldn’t quite shake them. From now until the trial, she would just have to keep taking deep breaths. Everything would work out in the end—it just had to.

Lily Smith, All-Star Kawaii, finally felt homesick. For the past three-and-a-half weeks, she had had the company of her friends to keep her energized. She enjoyed living with everyone and getting to know everyone, but now that they were actually going to leave the mall, she was starting to see how real that would be. It had been weeks since she had talked to her brothers; Ken must be worried sick since she hadn’t written or called. Lily had faith in her friends to get them all through the trial, and though she didn’t want to leave them right away, she couldn’t wait to see Matt and Ken again.

Rufus Price, All-Star Latinist, was excited to get to leave the Mall of Monomerica. He and his friends had been working so hard lately; they deserved some vacation time. It was sad that more of their friends wouldn’t be able to come with them, but it was a good group that was going to leave anyway. Rufus worried slightly about what would happen to all of them after they left. These people really meant something to him, and he didn’t want to leave them, but he was sure that everything was going to work out for the best in the end.

Austin Fitzpatrick, All-Star Idle, was ready for a change of pace, which was strange for him. He’d never had a problem with complacency before, but now he was ready to leave the mall. He missed Francesca and Delilah and Melissa and Randolph and everybody. The mall was becoming a painful place for him to stay. He certainly didn’t want to forget about his friends, but for his own sake, and for the health of his friends still with him, he needed to leave. Once the six of them left together, he would erect or effect some kind of memorial for those who lost their lives in the struggle. If doing that thing—that one thing—made Austin lose his All-Star title, then he would be okay with that. It was time to move forward.

Taylor Erzen, All-Star Lucky, was ready to leave. Living inside a mall may have been a dream come true in the past, but now it was anything but. It had bothered her at first that she wasn’t the queen of popularity among her peers, but she was starting to realize how important that really wasn’t. Austin was right; she talked a big game of changing who she was, but she never made a truly proactive step. But no more. She was finally going to be herself. Everyone else in the mall had been so grounded in who they were, and it was time for her to do the same. She didn’t
care what other people thought of her, so long as she was happy being herself. First, though, she and her friends would have to get through the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair. As worried as Taylor was, she had Luck on her side, so there was no doubt in her mind that they would be able to pull through.

After a night of restless sleep, the six students met for breakfast. Rico wanted to discuss all that they had discovered the previous day so that they could have a plan of attack, but everyone was too tense to do any heavy thinking. Instead, they each went their separate ways and tried to clear their heads for the upcoming ordeal. Taylor stayed in the food court and worked on her tan one last time. Rico relented and wandered over to the Gym to run off some nervous energy. Lily engaged in a similar activity, albeit in the Arcade. Austin sought out the Lounge for a relaxing morning, and Jenny found her peace in the comfort of the Garden. Lastly, Rufus spent his morning in the Bookstore; he couldn’t focus on reading, but the store just kept his nerves under control.

The trial was set to start at noon, but none of the students wanted to be late. Rufus wandered over to the food court around 11:30 and was surprised to find no one else there. As the time grew closer, the other students began to trickle back in. Around 11:50, not all of the students had yet assembled.

“One of our friends doesn’t appear to be here,” said Rufus. “I hope they didn’t lose track of time; Monobear wouldn’t like that. We still have a few minutes, so why don’t we do a quick sweep of the mall to find them?” The four other students nodded in agreement.

Rufus wasn’t sure why, but he felt drawn to the East Sector, and to the Garden in particular. It was certainly strange for one of them to be late to such an event. Rufus really hoped he’d find their missing classmate so that they could walk together to the food court instead of him walking back by himself. He couldn’t wait for all six of them to make it out of this hellhole.

The Latinist crossed the threshold of the Garden, and the smile that had been fastened to his face ever since his return faded. Unable to control himself, Rufus dropped to his knees, and his eyes filled with water. The world went silent; he couldn’t hear his own screams.

Lily heard the cry and rushed to the Garden. Taylor came running to the Garden right behind Jenny, and a moment later, Austin entered the room. Each of their hearts sank at the sight before them. Rufus, inconsolable, was wailing at the top of his lungs in front of the Garden pool, in which floated the body of Success Summit’s All-Star Marathon Runner, Rico de Naranjas.
“Upupu…how…despairing. A dead body has been found, but I’m sure you’re well aware of that. Normally we’d be having the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair right now, but this seems to be a more pressing matter. After a brief investigation period, we’ll hold yet another Mall Trial. We’ll just have to see what happens after that.” Monobear’s announcement was subdued; he didn’t use his normally extravagant amount of energy, and that made his message all the more chilling. His hollow words hung on the five students’ ears.

They were supposed to get through this together.

The six of them were supposed to leave together.

There were only five of them now.

Rufus screamed until his voice faltered. His throat was in pain, but his heart and soul hurt more. Someone had done this to Rico, someone had murdered Rico. There was sadness on the front, but he could feel the anger rising within.

Lily went over and held Rufus. She hated to see him so distressed; he was practically catatonic. She wanted to cry with Rufus, but the Latinist needed to grieve, and she wanted to be there to support him.

There wasn’t any blood, but Jenny still felt faint. The Sandwich Artist closed her eyes and kept breathing. Of all the times to lose her head, this was the worst time. Rufus was in a bad way, and Rico was…he was in a worse way. She had to be strong for everyone and help them get through this.

Taylor held back her own tears. Stupid Rico, why did he have to die? He was such a good kid. Seeing Rufus’s distress, the Lucky understood now how Markus must have felt having to lose not only Francesca, but also James. She mourned for her lost friends, and now she mourned for Rico as well.

Austin felt numb. The moment they all had gone in search of Rico, Austin had known; he’d just had a feeling. The Idle had wanted to be the one to find the body so he could brace Rufus for the shock. Lily seemed to be comforting him, though. He took a step toward the body; this was going to be a tough day that he wouldn’t easily forget.

Before Austin could start examining the body, Monobear appeared and distributed the Monobear File to everyone. They each took a moment to read it over by themselves—except for Rufus. Rico’s time of death was simply listed as “that morning.” Cause of death was due to lethal injection. The body was otherwise unharmed.

Jenny was trembling, Lily was comforting Rufus, and Austin was starting to look at the body, so Taylor started scanning the area for clues. She was acting on autopilot, shutting herself off to the reality around her. There were a number of objects scattered around the pool, but Taylor picked out a scrap of paper. It was crumpled and wrinkled, but not destroyed. In messy handwriting, Taylor read the following message: “I know who the Liar is. Meet me in the Auditorium.” The Lucky looked around her; they were not equipped to handle this sort of thing right now. Taylor realized that she would have to be the leader and steer everyone through this.

“Austin,” said Taylor, “you, Lily, and Rufus stay here and search this place. Jenny, you’re
coming with me to the Auditorium.”

Thankful for an excuse to leave the crime scene, Jenny followed Taylor out the entrance.

Austin knelt down beside the pool. The pool wasn’t very deep, so Rico was half-submerged in water. His eyes were closed, and his hands were folded over his stomach. He looked peaceful in death. In accordance with the Monobear File, the body was indeed untouched. With so few investigators, there was no time to waste learning what they already knew. Austin stood up and gave a silent goodbye to the Marathon Runner.

Lily looked up at Austin. She wanted to help with the investigation, but she also wanted to help Rufus. She met Austin’s eyes, and his gaze expressed a multitude of thoughts; he would handle looking for clues while she took care of the distraught Latinist. Each had faith in the other that they would perform their respective duties to the best of their abilities.

Oddly enough, the crime scene seemed rather organized to Austin. In front of the pool, lined up perfectly with its center, was the note Taylor had found. A few feet past that lay a syringe. Lethal injection. On the rim of the pool behind the syringe lay a cloth, neatly folded. The more interesting items lay along the perimeter of the pool. From the entrance, Austin started with the items on his right.

The first thing he found was a large, bloodied cloth. “Cloth” wasn’t exactly the right word, but Austin wasn’t sure how else to describe it. It easily would have covered the Idle’s chest like a shirt, but it didn’t have the right shape for a shirt. In addition, the middle of the fabric was folded over, as if it had a pocket.

Behind the bloodied cloth was a wet bow. It was probably brightly colored, but it was so soaked with water that the colors were dulled down. There was a small puddle of liquid that had seeped out of it surrounding it. Looking back at the red cloth, Austin noticed that the bow was nicely arranged as well.

The last item on that side was a gold bracelet. Austin didn’t think much of it, but upon closer inspection, he noticed that there was a good swatch of paint chipped off the outer edge. It was expected that a trinket would lose its shine over time, but this patch looked like it had been purposefully rubbed or scratched off.

Turning his attention to the other side of the pool, Austin had another three items lined up neatly. Austin first found a large black cloth. No, it wasn’t a cloth, it was a sweater of some sort. Except it wasn’t a sweater either. It was a large sheet of black sweater-material. It wasn’t a clean cut, though; the edges were horribly frayed.

Austin was appalled at the next item. To anyone else, it would just appear to be a regular purple tie, but Austin’s keen eye saw otherwise. One of the stitches on the backside of the tie had come undone. Ties were hardly the clothing items of boxers, so there was no reason for one to be marred in such a dreadful way.

The final item made Austin turn his attention back to Rico’s body. How had he missed that? The zipper to Rico’s wind blazer was lying on the floor of the Garden. As if killing him hadn’t been enough, someone had to destroy his clothes too. He may have looked peaceful in the pool, but that jacket was practically a part of his identity, and by disrupting it, they had messed with his essence and insulted his memory.

Lastly, Austin turned his attention back to the cloth near the syringe. It wasn’t covered in blood or anything, but with such a central position, it had to be important. Austin picked it up and
held it in his hands. It felt like a regular piece of cloth. Unable to make heads or tails of it, Austin brought the cloth over to Lily to ask for her opinion. She couldn’t discern any truths about it, either. The next logical thing to do was have Rufus look it over. Lily proffered it directly in front of Rufus’s face. Before the Latinist had time to react, he started to feel light-headed and slumped over. Lily quickly removed the cloth and held it far away from him. He was breathing, but he was even more unresponsive now. Having watched this, Austin presumed chloroform or something similar.

 Barely any time had passed, but Monobear’s voice rang out over the PA system again. “Change in plans. That’s enough investigating. Stop investigating! Stop it right now! Get your lazy butts back to the food court and get ready for the final trial!” Austin exchanged glances with Lily. This was fast, too fast. He wondered what Taylor and Jenny had found.

The Auditorium looked fine. Taylor gritted her teeth; there had to be something here. The Lucky started looking over the soundboard while Jenny headed to the stage. To her surprise, the soundboard was already on. The volume was turned down, so Taylor pushed the master up. When they had first investigated the Auditorium, Rufus said that turning the volume up high produced an annoying amount of static, but Taylor would hardly call the noise static. It just sounded like emptiness.

Taylor nearly jumped out of her skin when a strange voice erupted from the speakers. “Hello? Can anyone hear me? My name is Sparky. Is anyone out there? There’s only ten of us left. I think we’re trapped. We don’t know how we got here. He’s killing them. Please, can anyone come help us? There’s only ten now. Monobear might catch us soon. I think time is running out. If you can help us, I hope you will. Please, help us.” There was a lull without sound. “Hello? Can anyone hear me? My name is Sparky…” The same message continued to play.

Taylor’s skin felt cold. Who was Sparky? Was Monobear terrorizing someone else? She looked frantically at the soundboard. There was no CD in any CD slot, or cassette, or mp3 player. Where did that message come from?

Jenny peeked her head out from behind a curtain and called out, “Taylor, umm, I think you need to see this.”

Shaking her head to try to clear it, Taylor left the soundboard and headed down to the stage. The backstage looked like it had during the Olympics, except the door in the stage left wing was standing open. Jenny was already inside the room when Taylor entered. It was small, maybe a prop room or some such; there were no props in it now.

Jenny was bent over a computer. A real modem, hard drive, and monitor. Taylor had nearly forgotten what the technological achievements of society even looked like. Jenny was tentatively clicking through various folders on the computer, hastily scouring the documents inside. Taylor appeared over the Sandwich Artist’s shoulder and looked at what Jenny was doing.

“Here,” said Jenny, opening up what appeared to be an e-mail correspondence. Taylor began reading.

“My dear, it is quite the predicament indeed. Now, I have entrusted you with an arcane set of clandestine information; do not make me regret this decision of mine. Vigilance is a key factor in our operation, and so we can—at no time—shirk our responsibilities. If we are to enrapture the world in our beloved Despair, then we must adhere to the plan that we have already begun. Do I make myself clear and understood?”
“‘My dear,’ I thought you would have some fun with the news I gave you! Imagine how much despair this little incident would have given her. That’s what we’re striving for, isn’t it? This sort of darkness should make you feel such brilliant distress in the bottom of your inky heart! You should congratulate me on my wonderific performance!”

“Dearest, I will admit and relate that your news did fill me with ‘wonderific’ anguish, but I still wish to experience success. Every setback is a glorious blessing to us, but if we wish to share our message of oblivion with the world, we must stick to our preconceived ordinance. Do not fail me again.”

“‘Dearest,’ stop hounding me! I am perfectly capable of handling things myself! Have some faith in your constituents for once in your life! So what if the miscreants let out a little distress signal? What good could that possibly do them? They don’t know who they’re messing with!”

“My beloved colleague, you speak too much and listen too little. Yes, with a little creative innovation on the part of me and our energetic colleague, we have been able to suppress the signal for the most part, but you know how closely the Future Foundation is following us. Any slip-up like that could open the door wide open for them. Is that what you want? Do you want those upright prudes to interfere with our glorious endeavor? I ask you.”

“‘My beloved colleague,’” you are one to speak when it comes to speaking and listening. They let out one signal; we are broadcasting four continuously. You have a tendency for hypocrisy that you enjoy to neglect! I will handle the situation; do your own job!”

The correspondence ended there. Before Taylor could ask another question, Jenny had opened up some sort of control panel on the screen. “I clicked this,” said Jenny, “and then that announcement came on over the speakers.” Taylor had left the soundboard running, and so the message had continued to play in the background. Jenny clicked whatever button was on screen, and the message faded away.

There was a lot of information being thrown in Taylor’s face all at once, and she wasn’t sure how to deal with it. “Jenny, where did you find those e-mails or that program?”

“The program was already running, and the letters were in the Recycle Bin.”

“Why would you look there?”

“The most interesting files are the ones that have been deleted.”

“So if the Liar was here—”

Taylor didn’t have time to finish her query before Monobear’s announcement rang through the mall. They had barely been given twenty minutes! What kind of investigation was this supposed to be? Taylor had a bad feeling about this.

Taylor and Jenny met Lily, Austin, and Rufus in the food court. Rufus was standing on his own, but there was no life behind his eyes. Jenny wandered over to Lily, and Taylor to Austin. Lily wanted Jenny to tell her everything would be alright, and Jenny wanted the same. Taylor needed Austin to be stable for her to work off of, and he needed the same.

Monobear appeared before them and smirked. “Upu… I certainly didn’t expect this particular assortment to be the ones to take the final plunge. As I’m sure you’ve guessed, this trial
will be a little…different. I’ll explain when we get down there, so hurry up and get on the elevator.”

For the last time, the fountain in the middle of the food court was drained of its water and rose to reveal a hidden elevator. The doors creaked open, and the five students entered with trepidation. The doors shut before them, and they felt themselves descend into the shadows of the mall. Earlier, they had been hopeful to tear through the darkness, but now they feared what oblivion had in store for them.

The elevator stopped. The doors opened. The students stepped out and assumed their usual positions in the circle of podiums. An effigy of Rico had been set up in his usual spot, and the others found it hard to look upon him. Monobear took a moment and reveled in their solemnity before beginning the ceremonies.
Chapter 6--The Tricked and the Deceived--Part 10

Monobear: “Normally, this would be the part where I welcome you to the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair, but we seem to have a more pressing issue to attend to first. Now, before this all began, I told you that either all of you made it out, or none of you made it out. I told that to the six of you. I see five. But I’m a merciful bear; if you ingrates can out your murderous companion, then I’ll consider letting the other four players continue playing our trial game.”

Taylor: “So the Final Trial…it’s still a possibility?”

Monobear: “A possibility, but not a certainty.”

Austin: “Then I think we have to go for it. We can’t put all that time to waste.”

Jenny: “I agree. We must do everything in our power to leave this place.”

Lily: “So one of us really…killed Rico? I don’t want to believe that…”

Rufus: “…carissimum…”

Monobear: “Yup! Before any final trials can begin, you must first solve the murder of Success Summit’s All-Star Marathon Runner, Rico de Naranjas.”

Rufus: “SICARIUM!”

Lily: “R-Rufus-kun, are you daijoubu?”

Rufus: “EST SICARIUS INTER NOS!”

Austin: “You’re going to have to speak English if you want us to understand you.”

Rufus: “EGO ANGLICE DICO!”

Jenny: “H-he sounds rather angry.”

Rufus: “NON DORMIAM DONEC SICARIUM CAPITUR!”

Taylor: “Jesus, Rufus, calm down. We’ll get through this.”

Rufus: “NON AMICUS CARISSIMUS TUUS EST QUI NECATUR!”

Lily: “Rufus-kun, please calm down, desu.”

Austin: “He seems rather distraught. Perhaps it would be best to proceed without Rufus for now.”

Taylor: “I agree, we need to figure this out.”

Jenny: “Then where do we begin?”

Austin: “The body has usually been a pretty good starting point.”

Taylor: “Then we’ll start there. Austin, you and Lily stayed in the Garden, so what’d you find?”

Lily: “I didn’t find anything, actually; I stayed with Rufus.”
Jenny: “So only Austin did the investigating?”

Austin: “Yeah, but the crime scene was weird, you know. All the clues were laid out for us, lined up nicely.”

Jenny: “That is strange.”

Lily: “What does it mean, though?”

Taylor: “Let him finish with what he found before we decide what it means.”

Rufus: “DEPINGE CORPUS EIUS!”

Austin: “Rico was cool and peaceful, but there were a couple of items scattered around the pool. There was a bloody cloth, but it wasn’t a cloth. It was more like, uhh, like that.”

Jenny: “Like me?”

Austin: “Like your apron. It was like a bloody apron. And then there was a wet bow and a tarnished bracelet.”

Lily: “Oh no; that’s terrible! That poor bow!”

Austin: “And on the other side were, well, it was a large black thing, like, uhh, that.”

Rufus: “NOLLE VESTEM MEUM INDICARE!”

Austin: “Yeah, like Rufus’s sweater. And then there was a tie with some stitches undone and Rico’s zipper.”

Lily: “His entire zipper? It was just off?”

Jenny: “How did you know it was Rico’s zipper?”

Austin: “Because his zipper was off his windbreaker.”

Taylor: “Is that all you found?”

Austin: “There was a syringe, because he was poisoned. The Monobear File. And then there was this other cloth—”

Lily: “It almost made Rufus pass out!”

Rufus: “TU PUELLA STULTA, PAENE ME RUMPIS!”

Jenny: “How does a cloth do that?”

Austin: “Chloroform?”

Jenny: “We have that here?”

Lily: “It could be in the Pharmacy, desu.”

Taylor: “Chloroform isn’t exactly something you can buy!”

Austin: “It might not even be chloroform; just something similar.”
Lily: “Umm, is this as obvious to everyone else as it is to me?”

Austin: “Is what obvious?”

Lily: “The, umm, murder. He was poisoned, right? With the syringe? But he wouldn’t just go along with that, so the, umm, killer knocked him out with the cloth, desu.”

Taylor: “That…fits…I guess…”

Jenny: “So there was no struggle? Isn-t there always a struggle?”

Austin: “You know, there wasn’t anything up with his body to suggest that.”

Lily: “He looked so peaceful in the pool…delicate, almost, desu…”

Taylor: “And the layout of the clues…it’s too…overt.”

Austin: “Or apologetic.”

Jenny: “Apologetic?”

Lily: “I agree. Like the killer was sorry for what they did, so they made everything nice and tidy to make it easier for us.”

Taylor: “No, that doesn’t fit.”

Rufus: “DENIQUE ALIQUIS CONSULTO FACIT!”

Taylor: “They left behind a note. ‘I know who the Liar is. Meet me in the Auditorium.’ Rico was lured away somewhere; this was purposeful; they couldn’t be sorry about what they did.”

Lily: “But…but…but maybe they were, desu!”

Taylor: “Is that a confession?”

Lily: “N-no! I-I couldn’t have done it! It wasn’t me!”

Austin: “Then what did you two find in the Auditorium?”

Jenny: “A computer.”

Austin: “Huh? Like a real, working computer?”

Jenny: “Yes. We found interesting files on it.”

Taylor: “Yeah, Jenny found a correspondence in the computer’s trash between some people. They were pretty upset about something.”

Jenny: “And there was a control panel that amplified the soundboard or something.”

Taylor: “It was really loud and scared the crap out of me. You know…the e-mails mentioned a distress signal…I wonder if that was what that message was.”

Austin: “I still don’t understand this message. What was it exactly?”

Jenny: “A boy—I think his name was Sparky—said that they were killing each other. And he mentioned Monobear. I think…I think Sparky is in a Mutual Killing game as well…”
Lily: “Then we’re not alone…”

Rufus: “QUIPPE SOLI NON SUMUS! QUARE SIMUS?”

Jenny: “The messages also referenced the ‘Future Foundation,’ if that means anything.”

Rufus: “HIC ME REMINISCI FACIT!”

Austin: “What’s the Future Foundation?”

Monobear: “Don’t worry about it; it’s not important.”

Lily: “Huh? But I don’t know what it—”

Monobear: “I said it’s not important! So drop it!”

Jenny: “If Monobear doesn’t want us talking about it, then it must be important, right?”

Taylor: “I agree. There’s something there he doesn’t want us to know.”

Monobear: “I am still in charge! And I command that you don’t discuss that!”

Austin: “Hey, we’re just trying to solve a murder. We need to explore every possible option—even if it takes us down a blind alley.”

Lily: “Okay, it’s important, but what about the case? What does it have to do with the case?”

Jenny: “I am sure that it will become relevant soon enough.”

Rufus: “SICARIUM CAPIAM SI ME IPSE FACIENDUM SIT!”

Austin: “Settle down, buddy, we’ll catch them.”

Rufus: “INTER FAMILIARES TUOS NON SUM!”

Taylor: “Let’s talk about the other clues Austin found.”

Austin: “The apron, bow, bracelet, sweater, tie, and zipper.”

Lily: “Something for each of us…”

Taylor: “It seems like it…”

Jenny: “But…that would mean that we each did it? And, umm, that does not make sense…”

Austin: “None at all.”

Taylor: “Ugh. We can be so unoriginal. Elizabeth creates red herrings, and suddenly everyone thinks it’s the greatest idea since sliced bread.”

Austin: “We have a good track record with false clues; we can figure this out.”

Lily: “So if I have this right, desu, then only one of the clues actually implicates anyone.”

Austin: “And the trick is to figure out which one.”

Rufus: “NONNE VERAM VIDERE NEQUEITIS?”
Taylor: “So there’s a piece of evidence that is linked to each of us. Then that means the murderer implicated themself. Why would they do that? Isn’t the point for us not to figure out who it is?”

Lily: “Unless the killer was sorry…”

Taylor: “The killer wasn’t sorry!”

Austin: “So… the bloodied apron?”

Jenny: “I…I…”

Lily: “There’s blood on it, so it can’t be Jenny; she would have passed out!”

Taylor: “I guess…”

Rufus: “INDICIUM GRAVEM PRAETERMITTITIS!”

Austin: “Then the wet bow.”

Lily: “Don’t look at me, desu! My bows are still in my hair.”

Taylor: “But one could have fallen out while you were placing the body in the water.”

Jenny: “Umm, it would not have dried fast enough, so there was a need to disguise the evidence.”

Lily: “No! No! It wasn’t me!”

Austin: “Then let’s keep going with the other clues for now. The tarnished bracelet.”

Taylor: “That could belong to anybody.”

Jenny: “Why would a tarnished bracelet be incriminating?”

Lily: “Taylor takes such good care of her jewelry; she would never be able to live down wearing one that’s damaged.”

Austin: “And it’s not a normal rubbing away, either. It seems like it was ground up against something.”

Taylor: “Like I said, that could have happened to anyone.”

Austin: “The black sweatshirt?”

Taylor: “Rufus’s turtleneck.”

Rufus: “TACE DE VESTI MEA!”

Jenny: “Torn from the struggle.”

Austin: “No one willingly lets someone poison them.”

Lily: “I don’t think it could be Rufus. Look how upset he is, desu!”

Rufus: “NOLLE ME ADSPICERE!”

Austin: “Uhh, let’s just keep moving, I guess. Next is the tie. I can’t believe someone would ruin a perfectly good tie for such evil purposes.”
Jenny: “But it is just an article of clothing…”

Taylor: “I guess I wouldn’t live with a tarnished bracelet, so Austin wouldn’t be caught with a less-than-impeccable tie.”

Austin: “I take pride in my appearance. Which leaves Rico’s zipper…”

Jenny: “Why the need to implicate him? Rico wouldn’t commit suicide this close to the end, I think.”

Lily: “Out of all of us, I think he wanted out the most.”

Austin: “It’s insulting that the killer would do such a thing to him.”

Rufus: “SICARIUM!”

Austin: “So that’s the evidence. What’s the conclusion?”

Lily: “Umm…was anyone really ruled out? It seems like we all could do it, desu.”

Taylor: “Then what else do we have to go on? There wasn’t anything incriminating in the Auditorium. Just those messages.”

Austin: “Wait…where did you find that computer from earlier?”

Taylor: “Huh?”

Jenny: “In one of the rooms backstage.”

Rufus: “ECCE!”

Taylor: “Jesus, do you need to shout that?”

Rufus: “That was the missing piece.”

Austin: “He speaks.”

Lily: “Rufus-kun! Are you all better now?”

Rufus: “My heart feels like it’s been torn in half, but I understand everything now.”

Taylor: “Good God, it’s about time. We’ve been floundering without your help.”

Rufus: “Well, you’ll have to be patient, because I’m not going to tell you who it is.”

Jenny: “You…aren’t?”

Rufus: “Not yet, anyway. This time here is for the killer to plead their case and convince me to forgive them.”

Lily: “You expect them to give themself up? Why would they do that?”

Rufus: “If my reasoning’s correct, they won’t be able to avoid outing who they are. The least they can do is to do so with dignity.”

Taylor: “I forgot that Rufus never stopped talking during these trials…”
Jenny: “Then what do you propose that we begin doing?”

Rufus: “Begin discussing why Rico *had* to die. I’ll weigh in with my opinion if it seems necessary.”

Austin: “So…motive.”

Taylor: “You don’t mean…do you think Rico was killed because someone was going after Monobear’s latest incentive?”

Lily: “I thought we denied it; it wouldn’t be a thing anymore.”

Jenny: “Umm, Monobear, do you have the answer for this?”

Monobear: “Technically speaking, I never did take the offer off the table, so it’s still free for grabs. Maybe two of you will leave here after all. Oh no! I had such hope in all of you that I assumed you’d figure it all out! I’m so ashamed of myself!”

Austin: “That makes things a little more interesting…”

Taylor: “So two people could get out, big deal. Isn’t the rule that you’re not allowed to know who the killer is, though?”

Jenny: “But if you figure it out, I think it would be possible to skew the voting so that your friend wins…”

Austin: “There’s no guarantee they’d take you, though.”

Lily: “Yeah, we’re all such good friends; it’d be impossible to choose who to take with you, desu.”

Taylor: “Or would it, Lily? You and Jenny are practically connected at the hip. One of you could easily save the other.”

Lily: “*Nani*?! We would never do such a thing!”

Jenny: “Taylor, you and Austin are rather fond of each other, as well.”

Austin: “She does have a point, there.”

Taylor: “As if I would kill Rico to save Austin’s sorry ass. No offense, but you’re not worth it.”

Austin: “The feeling’s mutual.”

Lily: “Then that leaves Rufus-kun…”

Jenny: “We certainly would not expect him to attack his best friend…”

Taylor: “He is acting rather calmly after saying he’s got it all figured out.”

Rufus: “*Ita*, but why did Rico *have* to die?”

Austin: “You keep emphasizing that word. Rico had to die because somebody had to die for the murderer to get the incentive.”

Lily: “Wait, I think I kinda get it.”

Jenny: “You do?”
Lily: “There must have been something special about Rico. We all know Rufus is super smart, so if the killer was trying to fool us, he would be the most obvious target.”

Taylor: “What could have been special about Rico?”

Jenny: “Did he know something that he should not have known?”

Taylor: “We wouldn’t know anyway! All we have is the nice array the killer left for us.”

Jenny: “That and the note to the Auditorium.”

Taylor: “But we didn’t find anything in the Auditorium that connects to the case!”

Austin: “Unless that’s what Rico knew that he shouldn’t have.”

Lily: “Nani?”

Austin: “He read the e-mails, and he wasn’t supposed to, so the killer had to get rid of him.”

Jenny: “Are you insinuating that the, umm, the Liar has something to do with this?”

Taylor: “I think there’s more assuming being done than insinuating.”

Rufus: “I will relate that Austin is insinuating rather well.”

Lily: “So this is it…this is when the Liar is revealed…”

Jenny: “…I didn’t think that they would harm us…we all have gotten along so well…”

Lily: “Then Rico…he died because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

Taylor: “But wait! Rico wouldn’t have read that stuff if he hadn’t been told to go there! The killer had to have picked him out beforehand.”

Rufus: “There’s one important clue you’re overlooking.”

Austin: “Give us a hint.”

Rufus: “It has to do with the Auditorium.”

Jenny: “The Auditorium…all that was there was the computer and soundboard…”

Lily: “The soundboard’s in the back, and the computer’s in the wings, right?”

Taylor: “Yeah, but in a…shit. In a locked room.”

Austin: “But it wasn’t locked when you investigated?”

Jenny: “The door was open.”

Lily: “Then Rico read the e-mails, and the killer found out, so they got rid of him.”

Taylor: “But how did he unlock the door? He found a key?”

Austin: “I doubt Monobear would lock a door and then leave the key out for us to find.”

Monobear: “You’ve got that right! I can’t turn my back on you brats for two seconds without you
destroying my precious mall—which is against the rules, I might add! I don’t tolerate vandalism.”

Austin: “Oh, now I get it.”

Lily: “I think I do too.”

Austin: “It wasn’t Rico who opened the door; it was the killer.”

Lily: “And they broke the rules, so starting the mutual killing game was the only way…the only way that they could avoid punishment…execution…”

Taylor: “The whole ‘If I’m going down, I’m taking someone down with me,’ idea.”

Jenny: “Does that tell us who the killer is, though?”

Taylor: “…no, I guess it doesn’t…”

Rufus: “The killer was kind enough to out themself already, though.”

Jenny: “Th-they did? When?”

Rufus: “Austin, you were the one in charge of all the clues. Which one doesn’t make any sense?”

Austin: “Apron, bow, bracelet, sweater, tie, and zipper. They’re all articles of clothing.”

Lily: “And each identifies a certain member of our group.”

Taylor: “What do you mean ‘it doesn’t make sense?’ None of them make any sense.”

Jenny: “I think I have an idea. If Lily put Rico in the pool, then she might have gotten a bow wet.”

Austin: “Thus that clue would make sense.”

Taylor: “And the tarnished bracelet would suggest that there was some sort of struggle.”

Austin: “No one is poisoned willingly.”

Taylor: “And the same goes for Rufus’s sweater.”

Austin: “And the only way that tie could have been marred is during some kind of altercation.”

Lily: “And Jenny’s apron would just come from another struggle, desu. Th-they all still make sense, right?”

Jenny: “That is not what Rufus is implying…”

Austin: “So if they each implicate us, and it’s not supposed to make sense, that means the item doesn’t implicate the person.”

Taylor: “How’s that supposed to—oh…shit…I get it…”

Jenny: “Y-you do?”

Austin: “Geez, it’s been staring us in the face this entire time…”

Jenny: “H-has it?”
Taylor: “I…I think I know who did it…”

Austin: “Me too…”

Rufus: “Took you long enough.”

Jenny: “Th-then who is it?”

Taylor: “Jesus…I don’t want to believe it…but the killer is—”

Lily: “Me! It was me! I did it!”

Jenny: “Lily?”

Lily: “Yeah, I admit it, alright, it was me, d-desu. I killed Rico-kun…”

Taylor: “But that’s not—”

Lily: “You pointed out the right evidence. Everyone’s clue suggested a struggle—except for mine. See? You can’t argue with the facts, desu.”

Austin: “But why admit it?”

Lily: “Umm, well, I thought it would be better to go out on my own terms. Yeah, that’s it, my own terms. Not make a fuss like Delilah or Elizabeth, but just take the normal route, you know? Heh… heh heh…”

Jenny: “…Lily…”

Rufus: “So you’re the killer, huh? Tell me, why did you do it to poor Rico?”

Lily: “Y-you guys already figured that out, yeah? I broke down the door in the Auditorium, but I forgot that was against the rules, so I had to take the quickest way out, and that meant…killing Rico-kun…”

Taylor: “Jesus…”

Austin: “I find that hard to believe…”

Jenny: “…Lily…”

Lily: “J-Jenny-chan…I am gomen—”

Jenny: “I thought you knew better.”

Lily: “H-huh?”

Jenny: “Look at you. The Lily I know would never behave like this.”

Lily: “I-I am gomen…”

Jenny: “But not for killing Rico.”

Rufus: “…interesting…”

Taylor: “Jenny! How could you say something like that! Just look at Lily! She’s so shaken up about this.”
Austin: “It’s like Theo’s case; they didn’t have a choice, and they’re both very sorry.”

Taylor: “She’s already fessed up, so there’s no point in beating a dead horse.”

Jenny: “I know for a fact that Lily is not sorry about murdering Rico.”

Rufus: “Tell me, how so?”

Jenny: “Because I am the one responsible for Rico’s murder.”

Lily: “Jenny-chan!”

Rufus: “There we go.”

Austin: “Does that mean two people killed Rico?”

Jenny: “No. I alone am responsible; Lily is innocent.”

Lily: “Don’t listen to her! She’s lying!”

Jenny: “Lily, stop that. It’s not like you.”

Austin: “Two confessions…who are we supposed to believe?”

Taylor: “First off, who would lie about being the killer in the first place?”

Rufus: “Someone who wanted someone else to live.”

Taylor: “So Lily and Jenny…are we supposed to assume that Lily is protecting Jenny and vice versa?”

Austin: “But protecting them just means that the killer lives while the rest of us are executed.”

Jenny: “You forget Monobear’s incentive.”

Taylor: “But whoever’s taken along isn’t allowed to know who the killer is. If Lily’s protecting Jenny, then she knows that Jenny is the killer, and the same if Jenny is protecting Lily.”

Monobear: “I really won’t know who everybody thinks is the killer until they cast their votes at the end of the trial.”

Taylor: “Alright, girls, which one of you are we supposed to believe?”

Lily: “Me, desu!”

Jenny: “I assure you that I am the one who is telling the truth.”

Rufus: “We have heard why Lily thinks the evidence convicts her, well, doesn’t convict her. Jenny, what is your spin on the story?”

Jenny: “There is blood on the apron.”

Austin: “The struggle theory.”

Jenny: “But where did the blood come from? Rico’s body is unscathed.”

Lily: “Any blood could have been easily cleaned up; it still implicates you.”
Jenny: “If that is true, then how did I manage to kill Rico while surrounded by enough blood to stain an apron?”

Austin: “Haemophobia…”

Jenny: “It makes no sense for me to have done it.”

Taylor: “And so that means that you had to have done it…”

Lily: “No, no, she’s lying! If you want out of here, you have to convict me!”

Jenny: “Lily, please, stop.”

Lily: “But…but…”

Rufus: “Indulge us. Why, Jenny, did you do it?”

Jenny: “I needed to know what was behind that locked door. Monobear was keeping a secret from us, and I wanted to know what that secret was. In the back of my mind, I was hoping that it was an exit, but it was just some files. Still, I think those files are important, and I think that they will be crucial to solving this mystery.”

Taylor: “Did you find a key to the door or something?”

Jenny: “No. I picked the lock.”

Austin: “You know how to do that?”

Jenny: “Yes. Everyone, I think it is time that you know something about me. I am not Jennifer Zemenovski, All-Star Sandwich Artist. I am Jennifer Zemenovski, All-Star Spy. All this time, I have been the Liar.”

Lily: “She’s still lying to you, everyone! Jenny, don’t take the fall for me; I don’t want that anymore. I’m actually the Liar, desu. I am All-Star Despair! You know how they say that the people who smile the biggest are the most broken, well, I dare you to smile wider than me!”

Rufus: “Have you any proof to your claim?”

Lily: “Just look at me, umm, upupu. Ahh, I’m totally despairing over here.”

Rufus: “Jenny?”

Jenny: “Lily, when the secrets were handed out, you received mine. What did it say?”

Lily: “I…I don’t remember.”

Taylor: “You don’t remember, or you don’t want to remember?”

Austin: “It’s more suspicious if you don’t tell us.”

Lily: “I don’t think it means anything, but it said that Jenny was a member of the KGB.”

Rufus: “I never imagined it went that far…”

Taylor: “So that All-Star Spy bit…you weren’t lying.”

Jenny: “I have only told the truth this entire time.”
Austin: “This is so messed up…”

Rufus: “So Jenny is our murderer. Why not say so earlier?”

Jenny: “I needed to make sure that you discussed the importance of what was hidden in the Auditorium.”

Taylor: “I’m not following.”

Jenny: “Let me start from the beginning…”

Everyone had split up to ready themselves for the approaching trial. Each had gone to their own retreat. Jenny was at ease in the Garden, but her mind would not settle to her liking. Rufus and Lily had said that the doors in the wings of the Auditorium stage had remained locked. Something was hidden behind there, and Monobear didn’t want them to know what it was. Jenny had to know what it was—it could be crucial to their escape.

Slipping out of the Garden, Jenny made her way to the Auditorium and then to the stage. She stared down the door for a minute or so. Lifting her hat up, Jenny pulled a bobby pin out of her hair; she had been taught to always be prepared. Feeling her way through the lock, Jenny adeptly tricked the tumblers and pushed the door open.

The room inside contained little more than a computer. Silently, stealthily, she booted up the PC and began digging through the hard drive for anything. Someone had left their e-mail in an easily hackable state, and so Jenny jumped at the opportunity. The material was interesting to say the least. She made a mental note of where the files were located and continued searching elsewhere. Soon she found a control panel that seemed to be linked to the soundboard in the back of the Auditorium. She had hardly switched it on when she felt the presence of a cold shadow in the room.

She spun around to see Monobear grinning ruefully at her. They stared at each other.

“Well, well, well…what do we have here?” asked the bear. Jenny stood her ground in silent protestation. “Someone’s gotten somewhere that they shouldn’t be. And you’ve dismantled my little door. Didn’t you know that desecrating the mall is against the rules? And I’m sure you know what I do to those who break the rules. Upupu…”

A single bead of sweat trickled down Jenny’s temple. “No. You can’t do that to me.”

“It’s the rules, dear. I’m afraid your execution is imminent.”

“No. I won’t let you do this.”

“You’re determined. I like that. You haven’t completely given in to despair yet. I wonder…I bet I could make you fall further. Alright, I’ll let you off the hook under one condition.”

“Don’t toy with me. What is it?”

“You must commit a murder.”

“…fine.”

“But it has to be the first person you meet after you leave here.”
“That’s not fair!”

“Says the girl who broke the rules! And you gotta pull this off before the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair begins, or else we’ll start the festivities with your execution!” Cackling, Monobear slunk back into the shadows from whence he came.

Alone in the room, Jenny slunk down against the wall. The tears came naturally. She had just wanted to cover all the bases. She just wanted to ensure that her friends had all the information they could get. The six of them were supposed to leave together, but that was no longer possible. What was she going to do?

Her head spinning, Jenny stumbled out of the wings and out of the Auditorium. She was so lost in her thoughts that she had no idea where she was. Her mind was cloudy with Monobear’s ominous portent. But then Rico’s voice snapped her out of her reverie.

“Yo-o! Jenny! What’re you up to? You ready for the trial? Not much longer and we’ll all be out of these stupid walls.”

Jenny rushed forward and embraced Rico, tears streaming down her cheeks; she would never be able to go through with this.

“Jenny? What’s the matter? It’s going to be okay.”

Jenny pulled away from Rico and looked him in the eyes. “No, Rico, it’s not. I messed up.”

“Hu-uh? What do you mean ‘you messed up?’”

“I messed up big time; I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

“Forge you? For what?”

“For what I’m about to do. Rico…I’m going to kill myself.”

“Wha-at? What are you talking about? Don’t say things like that!”

“I…I don’t have a choice.”

“I don’t understand; what are you talking about?”

“I broke a school rule…and Monobear said he’ll execute me unless I murder someone—the first person I meet, actually. But…I can’t do that, so I’m going to go down on my own terms.”

“Yo-o, Jenny, that’s not funny. Don’t joke about that kind of thing.”

“I wish I were joking…”

“What rule did you break?”

“I broke into the backstage wing door in the Auditorium, and Monobear caught me. I wasn’t supposed to be there, so he’s going to punish me.”

“Jenny…I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“I… I don’t think so. Maybe…can you tell the others I’m sorry? I don’t want them to think less of me.”
“Yeah, of course. I’m sorry…what did you find back there?”

“Some e-mails. I wish I’d had more time to investigate. There was information about our kidnapper there, I’m sure. It would be useful during the trial, I think.”

“…and he’s just going to lock that all up again so we’ll never get to see it again…”

“I am so sorry that I have to cause you all grief so close to the end…you all mean so much to me…”

“…Jenny, you broke into that room once, so you could break into it again, right?”

“Umm, sure, I suppose so. But it doesn’t matter because I won’t get another chance to before the Final Trial.”

“Unless you murdered someone.”

“Yes, unless I murdered someone. But that doesn’t matter because I would never think of doing that.”

“Unless you murdered me.”

“Rico…what are you…?”

“If you killed me, you would be able to get that evidence to everyone.”

“I couldn’t! I won’t.”

“Jenny, listen: this thing is bigger than you…it’s bigger than me.”

“Please, don’t.”

“Jenny, I think you should kill me. That way we can be sure to protect our friends. Their lives mean more to me than my own.”

“They mean a lot to me as well…”

“Then you can do it.”

“N-never!”

“Jenny! Listen to me! I want you to do this. I want everyone to get out of here safely—with or without me.”

“You…you would throw away your life like that?”

“It sounds to me like you’re going to throw away your life, too. If you take me with you, then we can give them a boost they wouldn’t otherwise get.”

“You are serious, then?”

“Dead serious. Shit, sorry, I misspoke.”

“I…I…”

“This way we can beat Monobear. He’s caused us enough grief; this time, we’re playing by our own rules.”
“…then what happens to me afterward?”

“You go to the trial. After they get the info you found, you turn yourself in.”

“…I don’t have a way out of this…”

“So make the most out of the time you have left.”

“I…if you’re sure…”

“I am.”

“…okay…”

“Don’t worry; I’ll be waiting for you on the other side.”

“It…it’ll be okay, won’t it?”

“Yeah. So how do you, uhh, want to do this?”

Jenny: “I used the chloroform to put him under before I gave him the injection. It happened just like they told me it would. He didn’t feel any pain. It was very peaceful. I didn’t want to leave his body on the ground, so I laid him in the pool. I needed to make sure there was something there that incriminated me, but I couldn’t make it too obvious, so I put forth the different clothes, taken from the Department Store. I quickly wrote a note to take us to the Auditorium, and then I met everyone at the food court. And now we’re here. I hope you understand.”

Lily: “Jenny…”

Taylor: “Rico…”

Austin: “Wow…”

Rufus: “His heart always was in the right place. One last question, for the sake of curiosity: how did you get the blood on your apron?”

Jenny: “We all have our scars…I would like to keep this one covered.”

Rufus: “Fair enough.”

Jenny: “Then…this is it. There is no point in dragging this out any longer. I think it is time to vote.”

Lily: “Jenny-chan!!”

Jenny: “Lily, no, don’t cry.”

Lily: “Wahh! I don’t want you to go, desu!”

Jenny: “I’m sorry, Lily. I don’t want to go either. I wish I could just stay here with you, but that’s not what’s going to happen. Be strong, Lily. Be the strong, strong girl I know you are.”

Lily: “N-no! It’s not too late! I could still have done it, you know!”

Jenny: “Lily, please. I don’t want to see you crying. I’m doing this for you, okay? You mean the
world to me, and so I want to make sure that you get the world. Let me see you smile, okay? Let your smile be the last thing I see.”

Lily: “I…I…I’m going to miss you, Jenny-chan.”

Jenny: “I’ll miss you too, Lily, but it’ll be okay. You’ll see. We might be apart for just a little bit, but we’ll see each other again someday. So until then, there’ll be no more tears.”

Lily: “I…I won’t forget you, Jenny-chan! You’re my best friend. I’ll get out of here, and live a life twice as good for the both of us!”

Jenny: “Everyone, thank you for letting me get to know all of you. I’m sorry things have to end this way, but I’ll always treasure the happy times we spent together. Do something great for me. Okay, Monobear, I think it’s time to vote.”

Monobear: “Upupu…what a story. Alright then, kiddies, you heard the Spy. Let’s get to voting!”

It was the most somber vote yet. There was less uncertainty with this one, but that didn’t make the ordeal any easier to complete. One by one, the five students cast their votes and waited for Monobear’s declaration.

Monobear: “Well? I hardly doubt that this announcement will surprise you, but now that I’ve tallied the votes, I can say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jennifer Zemenovski is, in fact, GUILTY of the murder of Rico de Naranjas! Upupupu! Is there anything that the guilty party wants to say before they face their punishment?”

Jenny: “I think I have said my piece. Yes, I am at peace now. Good luck everyone. Don’t shed any tears of sadness now, only tears of happiness.”

Monobear: “Alrighty then. Now, I have prepared a special punishment for the murderer! This masterpiece is titled ‘Behind the Smokescreen of the Smoking Gun.’ Upupupu!”

Monobear led Jenny into the execution chamber. The others couldn’t watch, but they also couldn’t take their eyes off their friend. Jenny stood on the platform, her hands held behind her back. She bowed her head slightly and closed her eyes. She thought about Lily and the rest of her friends. It made her feel warm.

From the other side of the execution chamber, a giant Gatling gun was lowered from the ceiling. Monobear jumped up and straddled the barrel. From the top of the top barrel, Monobear produced a rifle. Attaching a laser scope to the top, he took aim at the Spy.

The first bullet hit her cap and blew it off. The force of the impact dislodged Jenny’s ponytail, and her hair fell delicately about her face. The second bullet cut the strings of her apron so that she no longer could hide behind the cloth. Her apron fell to the ground at her feet.

The third bullet went straight through her heart. It was difficult to see the blood on her red shirt, so it was as if she hadn’t been shot at all. She felt pain for a moment, but it quickly went away. She staggered forward a step. She was getting awfully dizzy awfully quickly. Her body felt very heavy. She stumbled forward again before falling to her knees and then fully to the ground.

Jenny’s mind was fuzzy, and she was getting tired. She started to drift off to sleep. She thought about Lily’s smile; her dreams would be marked by the happy faces of her friends.

Her heart beat one last time.
Monobear cackled menacingly. “Upupupu! Well? The show’s over! Get back to your stations!”

In a daze, the four remaining students wandered back into the trial room. With barely no time having passed, an icon had already been erected in Jenny’s spot, her face covered by a red X in the shape of a breadknife crossed with a rifle.
Chapter 6--The Tricked and the Deceived--Part 11

Monobear: “Well, kiddies, now that that pesky business has been taken care of, it’s just you and me now.”

Taylor: “Jesus, our friend just died. Can you give us a minute to grieve in peace?”

Monobear: “And miss seeing you struggle to fight despair? I don’t think so!”

Austin: “So we’re actually doing the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair now?”

Monobear: “You bet we are! We can’t let all that investigating go to waste, now, can we?”

Lily: “N-no, we can’t. We have to keep going—for Jenny’s sake.”

Monobear: “Upupupu! Isn’t this exciting! It all comes down to this! The final hour!”

Rufus: “To be more specific, your final hour.”

Monobear: “That’s pretty big talk for a simpleton. We’ll just have to see if you can put your money where your mouth is. Without further ado, I declare the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair in session! Prepare to despair!”

Taylor: “Fine! Then do your worst!”

Austin: “I actually plan on staying awake through all of this.”

Lily: “I’m going to be strong and win this for Jenny, desu!”

Rufus: “And not just for Jenny, but for Rico and all the others.”

Monobear: “Upupu…if that’s how you feel, so be it! Let me lay out how this trial is going to go. Instead of all of you ganging up on some killer, I’ll be your antagonist. I have six simple questions for you. You can debate what you think the answers are to your hearts’ content, but you must all agree on one definitive answer. If you get them all right, then I’ll be a bear of my word and let you free; but if you’re wrong even once…then it’s curtains for the whole lot of you! So…do we have a deal?”

Taylor: “Damn straight we do.”

Austin: “We’ll get it right, I’m not yawn worried.”

Lily: “Nipah! I won’t let Jenny down, so I’m all aboard!”

Rufus: “If you think you can hide my excellence from the world any longer, then you’re sorely mistaken. Let’s get this show on the road already.”

Monobear: “Have it your way. Since this is your last test, allow me to present you with your six questions. All-Star Test Takers will know that you don’t have to answer the questions in order. If you’re stuck, skip to one that you know you can answer and come back to the rest later. Whoops! I forgot one little thing! Yes, I have six questions, but you must actually answer the first five before you can answer the last one.”

Taylor: “What-ever! Get on with it!”
Monobear: “Question number one: Why were you taken to this mall? Question number two: Who is responsible for taking you here? Question number tres: What is your connection to Success Summit? Four question number: What has happened to you? And five number question: What has happened to the outside world?”

Lily: “Th—that doesn’t seem so bad, right?”

Austin: “I’m just glad he didn’t ask us a question about when two trains leaving different stations would collide with each other.”

Rufus: “Why in the world would he ask that?”

Austin: “He’s Monobear; he’s done stranger things before.”

Rufus: “Hmm…but who exactly is Monobear?”

Taylor: “You mean who kidnapped us?”

Lily: “That’s simple enough: it was Monobear!”

Monobear: “Guilty as charged.”

Taylor: “But that’s not the answer you’re looking for.”

Monobear: “As the proctor of this exam, I can say that you do need to be more specific if you wish to obtain all points possible.”

Rufus: “Then I have one more question for you. In the trials before, the killers were always active participants. Am I to assume that this will be the same case?”

Monobear: “To an extent. But don’t think I’m going to just give away the answers! Upupu!”

Austin: “So…who kidnapped us?”

Rufus: “Well, what evidence do we have?”

Taylor: “If I’m to believe that the clues we found point to any one person, then there must be a connection to the people featured in the newspaper articles.”

Lily: “We didn’t find any newspapers, desu.”

Austin: “Jenny and I found two. The first talked about some guy Cimber and a military coup, and the other was about this other guy Tuffwynd and his global weather service.”

Taylor: “Rico and I also found articles. The first was about this lady magician; I think they called her ‘Dazzle.’ The other was super hard to read and talked about some scientist named Kaducius and how he was providing therapy through, like, comas.”

Lily: “So those are the people who kidnapped us!”

Rufus: “That’s certainly a possibility, but couldn’t those articles just pertain to ‘what happened to the world?’”

Austin: “You have a point.”

Rufus: “If I’ve said it in one trial, I’ve said it in them all, d—”
Taylor: “‘Don’t be hasty.’ Yeah, we got it.”

Rufus: “Can anyone else think of anything that explains who took us here?”

Lily: “Not really…but I have a question. About Jenny. Since Jenny was the Liar, and since she was an All-Star Spy, that means she wasn’t All-Star Despair, right?”

Austin: “That makes sense.”

Lily: “Then who is All-Star Despair?”

Taylor: “Don’t you tell me that one of you is also a Liar; I couldn’t handle that.”

Monobear: “Miss Zemenovski was the only liar among your little party.”

Austin: “Then All-Star Despair is definitely not one of us.”

Lily: “That’s a relief.”

Taylor: “That’s great, but it leaves another mystery for us to solve.”

Austin: “At least we don’t have to solve it to pass Monobear’s test.”

Rufus: “I have a feeling that we’ll have to figure it out anyway in order to solve one of the other problems.”

Monobear: “Really? What makes you think that?”

Taylor: “Well that practically confirms it.”

Austin: “So…who or what is All-Star Despair?”

Taylor: “Maybe there’s an easier question for us to answer first.”

Lily: “How about our connection to Success Summit? We’ve got that one pretty much figured out already, right?”

Rufus: “From what we saw from the videos. It’s nearly impossible to prove that we never did attend that school.”

Austin: “Then our connection is that we were students of Success Summit. That also means that our talents are legitimate, that we’re exceptional students.”

Lily: “Then what about the All-Star Psychologist? And didn’t Austin mention an All-Star Lawyer in his video?”

Rufus: “They were probably members of a different class. We were set to be—and must have been—members of the forty-fifth class.”

Taylor: “Then we’re not alone; there’s other classes.”

Lily: “But maybe the Psychologist and Lawyer graduated already, and we’re the only real All-Star students left.”

Rufus: “They could always be in a class below us.”

Austin: “But we’re freshmen, aren’t we? The last thing I remember before waking up here was
preparing for freshman orientation.”

Lily: “But what about the thing with Markus-kun? Could a boy go through that drastic a voice change in just a year?”

Rufus: “I highly doubt it…”

Austin: “Then I guess we’re not freshmen after all. I wonder what we are…”

Taylor: “Actually…Austin, how old are you?”

Austin: “Me? Fifteen. But I guess I’m not if we’re not freshmen.”

Taylor: “Then how old would you be in 2012?”

Austin: “I’d be eighteen.”

Taylor: “And in a school, that would make you either a junior or senior.”

Lily: “But in 2012 I would only be turning seventeen!”

Rufus: “Who cares how old we would be in 2012?”

Taylor: “Rico and I found some calendars in the Monobear store marked for 2012. I highly doubt he would stock calendars that couldn’t be used by anyone, so it must actually be 2012, not 2009 like we thought.”

Rufus: “Then since Austin is eighteen and Lily is seventeen, then that would assert that we are the senior class, a mixture of seventeen and eighteen-year-olds.”

Lily: “So the Psychologist and Lawyer are younger than us.”

Rufus: “Not necessarily. They could’ve been ahead of us and graduated.”

Taylor: “Either way, we know that we weren’t alone in the school.”

Austin: “Is that enough, though? Our connection to Success Summit is that we were—are the senior class.”

Lily: “What more could it be?”

Taylor: “Actually I’m thinking.”

Rufus: “Shocker.”

Taylor: “Now is not the time for that! The article I read about the scientist. It said he had a way of messing up people’s memories or something. What if we weren’t actually in the class? What if we were just made to believe that?”

Austin: “We already have the videos, and on top of that there was the class photo that we found and the transcripts and medical forms. Those were real, tangible things. We couldn’t have dreamed those up.”

Lily: “Monobear could have just fabricated them, desu. He’s gotten his hands on strange blueprints, so why couldn’t he forge a couple of documents? Photoshop’s not even that hard to use.”
Rufus: “You’re asking if we can believe if anything is true. We have to assume it is. What other alternative could there be? We’re not All-Stars? This is some fuck’s sick joke? We have fought too hard to get here and we have lost too many friends for this all to be one big lie. We are the senior class of Success Summit.”

Lily: “When you put it that way, it makes sense. Yeah, only I could be the All-Star Kawaii, and only Elizabeth could’ve been an All-Star Historian!”

Rufus: “Then we’re all agreed?”

Taylor: “I guess I can’t object.”

Austin: “It sounds okay to me.”

Lily: “Let’s do it!”

Rufus: “Alright, Monobear, our connection to Success Summit is this: not only are we the forty-fifth class, but we are also the senior class.”

Monobear: “Is that your final answer?”

Lily: “Desu!”

Monobear: “Let’s see then…your grade for that question is…hmm…passing…”

Lily: “We got it!”

Rufus: “As if there was any doubt.”

Taylor: “One question down, five more to go.”

Austin: “So where do we go from here?”

Rufus: “Let’s use the knowledge that we have as a fact to move forward.”

Austin: “We’re the senior class. What else does that tell us?”

Taylor: “Let’s explore what happened to us. Obviously we’ve had our memories tampered with somehow, and I bet it has something to do with that Kaducius dude.”

Lily: “What good does wiping our memories do?”

Austin: “We never would have killed each other if we realized that we already knew each other. We were friends; it would’ve been impossible. It got hard enough for us at the end, and that was only after knowing each other for a week or two.”

Taylor: “That can’t be all that happened to us, though.”

Lily: “Would it make sense to discuss the blueprints now? There’re an awful lot of them, desu.”

Rufus: “Rico and I found a set for Success Summit. There were several arrows all drawn over it, and several of the classrooms had been circled.”

Austin: “How many lines and circles?”

Rufus: “Five to be precise. Four went to classrooms, while the fifth went to the principal’s office
on the top floor.”

Taylor: “So the entire thing was scribbled over?”

Rufus: “That is correct. Like someone had been using it to plan something.”

Taylor: “That’s weird, because Austin and I found one that wasn’t marked at all.”

Rufus: “So you could actually tell what was in the school?”

Austin: “It was a pretty swanky place, too. There were a lot of, like, things.”

Rufus: “That’s so specific.”

Taylor: “It reminded me of the mall, actually. Laundry facilities, eating areas—not to mention a fully furnished dorm.”

Lily: “That does sound familiar. I saw three other sets of blueprints: one for a campground, one for a military base, and another for a hotel, and they all had those basic things in common.”

Austin: “It wouldn’t be that bad to go camping; there’s not much to do besides lounge around and relax.”

Taylor: “No, you’d get bored of it. I thought a mall was going to be a great thing, but look how this has turned out.”

Lily: “The military place sounds really boring, though.”

Rufus: “And how is any of this relevant to what happened to us? I believe we were discussing Success Summit.”

Lily: “Well, we got taken to a place with similar amenities to the school, so there has to be a connection there.”

Austin: “Counting the mall, Lily’s blueprints make four places away from the school. If we’re the senior class, then that means there would three classes below us. The numbers match.”

Taylor: “Four classes, four locations…and four newspaper articles. Shit. You don’t think—”

Austin: “We’re not the only game of mutual killing.”

Lily: “That’s so kowai! There can’t be more people in the same set-up as us!”

Taylor: “The message that Jenny found for us…Sparky is in one of those games. I imagine it’s safe to bet that there are sixteen kids in each class. Sparky said that there were ten of them left…”

Rufus: “So the game is working elsewhere. It’s not an isolated incident.”

Austin: “But if they’re anything like us, then I bet the other students are finding a way to escape their predicament as well. They would be All-Stars, after all.”

Rufus: “Ita, I’m sure you’re right.”

Austin: “Then we were taken here and others were taken to other places, but by whom?”

Taylor: “The people from the articles.”
Lily: “But that’s so random—and I should know! Who are these people?”

Rufus: “Do you think…could it be All-Star Despair? I encountered a packet in Japanese with Rico that discussed some sort of computer simulation, and the users were collectively known as, essentially, All-Star Despair.”

Lily: “And I remember reading something similar with Jenny that talked about an All-Star Despair Mastermind, and that they were actually a student involved in a mutual killing game.”

Taylor: “And neither of you thought to bring this up earlier?”

Rufus: “I’m still getting out of my pharmaceutical fugue; I have an excuse.”

Lily: “It was a really weird article, and it didn’t make much sense to me until nowish.”

Austin: “So is All-Star Despair a person or a group?”

Taylor: “Maybe it could be both.”

Rufus: “There was more to my article as well. The players were drawn into the simulation by the forces of a group known as the Future Foundation, supposedly the antithesis of All-Star Despair.”

Taylor: “Did you say Future Foundation? In the e-mail correspondence Jenny had me read, the one guy seemed very vexed about the Future Foundation. I think they were talking about Sparky’s message and how he got it broadcasted and how the Future Foundation was using that to track them down.”

Austin: “Then the Future Foundation could be trying to find us right now.”

Lily: “They’re sure taking their time, desu!”

Austin: “If the goal of the Future Foundation is to thwart All-Star Despair, and they’re trying to help us, then All-Star Despair must be what’s keeping us here.”

Lily: “And since there are four people for four facilities, it must be more than just one person.”

Taylor: “Wait, I think we’ve answered two questions. We know what happened to us.”

Rufus: “We had our memories altered and dumped here.”

Taylor: “And the ‘who’ who brought us here is All-Star Despair.”

Lily: “I am not so sure of the first part. Okay, so All-Star Despair brought us here, but how exactly did they do that? When we woke up on that very first day, we were all fully clothed. Lizzie was even wearing that giant dress of hers! How could all of that have happened?”

Rufus: “I suppose that has to do with when our minds were assaulted. I can only imagine that that had to have occurred right before we woke up. We were transported here, hypnotized, and then set into motion.”

Lily: “But why would we have agreed to come here in the first place? Why did we physically allow ourselves to be taken here?”

Taylor: “All-Star Despair must be pretty powerful if they can make such a terrible thing like this happen while evading the Future Foundation.”
Lily: “I don’t care how tough they are, desu! Elizabeth-chan would have put up a fight; that I know for sure! And I bet Cody-kun would have protested, and especially Melissa-chan and James-kun. We never would have given in to demands by some crazy terrorist group!”

Monobear: “Crazy terrorist group? You hurt my feelings.”

Taylor: “Don’t interrupt; it’s rude.”

Austin: “I think Monobear may have given us the answer to your question, Lily, without realizing it.”

Monobear: “What? I did no such thing!”

Austin: “Way back when, he mentioned something about the world being destroyed. I remember, because he yelled at Jordan when she called him out on it. The article I read with Jenny about the military guy talked about a lot of unrest and turmoil in the country. If the world had essentially ‘been destroyed,’ then it would make sense for us to hide out in a place like this.”

Rufus: “It is packed to the brim with the supplies we’d need to survive for however long we would need to lie low. And while that is a pleasant idea, I have my own qualms. In my blueprint of the school, it looked like an attack.”

Lily: “All this talk—how did we get here??”

Rufus: “I imagine the assault took us all by surprise. If Jenny could find the ingredients for chloroform in this mall—items which Monobear had to supply for us—then it’s certainly possible that All-Star Despair has access to powerful chemicals. For all intents and purposes, they could have knocked us out with sleeping gas, altered our memories, and left us in the South Sector.”

Taylor: “I actually really like that theory.”

Rufus: “Quid? I was just spouting some hypothesis.”

Austin: “You gotta admit, though, that it makes a lot of sense.”

Lily: “Yeah, I feel much better about how we got here if that’s our explanation.”

Rufus: “And you’re willing to go with that?”

Taylor: “Yeah. So, if I’m not mistaken, that means we definitely have answer for two questions: who kidnapped us and what happened to us.”

Austin: “I’m fine with what we’ve discussed.”

Rufus: “If it’s unanimous, I won’t object.”

Lily: “Sounds good to me.”

Taylor: “Alright, Monobear, listen up! The people who kidnapped us and brought us here belong to the group known as All-Star Despair! And this is what happened to us: we were snatched out of Success Summit, treated medically to fuck up our memories, and then left in the mall.”

Monobear: “How bold to answer two questions in one go. You must really believe in your All-Star title. Well, if those are your answers, then I have no choice but to tell you that they are, in fact, the answers that are…correct…”
Austin: “Halfway done; we can do this.”

Lily: “I still want to know who Monobear is. There were four people, so which one of them is our Monobear? Or are they all our Monobear?”

Rufus: “It’s not a question that needs to be answered in order for us to win, so you don’t have any reason to shield your identity from us, Monobear. Be a nice little bear and reveal yourself.”

Taylor: “Yeah, I’d really like to know who I’m talking to.”

Austin: “I’ll admit that I’m curious as well.”

Monobear: “Upupu…are you sure that’s what you want? The truth can be pretty startling sometimes. Are you sure your constitutions will be able to withstand such a revelation?”

Rufus: “Stop dragging it out. You haven’t got anything to lose.”

Monobear: “Nothing to lose? I’ve got the Future Foundation breathing down my neck! I’ve had to be careful with every little thing I’ve done heretofore, and you just expect me to give that all up so that you can have some information that means nothing to you?”

Rufus: “You’re the one who’s always harking on about how great despair is; this is your chance to feel the thrill of it yourself firsthand.”

Monobear: “Upu…that’s something that she would have said…”

Lily: “That who would’ve said?”

Monobear: “Shut up! Can’t you see I’m thinking!?”

Taylor: “Well think a little faster, please.”

Monobear: “Upupu…upupupu…UPUPUPUPU! Alright! That’s it! You asked for it, so here it comes! I hope you’re prepared for this! UPUPUPUPU!”

From seemingly out of nowhere, Monobear produced a small ball and slammed it against the ground. Smoke rose up from the shattered orb, obscuring the robot. The lights in the trial room flashed off for a second, but then returned with their usual luminosity. The students could make out a dark shadow in the smoke, and as the vapors dissipated, they were greeted by a face of pure despair.

The man standing in Monobear’s old spot had sleepless, sunken gray eyes. His skin was as pale as—if not moreso—Rufus or Jenny. His dark brown hair was cut military short, and he was remarkably clean shaven. His skin clung tight to the bones of his skull, as if already readying himself for death. His lips were pursed tight as he regarded the four students before him.

He wore what resembled a military uniform, except it was split down the middle, black on one side, white on the other. The gold buttons down the front gleamed brilliantly in the light of the trial room. He looked polished and positively shining, which, given his gaunt facial features, made him appear all the more sinister.

Man: “Upupu—oh, enough of that stupid ‘Upupu.’ That is not how the dignified members of society deign to speak. Now that that unpleasant Monobear business is over with, I can finally address you all properly. Lily, Rufus, Austin, Taylor, I have wondered if and when I would be able to stand in the same room as you All-Stars. Allow me to finally introduce myself to you: I am the
one they call Cimber Tillius, former All-Star Logician, leader of All-Star Despair.”
Taylor: “Who…what are you?”

Cimber: “I thought you already had that figured out. I am one of the four key members of All-Star Despair, a group dedicated to filling this world with despair.”

Austin: “That sounds a bit like Randolph’s philosophy…”

Cimber: “I assure you it is nothing of the sort. That All-Star Monk was misguided by words that shine with false beauty instead of reveling in the ones that glow with the glory of truth. For years, our disgusting society has wallowed in hope, trying so hard to ignore the omnipresent and omnipotent force of despair. Well, no longer. It is time for the world to acknowledge and embrace the true nature of despair.”

Lily: “Nope. You sound like Randolph-kun, desu.”

Cimber: “I can’t expect you to come to terms with it so quickly, I suppose. But I have more than enough patience. But you are All-Stars, so you should have no problem with prostrating yourselves before the glory of despair. Especially you, Rufus, *consanguineus meus*.”

Rufus: “*Tace! Mentitus es!*”

Cimber: “There is no reason for me to lie; you know that.”

Austin: “Rufus, what did he say?”

Rufus: “N-nothing. It’s not important.”

Austin: “You reacted pretty violently; he must have said something.”

Rufus: “He just spewed a disgusting lie. We’re almost out of here, so I’m sure he’s going to try to worm his way under our skin to mess with us. Just ignore him. Let’s focus on answering the few questions we have remaining.”

Austin: “If you say so. Shall we tackle why we were kidnapped first, or what specifically happened to the world?”

Rufus: “From what evidence we could have, I think it would be the most feasible to figure out what state the world is in.”

Austin: “The article about Cimber here stated that the world was in heavy throes of chaos. But then we read one about a global weather satellite system that made it sound like things were going pretty well.”

Taylor: “Rico’s and mine sounded pretty nice, too. I don’t know what could be going wrong when the most major article deals with a popular magician, or when they have the room to print a story about some lame science breakthrough.”

Cimber: “That ‘lame science breakthrough’ is responsible for the state you’re currently in.”

Taylor: “Thanks for the reminder.”

Lily: “The one that sounds the most suspicious is the military one.”
Austin: “I wonder what could cause such unrest. It must be awful not being able to take a rest.”

Lily: “Oh! Lily remembers again! When Jenny and I found the packet, it talked about the ‘Worst, Most Despair-Inducing Event in the History of Mankind.’ I bet that could rile some people up.”

Rufus: “But what exactly is that?”

Lily: “It…it didn’t say…”

Austin: “So this event destroyed the world? Does that mean we’re in outer space?”

Rufus: “I doubt it. You can’t explain the skylight if we’re in space.”

Austin: “It’s just a light fixture in the shape of a window that they plug in.”

Taylor: “Uhh, I’ve tanned enough under that light to know that that isn’t some dumb lamp.”

Austin: “So the world isn’t destroyed?”

Rufus: “Maybe not in the oblivion sense that you’re thinking about. But think about it. That event, if it agitated enough people, then who knows to what extent it had been ‘destroyed.’”

Taylor: “When things piss me off, I always feel like I need to go out and start protesting.”

Austin: “That sounds exhausting.”

Taylor: “Protests turn into riots, and riots turn into anarchy.”

Rufus: “Piss off enough people, and you’ve got a revolution.”

Cimber: “Revolutions are terribly wonderful things; every individual should have the chance to be a part of one at least once in their life.”

Lily: “But wouldn’t the police take care of it? And if worse came to worst, the government and military would step in, desu.”

Taylor: “Not unless you had a really charismatic leader. People are rioting, so they’re not going to listen to people supposedly ‘in power.’ I could care less about what some grumpy old Congressman has to say; I’d much sooner listen to a pop star or fashion model.”

Rufus: “Or a popular television personality. Say, a talented magician.”

Lily: “Gasp! A member of All-Star Despair!”

Taylor: “Her name was Dazzle, and it seemed like even the writer of the article was in love with her.”

Cimber: “Yes, she does possess a certain je ne sais quoi.”

Austin: “I guess riots and pickets and boycotts happen all the time, but if they’re given the right fuel, then they’ll burn for quite a while.”

Lily: “And that’s enough to destroy the world?”

Rufus: “It doesn’t seem plausible, but then again, nothing about our situation seems plausible.”

Austin: “We’ve been trapped here, right? Our school was attacked. That would make pretty big
news headlines. Heck, we’re still kids. Rioting and crud is one thing, but no one is okay with seeing kids get hurt, so something bad must really be happening or else someone would have come to rescue us by now.”

Lily: “The Future Foundation is trying, but All-Star Despair is standing in their way.”

Rufus: “Which makes All-Star Despair incredibly powerful—powerful enough, perhaps, to shift the world into utter chaos.”

Taylor: “Yeah, okay, sure. So Dazzle’s convincing everybody to keep this stupid stuff up, but this is America. How could she have influence in places like China or France or South Africa? Surely someone somewhere would have stepped in; we have a United Nations for a reason!”

Austin: “The media’s pretty adept at covering major stories, and American television can be rather entertaining.”

Cimber: “When it’s not rotting your sweet, impressionable little heads.”

Rufus: “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but not every country shares in our values; we have our enemies. No matter how charismatic Dazzle was, some countries simply would not listen to her message.”

Lily: “Not unless they were forced to.”

Rufus: “How do you mean?”

Lily: “Maybe All-Star Despair hijacked the TV’s and broadcast Dazzle everywhere.”

Taylor: “Hijacking? Are we all spies now?”

Austin: “I think it’s possible. Remember that global weather satellite? It could beam its info to any connecting computer, and it was pretty much connected everywhere. Instead of weather info, it could easily start broadcasting Dazzle.”

Rufus: “And before you know it, you’ve got someone fanning the flames all across the globe.”

Lily: “If that’s what happened to the world, then is it still that way?”

Austin: “It must be; like you said, the police and government would have gotten involved and rescued us by now if things hadn’t gone steeply downhill.”

Taylor: “That’s not the easiest pill to swallow.”

Rufus: “Look on the bright side: there’s a Future Foundation that’s going after All-Star Despair, so they must be trying to bring the world back to order. There are still people who haven’t given up hope.”

Lily: “I like the sounds of these people. I can’t wait to meet them!”

Cimber: “They’re really not that spectacular.”

Austin: “I can’t help but wonder what the Worst, Most Despair-Inducing Event in the History of Mankind is.”

Rufus: “It’s not relevant. We know now what’s transpiring beyond these walls, and that’s all that matters.”
Lily: “Is there no more that we can think that happened?”

Taylor: “I’m tapped for ideas.”

Austin: “I can’t think of anything either.”

Rufus: “Why don’t you sum it up this time, Lily?”

Lily: “Okeydokey, desu! Hey, Cimber, this is what happened to the world: the Worst, Most Despair-Inducing Event in the History of Mankind happened, and then the world broke. It broke because people started going crazy, but as their craziness started to dwindle, Dazzle came onto the scene and reinvigorated everyone’s feelings so that it’s still a tumultuous turmoil outside! Desu!”

Cimber: “It surprises me that you had faith enough in Lily to let her answer a very important question all by herself. She hasn’t had the most noticeable presence in the trials heretofore. It’s not too late for you to have her retract her conclusion.”

Taylor: “Don’t you say mean things about our Lily! Of course we have faith in her; she’s our friend! Get on with it already.”

Cimber: “If that is your desire, then so be it. Based on the statement that you have now put forth, it is my duty to inform you that your answer to my question was, unfortunately, the correct one.”

Lily: “NIPAH! I told you I could do it, Jenny-chan!”

Rufus: “Apol.”

Austin: “Whoa…”

Lily: “Kowai.”

Cimber: “It was brilliant to behold. She showed us the disparity that is rampant in society. People clung to the truths she illuminated, and we, as a people, were finally able to highlight the darkness that is rampant in civilization. No longer do we have to conform to such silly notions as ‘laws’ or ‘morals.’ Welcome to the Age of Despair. This world has little to offer, so take everything you want whenever you want it.”

Taylor: “You disgust me.”

Rufus: “To think that you and I…”
Austin: “Seriously, who even thinks of this stuff?”

Lily: “La la la, I can’t hear you…”

Cimber: “Yes… that beautiful world is what awaits you if you’re able to leave this trial alive. You’ve got one more question before I ask the Big One. Are you still up to the task?”

Austin: “Of course we are. So… why were we kidnapped?”

Rufus: “To cause this freak some despair, perhaps?”

Cimber: “Please, I do not need such overt compliments.”

Rufus: “Non credo…”

Lily: “That can’t be it, right? Just for him? That’s so…icky!”

Taylor: “But it’s part of a pattern. There was that game of mutual killing that Lily found and then that one about the computer simulation. I guess we’re just next.”

Rufus: “But those ones had very specific goals in mind. In the one I found, at least, there was an intention for rehabilitation that went dreadfully wrong.”

Lily: “That came after mine, though. Mine didn’t really seem to have a goal. It was just fifteen kids going after each other.”

Taylor: “Fifteen? Are you sure that’s right?”

Lily: “Sorta. There were actually sixteen, but one was hiding until the very end.”

Austin: “You know… I wonder if that sixteenth student was the Queen of Despair that Cimber was talking about.”

Rufus: “Now that you mention it, there was a lot of past-tense in Cimber’s retelling of that story, so it would make sense if she didn’t survive.”

Austin: “For someone as messed up as her, it was probably the time of her life.”

Lily: “Ooh, that gives me the chills. So if that game was for her pleasure, then this one must be for Cimber’s pleasure, desu.”

Taylor: “And the other groups? Are all the All-Star Despair leaders so crazed as to need their own experiment group?”

Austin: “Why go to all the effort?”

Rufus: “I doubt our antagonists are that fickle. We’re here for an ulterior reason, I’m sure of it.”

Taylor: “Now that you mention an ulterior motive… Jenny, your intuition was right. In the e-mails I read, someone was pestering—it must have been Cimber—about the Future Foundation. They mentioned that it was hypocritical for Cimber to worry about the radio broadcast when the Future Foundation was already watching them. I mean, it didn’t say that exactly, but it sounded like All-Star Despair was broadcasting something, uhh, despairing.”

Austin: “Like us.”
Lily: “No way!”

Austin: “You have to admit that it would make for good despair propaganda. Come watch these kids kill each other. They used to be friends, but now they only think about murder.”

Rufus: “That certainly does sound like something that they might enjoy doing, but how would they accomplish such a thing?”

Taylor: “Have you seen the security cameras in this place? I can hardly pee with any privacy.”

Austin: “I had the fortune of dissecting one of the cameras with Jenny. It didn’t have any physical tapes stored in it; everything was sent to some wireless receiver.”

Rufus: “It’s the twenty-first century—or so we’ve been led to believe. Technology has come a long way. Everything’s wireless anymore; save it in the cloud.”

Austin: “In light of recent evidence, though, this wireless-ness is somewhat poignant. There’s a satellite broadcasting Dazzle all around the world, but she’s tied up running her own game. Who’s on the airwaves when she can’t be?”

Lily: “Wait a minute, are you saying that we’re on television and we didn’t even know it?”

Taylor: “I knew I was going to be on the screen someday, but never like this…”

Lily: “Ken-nii! Matt-nii! If you’re watching, don’t worry, I’ll be home soon!”

Taylor: “But I’m supposed to be lucky. Why was I dragged into this?”

Rufus: “Haven’t you noted the similarities between our games and the others we’ve learned about? The game had to occur among students with exceptional talents; there would have been no thrill had sixteen regular students been put together.”

Taylor: “But why us? If we had been born just one year earlier, this never would have happened to us!”

Austin: “We can’t afford to think in hypotheticals. We have to keep looking forward, only using the past as a stepping stone to move forward.”

Taylor: “This entire time…you’ve just been using us for your own perverted sickness!”

Cimber: “Are you trying to blandish me too, or are you ready to submit another precious answer?”

Austin: “If anyone has anything else to offer, I believe I have the mystery of our involvement figured out.”

Lily: “Go for it.”

Rufus: “I.”

Taylor: “Show him who’s boss.”

Austin: “Then it comes to this. Alright, yawn, you kidnapped us to push forward your agenda of despair. You trapped us here and then broadcasted our hardships to the world to show how powerful despair can be.”

Cimber: “My, that was quite eloquent of you. You have a natural talent for speaking. Maybe you’re
not so adept at doing nothing as you claim. In any case, since that is your answer, then it would pain me not to tell you that the conclusion you have drawn is, in fact, the correct one…”

Austin: “Cool.”

Taylor: “Then that means—”

Lily: “WE DID IT! WE ANSWERED ALL THE QUESTIONS RIGHT!”

Rufus: “Not so fast, he’s still got one more trick up his sleeve.”

Cimber: “I never thought we would actually make it to the eleventh hour—”

Lily: “We’ve been here for eleven hours already?”

Rufus: “It’s a figure of speech, Lily…”

Cimber: “May I continue?”

Lily: “I am *gomen*…”

Taylor: “Lily, don’t apologize to this creep; he’s not worth your breath.”

Rufus: “I’d like to leave before we have been here for eleven hours, if you don’t mind.”

Cimber: “As I was saying, I’m pleasantly and unpleasantly surprised that we’ve lasted this long. I would’ve loved to see you fall at an earlier instance, but I am excited to see how much farther I can drag you down first. Without any further ado, I present to you the last question: Do you still want to leave, or will you give in to despair?”

Austin: “That’s it? That’s the question?”

Taylor: “What kind of question is that? Of course we want to leave!”

Rufus: “Just when I was starting to think you were intelligent, you pull this crap. Pitiful.”

Lily: “I already know the answer to that one! We’re so good, we don’t even need a discussion!”

Cimber: “You all have such shining bravado. Hear me out before you rush into some false idea of an answer.”

Austin: “This question is different. Is there still a right and wrong answer?”

Cimber: “My apologies, I was not clear enough. The outcome of this trial hinges upon your answers. If you feel ready to leave, then you may, but I am certain that I shall entice you to reconsider.”

Taylor: “As if!”

Cimber: “If you keep an open mind, I think that you will start to see things my way. Let’s start with the basis. The world is destroyed; you’ve affirmed this yourself. Think about all that you have here. Food, shelter, *entertainment*. You could easily live out the remainder of your lives in relative comfort. If you’ll excuse me, there are people out there who would *kill* for this level of comfort. You won’t have to struggle to make your way. So many have perished already; you can stay here in safety, I guarantee it.”
Rufus: “It’s toxic for us to stay here any longer; you’ll have to pull out the big guns.”

Cimber: “If that’s how you wish to play, then I’ll be happy to oblige. I will grant that you each desire to leave, but do you deserve to leave?”

Lily: “We’ve worked hard to get here; we totally deserve to leave.”

Cimber: “I’m not so sure. Since you’re so eager, let’s start with you, Lily Smith. All-Star Kawaii—you call that a title? What good can you do for the world with such a meager trait? You’re just a pathetic little weeaboo. The world would be fine with one less weeb running around. Oh, but you’re just this sugar sweet little girl who tries to make everyone happy, make everyone her friend. And yet you have such a hard time living in this world that you claim to love so dearly. You’re always devising some new, fantastical delusion to get you through the day. ‘We’re all a big family,’ or ‘we’re all a pirate crew.’ It would be funny if it weren’t so sad to watch. If you ask for my opinion, I think you should stay here under lock and key so that no one has to put up with your vagaries.”

Lily: “No, I, uhh…”

Rufus: “I won’t just stand here and let you insult her so openly.”

Cimber: “Ahh, yes, Rufus Price. Why would a sorry soul like yourself deserve escape? You talk a big game, but you’ll never be able to back up your bet. Just now you tried to defend Lily, but you couldn’t even keep Rico safe. Out of everyone, I was almost certain that someone would off you just to make the place more pleasant to inhabit. Jordan came close, didn’t she? I was rooting for her. You lord your intelligence over others because that’s all you know how to do, and so all you know how to do is isolate yourself from others. If you were to leave, you would do nothing but invite people’s anger against you. At least these people here have learned to tolerate you. I’m certain you’ll have a more meaningful social life in this mall than you ever could outside its walls.”

Rufus: “If you think that—I mean, if you—you can’t—I…”

Taylor: “Rufus is, like, a person, okay. He has feelings; you can’t just yell at him like that!”

Cimber: “So says Taylor Erzen. It’s a shame our queen had to leave before you could have the chance to meet her; she would have loved you. You’re similar, you know. You care so much about your own appearance and how you appear to others. Heaven forbid someone think negatively of you. Be honest, though, you just try to act so lovely because you know, deep down, that you are one of the most disgusting creatures to ever curse this Earth with its existence. You’re fickle, and though you want people to see you, they simply see right through you. In this mall, you will be able to live out your many delusions to your heart’s content; you can finally be true to you.”

Taylor: “That’s, like, not an okay thing… I mean… uhh…”

Austin: “Taylor’s a lot more than that, and you know that.”

Cimber: “Now we come full circle. Last—and certainly least—Austin Fitzpatrick. I would spell out why you should stay, but I feel it would be insulting to those present to iterate such redundantly palatable information. Your specialty in life is doing nothing. Should you leave, you will contribute absolutely nothing to the emerging world. Should you stay, you can live out your days in leisure and luxury. Out there, you’ll just get in everybody’s way. And I haven’t even mentioned the depression yet. I think you’ll agree with me that there are already enough psychopathic nutcases on the loose, so why add another to the mix? Stay and you can blissfully sleep your life away at ease.”
Austin: “But that’s not, like, a thing…”

Cimber: “And so, as I have now demonstrated, it would be a wretched misery should you wander out the doors of this prestigious mall. You should congratulate me on being generous enough to let you stay after all the grief that you have put me through. This trial is being broadcasted to the world right now. The Future Foundation is watching us at this very moment. They know everything; my identity—and that of my comrades—has been compromised. I am putting my life out on the line for you, and you’re hardly giving me the time of day. This is a gracious offer, and you should be jumping at the opportunity.”

Lily: “Now that you mention it…”

Rufus: “I suppose it wouldn’t be *that* bad…”

Taylor: “There’s that nice skylight after all…”

Austin: “It is rather busy outside…”

Cimber: “There, you see it now. This is simply how things are. You’ve tried hope for so long; isn’t it time to give despair a shot? Just submit. Trust me, you’ll be at ease once and for all. So, what is your answer; don’t leave me waiting much longer.”

Lily: “This is where we were with all our friends…”

Rufus: “I haven’t even begun to read all those books…”

Taylor: “I rarely feel the need to purge anymore…”

Austin: “We’re going to leave, thank you.”

Lily: “Austin-kun…?”

Rufus: “Quid?”

Taylor: “Excuse me?”

Austin: “Yeah, we’re all going to leave.”

Cimber: “I sense some disagreement. I want a unanimous decision, thank you.”

Lily: “Austin-kun, listen, it’s nice here.”

Rufus: “We really haven’t appreciated the gifts bestowed upon us.”

Taylor: “Austin, don’t be talking crazy.”

Austin: “C’mon, guys, we’re better than this. Lily, do you honestly believe all that crap? You’re one of the most genuinely nice people I’ve ever met. I’ll own up to being a little depressed here. Okay, maybe a lot depressed. But no matter how dark I felt, you were always there as a shining light to draw me back in. I needed the Kawaii Olympics, and I’m glad you let me be a part of it. You’ve kept our morale up, and that’s what you’re great at. Outside, even if you just touch one life with your good vibes, it will make your entire existence worthwhile, so don’t think you don’t matter.”

Lily: “Austin-kun…you’re totally right, desu! What was I thinking just now? Jenny-chan, I’m sorry, I got confused. It’s okay; it happens. *Hai*, Mr. Cimber, I want to leave with Austin-kun. Just
ignore everything I was saying just now!”

Cimber: “If the decision’s not unanimous, it may as well be in the negation, that is to say a decision to stay.”

Austin: “Okay, so, Rufus. You’re too smart to listen to this guy’s drivel. It’s impossible for someone to be liked by everyone. And you get that, and you don’t let it hold you back. You’ve used your abilities to guide us through several trials, and you never would have been able to do so if you were worrying about what we thought of you. We understand that you’re doing all you can for us, and we appreciate that. I would be proud to call you my leader someday.”

Rufus: “Well, Austin, I have to agree with you on every point you’ve made. Your argument is wholly sound. I am indeed intelligent, and I remember that it would be a travesty to hide my brilliance from the world at large. Cimber, you lying sonofabitch, I will be leaving with Lily and Austin here.”

Cimber: “As long as one remains, I cannot validate your feelings with any confidence.”

Austin: “Taylor. You know you mean a lot to me. You’re like my sister. I’d totally date you if it weren’t so weird. So what if you’re shallow or fickle or whatever? You take pride in yourself, and not many people do anymore. You refuse to let others drag you down; you’re always looking to better yourself. It would be a shame if you didn’t make it big someday, because I would want you to be the role model for my children.”

Taylor: “I am pretty, aren’t I? I shine bright like a…metaphors aren’t my strong point. Ugh, I’ve had enough of this charade. Yo, Cimber, I’m leaving this joint, and I’m taking Lily, Rufus, and Austin with me.”

Cimber: “Is that so? It’s not too late to rescind the strange phrases you’ve uttered. Are you really going to put stock in someone so irrevocably depressed?”

Lily: “I don’t care what Austin-kun is! Austin-kun is Austin-kun. You could say that he’s purple and made of sauerkraut and I would still love him. I’ll listen to him all day long.”

Rufus: “When it comes to issues of self-esteem, I believe I can claim an adequate level of expertise. I see nothing wrong with the way that Austin is conducting himself. He speaks with clarity and understanding, so it is only natural that I should take his words to heart.”

Taylor: “Austin is, like, my best friend. If Austin’s depressed, then it’s my job to get him the help he needs, but until then, I won’t stop loving him. Austin’s been nothing but a friend to me, and I will continue to be one to him.”

Cimber: “Your resolve is frustratingly obstinate…”

Austin: “I do believe, *yawn*, that the decision is now unanimous. So Cimber, listen to this, and everyone out there in front of your TV’s, listen up too. The four of us refuse to give in to despair, and we demand to be let out of the Mall of Monomerica.”

Cimber: “…fine.”

Austin: “‘Fine?’ That’s it?”

Cimber: “Yes. Fine. I’m man enough to admit when I’ve been beat. I concede. You’ve really thrown me into despair this time. I did imagine that this ending could occur. It was far in my list of possibilities, but it was there nonetheless. I suppose I should congratulate you on besting me, but
the sourness of loss isn’t exactly making me feel exultant. I suppose I must confer with my constituents on how to proceed from this point…”

Austin: “So what happens to us now? We do get to leave after all. The world is watching; you can’t go back on your promise.”

Cimber: “I don’t intend to. I’ll need some time to ready the preparations for your departure. My, would you look at the time already. I couldn’t eject you into the darkness of the evening in good conscience. Yes, one more night in the mall won’t hurt. In a moment or so, you will take the elevator back up to the food court. You will enjoy what time you have left in the mall, and then tomorrow at precisely noon, I will open the gate in the South Sector. You will then be free to leave. In fact, I’m going to force you to leave; after this affair, I couldn’t stand to have you stay.”

Taylor: “Not good enough! I want out now!”

Rufus: “I think it would be wise for us to take some time and recuperate. Today has been draining. I could do with a good night’s sleep.”

Lily: “All the hard stuff is behind us, so it’s smooth sailing now. There’s a lot of cool stuff here we’ll be saying goodbye to, desu. I wouldn’t mind one last run on the dancing machine.”

Rufus: “And there was a certain book I never got around to reading. I’m sure no one will mind if I take it with us.”

Taylor: “And I did have my eye on this one necklace…alright, I guess I can hold out until tomorrow. But Cimber, what happens after the gate opens?”

Cimber: “It doesn’t matter to me. You’ll walk out and reenter the world. What you do after that is up to you.”

Taylor: “That’s a little daunting…”

Austin: “But we’ll all be together, so I’m sure we’ll be able to deal with whatever we come across. We are All-Stars after all.”

Cimber: “What a touching sentiment. It’s that kind of putrid ideal that audiences just eat up, so we’ll end this here. It is my unfortunate opportunity to draw the Final Trial of Ultimate Despair to a close. Now, I have business to attend to; the mall awaits.”

Cimber politely excused himself from the circle of podiums and calmly walked over to the execution chamber. He walked through the doors, and they shut vehemently behind him. The loud sound of a lock sliding into place reverberated throughout the trial room.

The four surviving students looked at each other in silence. They had done it, they had finally done it. The Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing was officially over. Lily, Rufus, Austin, and Taylor worked their way over to the elevator and walked in. The elevator rides had once been uncomfortably claustrophobic, but now it was virtually empty.

As the elevator rose, so did the spirits of the students. The reality of their victory was still setting in, but they were free now. Taylor looked around at her classmates; they all were so seriously lost in thought. They looked so funny in their consternation that Taylor couldn’t help but start to laugh. Her raucous laughter soon grew contagious for Lily had begun to join in. Before long, both Austin and Rufus were laughing as well. The mall had been such a drain on them that it felt like an eternity since they had all laughed so strongly.
By the time the elevator made it back to the food court, the four students were laughing so wildly that tears of happiness were welling up in their eyes. They stepped out of the elevator, and the mall itself seemed to have changed in their absence. The mall no longer felt open and empty, but had a homey feel to it. Even the skylight seemed to shine brighter with the hopeful rays of the sun illuminating everything below.

They were finally free.

End of Chapter Six

Surviving Students: 4

Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky

Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle

Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist

Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii
Epilogue—The Last and the First

It was late afternoon when the trial ended. Taylor, Austin, Lily, and Rufus lingered in the Food Court until dinner time, and then they enjoyed the greatest feast they had had yet. The four of them were happy to simply be alive. So much had happened over the past twenty five days, and the students were changed for better or for worse.

After dinner, the four continued to sit, talk, and enjoy each other’s company. Now that the veil of evil had been lifted from them, the mall was not nearly as frightening as it once had been. This didn’t deter them from their goal of leaving, though; they were still dead-set on leaving the mall behind once and for all.

The hour grew late, and the exhaustion of the day weighed down on the survivors. Bidding each other a good night, Rufus, Lily, Austin, and Taylor retired to their individual rooms for a much deserved rest.

Lily’s heart was broken, but in a happy way. She was sad that she had lost so many of her friends, and that there were only a few of them left, but she was happier that they were all finally getting to leave. For the first time in her life, Lily Smith felt tired. This had been a tiring month, and it had been hard for her to keep her energy at her usual levels all the time. Maybe it was time for her to catch a rest—just for a day or two. Then she’d be back in action. But would it be right? It would be weird if she just tried to have things go back to the way things were. Things are different, so Lily should be different, too. She needed to do something to commemorate the friends they’d lost, and the Kawai knew just what to do.

It was about time for Rufus to leave this forsaken mall. He had put up with these hooligans for far too long. He had the victory to revel in, now, but it still felt like a hollow win. Rico deserved to exult in it with him. The Marathon Runner would’ve done so much after the escape. The life of a Latinist was often a lonely one, and Rufus wouldn’t feel comfortable hiding away the life given him when others could have made a greater use of it. As comfortable as the solace of his books had been, Rufus would have to move out of the shadows and assert himself as an active member of this emerging world.

Austin fell asleep almost instantaneously; he had never been so exhausted in his life. He didn’t lead an exhausting life, but the vicissitudes of existence had worn away his soft shell. He had gotten riled up ever so slightly during that last confrontation with Cimber. The Idle had always had a penchant for speaking plainly and candidly, but he seemed empowered somehow during that exchange. He truly believed the things he had said. And maybe he would continue to say those kinds of things after their departure. Maybe Austin would have to change his title from All-Star Idle to All-Star Guy Who Says Things. It was a working title.

Taylor spent a large amount of time looking in her mirror before going to bed. She didn’t look different; she still had the same eyes, the same nose, the same mouth. But for some reason the face looking back at her was different. And for once, when the face didn’t look the same, Taylor was okay with it. Her mirrored image did not fill her with distaste, but rather it sparked a flame of power in her. The person Taylor saw was an unconquerable woman, a woman who could inspire the masses to join her on her side. In a way, she was a lot like that Queen of Despair, but Taylor was definitely on the side of Hope, and that would always prove to be more powerful.

Regardless of what thoughts were running through their brains, the four students drifted off
to sleep. While they rested, the night passed into day, and the hour of their leave was fast approaching.

After sleeping in, the four students came together for a healthy breakfast. Rufus, Taylor, and Austin were shocked to see Lily, for she had chopped all her hair off. In memory of the friends that she had lost, Lily decided to take her metaphysical moving forward and present it physically. With a clean cut, Lily hacked off her pigtails and the majority of her hair so that she was only sporting a light bob. The Kawaii’s new look just reminded all of them that they had changed, but that they had changed for the better.

After breakfast, the four students went off to pay their last respects to the mall. This cursed place had served as their home for the past few weeks, and soon they would never return to it. Lily danced once more in the Arcade, Rufus bade farewell to the books he didn’t read, Austin plunged his face into the Lounge’s pillows, and Taylor stared up at the skylight. All they could do now was wait.

When they had about an hour until Monobear promised to open the gate, the four survivors met one more time in the food court.

Austin: “Only an hour more…”
Taylor: “I still can’t wrap my head around it…”
Lily: “It doesn’t feel real, desu…”
Rufus: “It’ll be strange to see the outside world again…”
Austin: “But that doesn’t matter. We get to leave in an hour, and everything will be better.”
Lily: “We get to leave…but not everyone got that luxury…”
Taylor: “We will be leaving quite a few of our friends behind…”
Rufus: “I sincerely regret not bothering to learn most of their names now.”
Lily: “I don’t want to forget any of them at all!”
Austin: “Then we need to make sure we don’t. In their own ways, each of them helped to get us here, and we owe them our lives for that.”
Rufus: “That we do, that we do.”
Austin: “Theo really should have done that yearbook idea I had.”
Taylor: “Or, you know, you could have done it.”
Austin: “That’s far too much for me to do.”
Lily: “But maybe we could all do it together, desu! I’m sure we could figure it out if we all put our minds to it!”
Rufus: “Where would we start, though? There’s so much we’d have to cover.”
Taylor: “Why not start at the beginning? It was so long ago…does anyone remember anything about Francesca?”
Austin: “I didn’t get to know her very well, but she wore her heart on her sleeve. I could just tell that she was a strong person who wouldn’t take crap from anybody. Sigh. But she was gentle, too. I knew I could talk to her if I needed someone to talk to, and I know she’d listen. I wish she could have talked to me; I would’ve made her such a lovely crown.”

Taylor: “She was the only girl not to have a makeover that night. That says something about a person, having that much confidence in their appearance. I think I could’ve really learned something from her—and not just because she was a Tutor.”

Rufus: “Francesca…I’m having trouble with the name. Was she the one with the heinous laugh?”

Lily: “Oh, it was gruesome, wasn’t it? Like nails on a chalkboard, but harsher.”

Rufus: “Hmm…well at least she didn’t have to go through all the ugliness the rest of us did.”

Austin: “Delilah didn’t have to go through much either, for that matter. I never got a good vibe from that chick.”

Taylor: “It’s rude to speak ill of the dead.”

Austin: “I’m not speaking ill, I’m just speaking my mind. We just had polar personalities. She was always wanting to do things, always moving. I get tired just thinking about her.”

Taylor: “You have to admit that she knew her way around a salon. God, I felt so pretty that night she did up my hair. She serviced all of us without barely breaking a sweat.”

Rufus: “With that kind of energy, she would have been a great contributor had she been on our team.”

Lily: “She was on our team, desu. We were—are all members of Success Summit’s forty-fifth class! Monobear just made us forget that for a little bit, but that doesn’t stop Delilah from being our friend. At the end, she told us to do something great for her, so she was still rooting for us way back then.”

Rufus: “You know who never stopped rooting for us? That red-headed girl. She was very boisterous, but she had our best intentions in mind.”

Taylor: “Melissa, you mean.”

Rufus: “Ahh, yes, that certainly was her name. I noticed her gumption from the start, and I tried to make myself very familiar with her. She was certainly leader material.”

Lily: “And she was so nice to everyone! She made us play games and get to know each other and really make this place feel like a home.”

Austin: “And I give her props for figuring out how to deal with James. She’s a better person than me for doing that.”

Taylor: “You’re talking about when she flipped her lid, right? Yeah, I didn’t think she had it in her, but it was certainly refreshing to watch.”

Austin: “Randolph could be refreshing on occasion. I’ve been told to say a thing every now and then, but he could say things too.”

Taylor: “As weird as it was, he did have a pretty decent sense of humor.”
Rufus: “Aside from being part of a cult.”

Lily: “To each their own, right, desu? I still think that Randolph knew what he was talking about. He’d also talk about peace and serenity, and I think there was some real truth there.”

Austin: “We meditated together once; it was a really chill experience.”

Lily: “While James on the other hand was always so loud.”

Taylor: “That kid…he was something else.”

Austin: “Can you blame him? He had his own agenda. He wanted out because he felt he needed to do something big with his life. He made a promise, and he intended to keep it.”

Taylor: “I think we should try to live out his promise for him.”

Rufus: “I have no problem with that. I’ll help anyone who’s that open about speaking their mind. Hmm…he did talk quite a big game…”

Lily: “But I think he was all talk. Don’t ask me how I know, but I just know that he did genuinely care about us, even if he wasn’t willing to admit it. He cared about us, desu.”

Rufus: “Like one big, happy, dysfunctional family.”

Lily: “Speaking of dysfunction, Lizzie was all over the place. We could be having a wonderful conversation, and then she would just say something from out of left field.”

Taylor: “And when she wasn’t talking about herself, she was talking about food. For someone who could rock a corset, she loved to eat.”

Austin: “I still give her props for wearing that get-up everyday.”

Rufus: “She certainly looked the part of ‘Historian.’ Clever, to boot.”

Lily: “Except when her stubbornness got in her way.”

Taylor: “I never had to worry about her getting in the way of me and Cody, though. That boy was all mine.”

Austin: “I’ll admit that he was a remarkable specimen of the male persuasion.”

Taylor: “He may have come off as, well, a boy, but he totally had a soft underside. Sensitive, even.”

Austin: “And so friendly toward everybody.”

Rufus: “Not stupid, either. During one of—you said her name was ‘Melissa’—one of her games, he let slide that he skipped a grade.”

Lily: “Oh wow, you’re right, I forgot about that. Cody was something special, wasn’t he? I knew there was a reason why I liked him.”

Rufus: “I think it’s safe to say we all liked him.”

Taylor: “If only the same could be said of Markus…”
Rufus: “Ita…the boy with too much personality.”

Taylor: “I had his secret…he had legitimate emotional issues, and I think it’s apparent how they manifested. I…I’m ashamed I didn’t reach out to help.”

Austin: “You couldn’t have known; there was nothing you could have done.”

Taylor: “To be that convincing, he had to have had some real talent.”

Rufus: “I remember a scared looking child.”

Lily: “Then there was the one who wanted to be super strong and ended up becoming our leader. He yelled a lot…”

Austin: “And then there was him at the end…”

Taylor: “If I have to see a silver lining, at least he’s not suffering anymore.”

Rufus: “And if it’s any consolation—what did you say her name was? Francesca?—Francesca is there taking care of him now.”

Lily: “Yeah, I’m sure they’re all together. I bet they’re having a huge party, desu!”

Taylor: “I love that! Except Theo is sitting awkwardly in the corner while everyone’s dancing!”

Rufus: “I disagree. With all the traveling our map-making friend did, I am sure that he was well-versed in the realm of dance.”

Austin: “Theo cutting a rug…now that’s something I’d like to see.”

Lily: “Why would Theo be cutting a rug?”

Taylor: “Oh, Lily…it’s a figure of speech. Alright, I retract what I said earlier about him not dancing. He was so quiet and nondescript that I often forget about him having a personality.”

Austin: “He wasn’t so much quiet and nondescript as he was thoughtful.”

Rufus: “Quite. Theo was a marvelous help during the trials. He’d always take the unpleasant job of looking over the bodies, and I commend him for that.”

Taylor: “Not to mention how cute he was when he was trying to court Jordan. God, they were adorable, and he was so nervous about talking to her in the first place. Down to the very end, he really cared about her.”

Rufus: “And with how that hit Jordan, I think it’s obvious how deeply she cared for him as well. I also tried to become very familiar with her, but she would never open up.”

Taylor: “She did at the end…”

Lily: “I really liked her then! I mean, I always liked her, just like I’ve liked everyone, but she was so much fun to be with then. We talked about sailing around the world. Gasp! I know what we have to do now! We have to take a trip around the world.”

Rufus: “Let’s not be so hasty, okay? In the spirit of Jordan Koulibagh, let’s take things slowly.”

Taylor: “Wow, I’m impressed you got her last name right, too. But you obviously never listened to
one of our conversations. Boy, once you got that girl started, you couldn’t stop her.”

Austin: “I wish she could have been that open with all of us, show us who the real Jordan was. The happy and light-hearted Jordan as opposed to the reserved and closed-off Jordan.”

Rufus: “If anyone personified the phrase ‘what you see is what you get,’ then it was undoubtedly…Ri-Rico…”

Lily: “Rufus-kun, are you daijoubu?”

Rufus: “I…I will be…I’m still getting over the shock, I think.”

Austin: “You fared pretty well yesterday.”

Rufus: “There was a lot of adrenaline yesterday. I find it strange that I will never have the chance to see his goofy, smiling face again.”

Taylor: “I know what you mean. He was so happy-go-lucky. I was a bit envious of his boundless energy.”

Lily: “He certainly gave me a run for my money! Omigosh! I made a funny! He gave me a run for my money.”

Austin: “He didn’t run from the situation here, though. I don’t know about you guys, but I kinda saw him as our leader toward the end.”

Taylor: “Yeah, definitely. And it’s weird, because in the beginning I was able to make him cry, but just look at how strong he became.”

Rufus: “And he…he sacrificed himself for all of us. You can’t just forget about something like that…”

Lily: “He and Jenny-chan both. I miss her already, but I have to be strong for her, just as you have to be strong for Rico-kun!”

Rufus: “Y-you’re right, Lily. I will be.”

Lily: “That’s how they would want it. Jenny and I were BFFs, so I know that’s how she would want it. She only ever wanted to be friends and be happy with everyone, and she was so scared of making someone mad or angry.”

Taylor: “I thought I could scare her out of her own skin some days.”

Austin: “But she really did have good intentions.”

Rufus: “Cute too, a little.”

Taylor: “What? What what what? You thought she was cute? I didn’t know you were capable of such emotions.”

Austin: “I guess we can have surprises at the very end after all.”

Lily: “You two would’ve made such a cute couple!”

Rufus: “Just because I thought she was cute doesn’t mean we were going to get married. Nescio, she just seemed to remind me of someone, but I can’t quite put my finger on whom…”
Lily: “Either way, I bet she’s smiling right now having heard you say that just now.”

Austin: “You think she’s listening?”

Lily: “Hai. I think they’re all watching and listening. We’re all a part of the same class, and a silly thing like death isn’t going to stand in the way of that. Before the end, even if it takes a little while, Jenny-chan said we would see each other again, and I believe her.”

Taylor: “Hey, all of you, if you’re listening, I’ve got some stuff I want to say to you!”

Austin: “Taylor, are you sure about this? You have a way of putting your foot in your mouth.”

Rufus: “Perhaps you should leave the talking to someone else.”

Lily: “They’re definitely listening, so, umm, be careful…”

Taylor: “Hey! You better keep watching over us, got it? I don’t want any of you—for even a second—to stop watching us, because we’ve got to live out our lives for all of you now! We won’t settle for second-best, so we’re gonna give this life everything we’ve got! We’re going to do something big; you can bet on it!”

Austin: “Hey, yeah. Ditto all that. Even if it looks like I’m not doing anything, I totally am. I’ve got a yearbook of all your faces in my head, so you’ll always be there, in the back of my mind, urging me to do my best, depression or not.”

Rufus: “Ecce! I’ll make you proud, Rico! I won’t feel sorry for myself any longer! Rufus Price is going to do some great things; everyone in this world is going to know how amazing a person Rico de Naranjas was!”

Lily: “Jenny-chan! It’ll be okay! We’ll see each other again someday, but until then, I’ll be just as kawaii as ever—if not moreso! I’ve learned so much from you, and you’ll be with me always—I just know it!”

Taylor: “The forty-fifth class of Success Summit lives on!”

Austin: “Yawn, yeah…”

Rufus: “Indeed!”

Lily: “Nipah!”

Taylor: “God, I feel energized now. Does anyone know what time it is?”

Austin: “Umm…I think it’s—”

For the last time, Monobear’s voice rang out over the PA system. The students knew who was behind the voice, and so the demonic robot wasn’t so unnerving anymore; they had beaten their enemy. “It’s noon, you…you…you bastards! It is time for you to get out of my mall! Stay here any longer and I’ll start pumping the place full of neurotoxins!”

Taylor, Austin, Lily, and Rufus looked at each other and silently nodded their understanding to each other. Together, they got up, left the food court, and made their way to the South Sector. Hand-in-hand, they stood before the gate that had kept them shut off from the outside world. Nearly a month ago—twenty-six days to be exact—the sixteen of them had awoken to this nightmare, and now a fourth of them was about to make their escape.
A loud buzzer went off, and a hiss of air was released from the vault doors. Creaking, the door slowly opened. As they swung open, the light of the world fell in upon the four students, blinding them in their brilliance. The rush of fresh air swept over them, and they could feel their journey ending.

As their eyes adjusted to the new light, they found that they were not outside. They looked behind them, but they were not in the mall, either. They had been transported somehow to a new room. Quickly scanning the room, they found that they were just four shadows in a room filled with twelve other shadows.

And then that voice again.

“Upupupu…it’s time for round two!”

End of Epilogue

Surviving Students: 16

Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky
Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle
Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist
Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???

??=?—All-Star ???
Francesca Maysworth—All-Star Tutor: The Right Way to be Slapped Silly

Francesca knew when she was beat. In a way, it warmed her heart that her friends had been able to solve the mystery she created. They would be able to do alright without her. Calmly, she smiled at her classmates and wished them good luck in their lives; she asked that they would do good in her name.

In the execution room, Monobear strapped her to a student desk. The desk itself was on a conveyor belt. Monobear flipped a switch, and the desk was mobile. Francesca was positioned so that she could watch the punishment that was coming her way. The desk would travel through a series of rotating pinwheels, each lined with hard, wooden rulers. The Tutor judged that the rulers were level with her head.

As she neared the rotating wheels, the whirring of the machines grew louder and louder. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. With a deep breath, she prepared herself for her just desserts.

The first ruler stung her cheek, and the next her forehead. She winced from the pain, but the rulers kept coming. With each strike, her face grew redder and rawer. Reactionary tears escaped from the corners of her eyes.

The desk rolled endlessly through the tirade of rulers. Somewhere in the middle of the procession, Francesca was struck in just the right spot to knock her unconscious; she would never revive. Eventually, the desk rolled out of the whirlwind, and Francesca’s body sat limply in the chair, her head still bowed.

In the trial room, her face would be covered with a red cross made by intersecting rulers.

Melissa Davis—All-Star Politician: Combustion or Bust

They had voted for her. They had voted for her. But she was their leader...how could they vote for her? Melissa laughed once, twice, feeling the hysteria setting in. This wasn’t happening; this wasn’t happening.

In a daze, Monobear guided her into the execution room; this wasn’t happening. She stood on the stage, addressing her classmates. Monobear shackled her to the podium in the center of the stage. Under any other circumstance, she would have reveled in this position of power, but now she was scared out of her mind.

In a flash, Monobear began adorning her with various campaign buttons, all showing his brilliant, smiling face. Not one inch of her clothing was spared, but no needles pricked her skin. Monobear cackled to himself, and then the buttons began to blink in rapid succession. Bombs.
A moment of abject clarity struck Melissa; she wasn’t going to die today. Frantically, she began to rip the buttons out of her clothing, tossing them aside like the trash they were. Button after button, but the flashing was growing more and more rapid. With each pulse, her mind raced to survive. Nothing could stop her.

There was one button in the square of her back. Her hands just couldn’t reach it. Sweat dripped down her face as she clawed at that one final button. Her fingers just could not unlatch it. In a fit of desperation, Melissa tore her jacket in two and discarded the buttoned apparel on the ground. She kicked all the blinking buttons away from her. The blinking stopped. She released a sigh of relief.

Then the podium exploded, the blast of which sent her flying into the air. Her charred body hit the ground with a thud; her frenzy had finally subsided.

In the future trials, Melissa’s picture would have a cross superimposed on it in the shape of campaign stickers.

James Beck—All-Star Movie Producer: Let the Credits Roll

James’s eyes flared with anger and hatred behind his sunglasses. These idiots! He had played by the rules, and he had done what he had to, and now he had to lose? Life was too unfair; this whole affair had been a shitshow. Tch, whatever. Why delay the inevitable?

James marched into the execution room like a king on his way to coronation. Monobear had transformed the execution chamber into a makeshift movie theatre, and the feature film was James’s murder. The Movie Producer took a seat in the audience—Monobear handcuffed him to the seat—and he watched the captured film of his gruesome deed. All in all, he had done a pretty miraculous job of taking them out. Shame he couldn’t have taken more of those peasants down with him.

The film ended, and, in the back of the theatre, the projector sputtered in frustration. The reel was empty, and it needed to be rewound. Monobear flicked the switch, and the film began to roll back. Tracing the film to the reel, it was evident that the film had been sprawled throughout the entire theatre. James watched it whiz past his face and back again.

Along its journey, the film came right at James and began to wind around his neck. Tighter and tighter. All the while, James just smirked as always. What a pedantic way to die. That Monobear had a wicked taste of irony. Breathing was becoming difficult. His sunglasses made the world before him dark, but his vision continued to darken all the more.

There was a snap. James’s head fell forward, and he was helpless to stop his iconic sunglasses from falling off his face and crashing onto the ground. The lights in the theatre went out, and Monobear the usher came in to sweep away the trash.

James would have rolled his eyes at the irony of having his faced crossed with red boom mics in the trial room from here on out.

Cody Cameron—All-Star Waterskier: Totally Tubular Tidal Pool

Cody hadn’t thought this far. He didn’t want to think what about would happen if his plan failed, and now he was stuck. They’d ratted him out. He was ashamed. He had made a terrible
mistake. There was no going back now.

The Waterskier wasn’t going to go willingly, so Monobear had to jump into action. He secured skis to Cody’s feet and dumped him into a giant tank of water. The bear then tied one end of a rope around his torso and the other end to a jet ski. Revving the engine, Monobear prepared to have some fun.

He started slowly around the tank, building up speed. Before long, there was enough tension to bring Cody to his feet, and he began skiing around the tank. Monobear kept increasing speed, and soon Cody was flying through the tank. The tank was a closed unit, though, and the water had a single pattern to flow. As they went round and round, a vortex started to form in the center of the tank.

Monobear lost control of the jet ski and jumped out of the pool. The tension became too much, and the rope snapped. The jet ski flew out of the tank, but Cody did not. He flopped over and was submerged in the water. The whirlpool dragged him under. With his feet bound by the skis and his arms bound by the rope, Cody was unable to get his head above the waterline. He held his breath as long as he could.

The vortex slowed and the water became stagnant once more. The skis unlatched themselves from Cody’s feet and floated next to the Waterskier, face-down in the pool.

At the subsequent trials, Cody would be memorialized with an X in the shape of criss-crossed skis over his face.

Markus Aslanius—All-Star Thespian: Eating up the Lime in the Light

Markus couldn’t stop laughing. It was the greatest joke he had ever heard, the most comedic role he had ever played. And his fellow actors had done such a superb job of supporting him. They had even identified him as the killer! How fantastic!

Never ceasing to find the situation so humorous, Markus approached the platform and stood center stage. He was in the lime light, just as he was supposed to be. This was where he belonged, after all. Even Monobear thought so. Markus’s talent was to entertain, and that’s exactly what he was going to do.

All those years had heightened his stage senses. Markus daintily tiptoed away from an anvil before it crashed on top of him. He ducked nimbly as a spear went soaring across stage. With a skip and a jump, he artfully dodged spiked balls that traveled from down stage left to upstage right. Markus’s eyes twinkled; he could tell that his audience was in awe of his performance.

Monobear had had enough of the Thespian’s grandstanding. The robotic bear brandished large canes and used those to secure the actor center stage. Markus didn’t mind; he got to stay onstage. He was enjoying the attention. But what’s a play without conflict? On cue, the spotlight directly over center stage came loose from its holdings and crashed into the stage. Since birth, Markus had wanted to be in the lime light, and now he would forever be encompassed in it.

A presence like his was difficult to ignore, so at the following trials, Monobear rigged his picture to loom over the other students. And to remind them of what an impressive performance he had demonstrated, his face would be covered with overlapping canes crossing him out.
Jordan Koulibagh—All-Star Golfer: Three to Get Ready and Fore, Time to Go

Jordan’s face was a statue of stoicism as Monobear identified her as the killer. She had been so careful, but she had lost. She took a risk, but it didn’t pay off. She was humble enough to admit that she had been defeated, but she was too proud to let the others see her break. There was no point in mincing words; all that remained was her execution.

Jordan entered the execution chamber and sat on the pedestal in the middle. Though escape was far from her mind, Monobear tied her to the platform regardless. From her elevated position, she stared blankly at her classmates, and they stared back. The ceiling opened up above her, and a large metal plate came out. As it descended, Jordan could make out that it was a blade of a murderously large golf club. How fitting.

The club swung high above her, and Jordan could feel the blast of displaced air rush over her. With a metallic groan, the club descended once more, and swung again. The club was still high above her, but the blast of air was still as intense. The club continued its descending and swinging pattern. Jordan looked down at her pedestal and realized, all too fittingly, that she had been placed upon an oversized golf tee. That Monobear had a sense of humor.

The blade swung, and Jordan felt the metal touch the top of her hair. The club descended one final time. Jordan braced herself for impact. The club drew back and then mightily thrust forward. If that impact did not kill her, then the impact of her body against the wall of the execution chamber certainly did. Her body stuck to the wall for a second before sliding down, coating the wall in her essence. She fell to the floor, never to rise again.

Since she was the killer, her commemorative sign would not be adorned with a regular “X,” but with one fashioned in the shape of interlocking golf clubs.

Rico de Naranjas—All-Star Marathon Runner: The Dreaded Tread of an Amazing Race

He’d almost gotten away with it. He’d almost fooled them all. Weak little Rico couldn’t kill anybody—he was everybody’s friend! But he’d showed them; he’d done it. It was dumb luck that they found him out, but he had taken them all by surprise. They wouldn’t be forgetting about him anytime soon.

In the execution chamber, Monobear dropped Rico into a large, glass, rectangular open-ceiling box. Was this really all Monobear had planned for him? How lame. With a start, the ground underneath Rico started to move backward. He looked behind him and noticed that the floor had given way to a pit of spikes. How original. Rico casually started walking forward to escape the pit. If Monobear expected a battle of endurance, Rico would undoubtedly come out as the victor.

Monobear was aware of Rico’s talents, and so he pushed the treadmill floor to move a little faster. Rico went from a casual walk to a fast walk to a light jog to a run and then finally to a sprint. Rico was running as fast as he possibly could, but the treadmill would sooner wear itself out than he would tire. Monobear cranked the floor up one more notch, and Rico couldn’t sprint any faster. With one step, the treadmill floor dragged Rico’s foot too far back and he lost his balance. The Marathon Runner fell face down onto the treadmill floor, and in an instant, his body was deposited into the pit of spikes. The floor of the box gradually slowed to a halt.

Would there be more trials, his effigy would be effected with an “X” comprised of running shoe spikes.
Lily Smith—All-Star Kawaii: A Super Duper Plain Nothing-Special Execution Extravaganza

The tears would not stop flowing from Lily’s eyes. Why didn’t her friends understand? She didn’t mean to do it; it just sorta happened. Okay, maybe she did mean to do it, but they should forgive her anyway. What would they do without a kawaii princess in their lives? It was so rude to let her be executed!

Monobear strapped Lily into a chair surrounded by stuffed animals of various vibrant colors. The stage reminded her greatly of her room at home. The lights on stage had been jacked up to maximum brightness, and Monobear had placed a multitude of lenses over the lights to turn the stage into a rainbow battlefield. At the press of a button, a gigantic television screen descended from the ceiling and settled mere inches from the Kawaii’s face.

The screen came to life, and Lily was bombarded by a rapid succession of exotic images. The pictures flashed by so quickly that her brain was having difficulty cataloging what she was seeing. Lily closed her eyes to avoid looking at the images, but Monobear rushed over and taped her eyelids open. As the pictured continued to flash by with alarming alacrity, her eyes began to ache greatly and more tears were forming in the corners of her eyes. She was starting to feel dizzy and her head was pounding. Her body started shaking, and soon she fell backward into the crowd of stuffed animals. The television moved to loom over her as she lay on the ground convulsing. In her state of seizing on her back, she was unaware of her tongue falling back and obstructing her airway. After a moment, the television shut off and flew back into the ceiling, leaving Lily on the ground. Her body twitched once more, but then there was no more oxygen left in her little body.

From here on out, her picture in the trial room would be decorated with interlocking bows in the shape of an “X.”

Rufus Price—All-Star Latinist: Mental InSTABility

Rufus smirked and rolled his eyes. He had planned everything out so carefully in advance and he had executed it meticulously; leave it to these imbeciles to blindly guess correctly. It hurt that they should think him the most likely to have committed the murder—granted, they were right—but it hurt, nonetheless. In the end, it just came down to dumb luck, and as infuriating as that was, there was little he could do to argue.

Initially, Rufus was alone on the stage, but then twenty-three Monobear robots dressed in togas filed in single-fashion. The Latinist knew immediately where this was going. The Roman bears circled around Rufus. He knew they would attack, but the question was which one would strike first. Rufus began to turn around to see which one gave warning signs so that he could brace himself for the blow.

The moments ticked by, and the robots continued to stare at the Latinist. The suspense and apprehension was starting to make Rufus sweat. If he could just figure out which one intended to go at him first, it wouldn’t be so bad. He was getting more nervous by the second, and he was spinning around at a quicker rate. With his back turned, and with no previous warning, one of the Roman bears launched a dagger into the base of the Latinist’s spine. Almost immediately, the other twenty-two countrymen fell upon him. There was a mass exodus of blades and knives, but then they quickly fled the scene of the slaughter, leaving the Latinist to bleed out by his lonesome.

In recognition of his daring exploits within the mall, an image of Rufus would be
constructed to sit in on the trials, the letters “S,” “P,” “Q,” “R” in red making an “X” overtop his face.

Austin Fitzpatrick—All-Star Idle: I’ll Think of Something Clever Later

Austin yawned deep and wide. Murder was exhausting. Having gone through the ordeal himself now, Austin marveled that so many of his friends were able to go through with such an extreme action. And with the results of the trial, it had been such a waste of his time. Oh well. Such is life. There was only one thing left to do and then Austin would be able to sleep for a long, long time.

Austin lay on the stage under a small, glass box. That was it. He could feel the eyes of his friends on him, but he couldn’t do much in the confined space. His head was pressed against one end, his feet against the other, and his arms were pinned between his own sides and the sides of the box.

Monobear would have loved to have the surviving students watch their once-friend slowly suffocate to death, but it would be a long execution, and there were other things to be done. The bear ushered the students out of the execution chamber and left Austin by himself. As the doors to the chamber shut, the lights went out, and Austin was submerged in darkness, alone with his thoughts. After a bit, Austin started hearing the voices of his deceased friends whispering to him. He wasn’t sure if he was hallucinating from lack of visual stimuli or from the lack of oxygen. Probably a mixture of the two. Their voices were welcoming to him, they longed to see him and be with him again. He had missed them, and he had considered going to them earlier by his own devices. But now he would see them again, and that thought put a smile on his face as he drew his last breath in the box.

In the trial room, his picture would stand where he normally stood, but it wouldn’t be marred with any markings; Monobear couldn’t be bothered to bother with anything like that.

Taylor Erzen—All-Star Lucky: The Inevitable Fade of Beauty

Taylor was the Lucky! That meant that she was supposed to get away with it! It didn’t make any sense that her classmates should out her! It was so unfair. Taylor felt that she had been greatly cheated and lied to. How obnoxious! She was supposed to be somebody! And now her life was about to be cut short. Those stupid classmates of hers didn’t know what was good for them.

The stage of the execution chamber had been transformed into an elegant catwalk just for Taylor. The lights were specially tailored to highlight every one of the Lucky’s steps. Cameras were established all along the walkway to document each second of Taylor’s shining moment. Taylor stood at the back of the platform and felt the power of the lights fall upon her; she was going to go out in style.

With an empowered strut in her step, Taylor made her way along the catwalk, making sure to make those heads turn. Eat your heart out, America. She was fully aware that she would not be returning from the front edge of the procession, so she made sure to make every step count. Stop, smile, strike a pose. At the end, Taylor threw her arms up and reveled in the warmth of the stage light. As she felt the golden light from above shower over her, she then felt the piercing sensation of metal spears shooting from the ground. The metal poles pierced her body, and, for a moment, Taylor wondered how it had all gone wrong, but then the spears retracted into the ground, and
Taylor’s lifeless body fell off the stage.

During what remained of the mutual killing game, a framed photo of the Lucky would stand in her spot, a simple, unembellished red “X” covering her gorgeous face.
Fangan Ronpa 2: Despair Run Wild

Prologue—A Set Itinerary

Rina was the first to wake up. She scanned the rows of heads in front of her, and she was assured that no one else was awake. Next to her, her sister Melody was still asleep. The other fourteen children were strangers to her. The sixteen of them were seated in the first four rows of a bus, two aisles and two to a seat. Outside, they seemed to be in some sort of forest. Already, none of it made sense.

Rina nudged her sister with her elbow. Melody stirred slightly. “Five more minutes…” muttered Melody. Rina nudged her sister again until Melody opened her eyes to look at her. “Five more minutes won’t hurt, Rina. We’re not going to be late to school. Hmm? See? We’re already on a school bus.”

Rina took a deep breath; she was used to requiring patience with her sister. “Melody, we’re going to a boarding school; we don’t ride school buses.”

“But we’re on a school bus, so we must be going to school. Why else would we be here?”

“That’s a great question, and I don’t exactly have an answer for it.”

“Ooh! It’s like a mystery. How exciting!”

“No, not exciting. It’s scary. We shouldn’t be here.”

“Well I think it’s exciting. Ooh, maybe one of them knows why we’re here. Hello? Excuse me—”

“Melody, stop it. We don’t know any of these people. They’re strangers.”

“They’re only strangers until we get to know them.”

The two girls’ musings had awakened the attention of a boy sitting in the row ahead of them. “I couldn’t help but hear you two girls talking, and I take it that you don’t know what’s going on either.”

Rina scowled. “No, we do not.” She wanted to keep her distance from these people until she knew who they were.

Melody was not so cautious. “Hi! I’m Melody Lupa, and this is my twin sister Rina. What’s your name?”

Rina jerked. So much for discretion. Despite being identical twins, Rina and Melody were vastly different, both in dress and in manner. At the moment, Rina kept her hair straight and off her forehead by means of a black headband. Her small, red-rimmed glasses adorned her sharp eyes while she kept her lips pursed. She wore a plain, black T-shirt underneath a slick, fur-lined denim jacket. Despite sporting a denim top, she wore denim jeans, and then finished off her ensemble with red Converse sneakers.
Melody, on the other hand, had a much freer demeanor. She had no need for glasses, and she let her hair remain long and wavy. To add a bit of flair, she adorned her fine hair with a fresh daffodil. She wore a bright yellow sun dress that fell to just above her knees. And starting just below her knee, Melody wore the cutest pair of cowboy boots, or, in her case, cowgirl boots.
The boy in front of the girls was as taken aback as Rina. “Uhh, my name’s Eric. Eric Armstrong, although most people just call me ‘Sparky.’” Sparky looked like he belonged in a science fiction movie. He tried to hide his baby face, but there was little he could do. He wore a pair of goggles over the blonde hair covering his forehead. The rest of his hair was a mess, but that couldn’t be helped. He wore a bright green vest over a yellow long-sleeved shirt. His pants were baggy and completely covered his ankles and the backs of his sneakers.
Melody beamed while Rina stared deadpan. “It’s nice to meet you, Sparky!” said Melody.

“Uhh, yeah. Likewise,” replied Sparky. “So do you guys know any more than I do?”

“Nope! We know absolutely nothing!” said Melody.

“Forgive my sister,” said Rina. “We’ve just woken up, so we’re still trying to secure our bearings. Any information you can give us would be greatly appreciated.”

“I’m afraid this is out of my realm of expertise. It looks to me like we’re in a school bus, but I don’t know much more than that.”

“A pity.”

“Hey, why are we whispering?” asked the boy leaning across the aisle from Rina.

The boy reeked of smoke, and Rina recoiled from the smell. “Excuse me, but who are you?”

The boy ran a hand through his shaggy, greasy hair. “I’m Ed.” He stared at everyone else.
Rina rolled her eyes. “And do you have a last name?”

“Bell.” Ed stared blank faced at Rina while she continued to scowl at him.

“And is that all you have to say for yourself? You’ve given us your name but that hardly tells us who you are.”

“Umm, lemme see, uhh, I’m an All-Star, uhh, All-Star… I got this, I know it. It’s on the tip of my tongue. I am an All-Star… Clown. Yeah, that’s it. All-Star Clown.” Ed’s hair was long and greasy, obscuring much of his eyes, and it would take an extraordinary amount of hygienic energy to undo the damage already done to it. His ratty orange T-shirt fell down to his waist. Then came his equally ratty boxers, followed by his baggy pants and high-tops.

Rina looked disgusted. “There is no way you’re an All-Star Clown.”

Melody leaned over her sister to look directly at Ed. “You’re an All-Star Clown? That’s so cool!”

“Yeah, it is. Are you an All-Star too?”

Melody nodded. “I am an All-Star Twin, and Rina’s an All-Star Psychologist.”
Rina grimaced. “Melody, what have I told you about talking to strangers? We should keep our titles to ourselves.”

Sparky spoke up. “I’m an All-Star Engineer. So if we’re all All-Stars, then we all go to Success Summit, right?”

Rina raised her eyebrows as if to say “I will never tell you,” but Melody nodded in affirmation.

Sparky looked at his seat-mate and at the rest of the kids still asleep on the bus. “I bet they’re all All-Stars, too.”

“There’s four rows of us and four in a row, so that makes, uhh, don’t tell me, sixteen of us altogether,” added Ed.

“That’s how many there’s supposed to be,” replied Sparky.

Melody was still beaming. “So we’re on our way to school? I’ve been so excited to go to Success Summit ever since we got the invitation.”

“Melody,” started Rina, “notice how the bus isn’t moving.”

“Then we’re already here! What are we waiting for? Let’s go already.”

“Melody! We are not at school. When we go to school, we will go like normal children; we will not suddenly wake up on a bus with no recollection of how we got there.”

Without warning, the girl against the window on the seat opposite of Sparky jumped up and stood on her seat. With wild eyes she scanned the inside of the bus. In a loud voice, she proclaimed, “Students of the forty-sixth class of Success Summit, it is time for you to arise! Wake up and proceed into our future! The time is now!” A few of the students began to shuffle from the proclamation.

Rina was abhorred by the sudden burst and jumped from her seat into the aisle. “Sit down! Just who do you think you are?”

The girl refused to sit and instead focused her wild eyes on Rina. “I am the Cassandra Simone! Behold! Cassy the All-Star Diviner! And you are Rina Lupa, All-Star Psychologist. Both of us members of Success Summit’s forty-sixth class! Now, my fellow classmates, wake up and join the rest of us!”

Cassy wore an opaque, white shawl that fell halfway down her thighs, but her dark purple and lavender-splotched camisole permeated the bright fabric. Underneath, she wore loose black slacks and open-toed shoes. Despite the mundaneness of her clothing, she went wild with her hair and make-up. She contrasted her pale skin with an inordinate amount of black eyeliner, and she was quite familiar with the effects of mascara. She wore a silver band across her forehead, but she allowed her dark bangs to fall over top of it, and what was left in the back was tied into a make-shift ponytail. On either side of her face, though, she had strands of hair adorned with beads.
“Would you sit down and be quiet!” demanded Rina. “You’re creating a scene. And how did you know my name? You were asleep until a second ago.”

“I know everything!” replied Cassy. “I am an All-Star Diviner! It is my business to know the truth about things! I know you, and you, and you, and you! Now come, my friends, wake up! Hunter, now!” Cassy reached down and vigorously shook the girl sitting next to her. Before long, the girl came to and swatted Cassy’s hands away.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked the girl.

“Hunter, I have revived you! Now help me with the rest of our classmates!”

“How do you know my name?” asked Hunter.

Melody popped over her seat. “Cassy’s an All-Star Diviner; she knows all sorts of secret stuff.”

“And I’m the queen of France,” replied Hunter.

Ed leaned over his seat to look at Hunter. “Sup. We’ve all be sharing our names and All-Star titles. Like I’m a Clown and Sparky’s a, uhh, an Engineer.”
Hunter turned around to look at Sparky. Sparky waved back to her. “Hey.”


Hunter wore a jacket with camo fabric and pants of a matching pattern, which were tucked into her steel-toed boots. She wore a bright orange vest over top, and her trademark BB gun was strapped to her back. Even her Yukon hat with the ear flaps down was coated in a camouflage pattern. She would have given off an immaculately intimidating façade if not for the bright red tuft of hair peeking out from the front of her hat.

Melody looked quizzically at the girl. “You're Hunter the Hunter?”

“Yeah, got a problem with it?”

A boy in the second row turned around to regard everyone. “Hey! You, Loudmouth, sit down.”

“Thank you,” muttered Rina under her breath.

Cassy stared wildly back at the boy. “I will do no such thing, Shu Nguyen, All-Star Lawyer!”
“Sit down, now!” The austere tone in Shu’s voice actually assuaged Cassy’s whims. She sat. Shu coolly cocked his head upwards. “Now, who’s going to tell me what’s going on?” Cassy shot straight up out of her seat. “Except you.” Cassy sat back down.

Shu’s hair was cut business short and his angular features gave him a look of superiority. He wore the finest suit money could buy, a powerful red tie contrasting his money green dress shirt. Even in the poor light of the bus interior, the gold watch on his left wrist glinted and gleamed.

Rina was relieved that someone else had some common sense in this bus. “We’re the members of the forty-sixth class of Success Summit, and for some reason, we’ve all woken up on this bus together.”

“Nice and concise, just the way I like it.”

Rina could feel her face wanting to blush, but she resisted the urge. “You’re welcome.”

“So are you lot going to give me your names? Or am I gonna have to pry them out of Loudmouth over here?”

“Perhaps in the interest of time we should wait until everyone else is with us so we don’t have to go through this exposition another ten times,” suggested Sparky. The others agreed that
this was a wise idea, and before long all sixteen students were ready to share their stories.

Shu grabbed Cassy and moved to the front of the bus to gather everyone’s attention. “Alright, listen up. We’re going to do this like civilized individuals. Loudmouth here is going to call out your name, you’re going to rise, tell us your name and All-Star title, and then sit back down. Got it? Loudmouth.”

Cassy waved her hands in the air dramatically. “Spirits, lend me strength! It would be too easy to reveal you in a random order, but I know that one among you would prefer order, so alphabetical it is! First up: Eric Armstrong!”

Sparky stood up and waved meekly. “Hey. Like Cassy said, I’m Eric Armstrong, All-Star Engineer, but you can call me ‘Sparky.’” Sparky spoke in a very casual, down-to-earth style, which did not help his already youthful looks.

“Next: Ed Bell!”

Ed followed Sparky’s example. “Uhh, sup. I’m Ed and I’m an All-Star Clown. Uhh, honk honk, I guess.” Ed was not necessarily slow of wit, but he was certainly slow of speech.

“Then we have Rosa Bellamy!”

The girl two seats in front of Rina stood up. “Hello, everyone. My name is Rosa Bellamy, and I am an All-Star Maid. It is a pleasure to meet you.” She spoke fluidly and languidly, relishing each and every syllable.

Rosa wore a tight, sleeveless black top. It was far too small for her, as it left much of her midriff exposed; nevertheless, it instantly brought attention to the endowment she inherited from her mother. Her black pencil skirt wasn’t any looser on her, and it was equally as unfittingly short. She wore light ballet flats with white knee-high stockings. She kept her hair back with a lasciviously red bandana; she couldn’t have her hair detract from her fair skin—with just a touch of rouge—or her piercing green eyes.
“Oh, the voices tell me now to call upon Maxwell Carswell!”

The boy sitting next to Ed slowly stood up. “My name is Maxwell Carswell. I am an All-Star Mathematician.” Maxwell sat back down. When he spoke, he spoke quickly and in distinct fragments. He looked down the entire time, making eye-contact with no one.

Maxwell wore a brown hooded sweatshirt that was too big for him, obscuring much of his hands. He wore khakis and brown dress shoes to create an ensemble of brownness. Over his unruly brown hair, he wore a pair of headphones. The cord from the headphones was tucked between his sweatshirt and undershirt, looping out the bottom and connecting to the music device hidden in his hoodie pocket.
“Your time is now, Billy Cosdon!”

The boy near the window in the front row bounced up. “Kapow! They call me Billy Cosdon the All-Star Nerd! Kapow!” After Cassy, Billy easily had the most energy in the group.

Billy was on the heavier side, so he had to keep his light brown hair short so it wouldn’t make him too hot in the summer. He also wore light gray sweatpants since they weren’t constricting. He had the insignia of his favorite superhero, Justice Man, on his light blue T-shirt, which came just to his waist. He wore a large, red, digital watch on his right wrist that bore the mark of his second favorite superhero, Justice Woman. To accent his triple ensemble, he proudly wore the cape of his third favorite superhero, Justice Dog, over his shoulders, but he wasn’t keen on tying knots, so the strings came down into giant bunny ears over his chest.
“After Billy, the stars are showing me the name of Eugene Ford!”

The boy who had been sitting with Shu until the Lawyer moved jumped up. “Yo, wazzup, my homies? My name is totes Eugene Ford, and how hella cool is it that I’m considered the All-Star Lucky? Yeah!” Eugene was also energetic, but in a slightly more uncomfortable way.

For some reason, Eugene already had a bandage on his cheek. To complement his tuxedo T-shirt, he wore a hot pink bow tie. His jeans had been purchased with those holes already in them, but that didn’t take away from his socks and flip flops combo. A sixteen gauge earring adorned his left ear while his right was clear, and his hair was a sort of reverse mullet: party in the front, business in the back.
“This name comes to me as clear as day: Ruby Jain.”

The girl sitting next to Rosa stood elegantly. “Greetings, everyone. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ruby Jain, All-Star Equestrian.” Ruby spoke with an ample amount of confidence and self-assurance.

Ruby wore a traditional—albeit stylish—sari to complement her dark, flawless skin. The bright red fabric with a gold-leaf print wrapped its way from her feet up to her neck. Her right arm and shoulder were completely free, and so her large, gold bracelet showed prominently, but her left arm, save for her ringed fingers, was obscured by the dress. Ruby’s shimmering hair was parted to either side to expose as much of her face as possible, and her gilded chandelier earrings worked to frame her face as well. Her sari was long enough to obscure her high-heeled sandals so that she appeared taller than she really was.
“Oh dear, I am receiving a vision of immense portent! I see not one, but two names! Yes, I see the twin names of Melody and Rina Lupa!”

Almost simultaneously, Melody and her sister stood up to address the crowd. “Hi, I’m Melody, and this is—”

“I am Rina Lupa. I am the All-Star Psychologist, while—”

“And I’m the All-Star Twin.” No longer having to whisper, Melody’s melodic voice bounced with a natural airiness, while Rina’s maintained its cool cadence.

“This divination is starting to exact its toll upon me, but I will persevere for the sake of us! Claude Marley, come on down!”

The young man sitting with Sparky got to his feet. “Hello, everyone. I am pleased to meet every single one of you and get to know you. As our host graciously said, my name is Claude Marley, and I am the All-Star Poet in our band of skilled artists.” Claude’s consummate understanding of meter and verse made his words flow even in natural speech.

Claude was wearing an oversized yellow T-shirt that had been around far longer than intended. He also wore a pair of faded purple pants rolled up into shorts, as well as faded flip-flops.
on his feet. A rainbow beanie fell on top of his head, covering some of the dreadlocks that fell over the dark skin of his face. Like most poets that he knew, Claude had his ukulele strapped to his back.

“This one came to me in a flash! John Matthews!”

The boy next to Billy rose up. “What up? Matthews, John Matthews. All-Star Cheerleader.” John was aware of the intimidating force of his bulk, and he kept that force present in his voice as well.

John’s muscles strained against his custom pink and silver cheerleading uniform: a tight, sleeveless top and matching skirt. Written in bold letters across his chest was the word “CHEER.” The uniform itself left little to the imagination, and the short length of his skirt caught the eyes of the girls and a few of the guys. John kept his hair short so he wouldn’t have to worry about it covering his face during a routine.
“Hmm…I’m getting mixed signals now…but I believe that our next stranger is Shu Nguyen!”

Shu cocked his head back. “Listen up. That’s me. Shu Nguyen, All-Star Lawyer. Now get on to who’s next, Loudmouth.” Shu spoke in a commanding and authoritative voice, not unbefitting of an attorney.

“What a lovely sign! Reggie Nipohc, it is you!”

The girl next to the window in the front row daintily stood forth. “Hi. It is very nice to meet all of you. I am Reggie Nipohc, and I am blessed to be called Success Summit’s All-Star Pianist.” Reggie spoke softly and melodically.

Reggie wore a silky, dark gray, sleeveless dress that came down to her knees, and then her legs were covered in off-white leggings. Her dress was as wavy as her curly, dark brown hair that fell in waves just past her shoulders. She had a green hairband wrapped around her left wrist, a red scarf with white polka dots around her neck, and red ballet flats. She had long eyelashes and naturally rosy cheeks, but more striking were her soothing pale blue eyes.
“This one is a bit queer, so bear with me! Cassandra Simone! *Ahem,* Cassandra Simone! Cassandra Simone, reveal yourself!”

Shu pinched the bridge of his nose. “That would be you, Loudmouth.”

“*Gasp!* So it is! Behold! Cassandra Simone! I am Cassy, the All-Star Diviner!” Cassy spoke just as wildly as she acted.

“Enough show-boating, Loudmouth. We’re almost done.”

“Then without further delay, I welcome Tina Wolfgarth!”

The girl sitting next to Reggie stood up. “Hello. My name is Tina Wolfgarth. My title is that of All-Star OCD. Don’t give me that look! Don’t think of it as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; think of it as organized, categorical, and diligent.” Tina’s speech was not exempt from the fastidiousness she applied to all facets of her life.

Tina kept her orange hair incredibly short but that just meant that it was manageable. She couldn’t bother herself with glasses sliding down her face, so she wore contacts, even if they dried out her eyes. Likewise, jewelry had absolutely no reason to be on her person; thank goodness her freckles lined up accordingly. Nor would she be caught dead wearing make-up. She wore a pressed
white blouse, but she kept her cuffs pinned back to avoid their agitating her wrists as she goes about her business. She donned a pair of wrinkle-free off-gray Capri pants with more-practical-than-stylish dress shoes.

“And last, but certainly not least, my former bus-mate Hunter Zaroff!”

Hunter stood up to see everyone. “What up? My name’s Hunter Zaroff, All-Star Hunter. Yeah, I’m Hunter the Hunter, you got a problem with that?” Hunter put a hand on her BB gun. “And this is Greta. She doesn’t like it when people have problems with things.” Hunter didn’t take shit from people, and this trait was reflected in her speech patterns.

After Hunter sat down, Shu ushered Cassy back to her seat and then addressed the rest of the students. “Now that those introductions are out of the way, it’s time we start figuring something out. First off, I want to know—”

The main door at the front of the bus opened, and a voice from outside the bus rang out through the air, as if over a PA system. “Kiddies, I see that you’re all awake! How wonderful! Now be good little campers and get out of that dingy old bus and into the fresh air! In fact, you should especially make your way to the Fire Pit. I can’t wait to finally meet all of you!”
Tina made a move to leave, but Shu stood in her path. “Where do you think you’re going?” asked the Lawyer.

Tina took a deep breath to retain her composure. “The voice told us to leave this bus. It would be rude to keep whoever it is waiting.”

“We’re not leaving until we figure a few things out. We have no idea who that is.”

John stood up and cracked his knuckles. “All the more reason for us to get out.”

Melody jumped up. “I want to go outside! It’s such a pretty day. It would be a waste to spend it in here.”

More and more of the students voiced similar opinions, and so Shu was forced to relent. Taking the lead position, Shu exited the bus with everyone else following behind. Not far from the bus, the students spied a large fire pit already stocked with enough wood for an inferno. Around the pit were sixteen stone blocks. Not seeing anyone else in sight, the students picked seats and sat around the pit. Shu the Lawyer took what he felt was the seat at the head of the circle. To his right sat Tina the OCD, followed by Claude the Poet, then Reggie the Pianist, Billy the Nerd, Ruby the Equestrian, Maxwell the Mathematician, Melody the Twin, and Eugene the Lucky directly across from Shu. After Eugene came Cassy the Diviner, Sparky the Engineer, Rosa the Maid, John the Cheerleader, Hunter the Hunter, Ed the Clown, and then Rina the Psychologist sat on the other side of Shu.

The students sat in silence for a minute, waiting for something to happen. Shu was growing restless. He stood up and said, “This is a waste of our time. Let’s just go out and find whoever is supposedly here with us.”

Rina turned to face him. “Hold still. Rushing off on our own isn’t going to help anything. If we do plan to do something, we should do it together, as a whole.”

“The safest thing to do is to stay put,” interjected Tina.

“But it’s so nice out! Look at all the grass! I don’t want to stay put,” said Melody.

“It’s a little hot, though,” added Billy. “Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

“If we left, what would we even do?” asked Reggie thoughtfully.

“I suppose we would try to find out why the forty-sixth class of Success Summit woke up on a bus in the middle of the woods,” answered Claude.

“Eww, we are in the middle of the woods, aren’t we?” posed Rosa. “I’m liable to burn if I’m out in the sun much longer.”

“A little fresh air never killed anyone,” barked Hunter.

“My skin is fair,” came Rosa’s rebuttal. “Maybe one of the boys will be kind enough to find me some sunscreen I can rub on my body. They could even help get my back.”

“That’s totes fine with me!” yelled Eugene.
“I’m down with that,” added John, almost simultaneously.

“I highly doubt sunscreen is our top priority at the moment,” remarked Ruby. “Can we please focus on what’s important?”

“I’m open to suggestions,” said Sparky innocently.

Shu took command once again. “Then here’s what we’re going to do: we’re all going to—”

“Uhh, I’ve got an idea,” interrupted Ed. “That chick, uhh, Cassy seems to know things, so we should, uhh, ask her what to do.”

“Perfect timing!” exclaimed Cassy. “I’ve just received a vision! Yes! We shall all do as Maxwell instructs!”

All eyes turned on the Mathematician, who, without meeting any of their gazes, quickly said, “Mother always said to stay in one place if I was lost.”

“The prophet has spoken!” yelled Cassy. “It is decided! We shall wait here for the universe to divulge its secrets to us!”

Shu sat back down on his rock. “Unbelievable,” he muttered under his breath.

Without delay, the universe presented itself. The same voice from earlier rang out through the air, but this time it was not concentrated from a PA system. Instead, it seemed to emanate from the kindling in front of the students.

“Upupupu! Get ready, because it’s show time!” From the stack of wood emerged a small, robotic bear. It looked like the teddy bear of a psychopath. One vertical half of the bear was white and pure, but the other was black and malevolent with a wicked sneer stuck on its face. The sudden appearance of the bear surprised the students, to say the least.

“Upupupu! Hello and welcome to Camp Monomono! I will be your host, the great and wonderful Monobear! We’re going to have a great time here together, I just know it!”

A look of horror spread across Tina’s and Rosa’s faces. “Did you say ‘camp?’” asked Rosa. “We’re not expected to be camping, are we?”

“I—I would never go camping in my life,” asserted Tina. “It must be a mistake that I have been brought here.”

Monobear just laughed at the plight of the girls. “Rest assured, there’s no mistake. You see, the fine folks of Success Summit thought it would be grand to treat the forty-sixth class to a camping retreat before the school year starts. This way you can all get to know each other before you’re stressed out by projects and exams.”

“Monobear, you are a dirty, filthy liar!” declared Cassy, rising from her seat. “The higher-ups at Success Summit know nothing about this trip! This is not a school-sanctioned event!”

Shu was indignant that their “host” might be leading them astray. “Hey, Bearbrain, is this true?”

Despite its being a robot, Monobear looked unnerved. “Upu…well, you see…the thing is…ah, screw it! Yes, it was a lie!”
Billy was confused. “But why would you lie about that?”

“Because I had this great big plan set up for all of you. But I guess somebody just had to go and spoil all the fun. So you know what? We’re going to have a change in plans.”

“Is it just me, or does this machine like the sound of its own voice?” mused Ruby.

“Now that you mention it, I am sensing a certain proclivity on its part,” answered Claude.

“Uhh, I think it’s kinda cool,” added Ed.

“If you would all be quiet, maybe I could get on with my great exposition!” yelled Monobear. “Listen up! This is how it was supposed to go: you were all going to think you’d never met before, and that this was a vacation for all of you, and you would find and discover joy and friendship together in this lovely camp.”

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘you were going to tell us that?’” asked Eugene.

“It means that I’m not going to tell you that. That would’ve been the lie, so here’s the truth: this is not the first time you’ve all met each other.”

“Of course not, silly,” giggled Melody. “Rina and I have known each other our entire lives.”

“Melody, he—she—it means the rest of us.”

“Ohh…”

“Nope, you brats have been together before.”

“Then why don’t I remember any of that?” asked John with a hint of suspicious malice in his voice.

“Because you’ve all had your memories erased, duh. But why is that, I wonder. Oh well, I guess you’ll have to figure that part out on your own.”

“I take it we’re not here to learn about friendship either,” said Sparky.

“You got that shit right! In addition to losing your memories, you lot have been kidnapped, and you’re gonna stay in this camp for a long time.”

“If you think Greta and I are just going to sit back and do nothing about this, then you’ve got another thing coming,” stated Hunter. “There’s no way we’re staying here.”

“Well, if you must know, there is one way to leave Camp Monomono.”

“Stop holding out on us and just tell us already,” demanded Shu.

“Upupu…this is not a Camping Trip of Mutual Friendship, but rather a Camping Trip of Mutual Killing!”

“Did it say ‘killing?’” asked Reggie. “I do not like the sound of that.”

Tina nearly choked on her saliva. “You’ve got to be kidding me! That’s preposterous!”

“I’ve heard many phrases in my day, but that is a new one,” said Claude.
“What’s that even supposed to, uhh, mean?” asked Ed.

“It means that if you want to leave Camp Monomono, all you have to do is murder one of your classmates! Simple, really!”

“Ha ha, that’s a funny one, real ironic, pal,” Eugene sputtered.

“That’s highly illegal,” murmured Ruby.

“The Justice Family wouldn’t like this one bit…” mumbled Billy.

“I’m going to be sick,” muttered Rosa.

“Granted, there are some rules accompanying it. You’ll find a list of all the camp rules in your cabins.”

“How can it just act like that doesn’t mean anything?” asked John in bewilderment. “Killing somebody is a big deal!”

“It doesn’t feel so nice out anymore…” said Melody.

“It can’t be that cut and dry,” added Sparky. “There’s got to be more than one way to look at this.”

“Well, we all seem rather averse to the idea, so I think it’ll be rather difficult to get us to indulge in such a disgusting thing,” stated Rina.

“Think of it what you will, but them’s the breaks. Of course, you can always live out your life in the luxury of Camp Monomono. You’ll be provided with food and shelter and all the great outdoors time you could wish for!”

“Like hell I’m staying here,” declared Shu. “I’ve worked too hard to get stuck in some camp.”

“Mother won’t like this…” mumbled Maxwell on his own accord.

“Well I’m not killing anyone, and Greta here will make damn sure that no one kills me.”

“The clouds hide the truth of the future from me! I can only wonder what will lie in store for us!”

“Upupupu…so there you have it. For now, at least. But where are my manners? Welcome to Camp Monomono! You’re free to explore this place to your heart’s content, but don’t break any of the rules! We’re going to have a lot of fun here, I just know it.”

With a wave, Monobear jumped back into the pile of kindling. John immediately rushed into the Fire Pit to try and find the bear, but it was as if the robot had completely disappeared. Dismayed and confused, John returned to the group of students. They looked at one another, unsure of what to make of Monobear’s proposed game. Was this real? Was this really happening? As the sixteen students huddled around the Fire Pit, they wondered what the future would hold for them. Not even Cassy could see what despair and darkness awaited them.

End of Prologue

Surviving Students: 16
Sparky Armstrong—All-Star Engineer
Ed Bell—All-Star Clown
Rosa Bellamy—All-Star Maid
Maxwell Carswell—All-Star Mathematician
Billy Cosdon—All-Star Nerd
Eugene Ford—All-Star Lucky
Ruby Jain—All-Star Equestrian
Melody Lupa—All-Star Twin
Rina Lupa—All-Star Psychologist
Claude Marley—All-Star Poet
John Matthews—All-Star Cheerleader
Shu Nguyen—All-Star Lawyer
Reggie Nipohc—All-Star Pianist
Cassy Simone—All-Star Diviner
Tina Wolfgarth—All-Star OCD
Hunter Zaroff—All-Star Hunter
My name is Amanda. You might know me better as allstarkawaii.tumblr.com, or the illustrator of my friend’s massive as all hell fanfiction. I must say, it’s been a ride and I can hardly believe how much I’ve grown as an artist in the process. But now that Universal Despair Sale has come to a close, I’d like to shed some light on the work I’ve done and the influence it has brought to the story.

I remember when Nate first texted me, asking me what my Super High School Level title would be if I was in the Dangan Ronpa universe. I didn’t think much of it at the time, so naturally I jokingly replied that I would be the SHSL Kawaii (desu). However, I was not at all aware that anything would come of that simple little question. A few short weeks later, I was texted over the summer in regard to possibly doing an art challenge. And, of course, I can’t turn down a challenge of any sort, so I accepted without knowing what I was getting myself into.

I was sent the original draft of the prologue and asked to create designs for sixteen original characters based on a vague description of their appearances and a basic outline of their personalities. I was incredibly excited. Getting complete artistic liberty while creating unique designs for a bunch of interesting characters? Sign me up. The idea of the task was daunting, of course, but I was willing to do it.

Because I was excited, I got to work right away, starting from the bottom up. This means the first character I drew was Taylor, and then I moved to Austin, and I ended with Melissa. I wanted to go about it this way because I was rather excited to design Lily (she did have my favorite title, after all), and I wanted to knock her out early on. But, all the same, I didn’t want to design all the characters I was eager about first and be stuck with the not-so-exciting ones last. I’d lose motivation pretty quickly that way. So, it seemed to make sense to move in some sort of chronological order.

It didn’t take long to crank out each character’s design. I eventually worked up a pace so that I was making one per day. It was fun to give each of these characters an actual, tangible design. It made each of them all the more real. Austin was no longer just some slacker who only half-dressed himself in the morning. He was a cutie who wore an immaculately kept suit with blue and red gym shorts. Elizabeth wasn’t just some stuck-up historian in a large, impractical dress. She was officially a blonde beauty who wore a stunning blue dress with a floral pattern.

To be honest, I could talk for ages about each character’s design and why I drew them the way I did. For example, I selected the colors pink and yellow for Taylor to emphasize her femininity, whereas I chose more muted, earthy colors for Theo to highlight his humility and down to earth-ness. Almost each character has a story or a reason behind their design.

Some of the characters, like Markus and Francesca, were easy to design, as they were rather straightforward and simple. Other characters, like Randolph (who took an immense amount of research to design) and Lily (who required over 100 layers of color), were more difficult and took a little more time. But, in the end, I like to think that they came out well and that each design accurately reflects each character’s personality and title.

Shortly after I finished designing each character, I was asked if I could create a class photo, so that every time a character died, they could be removed from the picture. Still eager to draw all of these characters, I was quick to agree. I got to work right away, doodling a rough sketch of each character’s placement. Since the story was not finished at the time, I was not aware of who was going to die and when. As such, the final picture with only Taylor, Austin, Rufus, and Lily looks
rather odd and sparse. But that is neither here nor there. The class photo was definitely a challenge for me, as I’d never drawn anything so big or detailed. It took a lot of time, and due to an immense amount of procrastination and technical difficulties, it took a few months for me to finally finish. But, in the end, it got done.

As Nate wrote more and more of his story, I gradually fell more and more in love with these characters. I found myself doodling them frequently and often drawing them in the margins of notebooks. In fact, I still have many of these drawings, and if I ever become ambitious enough, I very well may upload them to tumblr one of these days. In fact, if anyone is interested in seeing these drawing or contributing anything themselves, it’s recommended they check out the #universaldespair sale tag on tumblr.

Whenever Nate sent me a newly-written part of his story, I’d record my thoughts and feelings and would close with what I liked to call my ‘favoritecharacterometer’. Because Nate will share his, I feel like I should share my own.

1. **Austin**—He was such a cutie!!! Not to mention an all around interesting character. In my opinion, he had some of the most interesting social links and always had a funny way of putting things that made me fall in love instantly.
2. **Lily**—She was created after my own title, so of course I absolutely adore her! Not only did she have one of my favorite designs, she was just so fucking cute.
3. **Cody**—It’s funny because whereas he was once one of my least favorites, he quickly grew into one of the best characters. He was so sweet and genuine.
4. **James**—I was heartbroken when he died. He was a douchebag, but he was a lovable douchebag.
5. **Rico**—Rico had some beautiful character development and his bromance with Rufus was my fave.
6. **Theo**—He always fluctuated on my favoritecharacterometer. But ultimately, he was an interesting and mysterious character who I always wanted to know more about.
7. **Jenny**—How can you not love Jenny? She was so sweet and genuinely cared for her friends.
8. **Taylor**—I didn’t think I’d like her as much as I did! She was such a complicated and complex character, and she was very interesting to see develop.
9. **Jordan**—She was another character I had many mixed feelings about throughout the story. And, uh. That’s all there really is to say on the matter.
10. **Melissa**—What a cutie. Too bad it took so long for us to see her true colors
11. **Rufus**—He never personally left much of an impression on me, despite being around for the entirety of the story. I was ultimately more interested in his relationships with Jordan and Rico than in him himself.
12. **Randolph**—He didn’t become interesting to me until we learned he was an occultist. But by the time that came out, he was done for.
13. **Francesca**—We didn’t get to see enough of her for me to really fall in love with her. It’s a shame, too.
14. **Markus**—He changed too much for me to really fall in love with him as one person—it was almost like he was 4 different characters. By the time he died in chapter 4, I was thoroughly done with him.
15. **Delilah**—Despite her, um, endearing personality, I never got to see enough of her for her to really leave an impressions on me.
16. **Elizabeth**—What a bitch.

It’s been fun designing all these characters, and now as we’re heading into the sequel, I hope to have even more fun with a whole new set of sixteen characters. So, I hope to see you all there in Despair Run Wild!
My name is Nate, I run the blog sarcasticfreedom.tumblr.com, and I am the author of Fangan Ronpa: Universal Despair Sale. Now that the story’s all wrapped up and edited, and the bonus material has all been distributed, I thought I’d give a few last remarks to bring this adventure to a close. And what an adventure it has been!

Like most people who read/play Dangan Ronpa, I was mesmerized by the DR universe. I’ve always liked the idea of stories that start with a set number of characters that dwindle throughout the piece; Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None* is a prime example, while *Survivor* and the *Total Drama* series are as well, albeit to a lesser extent. It wasn’t long before I had to decide on what my personal Super High School Level/All-Star title would be, and I doubt it’s a surprise that it was that of All-Star Latinist. Soon enough, I was imagining what part I’d be playing in trials, trying to convince others of my innocence and nabbing the real killer, etc. I bounced a few ideas off my friend Amanda, aka allstarkawaii.tumblr.com, and before long I had a list of sixteen All-Star titles set up.

I never meant for anything to come of it, but one day in the summer between freshman and sophomore year of college, I thought it’d be fun to write up a mock Prologue, just for fun. I then sent that to Amanda, and she loved every bit of it. I sent it under the pretext of giving it to her as an art exercise in designing diverse characters, and she started producing the beautiful character art. Once I saw the sixteen All-Stars in all their glory, I couldn’t not write the story. Thus Fangan Ronpa: Universal Despair Sale began to breathe life.

As I planned, there were certain stylistic choices I made, the biggest being the play format and Americanization. I imagined that the trials would get so incredibly tedious to read if it was constantly filled with “He said,” “She said,” and so I cut that out altogether. I think the play format allows for the trials to be seen like the canon trials, like a play or movie being enacted in front of the reader. As a fan of Dangan Ronpa, I have spent my fair share of time investigating others’ OCs and stories. I’ve seen fan-stories where they keep to the Japanese premise, and they have sixteen Super High School Levels with Japanese names. In my opinion, it is hard to keep the names and titles of these characters straight throughout. I simply think it’s easier to remember Bob the Builder and Dora the Explorer than Yosuke the Builder or Chihiro the Explorer. And can you blame me for wanting to put my own spin on things?

The first thing I did was come up with the sixteen titles. I wanted a blend of talents, and I believe they can all be sorted into one of three categories: Mental, Physical, or Innate. Rufus and Elizabeth would exemplify the first, Jordan and Cody the second, and Austin and Lily the Third. From the list of titles, I figured out who would kill whom and in what order. It wasn’t until after that was set that the characters received names or even personalities. As far as naming, some of them have intricate reasonings behind their names, while others do not. For example, Cody was named after a Cody who went to my high school, who, oddly enough, competed professionally in barefoot waterskiing.

I liked to think of the story as a playable game, but I wasn’t sure who the main character would be. I thought it would be cool if the player had the choice between playing a boy or a girl, and so I had in mind that Austin and Taylor would fill those roles, respectively. Looking back, I think it could only be played from Austin’s perspective. But thinking about both of them as a plausible main character, I had to dedicate enough time to flesh out both of them. But it wouldn’t be fair to center the story on these two characters, so I ended up with an omniscient narrator. I’ve read about the original Dangan Ronpa that the creators stated that each character had a significant
From Chapter One onwards, I knew exactly how long each character would live. While writing Chapter Four, I would often look at Cody’s picture and think to myself “You gonna die soon.” Indeed, I had a picture of each All-Star saved on my computer and organized into either the “Dead” folder or the “Alive” folder. The order in which the murders occur is basically the same as what I had initially planned, with two distinctions.

The first distinction is that Elizabeth was not intended to be the third murderer. Originally, Theo was going to pull off his “double murder” in Chapter Three, but as Elizabeth’s personality developed throughout, I couldn’t stand her narcissism—though it made for a strong character trait—and I wanted her off the page as soon as I could manage. It also felt better having her case separated more from Jenny’s timewise since those two characters were linked so closely together early on. The consequences of this move meant we had less time with James, which is a shame, but we also got to see Jordan’s and Theo’s relationship blossom and the blow-out that would eventually ensue, and I think that that made for some good entertainment.

The second distinction was that there were not originally supposed to be four survivors. I got the idea halfway through that I could turn this into a serial project with more characters all coming together in the end, but in order for that to happen, I’d need to keep more of the senior class alive than planned. The motive for Jenny’s murder was still going to be centered on Monobear’s incentive, i.e. she would kill to get Lily out of the mall. In the following chapter, without Rico, Rufus, under his own hubris, would kill Lily and charismatically try to convince Austin that Taylor had committed the murder. The Idle would ultimately see through Rufus’s deception, and he and Taylor would be the survivors. After that point, one of two endings would occur. As the final two, Taylor and Austin would come together, and then they would simultaneously stab each other. But since Taylor is a Lucky, her attack would prove fatal while Austin’s would not. Monobear would then ask her who killed Austin. In the hopeful version, she says he killed himself, and she walks out of the mall, alone and alive. In the despairing ending, she says, “I killed him, duh,” to which Monobear replies, “The killer has been correctly identified,” and she is consequently executed. If I ever feel adventurous—let’s face it, if I have the time—I’d like to go back and rewrite these bits as an alternative ending, but that won’t be able to happen for a long time.

Writing the story was a huge test for my imagination as well. I often tell people who read it that the trials get much better after Chapter One, because I think it’s clear that I had no idea what I was doing at that point in time. Shocker as it is, I’m not well versed in the art of murder, and trying to create a realistic mystery was a new challenge.

The personalities of the students were not obvious to me either from the start. I had no idea Elizabeth would be so self-centered, or that Cody would be so adorable. As a writer, I had moments when I had to wonder why a specific character had said what they did, and it is in those moments that a character truly becomes alive for a writer, and it is one of the most miraculous feelings in the world.

As I mentioned earlier, I conversed in detail with Amanda about UDS. I am truly appreciative that I had someone to discuss things with throughout the process. I began writing late June/early July 2013, and then finished the epilogue mid-March 2014. UDS took up about nine months of my life, mixed between 36 college credits, four theatrical productions, and two jobs—both in the tutoring profession. Either way, I’m incredibly happy with the outcome (and the response!), and I have, beyond a shadow of a doubt, grown as a writer because of it.

Toward the end of the writing of Chapter Four or Five, Amanda and I got in to talks about voice-acting the trials. Between the two of us, we could muster a crew of seventeen actors to
record the appropriate lines. In addition to presenting it like a radio play, we wanted to turn it into a
Ren’Py styled visual novel, so that the readers could feel like they really were playing Fangan
Ronpa: UDS. We recorded most of the prologue and much of the first chapter, but we ran into
technical difficulties on both ends. I still have those recordings and would be more than happy to
share them with anyone interested. I would also be supportive if someone wanted to take the
initiative and run with this idea themselves—as long as they give credit where credit is due.

Every time I would send a chapter to Amanda, she would reply with what we called her
“favorite characterometer,” wherein she listed in order the All-Stars ranked from favorite to least
favorite. Just recently did I share with her my favorite characterometer, and so I’d like to take the
time here to present my list and briefly explain why everyone fell where they did.

1. Jenny—She had the most endearing—in my opinion—character development
throughout, and though she played the shy girl, she was still a substantial character.
2. Austin—I enjoyed how he could analyze the other characters so poetically and never
threateningly, as well as providing me a mouthpiece to discuss gender/sex equality/fluidity.
3. Cody—In many ways he functioned as a foil to Austin, and I had fun deconstructing the
typical-jock stock character.
4. Elizabeth—Despite her disgusting egocentrism, she was a strong character with a definite
personality.
5. James—Similar to Elizabeth, and a lot of fun to write. Tch.
6. Rufus—Despite being the character I most closely put myself into, Rufus was an ass
with few social skills, so he doesn’t get any higher than sixth place.
7. Taylor—She annoyed me with her wishy-washy-ness, but she was also fun to write at
times because she was, well, herself, the primadonna.
8. Jordan—I wish I could have done more with Jordan. She was my first real attempt at
writing a POC, and I feel ashamed of the way I portrayed her. In the beginning, she tells the
others to ignore her skin color and sex, and I made her feel ashamed of these aspects of
herself instead of empowered by them. I wish I had written her stronger so that I could
justifiably put her higher, but I know that she has helped me to create better, more realistic
characters in the future.
9. Delilah—We didn’t get to see a lot from her, but who can’t fall in love with her strange
Southern colloquialisms? You sack of flour!
10. Lily—I felt that Lily was rather flat, so that’s why she appears lower on the list. I needed
her to be flat, though; the Shopping Spree of Mutual Killing was enough to inspire
depression in any of the kids, but Lily always acted as a beacon of positive energy.
11. Francesca—We didn’t get to see a lot of her either, but had we, we would have seen a truly
altruistic soul racked with inner conflict. As the author, there are things about the characters
I know that were never written down; Francesca’s story is one I would like to revisit at some
point in the future.
12. Rico—I will admit that Rico had an amazing journey as a character, but as a person, he just
sorta rubbed me the wrong way. It’s perfectly fine to like him, but in real life, I wouldn’t
seek out his friendship, I don’t think. He’s kind of a loser—a lovable one, but a loser
nonetheless.
13. Theo—Thoughtful, considerate, astute; all great traits to have, but not very interesting ones.
He only became interesting to me when he developed his crush and relationship with Jordan.
14. Melissa—Oh god, she never shut up!
15. Markus—Markus could be categorized into four different characters: Cowardly Markus,
Bravado Markus, Aggressive Markus, and Nihilistic Markus. Had he solely been one of the
four, he may have held him own, but his shiftiness pushed him down.
16. Randolph—Flat as well, and he really only became interesting after his occult plot twist,
despite having a “sense of humor.”
And with that, I’d like to bring Fangan Ronpa: Universal Despair Sale to a formal end. This has been an amazing experience, and I’m glad that I’ve gotten to share it with others. But if the cliff-hanger of the Epilogue is any indication, there’s more where this came from, so until then, don’t give in to the forces of despair.

(Still can’t get over the fact that the story’s over? Continue the dialog with the cast over at asktheallstars.tumblr.com. And don’t forget to check sarcasticproductions.tumblr.com/fanganronpa for updates to the series.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!