This is the fifty-fourth Killing Game. The participants know full well what this entails, and several believed they had already escaped this fate by 'aging out' of eligibility. In a world infested by Despair, these broken-hearted Ultimates could never stand for something like 'hope'...

But instead, maybe they can find redemption.

[The sequel to Everybody's Brand New and Improved Killing Game Semester. Daily Updates. Can be understood just fine without reading BNAI first, but does spoil part of BNAI's ending]
[Comments and Speculation greatly appreciated!!]
["Other" tags are to avoid clutter]

Like to liveblog? Join Everyone's Brand New And Improved Discord Server.
https://discord.gg/KbWpxN2
I only just found out that there exists a grammar rule where sometimes commas are not the right punctuation to use in dialogue so please excuse this, it's a rule nobody ever told me about in all my years alive till recently. I'll try to fix it up where I can but this thing has way too many chapters.

Content warnings are hard to properly convey in tags so here we go:
- There is a small amount of canon-typical (Think Korekiyo), unrequited incest, condemned by all present
- There isn't a character here who doesn't have some amount of suffering in their backstory. Includes the full spectrum of such things, from sexual abuse to physical torture; Though the only gruesome descriptions will be in body discoveries and executions, the characters will discuss these things and some may crack morbid jokes.
- There's mention of religious/ritual abuse to varying levels
- Emetophobes might not have a fun time here because I'll admit, I do tend to lean on that sort of thing as an expression of extreme shock/disgust
- If you join the discord, https://discord.gg/KbWpxN2 and ask about any particular content you'd like to avoid, etc, or any of the above, I can give you a list of chapters to skip on reading!

-Above all else, remember. This is a story about becoming better. Everyone deserves a second chance.

Full character sprite collection, for if anyone wanted to, I dunno, make some...
Fanart... :3c : https://sta.sh/2sjg1br9vj4?edit=1

3D rendering images made using Koikatsu Studio
See the end of the work for more notes.
Nami was used to waking up in hospital beds.

She wasn’t quite sure why she was used to that, though. Some part of her had the vague feeling that it had to do with being injured, but maybe that was only because she didn't feel especially sickly. She definitely never worked in one. Nami Kaguya wasn’t sure of much of anything else at the moment she woke up in this particular hospital bed. She knew her own name, and she knew a lot of general things, but she wasn’t sure how old she was or what she did with her life. Didn’t she have a hobby, or some sort of job? Those aspects of herself were thoroughly absent. She hadn't lost things like the state of the world she lived in, or how to make toast, or any commonplace thing that regular people ought to know. This amnesia seemed astoundingly targeted. She could remember being sixteen... Maybe seventeen, but her own body didn't reflect the way she remembered it at that age, so she must have been older. By how much?

She looked around the hospital, sitting up in the bed. She wasn’t in a hospital gown, and there weren’t any needles stuck into her. There were no machines around the bed when she pulled the curtain back, and there was a silence throughout. Hospitals weren’t quiet, Nami knew that much. Hospitals were places which bustled with activity but somehow never felt alive.

This one was empty. So, was it really a hospital? She climbed out of the hospital bed, getting to her feet, and tucked the hair hanging against one cheek back behind her ear as she glanced around some more. Then, she reconsidered, and untucked it after all. Something told her she looked better that way. Where were the nurses, the machines, anything to indicate that this was a true medical facility? Absent, and without it, the illusion fell away.

Nami realized there really wasn’t anything for her here in this room. It was astonishingly devoid of
anything of any interest. Just two beds with curtains, the other one already emptied. No cabinets. Nothing. There weren’t any windows, just a door against one wall. Empty. To somebody else, it might be unsettling. Nami just thought it awful boring. Maybe she was in shock, or maybe she saw worse on a day-to-day basis. Who was she to know?

Somehow, though, she realized she shouldn’t go out that singular door just yet. Instead, she turned back to the other bed, the one that she hadn’t woken up in, and reached out, placing her palm against the paper-thin sheets. There was an inherent warmth; And that, Nami realized, was what she’d been checking for. Some part of her stomach lurched to know that somebody else had woken up in this room before she did. She felt like maybe, they hadn’t even investigated her bed, but she couldn’t be sure of that.

Frightening as the thought was, she was certain she’d be able to tell if anything had been done to her in her sleep, and at the very least there weren’t any signs of that. Even so, just being watched while unconscious was something that she couldn’t bring herself to be all too okay with. Being stared at by somebody while in a state where she couldn't regulate every bit of her own posture, appearance, make small changes to appear less disgusting than she felt? She was not fond of that at all.

With this information, there truly wasn’t anything left for her to do in this room. It seemed like the sort of room that’s existence was only ever intended to be left behind, so Nami made her way to that singular door.

Now, she thought, it would be a real dick move to put her in this room that was clearly only meant to be exited, then lock her in. She glanced at the hinges and saw that it was a push door, another strange thing to have in a hospital, and turned the handle, pushing against it. The door moved, but not… Enough.

It wasn’t locked, that much was clear, but rather, it was blocked from the other side. That wasn’t good. Nami could only imagine that whoever else woke up in this room looked at her, thought she might be dangerous, and decided to barricade her in. She glanced down at her own hands. She didn’t think she looked dangerous, but if she did, that was somehow satisfying. At least, if they thought she was a dangerous woman, it would be satisfying. Except for the fact that it had led someone to barricade her inside an incredibly empty room. And the fact that it was salaciously optimistic of her to even give herself thought that the barricade had that nature, rather than the nature of whoever woke up assuming that she was a perverted freak who never should be allowed near anybody in society and-

Nami cut off her thoughts and slammed her weight against the door, hand still turning the handle. The stuff on the other side budged enough for her to see down the hallway, but not enough to slip through, and she could tell by the way that the door had stopped short that the debris was fully between the door and the wall on the other side of the hallway, completely blocking any chance of getting it open from the inside. The person who blocked her in knew what they were doing. Nami groaned, rolling her eyes before making a half-hearted cry out into the hallway, not coming across as very loud or frightened, “Hey, can anybody help me? Don't really wanna die? Anyone?”

With a cry for help like that, it wasn’t surprising when nobody showed up. Well, nobody came down the hallway, but someone did appear with a strange suddenness, right in front of Nami. She pulled back from the crack in the door to see the smiling redhead greet her. “Ah, hello there! My, seems you’ve gotten yourself into a bit of a pickle. Why don’t I help you out? I’ll just move all these cabinets out of the way…”

With that, the girl stepped aside to throw her weight against the cabinets, only for them to very
obviously not move at all. Nami spoke again, “Cabinets, huh? I guess you’re not really strong enough to move them… Means whoever trapped me in here must be on the stronger side, I guess. Did they really think they couldn’t take me in a fight, if they could do shit like this?”

“Sorry…” The girl sighed as she stepped back to the crack in the door. “Well, I can try to find somebody to help. What’s your name? Mine’s Box. Box Hako. I’m the Ultimate… Uh, technically I’m the Ultimate Person Who Helps Other People Through No Particular Talent, but that gets shortened to Ultimate Volunteer!”


“Oh, I’ve met him! So, Nami Kaguya, The Ultimate…?” Box prompted.

“Fuck if I know,” Nami said, “Might not even be an Ultimate? Tee-bee-h? I don’t remember having a talent.”

“Well, I think everyone here is an Ultimate,” Box said, “So you’re probably the Ultimate Question-marks! I think that can happen sometimes… Yeah, it does, sometimes! Somebody had to be, so don’t beat yourself up for it! Okay then, I’m going to go find somebody strong who can help me push these things and get you out of there!”

With that, Box ran off, and Nami was left in the room again. That girl was… Strange. It did stand out to Nami that she seemed to appear from out of nowhere, but maybe she just hadn't been paying enough attention. Box Hako... A weird name, and a weird talent. She couldn't complain about being rescued, though. The Ultimate Question Marks... That matched up with the amnesia she was having, so she'd take Box's word on that one, unless there was somebody else also missing a talent in this place. An Ultimate, though. Ultimates. Nami hadn't realized how strange the situation was in the moment, but the fact that Box introduced herself with the talent... Well, maybe it wasn't. Maybe she was wrong, and Box Hako just adhered to her talent so much that she also required of herself the 'volunteering of information'.

![Box Hako](image)

It didn't have to be what Nami dreaded it could be. It didn't have to.

It probably was, though. Huh. She just shrugged her shoulders and talked to herself, "Guess I'll die?"

It helped a little bit.
Nami waited in the room for quite a while, having no idea how much time was passing and having nothing to occupy herself with. Well, some idea of the time passing. Even though there weren't any clocks, Nami was a regular person who had some idea of the passage of time, and she figured it was a good fifteen minutes before Box returned, getting her attention with a shrill, “Kaguya! Hey, Kaguya! I found somebody who can move this stuff, probably!”

“It’s not probably, it’s definitely!” A voice which sounded as if it belonged to a six year old boy piped in, and Nami turned to look through the crack again; She saw that the source of that voice was actually a boy who seemed sixteen at the youngest, and it was clear from the first moment that his personality type was more enthusiastic than anybody his age had the right to be. Before Nami could say anything, the guy lifted his leg and kicked a cabinet, sending it flying down the hallway with a loud crash. Who did this kid think he was, just throwing furniture around willy-nilly? He knelt down and picked up what looked like an arcade token.

Nami just pushed the door open with the blockage gone, looking between her two boisterous rescuers before deciding that she probably should introduce herself to the newer of the two, “Hey. Thanks for that. Why don’t you guess my name? Your options are, one, Nami Kaguya. Two, Nami Kaguya. Three, Nami Kaguya.”

“Oh! I was wondering how she would have gotten trapped in a room after I saw her,” The boy said, “I totally thought that the Kaguya that Hako was referring to, was Tomoe Kaguya! But you’re a different one Nami, Nami, Nami Kaguya! I’m Etsuko Yushu and I am the Ultimate Runner. That’s how my legs are so, so strong, nya!”
“Tomoe Kaguya?” Nami asked, her tone still barely shifting as she wasn’t especially shocked. She did remember that Tomoe had an ultimate talent. “Oh, that’s my twin sister. Where did you see her? I guess it’d be rude not to go say, what's up sis?”

“Are you serious?” Etsuko asked, his jaw hanging open, “Your twin is here and that’s all you have to say? Gosh. Also, I mean, come on- You were just trapped in a room! Being rude? You can be rude after that! Who do you think would even do such a thing, hey? Do you want me to kick the bad guys? I can kick them! Whatever bad guy mafia syndicate rolled up and trapped the fair Princess Kaguya in the boringest room!”

“Please calm down,” Box said, waving her hands in Etsuko’s direction and earning herself a small token of respect from Nami, “Kaguya is very capable of taking care of herself and barely even called for help loudly! I only heard her because it’s my responsibility to help maidens in distress, and gentlemen in distress too for that matter... She’s probably not afraid of whoever did this. I’m kind of scared, though! So could you stay near me and protect me, Yushu?”

Etsuko gave a small gasp, then saluted, ”Yes of course, Miss Hako! I'll use my combat legs for your sake, you can count on me!"

"Thanks very much," Box said, pressing her hands together now as she turned back to Nami with a sheepish smile on her face, "I apologize if I didn't make the best first impression. I was kind of
panicking, but I didn't want to worry you by showing it, so I just overplayed the friendliness, I guess. I didn't really think my behavior through. I do think that I'm right, though, about you being the Ultimate Question-Marks. After all, if this is what I think it is, there's always one person who either outright forgets their talent or is given a reason to keep it secret..."

"What you think it is? Miss Hako, Miss Hako, what do you think this is? You actually have an idea?" Etsuko asked, grabbing Box's arm and clinging to it.

"Please, please calm down, Etsuko!" Box repeated herself to him, then took a deep breath, "I... no, I shouldn't say it yet. If I say it out loud, I might jinx it, right? It's possible that it's not what I'm thinking, but if I said it, then it might end up being that thing..."

"You probably don't have that kind of power," Nami said.

"Probably not, but," Box shrugged, "I still would rather not entertain my idea! Hahah... It's definitely not the same..."

Etsuko pouted against Box's arm. "Whyy? Miss Hako, all ideas deserve to be entertained! Sometimes if you entertain a bad idea it becomes a good idea!"

"That really isn't how it works at all!" Box protested, shaking him off. "I act on plenty of bad ideas, and it never turns out well! The bad ideas stay bad ones no matter how hard I try..."

"Huh? Well, maybe I just learn to think that bad ideas are actually good ones," Etsuko said, letting go of her arm, but not because she shook him off. He did so to raise one finger up as he spoke, "But, I got to be an Ultimate that way! I used to think that running everywhere I needed to go, between cities and things, was a bad idea. Then I realized it wasn't."

"It was still a bad idea, even if it ended up working out well for you!" Box proclaimed, "I mean, seriously, that must have been miserable for a long time until you got used to it..."

"It was," Etsuko said, "But then it became fun! It became a good idea!"

"I'm not going to argue this with you right now..." Box sighed, then turned back to Nami with a sheepish smile. "Hey, you don't have to stick around here. Go see your sister."

"Ah, Yushu, do you know where you saw her?" Nami asked him.

"I have no idea where I was or where I now am. This place is a maze!" Etsuko answered as if that was actually something useful of him to say.

"Helpful stuff, Yushu! See you around," Nami said, walking away with an exaggerated wave back behind her.
"Tomoe?" Nami called out as she walked down the hallway, not especially loud, not caring especially much. She did want to see Tomoe, of course, but some part of her also didn't. She still didn't quite know how long it had been since she last saw Tomoe, since Tomoe left to utilize that Ultimate Talent of hers. Etsuko's lack of any sense of direction had still turned out to be quite inconvenient. She wasn't opposed to running into somebody other than Tomoe, but what was strange about this was that she hadn't run into anybody else at all yet, and she'd been wandering for quite a while.

It had only taken Box about fifteen minutes to find Etsuko, and Etsuko had seen Tomoe earlier, but what was strange about this was that there had to be more people. It couldn't possibly just be the four of them, because Nami knew that there was at least one other person. Tomoe wouldn't have barricaded her in a room, no matter how estranged they were. It just wouldn't happen, it wasn't in Tomoe's nature.

Nami's memory was clearing up as time went by, just a bit, just in specific ways. They were sixteen. When Tomoe was selected as the Ultimate Journalist, she started getting sponsored to go to various other places and never really returned home. Nami didn't hold that against her, but it did mean that they'd gone years without ever speaking to each other. Yeah, it was years. She was nineteen now. Nineteen. What was the date? She'd be twenty soon. Sometime soon. Nami had no idea what she'd been doing for those years, herself. She was already getting used to having the gap in her memory, which made her wonder. Yeah, she wondered. She'd forgotten things before, hadn't she? This wasn't the only time in her life she'd walked around with missing time. She was the only one in her body, it wasn't as if anyone besides Nami Kaguya piloted her body and caused those gaps. Sometimes, just, nobody did. That was it, wasn't it? Sometimes nobody did.

Nami was torn out of her thoughts by the appearance of a person, of the sort she'd been missing while wandering and wondering aimlessly.

Usually, seeing somebody come around a corner wasn't strange, but after wandering around calling for her twin sister for ten minutes with no response, only to have a boy who a more paranoid person might consider to be a ghost step out in front of her wordlessly... It was no surprise that Nami could only stand a moment in shock.

He turned and gave her a ghoulish smile. "Nami!"
"Who are you?" Nami questioned, staring right through him. "I don't recall giving you anything resembling permission to call me by my first name, or ever meeting you before."

"Whoa, you forgot? Well, okay, I'm not gonna say anything then! I guess that Nozomi was right with his theory," The guy said, laughing as he spoke. "The name's Goro Bakura, and I'm the Ultimate Idol! And you, Nami Kaguya, are the consequence of my memory!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Nami asked, "I'm no consequence of anything, I'm two years older than you."

"Heh, so you have enough implicit memory to know that much. I mean, if we never met before, how do you know I'm seventeen?" Goro prodded, "See, it's pretty obvious that our memories have been erased. The thing is, I remember more than I'm supposed to! At the same time, it seems you remember less than you're supposed to. Sorry about that, I really am! So, anyway, you've forgotten some stuff, but I'll share with you the extra info I have! This place, this situation? We're in an annual Killing Game."

"Wait." Nami froze where she stood. "You mean..."

"Heheh, that's right. I bet you thought you got away with it, huh? Yeah, apparently there weren't enough Ultimates from my selection year for Despair to pull this off, so they went and broke the mold and grabbed some people from the last three years too."

"What do you mean there weren't enough Ultimates from your year?" Nami questioned, "There's always enough Ultimates! There's always more than sixteen, so that some can still be around to operate after Despair takes sixteen of them for the game!"
"Oh good, you know that," Goro said, "And it doesn't count this time around? I mean, really. Status Quo is a myth perpetuated to keep us discontent in a never-changing world! Predictability is garbage! Maybe there are enough Ultimates, but not enough for what the network wants! It's the fifty-fifth annual Killing Game, after all. Double Numbers. An Eleventh. You know what that means, right~?"

"Oh, shit," Nami mumbled, "It's a gimmick year."

"It sure is!" Goro exclaimed, putting his hands on his hips, "And there are two different themes for the gimmick, too, so they really had to pull from a four-year pool of Ultimates. Theme number one, every Ultimate Talent present here has belonged to somebody else in one of the last fifty-four Killing Games. Theme number two, every Ultimate Student here has got a preexisting connection to at least one other student."

"How do you know this?" Nami asked, "I mean, I know you lost less memory, but how would you know it in the first place if you weren't working with Despair?"

"Oh, I was living with an Ultimate Despair! He didn't realize I was an Ultimate, of course," Goro said, clasping his hands in front of himself. "It was pretty cute. He was all hyped up about these gimmicks and everything! I mean, he was when he first heard about them, before the fifty-fourth game. I think... Wait... The timeline doesn't... Oh, well! Sorry I'm rambling! I bet he'll be so happy to see me here! Yeah, he's gonna love it, gonna be rooting for me! Or maybe rooting for me to get killed so he can buy my body... Did you know they do that, didja? Hahh.. Anyway, Nami, I'm not gonna tell you how, but you and me have a preexisting connection!"

"I... Really didn't need to know, most of what you just said to me," Nami said, brushing past him to keep walking down the hallway. "Anyway, you could be lying to me. My twin sister's here."

"I said at least one connection," Goro said, following after her. "You know, I think that if you don't remember your talent, it's better for everybody if you rediscover it all on your own! Trust me, it's a really great talent! Once you show your skills, you'll remember it, and it'll be like fireworks! Yeah, fireworks, cause you're the most amazing Ultimate I ever met! Just a fact!"

"Saying stuff like that just makes me want to be told what it is, you know." Nami sighed. "So, Tomoe also got through our year without being picked, and ended up here... Do you happen to know the ratios of the years, Bakura?"

"Oh, yeah, I do," Goro said, "There are five from my year. Four from last year. Four from your year, and three from the year before that. Can you believe that? Three whole twenty-year-olds. Aren't Killing Games supposed to be teenagers so that they're more tragic? This totally goes against the spirit of the game... Plus, don't you think that somebody who was already immersed in adult life would be even more despairing to find out that they ended up in a place like this? If one of them lives too long, I'd start to get suspicious, wouldn't you?"

"I think it's just tragic either way," Nami said, "So, besides Tomoe and I... There are two others from our year, huh? The majority are still from your year, though."

"Yeah, cause there's still the most of us left alive. Sixteen each from your other years already got put through a game after all! And, well, the miscellaneous murders. Hear all about those, living with Kiyoshi! Hurrah, the murders! Say it with me, will you? Never could get any of the others to do it... Pretty please?" Goro reasoned, "Anyway, I already met someone else from your year. That Nozomi I mentioned. You didn't even ask me about him!"

"I don't care about him," Nami said, paused a minute, then leaned close to Goro and whispered,
"Just because you asked nicely. Hurrah, the murders."

"Well," Goro said, beaming at the fact she'd humored him, "I'm gonna tag along with you and tell you everything I know, anyway. About Nozomi and stuff."

"Except for what my talent is, because you're just that insufferable?" Nami asked.

"Of course!" Goro said, gleeful beyond belief. Watching him, Nami could at least believe that him being a fan of her was legit. If only she knew what she'd done to deserve a fan. Even a fan like this one. Admittedly, he was kind of adorable, in a starstruck little kid way. She might deny it, but she kind of liked the attention.
"Anyway, Nami," Goro continued as he trailed along behind her. "The guy I met from your year is called Shinjiro Nozomi, and he's the Ultimate Waitress. He's blind in one eye and his preexisting connection is to some girl named Akabane that I couldn't get him to tell me about but I guess he already saw her somewhere here. And, you know, I've watched a lot of Killing Games before, but I can't seem to actually recall where any of these talents were used before, like, yours or his ... Except for mine, that is! There was an Ultimate Idol in the very first trial-based Killing Game... Well, sort of. No recordings of it survived, but I hear that her talent got switched to Ultimate Murderer at the very last minute, then she turned out to be working for Future Foundation and the one behind the game at first, but Despair hijacked it and changed its purpose."

"That's weird and complicated," Nami said, "Why would the Future Foundation ever do a Killing Game anyway?"

"Super weird and complicated!" Goro agreed, "Despair conned them into doing it by slipping them certain information, apparently. The plan was to use it as a way to easily and discreetly kill off both the Ultimate Despairs and Ultimate Hope that were inside Hope's Peak Academy, but obviously, that didn't go so well! Course, history's not super relevant to right now anyway."

"I see," Nami said, "I guess living with an Ultimate Despair gave you all this knowledge?"

"Yeah, it totally did," Goro said, "Do you wanna know what his Ultimate Title was?"

"Not especially," Nami said.

"Well, Nami, you're my hero! So I'm going to overshare with you whether you want me to or not, okay?" Goro giggled as he said this, then continued, "He was the Ultimate Despairing Stage Manager! Not a lot of people knew that he ever was an Ultimate, though. Not even his other clients! He just told me because I'm such a sweet little boy, I'm his new favorite ever since his last favorite disappeared... He said he didn't even tell that guy that he was actually an Ultimate Despair, just that he was Despair!"

"You seem awful proud about the fact that you were this Ultimate Despair's favorite client," Nami observed, "It kinda makes me suspicious of you. You better watch out. Don't tell the others this stuff so readily."

"Come on, don't suspect me of anything! I did it to survive, you hear me? To survive! Sometimes you gotta act like you like something you hate and then you can also pretend it's less terrible! Heheh, that's something that his old favorite used to say, he told me. And it was good advice~! Once I decided that I'd just fall in love with the guy instead, well, that made it kinda hard to hate him anymore!" Goro explained, "It's all super fake though... I mean, seriously, do I look like I'm capable of love? Except of course for the undying admiration I feel for you, Nami! That's just because you're the coolest person I've ever known, though. I wouldn't wanna kiss you or anything like that. That would be gross for both of us!"

"Yes, I can imagine that it would be," Nami agreed, "So there's sixteen people here? I've met three, counting you. I've also heard about three others, my sister included."

"I can actually only verify Nozomi, of the two I told you about. I didn't meet Akabane," Goro said, "So I have no idea if she's real."
"This place must be pretty huge, at this rate... You met one other person before me, and one of the people I met before you had to spend fifteen minutes finding somebody to break me out of the room I woke up in," Nami mumbled, then turned back to glare at Goro. "It wasn't you, who barricaded me in there, right?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Goro said, "No, really, I would never even think of something like that! Somebody would have to dislike you to do that. Or, I guess, be really paranoid. It isn't like it's hard to realize that this could be a Killing Game. If you watch them, the M.O. is always to wake up confused in scattered areas of whatever building the game will be taking place in!"

"Most people who end up in a Killing Game don't watch them, though, right?" Nami asked.

"I dunno," Goro said, "A lot of people watch them after their own year's game, after all. They get invested in the fates of their peers, then start keeping tabs. And a lot of the time it's just pop culture, babes! Those people who do watch 'em usually lose those memories, though."

"Well, if I did watch them, I don't have any memory of it," Nami said.

"Fair," Goro said, "Actually, I can't remember the last game, but I know I would've seen it... I feel like it was even an especially traumatic time in my home life, for some reason! But, that's something I'm blanked out on, too. Usually it's weird to remember the existence of Killing Games at all, though. I was kind of surprised you knew what I was talking about!"

"It's because it's a gimmick year, isn't it?" Another voice joined the conversation, and Nami looked up to see, at the end of the hallway, Tomoe sitting, legs crossed gracefully, atop a cot as she purred her theory, "I could hear your conversation from here. This is a perfect eavesdropping spot," She pointed directly above her head to the air vent she'd pulled the grate from, "On a gimmick year, the setting is always larger, and given this year's gimmick... Wiping our memories enough to erase everything about every Killing Game would ruin the point of our preexisting connections, wouldn't it? They're ever so integral in our daily lives."

"Tomoe!" Nami exclaimed, rushing towards her sister. "I was looking for you!"

"Hello, Nami, dear." Tomoe chuckled and stepped down from the cot, walking right up to her, though it almost resembled a glide. "It's wonderful to hear that. It's been a long time, hasn't it? And that's the thing. That's why we have enough memories to remember each other, alongside our memories of past Killing Games. The knowledge that you're here... My precious twin sister, why, isn't that motivation enough to kill? After all, if I consider somebody to be a threat to your safety... Why, darling, would I ever even hesitate?"
"Are you kidding me?" Nami asked, taking a step backwards from Tomoe, "Tomoe! We haven't spoken in years, can you really say that you care about me enough to do that sort of thing now? That's irresponsible!"

"Hm?" Tomoe pondered, tilting her head and blinking a few times. "Well, we did speak from time to time. Phone calls count, honey. I knew that you were safe at home, of course. I would have come home immediately if I ever thought that you were in danger..." She took another step forward, then wrapped her arms around Nami and pulled her in close, gentle, but feeling more like a trap than an affectionate gesture. "But I knew that you weren't, and my work was for the good of the whole world... To make it a better and safer place. As soon as my work was done, I knew I'd be able to come home and find you safe and sound~"

"I was safe?" Nami asked, "But, wasn't I an Ultimate too?"

"You? No, no, of course not." Tomoe said, pulling back but keeping her arms around Nami's neck. It was a strangely affectionate gesture, more like that of a lover than of a sister. "Being an Ultimate is so dangerous! If you had an Ultimate Talent, I never would have ever left you behind. I'd have stayed to keep you safe from the nasty Despairs, obviously. Don't you frighten me like that!"

"Well, I guess that you never knew about Nami's Ultimate Talent," Goro said, "But she sure did have one! Not like I'll tell you what it was, because she deserves to discover it again all on her own. She'll shine so bright and beautiful!"

Tomoe let go of Nami, turning to Goro instead and crouching down to be at eye level with him, staring. "And how would you know that, little boy?"

"I'm seventeen, jeeze," Goro protested, "You're only two years older than me... Anyway, Nami's talent helped me out one time! She doesn't have memory of that, though, and since you don't even know what her talent is, I really think it would be amazing if Nami could discover her own talent all over again! It would be better for her than if I just admitted it."

"That's a good point," Tomoe said, straightening up but narrowing her eyes as she now glared at nothing in particular. "But, we'll find sometime to speak in private, little boy. I'll keep the secret, but I need to know. You are aware? I need to know the talent of my precious twin sister, so that I can keep her. Safe, I mean."

"Tomoe," Nami got her attention again, "His name is Goro Bakura."

"Oh, I see," Tomoe said, "Goro Bakura... The Ultimate what, hm? You're one of the children from this selection year, aren't you?"

"I'm not a child!" Goro protested, balling his hands into fists and glaring at Tomoe. She'd definitely heard his talent mentioned, so asking him this question was her way of cementing that she didn't care if he lived or died. "You think you can make fun of me just because you're my hero's twin sister? I'm the Ultimate Idol, but I'll fuck you up!"

"Wow, making a direct threat like that in the throes of a Killing Game?" Tomoe asked, "You really must not care about your own life, then. Behaving like that will make people suspect you even if you're not the murderer, if you don't get killed first."

"You've already said you won't hesitate to kill somebody who threatened Nami," Goro said, "And
I'm no different! I wouldn't kill you, assuming Nami wouldn't want me to. Doesn't mean I won't beat you up for my own sake, though."

"Like you could beat me up, honey," Tomoe said, fiddling with her camera that she'd pulled from her coat pocket at some point. She lifted it and snapped a photo of Goro, then turned and grabbed one of Nami while she was at it, before lowering the camera again. "Nami, let's get out of here and leave this little boy in the dust. I'd really like to find out who it was that barricaded you inside of the room."

"Please don't kill whoever it was," Nami said.

Tomoe chuckled again, holding the camera in front of her mouth to hide her laugh, "Aww, Nami... Sweetheart, you don't want me to get executed, do you? You're a dear. I can't make any promises, though. I won't do anything rash, but you know that I need to protect you. I'll gladly do so in a cold and well-thought-out manner."

"Come on, Kaguya!" Goro addressed Tomoe, "We both just want to keep Nami, the greatest Ultimate of all time, safe, and see her flourish, right? Why can't we be friends and work together to do that?"

"Because I don't like you," Tomoe answered with complete, blunt honesty. "Nami, come on."

"Aww... See you later, Bakura," Nami said, waving to him as she was dragged along like a toddler called away from the playground. "Go meet somebody else or something."

"Yeah, okay," Goro sighed, then walked off in the other direction.

"You don't have to be so protective of me, Tomoe," Nami said once Goro was out of earshot, "I did just fine on my own without you... I think."

"Well, you're alive, so that much is clear," Tomoe said, "But you don't even have your memories right now, and you're in a Killing Game. I could never live with myself if anything was to happen to you. I've always protected you, haven't I?"

"Yeah," Nami admitted, mumbling, "But you never needed to. And we're both in a Killing Game. Not just me."

"Oh, yes I did," Tomoe said with a smirk. "You just never needed to know why I did. People really can be cruel, especially to a ragamuffin like you've always been, dear~! But I kept you from ever seeing any of that, correct? You haven't got a single stain on your memory, correct? I'm thoroughly reliable."

"I guess that you did, but if you did such a good job that also means there's no proof that you did," Nami said.

Tomoe turned around, looking Nami in the eyes. "I'd advise against getting into this with me, Nami. I could show you proof. I'd rather not need to. All you need to understand is that as your twin sister, I am truly devoted to protecting you. Your safety is my only priority. And if you challenge me on that, then I just might not make it, understand? I couldn't take ingratitude like that. I just couldn't."

"...Right, I'm sorry," Nami said, turning her eyes down to stare at the floor. "I know that you've done a lot for me, I don't actually think that you need to show me proof or anything like that. I'm just kind of freaked out, and I don't know how to interact with you either, cause it's been so long. You can understand that, right?"
"Oh, I can," Tomoe said, giving Nami a genuine smile now. "I missed you so much, Nami. I wish I could have come home, but I really only would have been able to if something really went wrong. I'm here now, though. And I won't lose sight of you again. I won't let anybody hurt you or steal you away from me. I'll stay by your side. Because I can't live without you, but that's alright. I know you can't live without me either. I'm sure of it."
Nami and Tomoe didn't have to go far to run into anybody else, which was only surprising to one of them. Tomoe had been listening in on all sorts of conversations from those who were relatively nearby, after all, so she was relatively aware of the number of people there. Although, given it was a Killing Game, they could only assume that there were a total of sixteen people. At the same time, there was one large surprise when they ran into somebody new, and that was the fact this person was alone, and surprised to see them. Unlike Nami's relative failure to find people, it seemed his was absolute. He called out, "Ah! So, I'm not alone here after all."

"Why would you ever think that you'd be put into a place like this alone?" Tomoe asked, stepping closer to him with her hands clasped behind her back. "No matter what your Ultimate talent is, you couldn't possibly be that important, you know. Torturing a single man just isn't Ultimate Despair's style."
"Right, I apologize." The man, who was tall and bald and didn't look much like a teen at all, said, "You may call me ssnad. I am the Ultimate Theologist... And I assumed it may be a situation unique to me, given that I've been an Ultimate for about four years now. I don't find myself especially important."

"So you're one of the twenty-year-olds," Tomoe observed, "I'm Tomoe Kaguya, the Ultimate Journalist. This is my twin sister, Nami. We're both from the selection year after yours. We hear that this is a gimmick year for the Annual Killing Game, so here we are. All of our talents have been held by previous Killing Game participants, and we all have some preexisting connection to each other. Given the situation, please admit to us your actual name. An absurd codename like that one has no place in a serious incident."

"A preexisting connection...?" Ssnad asked, then took a deep breath. "Well, okay. My actual name is Mitsuru Fujishiro. Anyway, I've met one other Ultimate before and actually known she was an
Ultimate. One who hasn't already been in a Killing Game, that is. Her name's Box Hako. I can't see how she would have ended up in this game, though. But they wouldn't bring back somebody who already made it through one and back to the outside world, would they?"

"She's here," Nami said, "I met her. Is she also from your selection year?"

"No, she's from last year," Mitsuru said, shaking his head. "The Ultimate Volunteer, yeah? It isn't that I don't think she could have been selected for a Killing Game, though. It's that I completely thought she was already dead."

"She's alive and well," Nami explained, crossing her arms over her chest. "So whoever told you she died was lying to you, I guess. She helped me out when I was barricaded in the room I woke up in."

"Somebody, er, barricaded you in? That isn't promising. Well, then. Nobody told anyone she died, not outright," Mitsuru said, "But she disappeared, and she'd been acting weird until she did, so we all assumed. She was either killed by Despair like her parents thought, or that was a cover-up story for something else happening to her. None of us ever thought we'd see her again."

"Hm," Tomoe said, "Maybe the intention was for her to participate in last year's Killing Game, but that was changed for some reason. Or perhaps, she did participate in last year's Killing Game, and she's simply the Ultimate Survivor."

"Ultimate Survivor?" Nami asked, furrowing her brow.

"Oh, I forgot that you never really watched the games," Tomoe noted, turning to put a hand on Nami's head as she explained, "Usually, for some reason or another, a player from the last year's game is thrown into the next year's game too. If Hako went missing too early for this game, then she was probably taken for the previous one, whether she ended up being involved or not."

"That would be something to ask her about," Mitsuru noted, "If she had been in a Killing Game before, then she might have a better idea of what we could do to prevent the game from happening. I mean, to keep anyone from being killed."

"That's not possible," Tomoe said, "This is the fifty-fifth annual Killing Game. If somebody was going to prevent the game, it would have happened already. I certainly don't think this group of people would stand a chance."

"Why would you say something like that? It's always possible to be better than the past!" Mitsuru exclaimed.

"Isn't it kinda obvious?" Nami said, "The only group that could prevent the game would have to be completely unwilling to kill, no matter what motive Monokuma threw at them. Tomoe is willing to kill, and we've already met somebody else who is. Not to mention, someone did barricade me inside a room, and I haven't found that person yet. This is not a super friendly group of people!"

"I guess that's a good point," Mitsuru admitted with a sigh. "I thought that I was already out of the jungle, that all I had to worry about was getting killed by Despairs out in the world. I could handle that threat. This one... I just. My point still stands. It's possible to be better than the past."

"So did we," Tomoe said, "But we thought wrong. We really should have realized that a gimmick year could do anything. It's honestly surprising that there isn't anybody even older here. I guess that the older you go, though, the more Ultimates are already dead or Despairing."

"I don't try to think often of the Killing Game," Mitsuru said, "Or about the tragedies of my
comrades. I prefer to focus on people who are doing well. There are plenty of those, too."

"Maybe you should have been in the habit of thinking about the negatives," Tomoe said, "You're woefully unprepared. Unlike Nami, of course, who shouldn't even be here because she doesn't have an Ultimate Talent, but she has me to be prepared for her anyhow and I did so to shield her from the horrors of these things in her youth."

"Nobody's really prepared for something like this, though," Nami said, "Except for maybe Bakura."

"Bakura?" Mitsuru asked.

"One of the others, Goro Bakura," Nami said, "He told us about the gimmick. He's kind of prepared, because he used to live with an Ultimate Despair who was a big fan of the Killing Games. So he's seen more of them than any of us would have, or would ever wanna see."

"I see," Mitsuru said, then hesitated a moment and spoke up again, "Wait. Goro Bakura... Did he tell you what his talent is?"

"Do you think you have a connection to him, too?" Nami asked, "He said he was the Ultimate Idol."

"No connection," Mitsuru said with a shake of his head. "I've just heard of him before. Given the nature of his talent, he's a celebrity, after all. I never would have expected him to end up an Ultimate, though. Not like I follow idol culture very much, but he doesn't exactly fit the typical idol image, and really the only reason I heard of him is because he was associated with a lot of scandals."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," Nami said, "He seemed scandalous."

"A very scandalous little boy, indeed," Tomoe agreed, then turned to Mitsuru again. "Do you think that others here would have heard of him? I'm sure the only reason I didn't is because I was focused on much more important things than fluff pieces about some idol back home doing... God knows what, showing his arse on television? I'll assume as much."

"I don't know," Mitsuru said, "They might, but it isn't like that's something that I could actually predict. I guess it just depends on what extent other people follow the news, or entertainment news. I'm sure somebody else has, at least."

"I guess we'll find out," Tomoe said, "No offense, Fujishiro, but I am interested in finding a specific person in this place. And that person just isn't you."

"Is that your way of saying goodbye?" Mitsuru wondered, "That's a little abrupt, isn't it? Couldn't I walk with you for a while?"

"Walk with us? Of course not." Tomoe tossed her hair over her shoulder. "We're looking for very different people, you know? You wish to search for the dead girl, I wish to search for the bastard who tried to trap my precious twin sister. Our motives are, frankly, incompatible."

"I..." Mitsuru frowned. "What if I don't want to walk around this place alone? Does it really hurt anything to have somebody else along for your search?"

"I don't care about that." Tomoe walked away before he could try to convince her further. Nami gave him a sympathetic look over her shoulder, but said nothing. Maybe it was cowardly of her and maybe it was cruel, but something about Tomoe... Nami could hold her own in an argument with
anyone but her. Anyone but the girl who'd given everything for her, and wasn't afraid to use that fact.
Nami had submitted to being dragged around by her twin sister.

It was how things had always been, after all. Even when they were in different classes in elementary school, they were always together on the playground, walking home from school, everything. Nami had always let that happen, even when things got annoying and she found herself waiting for nearly an hour at the end of the school day for Tomoe to finish whatever business she had, building her Ultimate Talent through spying on teachers, gathering intel to write an expose in the school paper, and leaving Nami to wait alone on a bench in the hallway until she was done.

Nami did wonder, if Tomoe was right, that she didn't have her own Ultimate Talent. Tomoe's talent was so integral to her life, it showed in all of Nami's memories, so shouldn't she have been just as aware of her own, if she had one? What did it mean to forget something like that, an Ultimate Talent, something which had such a strong impact on somebody's life, through and through? Something which influenced every bit of somebody's day-to-day life?

If she really did have one, and she'd forgotten it... then that had to be some sort of emptiness, right? She couldn't remember why she was used to waking up in hospitals, either. She couldn't remember plenty of things which she felt she ought to, memories conspicuous enough that she could tell she'd forgotten... And if there were those, how much was she forgetting that she didn't even realize she knew once? This was beginning to feel problematic. Where before she'd had the feeling of it being the usual to have gaps like these, the truth that the severity unsettled her was beginning to sink in.

"Hello there," Nami was snapped out of her thoughts by a strange voice, raspy and uncertain, as if the person speaking had hardly spoken a word in her life. She looked up to see a girl with what she'd describe as an eclectic appearance if she was being nice. Her mouth was hidden by a surgical mask and her skin was pallid and ashy, the dress she wore clinging to and faintly showing the outlines of her ribs, her hips, collarbones. She was outright skeletal, and the preppy skintight dress did nothing to produce an illusion of health. Even with this sort of appearance, that dress was mauve, and her hair a somewhat washed-out shade of pink. The leather jacket hung over her shoulders further complicated the look.

"Uh, hi," Nami said, "Who are you?"

"Riko Asahi," She answered, looking away from the twins and holding a hand to her cheek as she stared wide-eyed at nothing. "Ahahh... Do you have... A writing tool...?"
"I do," Tomoe said, then pulled the notepad from her belt and handed it over alongside a pen. Riko took it, nodding, then scribbled.

She held the notepad out, her handwriting careful to be legible without taking up too much space. "I am the Ultimate Heir. I am functionally mute. I can only speak to the extent I already did. I can greet people, give my name, and ask for something to write with or if you speak sign language. The way I ask them was carefully rehearsed with the help of a speech therapist, and I otherwise can't speak."

"Maybe we can find you some sort of whiteboard," Tomoe offered, "But in the meantime, feel free to use that notepad. The Ultimate Heir, then? Given your name, I think that I have some idea of who you are. Asahi Bottling Company, is it? Though, didn't you have an older sister who should have had that title?"

"Yui is the public heir," Riko wrote, "But I was given the Ultimate Talent as an heir. I handle all of the important stuff. Because I'm so sickly and miserable-looking all the time, I'm not exactly a good face for the company. Let me put it this way. She's the mascot, I'm the leader in training."

"I see," Nami said, "And do you know the reason you're here?"

"If I wasn't twenty years old I would assume it was a Killing Game," Riko noted, "I did somehow know it was safe to admit my Ultimate status to you. Usually that information is only planted during a Killing Game. So I am just a bit confused, I'll admit it."
"Well, it is a Killing Game," Tomoe said, "That's why you have the knowledge that you can actually say you're an Ultimate without worrying about getting murdered by Despairs for it. The reason you're here in spite of your... Advanced age, is because this is a gimmick year."

"Tomoe," Nami chided, "Everyone older than you isn't old and everyone younger than you isn't a tiny child."

"But, they are," Tomoe said.

"Whatever." Nami rolled her eyes, turning her attention back to Riko. "The gimmick isn't actually that we're different ages. That's just the means to the end. The gimmick is that there have been previous participants of Killing Games with the same talents as us, and everyone here has some connection to somebody else here. They pulled from multiple years to get enough people who fit that criteria."

Riko wrote again, "I am well aware that there's been another Ultimate Heir in history. So that seems plausible. I don't know many people, though, so forgive me if I doubt that I have any connections. It's no easy feat to be social when you're mute. Or maybe it is and I'm just bad at it."

Nami shrugged. "You never know. I mean, obviously, this is my twin sister Tomoe. Right, we haven't introduced ourselves. I'm Nami. Our last name is Kaguya. She's the Ultimate Journalist, I dunno what I am, and there's somebody else who claims to have a connection to me too, who I don't remember ever meeting before."

"You have established amnesia, though. I can remember everything as far as I'm aware. There aren't any glaring gaps in time. And for that matter, as far as I'm aware, I shouldn't know anybody else even remotely close to my own age," Riko explained, then realized something and hastily wrote more, "It's strange. Or... Well, if I think about it, I guess there is one person. She's in the yakuza."

"Oh. Now that's a little bit fucky," Nami said.

"Not especially. Are you that surprised to hear a large company has ties to the mob?" Riko wondered.

"If you put it that way, I'm not," Nami admitted.

"I was looking for something, so I should be off," Riko noted, "Is it alright if I keep this notepad?"

"I have plenty, so you certainly can," Tomoe said, and once Riko was out of earshot, completely changed her tune, "She's a peach, now isn't she?"

"I kind of liked her," Nami said with a shrug. "She was honest, after all. And I dunno why, but it feels like she's just doing her best."

Tomoe rolled her eyes. "Oh, whatever you say. You really do see the best in the worst people, don't you? She said she has connections to the mob. And wasn't she particularly unfriendly?"

"Particularly unfriendly... Reminds me of you," Nami said, starting to actually take charge and walk in another direction. "And you just don't trust anybody, so who are you to judge me for doing so anyway? If I somehow decide I want to make friends, you should be glad. I'll be safer if people don't hate me!"

"I guess you would be safer," Tomoe said, "But you know I can't just let you make friends so carelessly, Nami. Guard your heart, like I always said. Don't let anyone in unless they truly deserve
"Yeah, I know," Nami said. Some small memory whispered from behind a locked door that she didn't know, and never had known, and she'd let undeserving people into her heart and paid the price. But neither Nami nor Tomoe could know that right now. Nami’s whispering memory would have to wait a long time to get through to her.
"Moving on," Tomoe said, tossing her hair back as she moved. "It's about time we found some of these people I overheard talking, isn't it? I heard two pairs of men, and one pair of women. I can't say which we'll find first, I can just steer us in the right direction of where I heard a conversation. I can't remember where each of those pairs were. I'll assume that they're each other's preexisting connections, based on what content I gathered. Though of course, I was focused mostly on your conversation with that rotten little boy."

"Whatever you say, Tomoe," Nami said, shrugging her shoulders. "We should meet those people, though. Anyone else who knows what their preexisting connection might have information. Maybe even something that contradicts what Bakura told us."

"Oh, so now you don't trust him?" Tomoe asked.

"I never trusted him, I just didn't have anything better to think! And I didn't want you just being a bitch to him for no reason, either," Nami said, "I think he could be totally wrong about this Killing Game, but he's fine. He's just a weird kid."

"You do think that it is a Killing Game though, don't you?" Tomoe prodded.

Nami gave a nod. "Yeah, I do. And it also seems clear that he was right about the gimmicks in play here. I just feel like..."

"He's assuming that the reason these gimmicks are here is that it's a double digit year?" Tomoe said, "The fact that this is the fifty-fifth Killing Game, it doesn't feel quite right. Not so much like a fact at all. We can't trust somebody like that at face value."

"Sometimes the people who think that they know the most are actually completely wrong," Nami agreed, "He said he knew all sorts of things about Despair and the Killing Games, but if he really was certain of everything he told us, that would just be too convenient. He even mumbled something to himself about the 'timeline' not matching up."

"It would." Tomoe started, only to be cut off by another young woman's voice.

"Excuse me." The twins turned to see a girl with star and moon hairpins, a turtleneck sweater, and hair which almost seemed to glow with the colors of the night sky. "I couldn't help but overhear. I wasn't going to say anything, but somebody told you that this is the fifty-fifth Killing Game? I had to step up and say, there's no way. This is the fifty-fourth, for sure."
"Tsumugi!" Another girl called, running out of the same room that the first had appeared from. "What are you doing? I thought that we agreed to stay hidden..."

"But, Kaede," Tsumugi protested, clasping her hands to her chest. "This isn't the fifty-fifth game, right? It's the fifty-fourth, isn't it?"

"Of course it's the fifty-fourth," Kaede said, frowning. "Who said anything different?"
"Goro Bakura did," Nami explained, "He's the Ultimate Idol and says he used to live with an Ultimate Despair, which is why he knows things about Killing Games. Plus, this is obviously a gimmick year. Those are usually double-digits, so it lines up, I'm just not sure..."

"The last game that I can remember existing was the fifty-second," Tomoe added, "So it seems strange, to have jumped to the fifty-fifth."

"That's exactly it," Kaede said, "Why would you forget two games instead of just one or all of them? The only reason to forget one game is to keep the identity of the Ultimate Survivor a secret. The reason to forget every game is to take the players by surprise. There isn't a reason to forget two. Therefore, this is definitely the fifty-fourth game."

"And Kaede knows what she's talking about!" Tsumugi exclaimed, "She's the Ultimate Detective, after all! If she says that this is the fifty-fourth game, then it definitely is."

"Right," Nami said, "I'm Nami Kaguya, and this is my sister, Tomoe. She's the Ultimate Journalist, I don't think I have an Ultimate Talent, and we're both nineteen. This year's gimmicks are that every talent has belonged to a past Killing Game participant, and everyone has a preexisting connection. They pulled from four different selection years to pull it off. This is the stuff that seems pretty likely to be true, that we heard from Bakura."

"Mm, we're eighteen," Kaede said, "I'm Kaede Akamatsu. My girlfriend's Tsumugi Shirogane, the Ultimate Astronaut. So that's our preexisting connection."

"There are five from this most recent selection year, four from yours, four from ours, and three from the year before us," Nami explained, "At least, that's what I heard from Bakura. I don't know if his numbers actually are accurate, since he was wrong about this being the fifty-fifth game."
"If we trust these two that it's the fifty-fourth. Anyhow, so far, we haven't seen any excess of those numbers," Tomoe said, "But I don't trust him. Especially since he could have been wrong about what year Killing Game this is. Well, for all we know, it's none of the above."

"Well, that's the thing," Kaede said, "Even if I didn't sort out the reasons why this couldn't be the fifty-fifth year, the fact that we're from multiple selection years guarantees that. I'm eighteen, and I know that the game that others from my year were involved in was the fifty-third. And your ages line up with that, too. If this was the fifty-fifth game, then we'd all have to be mistaken on what age we are."

Tsumugi hesitated a moment, then spoke up again, "Unless there was a semi-annual Killing Game..."

"What?" Kaede asked, turning to look at her.

"There could have been one in between," Tsumugi said, "Maybe one that wasn't trial-based. Maybe one that wasn't even really broadcast, those definitely have happened before. That would make this a fifty-fifth... If something happened like that. I know that the 'annual' Killing Games are actually numbered by which game they are overall... Maybe if it didn't get a public broadcast, only Bakura, who lived with an Ultimate Despair, would know about it..."

"You mean," Kaede mumbled, lifting a hand to bite at her thumbnail as she averted her gaze. "A disorganized Killing Game... Who would they even use for something like that?"

"I don't know," Tsumugi said, "Maybe survivors from past games? Not like that's something we should worry about..."

"Do you..." Nami spoke up, "Do you remember the fifty-third game happening?"

"Not a ton," Tsumugi said, "But I guess we were left with vague memories of it because it really impacted us. Kaede and I met each other at the same time we met several other Ultimates from our year, because we were taken to a safe house after Despairs discovered our identities. We left early, which turned out to be for the better, because Despair found the house and all of the Ultimates who were still there ended up in the Killing Game..."

"And we don't remember most of what happened in that game," Kaede said, "But we know how it ended. In the fifth trial, the wrong culprit was voted for, and everybody else was executed. All our friends died. I guess that whoever got away with murder, would have ended up the Ultimate Survivor in this game."

"That's somewhat horrifying," Tomoe said, "Well, there are two other people besides the both of you who could be the Ultimate Survivor, if Bakura's right about there being four people from your selection year. If that game ended the way it did, it seems unlikely that it could have been either one of you, given your connection."

"Box Hako is one of them," Nami reminded Tomoe, "There's just one other person we haven't met yet from that year. I don't know if Hako would have killed anybody, though, let alone try to get away with it in a Killing Game. She seemed too nice. Too sweet, like a cinnamon roll!"

"Yes, but she did disappear a year ago," Tomoe said, "As Mitsuru said, she could be the Ultimate Survivor. That means that she could very well be more cruel than you're giving her credit for."

"I'll hold off on judgment until I meet the other one from that year," Nami said, then looked to Tsumugi and Kaede again. "If you met somebody, would you remember them being in the safe
"I don't know," Tsumugi said, shaking her head. "Probably not. They wouldn't want it to be obvious who the Ultimate Survivor is."

"That's true," Tomoe agreed, "For all we know, you're lying to us and one of you is the Ultimate Survivor. The game didn't end the way you're saying, or you're faking your relationship to throw us off..."

"One of us? No, there's no way that's true," Kaede said, "It couldn't be one of us. If you want to think that's a lie, then fine, but that's my two cents. It could not be one of us. Anyway, Tsumugi? Let's go back into the room."

"Right," Tsumugi agreed, turning back around and pulling Kaede by the arm back into the room they'd stepped out from, door thoroughly shut behind the pair as they returned to hiding. Tomoe bit the inside of her cheek as she watched them go, Nami observed. She suspected them of lying to her. Normally, Nami would have brushed that off as Tomoe's distrusting nature, but she had to agree. Something about these two... Was cagey and suspicious after all. Maybe they were just scared. Maybe not.
"They were weird," Nami observed, rubbing the back of her neck as she stared at the door, not really caring if she was overheard. "Kind of paranoid, huh?"

"Some people will become paranoid in the event of a Killing Game," Tomoe said, "It's not that strange. Though, I'm not sure I believe their story about the safe house."

"That's a weird thing to be lying about," Nami said, "But I dunno if I trust them either. Since they're hiding... You and I are probably the only people who met them so far, right?"

Tomoe started to walk down the hallway, and Nami followed while Tomoe spoke again, "That's true. I don't so much think that those two were telling a lie as I think that they might believe a lie, frankly. Anyone who's seen a Killing Game knows Despair has the ability to fabricate memories, after all. You can't trust anything that you think you know for certain."

"Like me not having a talent?" Nami asked, "They could have fabricated that for both of us. And maybe they tried to do it to Bakura too, but he was too obsessed with my talent to actually forget it?"

"I suppose that is possible," Tomoe admitted, cupping her chin in one hand as she moved. "See, I'm far more focused on you as a person than I would be on whatever Ultimate Talent you happened to have. That's because I truly care about you. I don't know why Bakura is so utterly fixated on your talent, but clearly, he just puts you on a pedestal. So I'm better than him. Aren't I, Nami? So much better than Bakura?"

"You don't have to compare yourself to that guy or anything," Nami said, "I mean, it's not like I'm going to pick some weirdo over my own sister, even if it's been a while since we saw each other... You gotta stop being so paranoid that I'll be better friends with somebody else. We grew up together, so if I had to choose, I'll always pick you. I know you've always had my back and stuff. Friendship ended with Tomoe, now Bakura is my best friend? Yeah right. That'd never happen. Just worry about staying alive. And keeping me alive, I guess, if that's really so important to you."

"It is important to me," Tomoe said, "Can you seriously imply that it's not?"

"I wasn't trying to imply that." Nami shrugged. "I just don't really care about keeping myself alive, so it's weird that it is that important to you? I don't want to die or anything, but in a Killing Game, there are only five survivors, at most... There are definitely people here who are way more worthy of being one of those five than I am."

"Aww, I don't think so," Tomoe whined, "You're definitely more worthy than any of those idiots that we've met so far! You're my siiiiister. My best friend! My compatriot through thick and thin, my imouto!"

"Stop being silly, I'm trying to have a serious talk with you! I gotta tell you the ashtray is a dish! What about Fujishiro?" Nami asked, "If nobody else, you have to admit, he seems like a good person. And Asahi, too. They're twenty, after all. They've already started their lives and now they're getting dragged down into this Killing Game? They deserve to get back out there and pick up their lives."

"Who's being silly now? Referencing Raymond Carver like jokes about my favorite author will disarm me? I don't care about that, Nami," Tomoe said, "I care about you. You're the only person..."
here that I care about, and that's not about to change, I'm not a passive person. I will protect the people that I care about, and that's just you."

"What kind of a shit for brains philosophy is that!?" Somebody else shouted, and the twins turned to see a boy in an egg t-shirt, jean shorts, and thigh-high socks at the end of the hall in a confrontational stance. "Yeah, didn't think you'd be overheard, did you? If you only protect the people you care about, then you're a bad person... You've got to protect anyone who falls under your principles! I protect the people I care about, sure, but then I also defend girls everywhere!"
"He means platonicallly," Another boy rounded the corner, looking much more normal, casually bland. "Defending girls platonicallly. He's not a dumb white knight or anything like that, he's just gay and strong. And also American."
"I guess that makes sense," Nami said, looking between the two. "Who are you?"

"The reason I'm strong is because I'm the Ultimate Fisticuffs! Randy Sempers!" The more enthusiastic one introduced himself first. "I'll fight anyone who threatens the safety of girls or thinks that I am one. That's it, though. I won't get into fights for no reason!"

The other one chuckled nervously. "Tsukasa Mizuho. I'm the Ultimate CEO... But, should we really be admitting that? I feel like it's safe, somehow, but I don't know."

"It's fine to admit that," Tomoe said, "Because this is a Killing Game. We're all Ultimates here. That other thing that Sempers admitted, though... Unnecessary. I wouldn't have guessed."

"He has a tough time believing that sometimes. Uh. Anyway... how can it be a Killing Game?" Tsukasa questioned, furrowing his brow in concern. "I mean... I thought that Randy and I were both in the clear, for that sort of thing. Given neither of us are seventeen."

"Well, you're not," Nami said, neglecting to actually explain the gimmick year this time around. "You're here now, and this is definitely a Killing Game."

"Nobody's announced it or anything yet," Tomoe said, "But, come on. There isn't any other reason that all of us Ultimates would wake up in a place like this out of nowhere, with no warning or anything of the sort."

"I guess that's fair," Randy admitted, "But don't people in Killing Games usually forget what a
Killing Game is? I still totally remember them. Not like I watched them, but, come on. How does somebody not know about such a huge pop culture phenomenon?"

"Usually," Tomoe said, shrugging. "Knowledge of Killing Games is erased for the purpose of making the game go more smoothly. I suppose in this case, whoever's organizing it didn't consider that necessary. The only real purpose of erasing those memories is because if people understand that a Killing Game is just a ploy by Despair to spread its message, then nobody will participate. This particular group of Ultimates, though? I don't doubt that a Killing Game can occur even with all of us understanding the reason behind its existence."

"There's no way," Tsukasa protested, "I mean, when we know exactly why a Killing Game is happening... We would never play into Despair's hands like that, there's no way we could ever do that! No motive could convince us to do something that we already know benefits only our enemy!"

"You're awfully optimistic," Tomoe said, "Surprising. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty," Tsukasa said, "And Randy is eighteen."

"At twenty, you should already be smarter than this," Tomoe complained, "No matter what, the game ends up happening. Some motive is always enough, even when people come up with the most outlandish theories about why the game is happening. From this group, plenty of us have already been disenchanted to the idea of standing up against Despair, since we've been Ultimates for so long. Thus, that memory stays intact. I can only imagine that the organizers prefer any excuse they can get, to avoid erasing as many memories. I can only imagine it's a difficult or expensive process. Perhaps both."

Tsukasa took a deep breath, then nodded. "I guess that you're right... Even so..."

"Hold on a minute," Nami spoke up, then turned to Randy. "You're eighteen? That means you're from the previous selection year."

"Yeah, I guess so. What of it?" He asked.

"I need you to be completely honest with me now," Nami said, "Have you ever been in a Killing Game before?"
"Are you kidding me? Of course I haven't..." Randy protested, then gave a sigh, "Though, I guess I know why you'd ask something like that! Given my selection year, you're trying to find the Ultimate Survivor, aren't you?"

"That's the idea," Tomoe said, glaring at him, "Although, I can't imagine why Nami actually came out and said it like that. The Ultimate Survivor wouldn't just admit it like that."

"That's true," Randy said, "But you know, isn't it possible that the Ultimate Survivor isn't even from my year at all? Just because they're the survivor of my selection year's Killing Game doesn't mean that's the first time they've been selected for the role, you know? Come on. If you're gonna play Sherlock with this stuff, at least do it right! Think through all the possibilities!"

"That's a good point..." Tomoe admitted, crossing her arms with a sigh, "So now, everybody's a suspect in this, excluding the seventeen year olds."

"A suspect? Well, why would you even care who the Ultimate Survivor is?" Randy asked, "That makes you awful suspicious. You do know that, right? Makes you seem weird?"

Tomoe blinked a few times, then explained, "That may be true, but we do have a reason. We heard from a pair of girls who have more memories of the last year than we do, and they claimed the only survivor of the previous killing game had gotten away with murder. We want to be able to figure out if someone here has already killed, because that person would be a bigger threat. Especially somebody who got away with it."

"Everybody voted for the wrong culprit, apparently," Nami added in, "And got killed for that, obviously. Cause that's how Killing Game works."

Tsukasa furrowed his brow. "Don't you think somebody who could get away with murder in a Killing Game would be smarter than to admit that they'd been in one before?"

"I think that," Tomoe said, "But as you can see, my sister, I love her to bits, isn't the brightest bulb in the box."

"Shut up," Nami mumbled, glaring at Tomoe. "I'm the smartest person in the room and if you understood that, you'd know why I just went and asked him outright, but, whatever."

"Yes, dear," Tomoe said, reaching out to pat Nami on the head before turning back to the boys they'd just met. "Well, in any case, I guess that if it really is that broad a category, it's something we ought to stop thinking about. We'll already need to suspect each other of intentions to kill at every turn once that bear shows up and briefs us, trying to also suspect somebody of having committed a murder in the past is just too much to think about. We'll be better off if we just focus on the problems of right now, and not the problems of the past."

"I'd say that having a killer among us already would be a problem of right now, but whatever you say," Nami said.

"Well, you don't have to worry about anything like that," Randy said, "I know this is a Killing Game, and people definitely will die... And I don't doubt that whoever the Ultimate Survivor is, they killed somebody before, but at the same time, I've always promised that I'll protect girls, even when I was young. My mentor always told me that we had to stand up and protect girls because most men are terrible, and I would agree with that... And you're girls, so I will protect you. But also
I'll protect anyone here who isn't terrible! Yeah, that's the plan."

"That's a shit-for-brains philosophy," Tomoe said, "Girls can be some of the most horrible people in the world."

"Well obviously, I know that too," Randy said, looking away with a frown. "But at the same time, you know, I was growing up with my mentor in an area of the world where any girl who was actually nice probably would have been doomed, if not for me and her."

"I can vouch for that," Tsukasa added in, "I was in that area too. There was a really big Despair population, so many that I couldn't even get away with not hiring any Despairs to work at my company. I really didn't want to enable them, but I just couldn't get enough employees. It wasn't a good time at all, since most of the Despairs who were willing to work were the malicious sort, not the depressed sort."

"That sounds like an awful place to live," Nami observed, "Where me and Tomoe grew up didn't have a lot of Despairs until we started getting older. Most of the Despairs were adults who worked in the school system, though, so when we grew up a lot of our classmates ended up Despairing. Even so, it wasn't like it spread through the whole town."

"That almost sounds more frightening," Tsukasa said, "To watch them fall apart around you... At least I knew what I was getting into, in that city."

"Yeah, we've all been touched by Despair in our lives, who the Hell hasn't? Break up the mutual pity party already, because that's not important," Tomoe interrupted, hands folded under her chin, "Nami, don't you think that we've spent enough time with these strange men?"

"I dunno," Nami said, "Randy seems kind of on the level, you know? More than most of the other people we've run into."

"Hey, thanks!" Randy said with a small laugh, "You're pretty cool yourself!"

"I don't care how on the level he might be, Nami," Tomoe said, smiling through a glare. "We still haven't found the person who trapped you in the room you woke up in, now have we? That's my number one priority right now, in the effort of meeting others. I frankly don't give a damn about any of these standard, non-threats."

"They're not standard at all, Tomoe!" Nami protested, "How dare you call them normies, when Randy at least is obviously not? That's such a huge insult! You can't just misnormie people."

"Normies?" Tomoe questioned, frowning, "Nami, if you want me to take you seriously, you can't just be using made up words like that."

"It's not like I'm the one who made it up, that means it's a real enough word that lots of people use it," Nami said, but under her breath with a pouty face, so Tomoe couldn't hear her but could at least be aware of her dissatisfaction with the situation at hand. Even dissatisfied, though, Nami still trailed along when Tomoe walked away, with one last look back towards Randy and Tsukasa. Well, she'd see them again later. She understood Tomoe's line of thought, with wanting to figure out who trapped her, but at the same time Nami didn't really think it was that important. She was nowhere near as important as Tomoe thought that she was.

Even so, this was a Killing Game. It was reassuring to have somebody like that on her side, somebody so protective that as long as she stuck by her, no harm would come to her. She wasn't worth that, surely, but she would certainly enjoy it while she could.
Prologue (The Barricader and the Barricadee)

It didn't take long before Nami and Tomoe came across the first individual in a short while, somebody who hadn't latched on to anyone else and was completely alone in the hospital. She was very short, hardly over four feet tall, and despite the twintails on top of that, she certainly didn't have the aura of a child about her. Quite the opposite. Nami could tell immediately that this girl was at least as old as her, if not older. And there was something dangerous about her. Dangerous and intriguing. Upon their approach she turned, glassy-eyed, without any hint of surprise. "If you've come to kill me, I'm sorry, but you'll have to do a little better than that. I heard you coming, and I'm ready for you. One of you's pretty good at being quiet, but the other... Are you an idiot? Even your breathing is obvious!"

That was when they both observed the long pole she held at her side, and she certainly looked ready to use it. It was about as tall as she was, but looked like it weighed nothing to her. She balanced it perfectly in her right hand.

"The Killing Game hasn't even started yet," Nami said, "Nobody has any motive to kill you. Especially not me."

"Actually, I think you do," The girl said, narrowing her eyes. "Everyone's been leaving me alone if I threaten them, but you... I did panic and barricade you in that room. So you've got motive to look for revenge. Can you really blame me, though? I woke up in a Killing Game, unarmed. I had to find a weapon, and you were the most likely person to find me unarmed if I didn't take countermeasures. Admittedly, I could... Probably take a girl like you with my bare hands! But I never claimed to think straight in difficult situations! Better safe than sorry!"

"You..." Tomoe hissed through gritted teeth and took one step closer.

"Tomoe, stop," Nami said, reaching out to grab her wrist. "She already explained her reason, and it makes sense. She was protecting herself, she didn't hurt me, and it wasn't anything personal. There's no reason to need any revenge for something like that, right? She was scared. We're scared too. Everyone is."

"I wouldn't think so, myself," The girl said, "But the thing is, you never know in a place like this. It's a Killing Game, so I was reasonable to be scared of you when I was unarmed, and I'm reasonable to think you could, in this situation, want revenge. Who are you?"

"I'm Nami Kaguya," Nami explained, "This is my sister, Tomoe, and she's the Ultimate Journalist."
How did you figure out this was a Killing Game, though? Like. We heard from Bakura, and even then, we're not totally certain, since we are, uh, weird ages for it."

"Hm? Well, it's true that I'm a bit old for one of these, but I figured it was possible I was the Ultimate Survivor and just didn't know it," She explained, "I'm two years too old... But, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what this is, and it's not like I'm an idiot! Waking up in an unfamiliar place, with other people, when you're an Ultimate. I may have thought I was free of this shit, but. I can't be unprepared by saying 'I'm sure it isn't that' only to end up dead."

"We're also two years too old, this game just pulled from several different years, because of course it did, I guess," Tomoe said, "Even still, waking up in a Killing Game isn't cause to immediately turn on the nearest person... That's volatile, or perhaps even cruel. I don't like to see that, when it comes to Nami."

"Well, you're here now, right? So obviously, you got out! I didn't do any real damage, and trust me, I fucking could have," She said, now smirking as she held the pole behind her, leaning her weight against it. "After all, I'm Sayaka Yamaguchi. That name sound familiar to you? It should. I'm the Ultimate... Little Sister."

"And why is that supposed to intimidate us?" Tomoe asked, "Of course somebody who looks like you would have that title, though your attitude doesn't seem to match... Maybe if your elder brother were actually here, you'd be sweeter, hm? Where's the Onii-chan?"

"Weren't you supposed to be a journalist? Oh my god," Sayaka complained, "It has nothing to do with an older brother or anything! It's family in the mob sense, couldn't you get that from my family name? It's the name of the biggest yakuza syndicate in the country! If the oyabun knew you disrespected me like this-"

"Like the yakuza even matter anymore," Tomoe interrupted, rolling her eyes. "I have much better things to report on than whatever some washed up, petty criminal group has been up to."

"P-Petty crime...?" Sayaka asked, seeming seriously taken aback. "How dare you! We're nothing at all like those color gangs with their minor stabblings and store robberies! It's organized crime, that's like, the opposite of petty! Why would you say something like that? Do you want to still end up dead if you get out of here alive? Such slander, that'll definitely get you killed! I oughta know, cause I'm the one they send to do that stuff. Which is the reason you should know that barricading Nami is the least I could do, when I woke up in a Hell that I thought I escaped... Well. Actually mostly I don't kill people for the mob, I break their legs, but..."

"I see, so you've killed before?" Tomoe observed, "And, you think that you may be the Ultimate Survivor... Well, that lines up. Nami, come. We'll be avoiding this girl for the entire duration of our time in this place, not a doubt."

"Good, cause, I don't want you near me anyways!" Sayaka's voice cracked as she shouted this at them, "I don't want any of you near me, because I plan on surviving this thing, all the way to the end. I still have lots of stuff I need to do! I can't just die amongst a bunch of goddamn... Uh... Morons! Like both of you totally are!"

"Saying shit like that is only going to raise death flags, you know that, right?" Nami asked, raising a hand to scratch the back of her neck. "Everyone will assume that you're going to die, and then some motive will end up specifically targeting you so that it really happens... Do you really want to raise flags like that? I wouldn't want you to, even though I am a moron..."

"Oh, shut up!" Sayaka snipped, "You look like the type to die first! See, how's that feel, to hear
something like that? Just leave me the fuck alone. I don't care what any of you think of this thing, but Killing Games are bullshit. People who would never end up getting attacked in real life end up in serious danger, and if you defend yourself you'll get killed in an even more painful way... Even I'm not safe here, so can you blame me if I'm on edge? It's way too fucked up and I want no part in it. I really did think... that I was safe already."

"That's a good point," Nami said, "I didn't even think about feeling distraught about this or anything. I just figured, this may as well happen. Adult life is already so goddamn weird. But now that you put it that way... I... This really is a Killing Game..."

"Nami, stop memeing and let's just get away from her, Jesus Christ," Tomoe muttered, grabbing her sister by the elbow and pulling.

"But I am nothing without my spicy vintage memes," Nami deadpanned, but didn't resist being dragged away, and also didn't make the other obvious meme related to the same comedian about Little Miss Jesus Christ over here who wouldn't let her get a Best Buy Savers' Card. As they were turning the corner, she raised her free arm and waved goodbye to Sayaka, who was staring after them with something other than anger or fear now. It almost looked like worry. Why would Sayaka show any worry about Nami or Tomoe, when they'd both just been rude to her and nothing else? Well, Nami thought, she might find that out later on too. As much as Tomoe clearly wanted to take up an isolationist strategy, Nami was actually kind of interested in some of these people's lives. Sure, a lot of them were insufferable, so call her a masochist for wanting to suffer them.

Didn't stop her from wanting to, didn't stop her at all.
"I want to meet the rest," Nami complained, leaning against the wall in the random room that Tomoe had pulled them into. She'd sat 'quietly' for a good amount of time as they made brief acquaintance with several of their peers, but now it was time to whine and hope that she could get her way. You know, like a child. If Tomoe was going to treat her like one, then she'd act like one.

"You'll meet the rest whenever the organizer tells us to all meet in a central location," Tomoe said, "We found out who trapped you before, and that's all we really needed from these people. Going searching for any more of them would just be stupid and dangerous. It's better to wait until we're going to meet them all anyhow. Every single encounter outside of the group is an encounter where somebody could end up dead, and that somebody could be you."

"That's dumb," Nami said, "You're dumb. I know that's technically true, that I could get killed, obviously I do! But at the same time. I can't just hide from everybody. I want to get to know these people, I... I don't want to die alone, and I don't want any of them to be forgotten either!"

"Don't think that just because we've been apart for a while, I'm not still looking out for your best interests above anything else," Tomoe said, "You're still my sister. I'm not going to make that into a joke this time, I'm serious. I only want the best for you. The best for you isn't to get to know these people. You won't die alone because you won't die, and it's not your responsibility to 'remember' any of these strangers."

"Yeah, you've said," Nami complained, "But you're not treating me like a twin at all, you're treating me like your kid sister. Like your baby sister!"

"You never complained about that before, honey. And you're certainly acting like one right now," Tomoe said, "Last I checked you enjoyed being coddled and shielded from all dangers in the world. Or was everything I did for naught, dearest?"

Nami shrugged, looking away. "I guess I just got used to a certain degree of independence while you were away, and now the coddling actually feels like coddling instead of normal? And. I dunno. I have an Ultimate Talent. I don't know what that talent is, but I definitely know that I don't want to see anybody just. Die and be gone. I want to be able to remember them as friends, if I live through this fucking thing! It's. It's the right thing to do!"

Tomoe pulled one of the pens from her belt and tossed it to the ground, staring at Nami as she did. "Nami, I really don't want to get into this. Just how ungrateful are you planning on being? I'm doing my best here. I've always done my best. Isn't it about time that I actually got something for it? But instead, here you are, hating me for helping you. The exact opposite of what you should be doing. You should be showering me with praise and thanks, you know. Where's Tomoe, thank you?"

Nami hesitated a minute, then stepped forward and leaned down, picking up the pen and holding it out to Tomoe. "Fine, so I'm a little kid. Kids start acting up eventually! Tomoe, I really am grateful that you protected me when we were growing up. Surrounded by Despairs and stuff, I know something could have happened to me! And as far as I can remember, you prevented that. But things are different now. These are other Ultimates, not Despairs! And do you think I'm so stupid I never noticed that your method of protecting me is to put yourself on the line? I dunno the extent of it, but... I'd be mad too if it was the other way around. You could just lay off now, okay? You don't have to protect me from the same sort of stuff. The only thing here is... is death. And I really don't want you to die for me, Tomoe."
"...You're an idiot." Tomoe mumbled, taking the pen back.

Nami chuckled. "Yeah, maybe I am. Look, I know you care about me. Consider the coconut that, just maybe, I care about you too! You can give it a rest now."

"I was giving it a rest for the past three years since I became an Ultimate," Tomoe protested, "And now we're both in the absolute most dangerous possible situation we could be in. The most dangerous situation that we should have been too old for. That we shouldn't even need to worry about anymore. What am I supposed to do?"

"Look out for yourself for once," Nami said, "It is dangerous, but it's a different kind of danger now. It's not like anyone was trying to murder me, out there, when we were growing up. Kidnap, attack, whatever, but murder? No, and you know how I know that? Because you're still here and if someone was trying to kill me you would've gotten killed by now."

"I suppose you're right," Tomoe said, sighing. "I just can't stand not to be extra cautious, though. Even if it's... Smothering."

"You can be," Nami said, "Just don't drag me into it. Be extra cautious for your own jazzy self! If it makes you feel better, then I will actually try. I'll try to survive, even if other people deserve to survive more than me, I'll do it for your sake so you can stop all this worrying. All this worrying is really just dumb!"

"Why do you and I just keep calling each other dumb?" Tomoe chuckled, leaning her cheek against her palm. "You'd think that's counterproductive. Our chances are much better if we're both as intelligent as I know that we are."

"Wow, I kind of thought you legitimately considered me an idiot," Nami said, "I mean, you totally undermined my attempts to bluff Randy. Come on. He was on the level, but he was also definitely not clever enough to keep from sweating a little bit if I correctly accused him of being the Ultimate Survivor."

"So that's what you were doing..." Tomoe sighed. "I'm sorry, I didn't even think of that."

"It's fine," Nami said, "So, about that Yamaguchi girl..."

Tomoe blinked. "Right, she's still troublesome. What if she ends up killing somebody before the game's even been announced by that bear?"

"I'm pretty sure that would be an unprecedented move," Nami noted, "I guess that if we still knew where Bakura was, he could tell us for certain if that had ever happened before."

Tomoe rolled her eyes. "Maybe, although, I'm still not so clear on his accuracy. Or his capacity to not also be somebody to make that unprecedented move, let's be honest."

Nami stepped toward the door. "There's still four people we wouldn't have met, right? To hit the number. I know two of them, Akabane and Nozomi, I heard about them earlier I mean. That leaves another two."

"Well, given the usual equivalence present in these Killing Games, I'd assume there's one woman and three men left to meet," Tomoe observed.

"Akabane is a woman, I think," Nami said, "As far as I heard. So does this mean you'll come with me to find the rest of them after all?"
"I can't stop you from going," Tomoe admitted, "That really wouldn't work, because you're right, we are both adults now and it isn't fair of me to treat you like you're younger. I can't make you hide in here with me, but I'll go with you, because I can do that much. I can't just give up on protecting you, stop cold turkey, or anything. We can certainly compromise, though. And this is my compromise."

"It's a good one," Nami said, aiming a smile in her direction. "Meeting new people is way easier when you're around. You might not be friendly, but you can make it feel like you've just sorta always known 'em! Even if your form of knowing, is like, staring deep into a person's soul and worst insecurities?"

"I do have that skill, don't I?" Tomoe chuckled, then grabbed Nami's wrist, and they stepped out of the room together... With Tomoe slightly ahead, of course. Tomoe would always be dragging Nami around, but hopefully now, it wouldn't be so annoying for the slightly younger of the two.
2:00 PM / 1400 Hours

After their return to the halls of the hospital, Nami and Tomoe finally located something other than stretching hallways and nearly-empty rooms, stumbling upon the cafeteria. It was much larger than a cafeteria for this many people ought to be, with enough tables that there would still be empty ones if every single participant in this game sat at a different one. There were hot cases, cold cases, and a full kitchen set up behind a counter that separated the preparation area from the dining area. In that preparation area was a pale man with orange eyes, in a red leather jacket, sliding a tray into an industrial oven.

“Um, hey, yeah, excuse me?” Nami called out over the counter, “What the fuck are you putting in that oven? Is it a person? Is it Yamaguchi? Did you kill Yamaguchi before she could kill you and now you’re trying to cover it up? She’s small enough to go in an oven, I think.”

“Nami,” Tomoe hissed at her, “If that’s true you don’t want to be asking about it!”

“I don’t think it’s true,” Nami said, "I'm making funney jokes."

“It’s not,” The guy said, standing and turning to face them, wiping sweat from his forehead, “It’s a sheet cake. That joke wasn't very funny, though. Your sense of humor is fucked.”
“It’s vintage!” Nami told him.

“Is this really the time to be baking?” Tomoe asked, frowning.
The guy shrugged. “I dunno. I bake when I’m stressed, and this is pretty goddamn stressful, and all the supplies were here… So I’m making a cake. That’s fine, right? Not gonna get up my ass for acting on my talent? And why the hell would I ever kill Yamaguchi, geeze… That kid… Wait. She’s here?”

“I don’t know about that,” Nami said, “The Yamaguchi that’s here is older than you. A lot shorter, though, I’ll admit that. She’s a lot shorter than pretty much anybody.”

“That sounds like Yamaguchi to me…” Someone else mumbled, then the first guy leaned down and pulled up a second one by the back of his sweater. He waved sheepishly. All his movements were sheepish, come to think of it. “Hi, I’m Kanoshi Kyosuke. I was sitting on the floor.”

“I’m Nami Kaguya. My sister is Tomoe, and she’s the Ultimate Journalist,” Nami introduced them again, “Oh yeah, and we’re twins. In case you couldn't tell. Why were you sitting on the floor?”

“Hiding, I guess?” Kanoshi said, “And also, there aren’t any chairs back in this kitchen area, but I didn’t want to leave Ruka alone if this is what we think it is! Or, to be alone myself, for that matter, um... And I somehow didn't think of just moving a chair. Now that I say it out loud I seem pretty dumb, huh? Look, I was panicking... Why would Yamaguchi be here, though? She’s two years older than us. She made it through the year she would have been in a Killing Game, no problem!”

“I guess we’ll find that out. Anyway, I’m Yuuri Ruka,” Yuuri said, extending a hand in their direction. “Ultimate Baker. And Kyosuke here is the Ultimate Tutor, which he neglected to mention.”

Nami shook his hand. “You don’t really look like the Ultimate Baker. Are you sure you didn't swap an i for that a?”

“I get that a lot,” Yuuri admitted, “But it’s my talent, even if it’s not my aesthetic. Kyosuke really looks the picture for his talent though, doesn’t he? So it balances out.”

“That’s fair,” Nami said, “No offense, Kyosuke, you really look exactly like a middle school math teacher.”
“None taken, that’s my dream job!” Kanoshi said, laughing a bit. “Math is the subject I’m best at tutoring, and middle-schoolers are the most cooperative. Little kids can get ornery, and high-schoolers don’t want to admit they’re doing anything wrong, ever. Not like I can’t handle tutoring anybody, I am an Ultimate after all! But, you know. Some tutoring is easier than others... Though. Hah. My talent won't really. Help me survive here, will it? Huh...”

“So,” Tomoe spoke up, staring at them both. “You two know Yamaguchi? Should we be worried about you? She was quite aggressive.”

“Aw, she’s harmless!” Kanoshi exclaimed.

Yuuri rolled his eyes. “Wouldn't say harmless, but... Yamaguchi won’t hurt anyone without a good reason. She’s got her own personal set of morals even if she’s being paid money to kill. If Yamaguchi kills anybody, they deserved it. So just don’t do anything to deserve it, and you'll be fine. When it comes to her, anyway. I can't vouch for anyone else here, probably. Cept Kyosuke is definitely too much of a wimp to kill you either.”

“What exactly would she consider a reason to kill, though?” Tomoe asked, furrowing her brow. “I
still can’t say I like those odds.”

“She probably wouldn’t even kill you if you tried to kill her, at least not in a Killing Game,” Yuuri said, “She knows how to incapacitate somebody without killing them. On all levels, from harmless but functional to ‘your arm will never be the same again’. Last I checked, she doesn’t want to die. So she wouldn’t actually commit a murder, knowing she’d get caught and executed for it.”

“That doesn’t answer my question of what would make her want to kill somebody, now does it, sweetie? You ought to give somebody a straight answer when they ask you a straightforward question. This behavior can do you no favors, Ruka. Many people don’t know the age-old ‘take mixed signals as a no’, for one,” Tomoe said, leaning over the counter with a smile. “Now tell me how to avoid pissing off your little friend.”

“It’s not hard or anything,” Kanoshi said, “Yamaguchi, at least in this situation, will definitely only kill someone she gets very angry with. She won’t risk her own life like that. So, unless she finds out you’ve done something super horrible like, I dunno... molest a little kid? Then she’ll let you live!”

“That’s her threshold? That should be no problem, then. Though you probably could have phrased that better,” Nami said, “I mean, in that case, how often could she even be deciding on her own to kill people?”

“Very often,” Tomoe said, then turned back to the boys. “Right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Yuuri said, nodding. “It’s not like she has a hard time sniffing those types of people out, since she looks like, ten. It’s her own way of fighting against Despair, I guess. Can’t blame her for that! Like, she was taught how to hurt and kill people since she was a kid. May as well use that skill for some sort of good.”

“Nonetheless,” Tomoe straightened up as she spoke, “No matter how much those people may have deserved it, she is a murderer, and she is in a Killing Game. I certainly won’t trust her as far as I could throw her. Given her size, that might seem far, but I assure you, I am physically a relative weakling and couldn’t much hurl a person anywhere.”

“So this is a Killing Game, you think?” Yuuri asked.

“Mhm,” Nami said, “It is. And I’m sick of explaining how that’s possible, so, I’m not gonna bother. You’ll find out eventually.”

“I’m fine with that,” Yuuri said.

Kanoshi fidgeted where he stood. “How’d they even... get a whole hospital to have a Killing Game in? This is so unbelievable…”

“It’s looking to be pretty true, so shut the fuck up,” Nami snapped at him, “They got it because they’re Despair, obviously, were you this critical of every single other Killing Game that happened? I wish it wasn’t. But it’s plenty believable.”

“I just…” Kanoshi looked down at the floor. “Would like the opportunity to think that it’s anything else. It isn’t exactly a good thing to hear about!”

“Well, you don’t have that,” Tomoe said, “You’re a damn idiot is what you are, if you think otherwise.”

“Can’t I just be an optimist?” Kanoshi asked.
“What’s the difference?” Tomoe asked, then walked over to one of the tables and pulled out a chair. “Nami, we’ll probably have better luck waiting here for others to show up, than going back out into that maze to look for Akabane and Nozomi.”

“You’re probably right,” Nami said, looking over. “I’m gonna keep talking to these guys for a little while though, if that’s okay? I wanna be a social.”

“...Mm, I guess,” Tomoe said with a sigh, but remembered their compromise as she settled into her seat.
“So, Kaguya,” Yuuri said, “I noticed, when you were introducing yourself and your sister, you didn’t say what your Ultimate Talent is… Though, I totally understand if you’d rather not share it or anything like that.”

“I’d share it if I could,” Nami said, looking up at the ceiling, “But the thing is, I have no idea. Tomoe says I never had an Ultimate Talent, but there’s this other guy here who says I definitely have a talent, but he won’t tell me what it is.”

“That’s rude,” Kanoshi said, “If you have an Ultimate Talent, you deserve to know what it is!”

“I know, right?” Nami said, rolling her eyes, “It’s super annoying. Here I am, thinking I’m just a normal girl, and this guy says I’m extraordinary but he won’t even explain? He says it’s better if I figure it out myself, which is dumb. It’s like he’s in love with me in every way except for romantic and sexual.”

“That’s a weird way to be in love with somebody,” Kanoshi said, “It kind of goes against the definition of being in love with someone, doesn’t it?”

“Well, he said it would be gross to kiss me,” Nami said, “But also seems very in love with me. Not that I blame him! Who wouldn’t want to get with this?” Nami asked, gesturing over her rather flat body which was further obscured by the sweatshirt and black jeans.

“I… Wouldn’t know, I’m super gay,” Kanoshi admitted.

“Serious?” Nami asked, eyes wide, “Just how many gay men are in this place? You’re the second one I’ve definitely met, third if I count Mizuho who definitely seemed gay for the first gay guy I met… And then that guy who’s in love with me also said he used to be with a guy… And there were those paranoid lesbians hiding in that room…”

“Yamaguchi is also a lesbian,” Yuuri added in, “And I’m not quite sure, myself. So basically, yeah, everyone’s gay. That tends to happen a lot in Killing Games though, for some reason.”

“Clearly,” Kanoshi said, “The Gays are just especially gifted! We end up with Ultimate Talents much more often because we’re just that skilled, yes?”

“Or, more likely,” Tomoe called from the table she sat at, lazily leaning on her arm, “You threw yourselves into your Ultimate Talents so that you didn’t have to stop and think about the truth of your sexualities before you were ready to come out…”

“That’s a pessimistic way to look at it…” Kanoshi whined, “Uh… Kaguya Two, are you straight?”

“Kaguya Two?” Tomoe asked, indignant about the name and not the question, “Well, I suppose that you do need a way to differentiate me from Nami, but good grief, I was born first… And personally, I don’t really care about relationships or anything. I never had a reason to think about it, so who knows what I would actually prefer? As far as I’m concerned, that sort of thing isn’t enjoyable at all, so I don’t think about it.”

“Hey,” Nami said to the boys, “She’s weird. Anyway, call her Kaguya, cause you can just call me Nami.”

“But that’s so disrespectful! I’ve known Ruka for years and we still don’t call each other first
names!” Kanoshi protested, balling up the front of his sweater in one of his hands, “It’s something that you should really only do with your family, or your lover, or your closest friend in the whole world, right?”

“Maybe normally,” Nami said, “But I’m a pretty sloppy person, in regards to etiquette. Plus as far as I know, I never did anything worth respecting, so. I’m Nami. Forget you ever learned that my last name was also Kaguya. That’s how we did things when we were in primary school and stuff. Tomoe is way more worth respecting. She’s graceful and mature and smart and stuff.”

“Wow, with praise like that I might just forget about the fight we had earlier,” Tomoe teased, “She’s right, though. Nami and Kaguya is how we were referred to as children, before we ended up in different prefectures with completely different social circles.”

“Hm…” Nami trailed off, “I don’t really remember any of my social circle from after you left, Tomoe, but I can definitely remember they called me Kaguya. They were mostly really formal for some reason. Except for this one girl who kept making this bad joke about me being Princess Kaguya, like from the story.”

“What sort of bad joke?” Kanoshi asked, “Like, were you rejecting lots of suitors?”

Nami shrugged, “I don’t think so… I think that she just called me it because of my name. I guess that if I was Princess Kaguya though, that would make Tomoe Sutemaru?”

“That makes it sound like you want to marry me,” Tomoe said.

“Ah…” Nami trailed off, “No, I definitely didn’t mean that. Just that you’d be the good friend waiting back home. But maybe I’m wrong and you’re actually the governess who tries to make me act more like a proper noblewoman…”

“That’s even worse!” Tomoe protested.

“Heh…” Kanoshi laughed a bit, smiling at Nami, “Watching you two, it’s really obvious that you’re siblings… Sometimes, two twins will be so different it’s hard to believe they’re related even if they look identical. I thought that when I first met you both, since Nami is all casual and friendly, but Kaguya is put-together and really aloof, but now I see it just takes a bit of observation! You are two peas in a pod after all!”

“You can’t just say shit like that, Kyousuke,” Yuuri scolded him, “People get freaked out when they find out you noticed those kind of things about them!”

“It doesn’t freak me out at all,” Nami said, “Cause you’re right, Kyousuke. Also nothing really freaks me out. My favorite creature is centipedes.”

Tomoe chuckled a bit from her table, but didn’t say anything else.

“Centipedes, eh?” Yuuri asked, “Well, why do you like those things? Trying to seem cool by picking a really gross bug? Cause, you don’t have to act tough. Here, I’ll show you, my favorite creature is the blue jay.”

“I just think they’re neat,” Nami said, “I’m not trying to be tough or anything. Blue jays aren’t that un-tough though. They’re kind of bullies among birds, right?”

“I guess so,” Yuuri said, “But it’s what I like, and it’s not a super cool thing to like, either. Plus, I mean, my Ultimate Talent is baking after all.”
“When will your cake be done?” Nami asked, tilting her head, “When it’s ready, can I have some?”

“Oh yeah, absolutely,” Yuuri said, tapping the counter between them with all the fingertips on one hand at once, “I love sharing what I bake. Hey, dumb question, you got a lighter?”

“No, why would I?” Nami asked.

“Damn,” Yuuri scoffed, “I woke up with my cigs still on me, but the lighter was gone.”

“So if any of us had a lighter before it would probably also be gone,” Nami said, “Aren’t you kind of young to have a smoking habit?”

Yuuri rolled his eyes, “Like anyone cares, anywhere. Told you, I bake when I’m stressed, but sometimes it’s not a big enough stress relief. Nicotine is.”

“I’ve been trying to get him to quit, but…” Kanoshi sighed, “Well, it’s not like he doesn’t have his reasons!”

“Whatever,” Nami said, “I guess I can’t judge. I can’t help either, though. Maybe being in a Killing Game will have you kicking the habit…”

“Doubtful,” Tomoe spoke up, “Honey, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but a factor of a Killing Game is that the participants’ needs are met, it’s much more despairing if cared for and enriched people can still be driven to kill. There will be cigarettes available somewhere in the building. Alcohol too, probably, given there are three participants who are of legal age for those things this year.”

As if on cue, a girl walked into the cafeteria holding what looked like a bottle of hard liquor.
“Hello,” The girl holding the bottle of whiskey said, her voice a bit squeaky, seemingly caught off guard by the number of people in the room. Moments later, a woman in a kimono stepped through the door as well, then stood in front of her.

Hold on, Nami thought, that’s too many women...

“Ahh, it’s nice to meet you all!” The second person said, “I’d like to apologize for Reicchi’s awkwardness, she wasn’t expecting you to be here. I’ll make introductions for the both of us, yes? I am Shinjiro Nozomi, and in spite of the fact that I am a man, I hold the title of Ultimate Waitress. My friend here, she is Rei Akabane, yes… The Ultimate Electrician. Isn’t that so impressive?”
“I’m not sure I’d trust her with my electrical if that’s what she’s drinking,” Tomoe said, staring at Shinjiro, “You couldn’t even pick a classier liquor?”

“She’s calling me trashy, Shinji,” Rei complained from behind Shinjiro.

“Ahh! Oh no!” Shinjiro exclaimed, then power-walked to Tomoe’s table and slammed both his hands down in front of her, “She is far classier than a petulant girl who would insult somebody she has only just met!”

“You’re insulting me now and you only just met me,” Tomoe said, crossing her arms as she looked up at Shinjiro. Rei started inching her way towards the others in the room, by the counter. Shinjiro narrowed his eyes at her, “I’m not insulting you, I’m defending my friend’s honor.”

“Does she always need crossdressers to fight her battles for her?” Tomoe asked.

“Tomoe!” Nami called out, “Be nice!”

"Mmph..." Tomoe made a strange, sort of strangled noise, then waved a hand in Shinjiro's direction, "Whatever, move along I guess. Just leave me alone and I'll leave you alone..."

"Thank you," Rei said, sidling up next to Nami, "What's your name?"

"Nami," Nami answered, "Kaguya is my sister and I's last name, but call her Kaguya and call me Nami. That way we can tell it apart and all."

"I see," Rei said, "My name is Rei."

"I heard Nozomi say that, yeah," Nami said, nodding, "Do you want me to call you that?"

"Hmm," Rei thought for a moment, staring over at Tomoe, then turned back to Nami, "No, not yet. You can call me Akabane for now. I don't like your sister."

"I can hear, you know," Tomoe called over.

"I don't care, you know," Rei called back then turned to the boys behind the counter, "Who are you guys?"

"Yuuri Ruka, Ultimate Baker," Yuuri introduced himself, "I'm making a cake and you're welcome to it. You got a lighter?"

"No lighter," Rei said, lifting her bottle and setting it down on the table, "Just some Jack. I don't smoke anymore."

"But," Shinjiro butted in to fill in the gap Rei left, "There were lighters at the same place. It's just a bit down the hall from here! It seems to be a much more well-stocked equivalent of a hospital gift shop, yes. Everything that you could think of needing is there! Well, perhaps not that. The food is simply junk, and there's no medicine. Of course, I'd assume that in a hospital there are plenty of other places to find medicine!"

"Kyousuke?" Yuuri prodded.

"Huh? Oh, yeah!" Kanoshi nodded, then hopped over the counter, "Nozomi, which way is the gift shop from here?"

"Just go out the door and to the left, it's straight ahead and you won't be able to miss it," Shinjiro
said, and Kanoshi took off in that direction. He turned to Yuuri, "So, you two knew each other before arriving here, hm?"

"Yeah," Yuuri said, nodded, "Kyou's the Ultimate Tutor, he kept me from dropping out my first year of middle school and we'd been friends ever since. You and Akabane?"

"Yes, yes," Shinjiro said, pressing his hands together, "She's a very capable young lady, that one! Though, the circumstances of how we know each other... I would really rather not describe that, ahaa!"

"Nobody's going to pry," Yuuri said.

"Thank you," Rei spoke, then popped the top off her bottle of whiskey.

Nami looked Rei over, "How old are you, anyway?"

"Seventeen," Rei said, "How the fuck else old would I be, it's a Killing Game?"

"Ah, but, Reicchi," Shinjiro tapped her shoulder, "I'm nineteen."

"Oh, that's right," Rei said, looking up, "How did that happen, Nozomi? There's no way you were an Ultimate Survivor, I'd have noticed if you disappeared."

"That's reassuring to hear," Shinjiro said with a chuckle, "I've clearly come a long way in life, to have somebody who would notice my disappearance! But, don't these twins seem a bit older than you, too?"

"It's true, we're also nineteen," Nami said, "There's people from a bunch of different selection years in this Killing Game. It's a gimmick year and it may or may not be the 55th Annual Killing Game. The gimmick actually has nothing to do with our ages, they just couldn't fulfill the gimmick if they were only pulling from one year."

"That's really dumb," Rei said, "But I guess it's Despair, they don't care about being dumb."

"You know, saying that might paint a target on your back," Yuuri warned.

Rei rolled her eyes and leaned her cheek against her palm while she took a swig from her bottle with the other.

"Fuck, give me that," Yuuri groaned as soon as Rei had finished downing a sixteenth of the thing in one go, swiping it from her and taking his own, equally long swig to no reaction from her.

"You guys are disastrous," Nami said, then looked past Rei to Shinjiro, "Are you going to swipe it next, Nozomi?"

"No, no," Shinjiro said, waving his hands in front of himself, "The thing is, I'm not exactly against drinking, but my tastes are much more sophisticated! I drink for the sake of being a connoisseur, not for the sake of getting drunk... Although, I'm still underage, I can't deny that a pricey bottle of wine also fulfills the desire to drown my sorrows! Partying or forgetting your troubles, why else would somebody drink before it's legal?"

"Clearly it's the latter version for any of us getting trashed here," Rei said, "Ultimates are by far the saddest people in the world, these days."

"It's tragic," Nami agreed, "But I guess since I don't know my talent, I can't really relate."
"Maybe you're not an Ultimate at all," Shinjiro offered, "You know, it's probably better that way, yes?"

"...Yeah, maybe," Nami agreed, staring as Yuuri set the bottle back on the counter.
Kanoshi returned soon after, handing Yuuri a lighter over the counter before he turned to Rei, "Hey, don't just be throwing that shit around..."

"Wow, the Ultimate Tutor can swear?" Nami questioned, taking a step back in surprise, "I thought for sure that you were not legally allowed to say fuck, from looking at you!"

"Oh, shut up," Kanoshi brushed her off, keeping his attention on Rei, "You hear me? I don't care what you do, but..."

"Kyoukuse," Yuuri interrupted, and he turned to look at him, "It's fine. I'm not gonna end up passed out in a place like this, I know my limits. I won't even drink enough to screw up my motor skills or anything."

"Knowing your limits never stopped you from screwing them up before, dumbass," Kanoshi mumbled, but hopped back over the counter, "I'll go put food coloring in the buttercream. What color?"

"Let's ask our new friends," Yuuri said, turning to Nami, "You got a favorite color?"

"Purple," Nami answered.

"What about a favorite color that's actually easy to replicate using red, green, and orange food colorings?"

"What the Hell kind of set of colorings is that you can't mix any of those colors," Rei complained, "Whatever, do orange with a little bit of red added in."

Yuuri shrugged, "For some reason, primary colors aren't usually found in food coloring. This stuff's weirdly good quality for finding it in the cupboard in a Killing Game, but there's only the three colors."

"Orange with red added in, got it," Kanoshi muttered again as he went and grabbed the proper colors and started adding them into the frosting that Yuuri had already prepared. Moments later, Yuuri pulled the cake from the oven, setting it to the side to cool a bit before he frosted it.

"Heyy, I smell cake!" Another voice chimed in, and that voice should have been familiar only to Nami. Instead, she turned her head along with Rei and Shinjiro when Etsuko called into the room, "Wow, wow, what's the occasion for that?"

"Hello, Yushu..." Nami deadpanned, "I see you're just as... cheery, as you were when I last saw you."

"What brings you here, Yushu?" Rei asked.

"Akabanny!" Etsuko exclaimed, dashing up to her in what was probably a record time for 'sprint of ten feet', "Ohh, and Yumi's here too!"

"Yushu, I swear to God, whatever you do, don't call me Yumi," Shinjiro hissed at him.

"Oh, right, right, I forgot, Yumi was your slave name-"

"Etsukun! Shut the fuck up!" Rei snapped, smacking him on the arm.
"What's with the nicknames between you three?" Nami asked, glossing over the weirdness which had just occurred, assuming that's what Shinjiro would want her to do.

"We've just known each other long enough for that," Rei answered, "And the reason for that will remain behind zipped lips until the end of time, won't it, Etsukun? You can call him Shinji from now on, just like I do."

"U-Understood, Akabanny," Etsuko said, his voice quivering with some amount of fear as he took a step back, "I guess the cake isn't to celebrate the reunion of my two best friends and me, is it...?"

"Why would it be that? I didn't know you existed till two minutes ago and I'm the one making the cake," Yuuri said, "It's because I'm the Ultimate Baker, it's just what I do, and that's it, okay? Now be glad that I'm sharing, though I dunno if you need the sugar."

"Well, I would very much appreciate the sugar," Etsuko said, "Hey, oh, Kaguya, who's that girl who looks like you but somehow even grouchier?"

"That's my sister, and you'll call her Kaguya. I'm Nami now," Nami explained, "Didn't you meet her already?"

"Huh, really? But I overheard you telling some guy that you never gave him permission to call you Nami!" Etsuko explained, "Guess I just kinda forgot you two grumpy gusses were different people!"

"I hadn't," Nami said, "But I'm giving you permission, so that's what you're gonna do, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Etsuko said, then whipped his head around to look at Rei again, "Wait, Akabanny! I was so excited to see you I didn't even notice right away and oh my God, you're getting drunk? Why? Why are you getting drunk when you should be happy that the three of us met up again?"

"Once more, I didn't know you were here until a few minutes ago," Rei said, "Second of all, you should be drinking too. This isn't some happy reunion, why would all us Ultimates be here for something pleasant? It's a Killing Game."

"Oh," Etsuko said, freezing where he stood, "It's... that."

"Yes, it's that," Nami said, "You're an idiot not to figure it out sooner."

Etsuko looked down at the floor, "So that's why Miss Hako didn't want to say what she thought it was. Cause she thought that it's a Killing Game. She didn't wanna be right..."

"Well, if she did think that, she was right," Nami said, "Where'd she go, anyway?"

Etsuko shrugged, "She ditched me cause she met someone she knows. Not surprising, people do that a lot. Doesn't make me think any less of her. But, seriously, a Killing Game? What'd I ever do to end up in a place like this?"

"Being an Ultimate, that's what," Yuuri said, "That's just how it is. You had to know the risks when you got your title."

"Obviously I did, but then my mama told me that it's only the Ultimates who do bad things or get so sad they wanna die who end up in these games! Cause those are the ones that Despair can find out about!" Etsuko protested.

"Heh," Rei said, smirking in his direction, "Come on, you think what we did doesn't qualify us as
Ultimates who did bad things, just cause we did them before we got the title?"

"I never ever did a bad thing in my life!" Etsuko claimed.

"Sure," Shinjiro chuckled, "Anyway, guess it's good that if you're going to be here, we are too. We can keep an eye out for you."

Etsuko pouted as he spoke again, his hands balled up in fists, "No, I can keep an eye out for you! I have my super strong combat legs, after all."

"Maybe," Rei said, "But you're also dumb as bones."

"Bones! Are! Smart!" Etsuko raised his voice.

"Shut! The! Fuck! Up!" Tomoe called over from her table, "I'd prefer if I could only hear you if I decide to eavesdrop, you know."

"Your sister's a peach..." Etsuko mumbled.

Nami raised her eyebrows, "A peach? What kind of vocabulary do you even have? I thought only Tomoe said stuff like that."

"Anyway!" Kanoshi said, "Ruka's frosted the cake while you guys were talking, so who wants a slice?"

"Everybody," Nami answered without hesitation.

"Not me," Tomoe said.

"Everybody except for my sister," Nami corrected.
Yuuri handed out pieces of cake on small paper plates, and there was still plenty of it left over. He didn't even take a slice of it himself, but also stayed on the same side of the counter, just in case Tomoe changed her mind or one of the several others in this place actually showed up. The latter was both more likely, and the first thing to happen, though everybody in the room was a bit surprised at who arrived next to the cafeteria.

Goro Bakura was not the surprise, but the two who tailed after him were.

"Shirogane? Akamatsu?" Nami asked, "I thought that you two were busy hiding."

"They were!" Goro said, grinning, "But look at this, I found them, and I convinced them to come with me to this room, cause if I could find them in that tiny room I totally could have killed them there. It's definitely safer in a big room with more people. Right, ladies?"

"I hate to admit it, but yes," Tsumugi admitted, lifting a hand to her own cheek with a sigh, "Kaede and I thought that we'd be better off avoiding interaction altogether, but Bakura has a good point. It isn't as if there's never been a double murder in a Killing Game, so spending time with each other as if the other would be an infallible witness to a crime..."

"It was a little bit foolish," Kaede said, "But can you blame us for being careful, even if our methods were flawed? I don't really know of any other way to be cautious in this situation, though... As a detective, I solve crimes after they've happened. I don't know how to prevent them in the first place."

"Well, being so damn paranoid wouldn't do you any favors!" Goro said, bouncing over to stand next to Nami, "It makes you seem weak. Like easy targets. If you're so scared of dying, then it must mean you can't defend yourselves. Even if it's true, you shouldn't give people that idea."

"And who made you the expert on what not to do in a Killing Game?" Yuuri questioned.

Goro shrugged, "Probably the guy who made me watch a bunch of them? Hey, can I have a piece of cake?"

"You know," Tomoe spoke up from her table, "Bakura, we're not so sure of your idea that this Killing Game is number fifty-five."

"I mean, me neither. I don't remember fifty-three, and I can't believe I'd forget two whole games. But, why would it be a gimmick year if it wasn't double numbers?"

"Maybe," Kanoshi offered, "Maybe the gimmick is just being used, on the fifty-fourth, to cover something up. I dunno, but I think it could be that they're using these gimmicks as an excuse to pull us from multiple years. Like they couldn't find enough people from the current year, or... They don't want it to seem weird that so many of us already know each other. Maybe two people shouldn't both be here, and they're covering it up with all these other connections."

Goro nodded, "Yes, yes, that's possible. Despair's been doing this for a long time, but they could still make mistakes! But what does it really matter what the reason is anyway? I'm sure that Monokuma will be announcing the title of the game, and then we'll know who's right. I know a lot of stuff, but you know, we've all had our memories messed with. I can't trust what I think I know, and neither can any of you."
"That's true," Kaede admitted, "Even Shirogane and I might be wrong about what we think we know. Those memories could just be planted to make us more miserable or paranoid, or something. I don't know."

"Sounds kind of paranoid to say that the memories could be planted for a reason like that, you know," Rei said, "I mean, no matter what I think that you two are always going to end up sounding like tinfoil hatters, so... I dunno, if I were you I might just sort of lean into that image. If you want to be left alone by others, being a weirdo is definitely one way to accomplish that."

Tsumugi looked up at the ceiling, "I feel like we somehow have some sort of promise to somebody, to get through this, but it would be kind of sad just to avoid getting to know anybody else, either."

"I'll say," Goro said, "A lot of the people who try to stay safe by looking out for number one and never making friends, doesn't work out well for them."

Tsumugi stared at him for a moment, then turned back to Kaede, "Why do I feel like that should mean something more to me than it does?"

"I don't know," Kaede said, her voice tinged with a strange hopelessness which shouldn't have yet set in, when Monokuma hadn't even yet confirmed that it truly was a Killing Game.

"Hey," Yuuri said, his voice cutting through the fog that Kaede's demeanor had poured into the room, "You want some cake?"

"...Yeah, that'd be nice, thank you," Kaede said, approaching the counter. She and Tsumugi both got slices of cake on those paper plates, along with plastic forks, "Ah, I'm sorry, I didn't even bother asking your name. I was distracted, I guess."

"There's too many of us to introduce now," Shinjiro said, "Why not wait, and we'll all make introductions once everybody is all in one place? It would get tiring to keep on saying our names and talents, yes?"

"Oh, fair," Tsumugi admitted, "It shouldn't be too long now, right?"

"I can't imagine it would be much longer," Goro said, then turned to Nami, "After all, Nami, you've met everybody by now! I mean, haven't you? Usually once one person has met everybody, it isn't long until the real announcements start happening!"

"Oh, yes, I have met everybody," Nami said, "If it's just the usual sixteen, that is."

Goro chuckled, "Yeah, I figured you would! Somebody as cool as you is definitely going to end up the one that the cameras follow, and being the first to meet everybody else is step one of getting to be the point of view in the game. I thought I'd try to do it, until I found out you were here. With that cowlick, you're a natural."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Nami said.

"Oh, just a trend I've observed," Goro said, "When you see enough Killing Games, you start to notice these sort of things, after all! Not that it's set in stone, but those cowlicks really do tend to signal if somebody will be getting a lot of screentime."

"...You're the weirdo here," Rei observed.

"Maybe I am," Goro said, turning his grin in her direction, "But I don't care about that! I could
pretend I was normal if I wanted to, but I'd rather be honest about what sort of person I am! You won't get any heartfelt reveals outta me or anything... Why do people even bother hiding their true selves, like anyone who's worth your time will ever prefer the mask to the reality? Well, to each his own.”
Prologue (Onee-sans)

Chapter Notes

Sorry for no update on either fic yesterday, I've been really busy with some other things lately so I may be easing up on the updates for a little while. It'll be back to daily soon enough, I just have a lot going on and haven't had the time to write as much as I usually do.

"I guess that the reason people wear masks is because they're absolutely intolerable to get to know without them. I know that you are," Tomoe called Goro out, but she was Tomoe, she was always going to say bitter stuff like that just because she could. Goro wasn't about to take it to heart.

"Well, you don't wear a mask either, Kaguya, that's why you're such a bitch," Goro called back, "I don't even care if you think that I'm intolerable!"

"Bakura," Nami said, softly, "She's still my sister, you know."

"Right, right! Sorry, Nami!" Goro apologized, scratching at the back of his neck, an action which for some reason made him visibly shiver, "I'll try to keep that in mind, but I'm sure not used to biting my tongue! Still, I'd like to give you the impression that all I want is to be your friend. Why else would I be showing off such casual body language?"

"Somehow, when you do it, it doesn't seem casual at all," Nami observed, "Please never do that again, actually. It's kind of... Unsettling."

"I have to agree," Kaede said, "Something sort of stops being casual the moment that doing that motion makes you visibly cringe. And to an extent that it wouldn't even take somebody with my talent to notice it. Right, Tsumugi?"

"Yeah," Tsumugi agreed, coiling her hands around Kaede's forearm, "Bakura, please don't do anything to make yourself uncomfortable for anyone else's sake... I'd rather you continue to be this odd, than to put on an act that doesn't help your emotional state."

"Wow, you girls are so mature!" Goro said, laughing through his words, "That's some really good advice. Better advice than anybody my own age could give me!"

"I could absolutely give you good advice," Rei said, narrowing her eyes at him, "So could Kyousuke."

"Not me? Okay, that's fair," Yuuri said, "Kyousuke gives pretty good advice, actually."

Goro thought for a moment, single finger pressed to his chin, "Yeah, but I probably wouldn't believe your advice! Not when I have got these super-smart big sisters to get even better advice from, anyway! I guess if you wanted me to take you seriously, you'd have to kill them or something."

"You're not worth killing for," Rei said.

"Good! That means that my big sisters are safe!" Goro said.
"It feels kind of familiar to be called somebody I just met's big sister," Kaede mumbled, holding a hand close to her chest, "Somebody my own age... Like I was tutoring them, or something..."

"Why's your memory that spotty?" Goro asked, "Onee-san! Maybe it was me after all! I know I'm not your age but if you can barely remember it happening at all, who's to say if the details are right?"

"Our memories are a little... Broken," Tsumugi admitted, leaning her head against Kaede's shoulder, "In a Killing Game, everybody's memories are, but I think that ours are even more scattered. Almost as much as Nami's. Even so, if it felt familiar for Kaede, it feels wrong for me, to be thought of as a big sister. I was always a little sister... Yeah, that's right. I had a stepbrother. I remember now. I can't place what his name could be, though."

"I hope we can help you get your memories back! You two, and Nami too!" Goro said, "And everyone else, probably. My wipe was a little less thorough than the others, you know."

"Yes," Shinjiro said, "That's true, he verified it with me shortly after we woke up. My theory is that the erasure that was supposed to go to him ended up with somebody else, and Miss Nami seems the most likely candidate, ah... You two are likely scattered for other reasons, yes."

"That's not reassuring at all," Tsumugi complained, "Why would you speak just to tell us that the reason our memories are scattered is completely unknown, even though somebody else gets a plausible explanation?"

"Because the world does not revolve around you, as much as your hair might make it seem as if it does," Shinjiro said, laughing as he spoke, "I could at least reassure Nami of the reason behind her memory loss, and tell you two to keep searching for answers. At least, I hope that my theory is correct, because I can only imagine that a self-proclaimed detective would do a better job at solving such a conundrum than a girl who cannot even remember what her own talent could be."

"That's true," Kaede admitted.

"Whoa, there's a detective here?" Somebody called out, and everybody turned to see Randy walking into the room, "That's pretty cool. Hey, you wanna team up? I've helped with a fair number of investigations in the past, you know. I even solved a murder one time."

"Don't mind him," Tsukasa said from right behind Randy, "Well, he's not lying, but he is exaggerating... That murder was solved by Randy and his mentor, sure, but it was half a year after the girl got killed. Kind of dumb luck to figure out something like that, right?"

"Depends," Kaede said, "It might actually be more impressive to solve a case that long after the murder happened. There's a reason that there's a specific division for cold cases in some police departments, after all. Not every detective is made to figure things out fast, some of them work better puzzling things out over a long period of time."

"See, she thinks I did well," Randy said, crossing his arms over his chest, "Anyway, though, I want to protect people here. It's my personal prerogative to protect women, but in a situation like this, I want to protect everybody! Working together with you would definitely help me accomplish that goal."

"It probably would," Kaede agreed, then gave him an amused smile, "Though, what if I don't want to accomplish that same goal? What would you say to that?"

"Why... Why wouldn't you?" Randy asked, taking a step back, "I don't want to see anybody get
"Nice specificity there," Goro observed, chuckling. "You'll really protect us from everything, not just killing?"

"Yeah, that's what I hope," Randy confirmed, "After all, if any of you were secretly bad people, I mean, killing is the only thing that gets punished in a Killing Game, right? I don't want anyone to get the idea that it's okay to just do whatever you want because you'd only get in trouble for murder. I'll personally punish anybody who does anything to hurt someone else!"

"Well, that sounds awful noble of you," Kaede mused, "Hm, okay. I'll help you after all. I was mostly just teasing, you know."

"Wow, thank you!" Randy exclaimed, stepping over to Kaede, "I promise I won't let you down!"
Soon, everybody was settled in, eating cake. Well, everybody who'd actually arrived to the cafeteria, and that was nearly all of them. There were only four people, Nami counted, who she'd met and hadn't yet made their ways here. She assumed at this rate that they all would, though. This was a central location, and one of the only things of any interest. This and the gift shop, which was so nearby that anybody there would end up coming here eventually. Nami focused on her own cake, figuring that she'd forget about it at the next interruption. As a result of her laser-focus on the slice of sugar, she was the first one to finish eating, and the only one to be done by that next inevitable interruption.

"Hello, everybody," Box called out into the room, then blinked as she looked around, holding a hand under her chin, "Well, almost everybody. There's two still missing if you count me and Fujishiro..."

At her words, Mitsuru stepped in behind her. He was still an absolute unit, Nami observed, and somehow she felt like of everybody here, Box was the one who appeared smallest standing next to him. Box was definitely not the smallest person here, that title would have to to Sayaka for height or Riko for weight, but those two at least had an intimidating presence. Somebody like Box, with the overwhelming good-girl persona, seemed incredibly tiny by comparison to the large theologian.

"Hako," Tomoe called from the table she was seated at, frowning at her, "I feel like you ought to know this. Though it's possible anybody from any year could be the Ultimate Survivor, you are currently the prime suspect if it is somebody from the previous selection year, given Fujishiro's testimony regarding your disappearance. I want to give you the chance to defend yourself, but it's likely I'll be taking action regarding your past."

"Ooh! Are you gonna tie her up?" Etsuko asked.

"That won't be necessary," Box said, taking a step forward and tucking her hair back behind her ear, "If you've decided that I am the Ultimate Survivor, then that's something I probably won't be able to change your mind about or anything like that. So, okay, let's go with that! I'm the Ultimate Volunteer, also known as the Ultimate Survivor!"

"You..." Tsumugi muttered, taking swaying steps in Box's direction with her fists clenched, "How can you say something like that so casually? Do you even know what that implies? Why would you just take ownership of it?"

"I never thought it would turn out like this," Nami observed, mostly to herself, "Someone lying that they are the Ultimate Survivor... If you're telling the truth, then you're a danger who should be apprehended. If you're lying, then it gives us a false sense of security to neutralize you as a threat, leaving the actual Ultimate Survivor free to repeat however it was they fooled the last group."

"Saying that you're the Ultimate Survivor implies that you're responsible for killing Tsumugi's and my friends," Kaede said, pointing straight at her, "Why would you admit something like that so easily? Do you want to be hated?"

"What? Oh, I'd say it because," Box showed a radiant smile, and one of the bulbs in the ceiling burst at that exact moment, going out in a singular, tiny flash of bright light, "None of that actually matters at all."

For some reason, Nami couldn't possibly recall what they'd just been talking about. She looked to
Box Hako, the Ultimate Survivor whose original talent of Volunteer spurred her into offering up any advice that they might need to survive a Killing Game, since she'd done it before. Kaede and Tsumugi looked especially perplexed, but Nami couldn't imagine why. There wasn't anything odd about this scene.

"Anyway, we can't even begin to think of what to do until Monokuma explains the game and the rules this time around," Box said, wandering over to take a seat on top of one of the tables. All eyes in the room followed her, "In fact, some could argue that there isn't any real advice to be had until the first motive comes in, but I guess I can say my advice for that one right now and it would still make sense," She sat on her hands and tilted her head to one side, "Any personalized motives that Monokuma hands out, well, don't keep those a secret. If we're all open about what motives we've been handed, we have nothing to hide from each other. The idea of sharing that information might seem scary, but if everybody shares it all at once, then nobody can really judge."

"But what if your own motive is much more gruesome than somebody else's, hm?" Shinjiro asked, "I understand the concept of spurring one to kill by threatening to reveal their secrets, yes, or threatening that somebody else could reveal their secrets, or reminding them of something in their past they'd rather not remember... At the same time, though, couldn't knowing everybody else's secrets cause the same sort of problem? You can say there would be no judgment if everybody shared all at once, but if everyone else's motive is a five and one person's is an eight, how can that person not end up judged by everybody?"

"Personally, I think it's more concerning that you can even think to assign numbered rankings to the severity of somebody's secrets!" Kanoshi exclaimed.

Shinjiro turned to Kanoshi, still smiling, but it was a terrible sort of smile that implied just about any emotion other than happiness, "Spoken by a true one on the secrets scale. Get back to me when you're at least a six! I think I can speak with authority on the topic, given I'd consider my secrets to be about a nine. But we're not about to speak about that."

"I'd speak about my secrets!" Goro exclaimed.

"Not you, Bakura," Nami said, lightly hitting his upper arm.

"They're like a ten!" He continued nonetheless.

"We know, Bakura," Nami once more brushed him off.

"Somehow, I don't doubt that," Shinjiro admitted, "But, again, I would rather we didn't get into all of that, and we certainly shouldn't make a point of getting to know each other when we'll be turning on each other in no short matter, I'm sure. Not that I intend to do any turning on anybody, but that doesn't change the fact that we shouldn't get too comfortable, no?"

"Don't you think it would be better if we all worked together?" Mitsuru asked, "I mean... Right, Hako? Being friends, that would help, right?"

"....No, I don't think so," Box said, kicking her feet out, "I mean, there's no surefire way. Bakura can attest to that too, since he's watched and rewatched so many Killing Games. But the thing is, in the last game, everybody promised there would be no killing. And they all got along as friends. And then, they set a record for the quickest case in a Killing Game to date. Well, quickest death, it wasn't exactly a murder, but that's quickest death if you don't count rule-breaking, ah... In any case, the bottom line is, the group that got along the best ended up having the soonest trial. There's no good prevention measure to take, as far as I can tell."
"Yeah," Goro sighed, pressing a hand to his cheek, "Humans really are fucked up, aren't they?"
Box continued giving her advice, backed up by Goro, though it was all very vague and seemed likely to be of little practical use when the Killing Game actually got going, so at a certain point most of the Ultimate Students in the room stopped listening outright. It was only when somebody else walked into the cafeteria that Box and Goro stopped with their rather pointless blathering, though. That someone else was two someone elses, the final Ultimates who hadn't yet made their appearance in the room.

Riko and Sayaka, the two most intimidating girls that Nami had met yet, if she didn't count her own sister. The two who were tied for smallest in two different dimensions, but still wouldn't look tiny put up against the giant which was Mitsuru. Sayaka did the talking for the both of them, "Okay, fuckers. I didn't think I'd actually come to a place where all of you decided to hang out, because that's a recipe for disaster, but Asahi needs somebody to introduce her, so here I am," Sayaka explained, hands on her hips as she stood in the doorway, barely even half its size, "This is Riko Asahi, the Ultimate Heir. She is unable to speak out loud, instead using sign language or the written word to communicate. And before any of you think of messing with me, I'm Sayaka Yamaguchi, the Ultimate Little Sister."

"Hi, Yamaguchi," Kanoshi said from behind the counter with a wave and a smile that were equally sheepish.

She took one step backwards, narrowing her eyes at him, "What... Moron-sensei? What the Hell are you doing here? Why are you here? You're an Ultimate? I thought Asahi was my preexisting connection!"

"As a large multinational company, it does make sense that Asahi Bottling would have made contact of some sort with the yakuza, yes," Shinjiro observed, "I can only imagine that's what the Ultimate Heir would be, with a name like that."

"Yeah, you're right," Sayaka said, offhand, keeping her glare fixed in Kanoshi's direction.

"Ahh, well, I'm the Ultimate Tutor," Kanoshi said, "And Ruka is the Ultimate Baker. That's why we're here. And nobody said there couldn't be more than one preexisting connection... Nothing's going to change the fact that we've met before and we're both here now."

"I guess that's true," Sayaka admitted, turning away from them with a sigh, "But, seriously, you guys... I thought that I'd be okay here, you know? Cause, I knew almost nobody even close to my own age on the outside! And I thought for sure that you guys weren't Ultimates! So what the Hell? Why do I have to deal with having three people I've already met? You guys are so young, you probably just became Ultimates recently... This is the right selection year for you to be here, but nobody's right this time around..."

"Hey," Box called out from where she sat, leaning her chin in her hands which she laced together, elbows on her knees, "Calm down, okay? Getting all worked up about this stuff isn't going to help anybody, and it will just hurt you for certain. If you take a few deep breaths and just don't think too hard about it, then you'll be just fine."

"How am I supposed to not think hard about the fact that I'm in a fucking Killing Game?" Sayaka demanded, "It's not exactly the most relaxing of situations, you know."

"Of course not," Box said, "But it's also not the most stressful, now is it? I can only imagine that
with a talent like yours, you can handle yourself. And anyway, would you look at me? I'm the Ultimate Volunteer, and I made it through the last Killing Game."

"So the survivor is you..." Sayaka muttered, looking at Box with scrutiny, "Somehow, I feel like, you're not telling the truth. And I can tell when people are lying, you know. It's a skill of mine."

"Well, I'm surely not lying about having experienced a Killing Game before," Box said, "So, maybe I'm not being completely truthful about one of the other things that I said... In any case, those were all statements of emotion, weren't they? So what does it really matter if I'm telling the truth?"

"That's a fair point," Shinjiro said, "To know one's own heart enough to actually know any truth to tell about emotions, that is an arduous task..."

"Not really," Rei said, turning to look Sayaka in the eyes, "I'm dying inside. Is that a lie?"

"No, that's perfectly truthful," Sayaka said, "If a little bit concerning. Uh, are you okay?"

"Only as much as any of us are, when we are telling the truth," Rei said, closing her eyes and leaning on one arm against the counter as she spoke. While all this was going on, Riko had made her way across the room, sitting down in a chair next to the table Box was seated on top of.

"Don't be so damn edgy," Tomoe said, waving a hand in their direction, "Anyway, somebody should check the gift shop for a whiteboard. You know, for Asahi? She told me earlier that it's the most convenient way for her to speak with people who don't know sign language."

"Oh, I'll go!" Etsuko volunteered, jumping up and down where he stood.

"I'll accompany you," Box said, taking a deep breath as she stood up from her table seat. The look she gave to the rest of the room made it clear that she was saving each and every one of them from the fate she'd taken upon herself, as sending Etsuko to the gift shop alone would likely result in his returning with many things, none of them what he was actually sent to find.

Once those two left the cafeteria, Sayaka wandered over to Yuuri and Kanoshi, elbowing Nami out of the way to talk to them. Nami didn't really mind, though, as Sayaka struck up her conversation, "So it's both of you, huh?"

"Yeah, we're both here," Yuuri said, "That shouldn't be a problem though, right?"

"Of course it's a problem," Sayaka muttered, "Now I gotta keep an eye out for both of you. Asahi, I knew on a business level, so it's not like I was thinking I'd have to protect her. You idiots, though..."

"Ah, Yamaguchi, you don't have to protect us or anything," Kanoshi said, "We can take care of ourselves... I wouldn't want you to try and protect us, and put yourself at risk as a result."

"Are you implying that I couldn't handle protecting you dummies?" Sayaka asked.

"No!" Kanoshi said, waving his hands in front of himself, "But you don't need to!"

"What Kyousuke's trying to say," Yuuri stepped in, "Is that he's very honored by the offer, of course, but we'd rather you focused on staying alive than protecting us. Putting yourself on the line for our sakes... You shouldn't do that, in this setting."

"It's not like I'd die for you," Sayaka said, pouting, "But I don't wanna just watch you die either. It's
a pain, but I'll have your backs."
Prologue (Monokuma's Arrival)

3:00 PM / 1500 Hours

"We got the whiteboard!" Etsuko exclaimed, bursting back into the cafeteria. Box followed behind him, her arms full of miscellaneous items, which led right into Etsuko's next words, "And snacks, too! Miss Hako really is so nice, she volunteered to carry all of that stuff back! On the condition that I don't eat it all and it gets shared with everybody. It's mostly savory stuff, cause I figured after that cake nobody would really wanna eat any candy! I sure don't! I got my sugar fix from that delicious, delicious frosting!"

"It's convenience store snacks, basically," Box explained as she dumped her armful onto one of the tables, "Chips, meat sticks, that sort of thing... Wah!" She jumped backwards, and everybody turned to look just in time to see the final moments of something leaping out of the pile of snacks, though it clearly hadn't been there the whole time.

"Upupu!" The thing exclaimed and stood up straight, leaving everybody in the room to recognize it, without fail, as Monokuma, "Hey there, you bastards! It took you so long to all end up in the same place, looks like it's a real batch of idiots this year... I had to show up as soon as this cardboard box kid put down the snacks, or before I knew it, another one of you would have run off and left me waiting again!"

"Hi, Monokuma," Goro said, laughing, "Nice to meet you in person, finally! You look taller on TV, though. Anyway... So this is the fifty-fifth Annual Killing Game, and you're here to tell us that, and all about the gimmicks where other participants in the past have had our talents and a bunch of us already know each other, so Despair had to drag in Ultimates who were a little older than usual?"

"Don't steal my lines, you good-for-nothing starlet harlot!" Monokuma said, pointing at him, "And anyway, you're wrong! Wrong about all sorts of stuff! I mean, no, okay, you're just wrong about one singular stuff. But this is the fifty-fourth Annual Killing Game!"

"I see," Kaede said, "So I was right, but that does beg the question, Monokuma, why are these gimmicks being used on this number? Aren't gimmicks usually reserved for an eleventh year? That's what everybody else here, seems to think."

"Well yeah, normally, but why wouldja ever wanna be normal? This is the fifty-fourth, sure as sunshine! But there's some gimmicks cause, what can I say? Folks didn't much like the last game, we had to do somethin' to get our ratings back up!" Monokuma explained, "Everyone loves gimmicks... But you know what everyone doesn't love? Last year's Killing Game, with an unsatisfying conclusion and way too many sympathetic killers! Despairs may be bad people, but even bad people can't totally revel in the gruesome death of somebody who hasn't managed to make themselves unlikable! And even if they did like most of that, which sure, some viewers did... That ending, man! It was so lame, but I can't just break my own rules."

"Yeah, you usually have somebody smart enough there to figure out the killer, but what I heard of last year's... Uh..." Nami froze midway through her sentence, then turned to look at Box, "What I heard about... The ending... And the Ultimate Survivor..."

Another one of the lights broke above them.

"Yeah, a super dumb and unsatisfying ending where hope won out but the mastermind didn't even
get executed! The lamest possible!" Monokuma exclaimed, "The most anticlimatic conclusion that a Killing Game has seen, probably ever!"

"That does sound unfulfilling," Tsumugi mumbled, though she didn't seem completely convinced.

"Moving on," Monokuma said, "The rules of the Killing Game are pretty standard, for you folks who've heard about it before! The name of the game is to commit a murder! Well, it's more like a murder-suicide, given that you'll get caught and executed. On the off chance you get away with it, though, and your fellow players accuse the completely wrong person beyond a shadow of a doubt, then they'll all be executed and you get to walk free! Except, there's one little difference this time around, and it ties into the gimmick of having people who already know each other. The thing is, you've got some beautiful bonds of unbreakable friendship between the lot of you... Nobody here would really be willing to get away with murder and let everyone else die. So to prevent you from just killing on motive and turning yourselves in immediately, here's the spicy new mechanic! If you get away with murder, you can take one other person out of this place with you."

Silence fell over the room as everybody looked between themselves. That changed the game completely, because Monokuma was right. Almost everybody here had somebody that they wouldn't dare to get killed, but if they could take someone with them to the outside, then all bets were off. The previous idea that they ought to try, at least on some level, to commit to camaraderie... Had been thrown out the hospital's barred windows. Nami could tell, looking around, that most of these people would gladly doom all the rest of them for the sake of somebody else. Tomoe would surely kill somebody to take Nami with her. Randy or Tsukasa might for the other, likewise with Kaede or Tsumugi. Monokuma knew what it was doing, throwing this new rule into the ring.

"What other rules are there?" Box asked Monokuma, keeping her eyes fixed on it without even a glance to determine if anybody else was seriously considering that rule.

Monokuma shrugged, "Oh, yeah, the boring ones! Well, okay. This is all you gotta know about the Mister Monokuma Hospital. There is a Hospice Wing. That's where your rooms are, and it's directly one floor down from here. This particular area is composed of the cafeteria, the gift shop, and a small auditorium. If you go too far in one direction, you'll reach the Empty Wings. That's actually, if you were to step outside, an adjacent building with floors upon floors of basic hospital rooms. Not specialized in any way. Given how easy it is to get lost over there, the Empty Wings will be closed to you after the nighttime announcements at 2200. You'll be receiving Monopads with maps on them, sure, but I still don't want anyone getting forgotten over there!"

"Why does that area exist if it's basically off-limits?" Tomoe questioned.

Monokuma put its hands on its hips and laughed, "It's because I wanna give you guys some space! You can't actually go outside or anything, so the annexed building should give ya ample opportunity to avoid each other and foster oh-so-juicy relationships! Anyway, like I said, downstairs from here is the Hospice ward. This is the Hospitality ward. Above us begins the Ultimate Wards. Right now, there are only four, but as time goes on more will be completed. Right now we have the Journalist Ward, the Idol Ward, the Electrician Ward, and the Tutor Ward. As you can imagine by the titles, these are wings of the hospital specifically designed to nurture your Ultimate Talents."

"Oh, like an Ultimate Lab?" Goro asked.

"Yes! But bigger!" Monokuma said, "The point of an Ultimate Ward is not just for you to develop your talent, but to share your talent with your peers. As for how you'll do that, figure it out. Except, I'll give you one hint. Once the Volunteer Lab is open, it's going to have all the components in it
necessary to directly counter a future motive. So, it's that sort of thing! Every one of your talents, the great brains behind this game have determined a medical application for. When in a hospital, do as the doctors do! And that's the whole thing."

"Nowhere else that's off-limits?" Nami asked, "You have to tell us all the rules if we want to avoid breaking them."

"Oh, right. You can get there through the Empty Wings, after all... You can't go on the roof. Even if you figured out how, going on the roof will subject you to immediate execution."
“No going on the roof, understood,” Box said, “Though, that’s a funny way to phrase it. Immediate Execution… Isn’t it referred to as ‘Punishment’ for any other rule?”

“Well, ya see,” Monokuma explained, “Most other ways that rules get broken, you’ll die pretty fast! Multiple impalement or shooting by a gatling gun, stuff that doesn’t give you more than a split second to look your death in the face… But the roof thing! Man, that pisses me off so much that you’ll experience the death you woulda received if you were a murderer!”

“That seems excessive…” Tsukasa observed.

“It’s a punishment exactly as fitting as the crime! Letting you bastards get onto the roof can totally ruin all my carefully laid plans!” Monokuma explained, then held a paw to its sickening grin, “Anyways. One more rule, you can’t attack your beloved headmaster, moi. That’s all I got for you! The time is currently 1500. Your motives will be delivered tomorrow morning at breakfast. That gives you about sixteen hours for yourselves before the reasons to kill begin! And you can spend seven of those in the Empty Wings! Isn’t that cool? Once you receive your Monopads, you can go explore! Who knows, maybe there will be something interesting in the Empty Wings after all…”

And with that, Monokuma was gone.

“Motives in the morning, huh?” Tomoe observed, “That doesn’t give us very much time, now, does it?”

“That’s assuming nothing happens before the motives are even delivered! Don’t you wanna try and break that record Hako mentioned?” Goro said, laughing.

“Absolutely not!” Randy said, “That’s terrible! We won’t break that record, we’ll make a brand new record of the longest time without a murder in a Killing Game! And by longest, I mean never. We can do that, right, Akamatsu?”

“Not quite,” Kaede said, “I really don’t think that total prevention is something that makes sense in this situation. We can’t hope for that, all we can hope to do is mitigate the damage done.”

“Ah…” Randy trailed off, frowning, “Come on…”

“She’s right, you know.” Rei said, picking up the Monopad which had just appeared on the counter in front of her before she started to wander away, “Nobody’s managed to avoid killing before us, and we certainly aren’t the group to make it happen. Monokuma’s truly out for blood this year, with last year being so apparently disappointing. And it isn’t as if we’re a pile of good people, either.”

“This is true!” Shinjiro observed, grabbing his own Monopad as well, “If anybody was going to break the mold, it surely would be any other group than us, yes. I can already tell that your moral fibers are... Unsatisfactory.”

“Does nobody agree with me?” Randy asked, “Tsukasa? What about you?”

Tsukasa took a deep breath and crossed his arms, “I hate to disagree with you, Randy, but I don’t think… It’s possible, for nobody to die. I just don’t want to get my hopes up, if chances are that they’ll just be dashed. It isn’t that I want the game to happen, it’s that I think there isn’t any way that it won’t. I mean, if we sit around thinking we can prevent it and nothing will happen, it’s
dangerous, isn't it?"

“With an attitude like that…” Randy mumbled, “Then of course, it’ll happen. Look, it’s not dangerous to think nothing will happen! I’ll be on the alert anyway and protect everybody!”

Kaede took a deep breath, then spoke up, “No. Optimism is a tool, not a way of life. It’s important to know when optimism can help, and when it can just hurt. Right now, being optimistic can only hurt us. I know that it’s sad, but it’s true! Hoping that everything will turn out fine, that just means it will hurt more when it doesn’t. Use optimism at the right time, Sempers. That’s my first lesson to you as my disciple. Useful optimism is thinking that those of us who make it through can still go on to live good and happy lives, which I do believe.”

“He’s your disciple now?” Tsumugi asked, “Really?”

Kaede shrugged. “It isn’t like I plan to investigate much in this game, he won’t learn much from me. I don’t want the blood on my hands, for finding the culprit alone... If he wants to acknowledge my detective skills, though, why would I stop him?”

“I guess that’s true,” Tsumugi said. “But forgive me if I don’t want some enthusiastic guy following us around everywhere. Doesn’t that put a bit of a wrench in our reputation as the paranoid lesbians? You’re the one who said our best bet is to keep to ourselves...”

“Don’t worry, yo, I’ll totally give you all the space you need,” Randy said, waving his hands in front of himself. “Me and Tsukasa have got our own stuff, anyway! I just think it’s cool that I can learn from a true great in something that I’m interested in. Except, uh, what did you mean? You don’t plan to investigate much? How would blood be on your hands?”

“Well,” Kaede said, looking away from him with one hand on her hip. “That’s because I don’t, eehh...I mean, think about it. If one person does most of the investigating, and leads the trial, and all of that, don’t you think that means that whoever ends up executed, it’s that person’s fault? I decided a while ago that I don’t ever want anybody else’s blood on my hands. I don’t want to get anybody else condemned. So, I’ll help a little… But really, I just want to keep to myself. Myself and Tsumugi.”

“Saying something like that…” Tomoe grumbled, “After what Monokuma said, it’s really suspicious, isn’t it? Latching onto just one person and disregarding all the others…”

“Isn’t that what you do, though?” Nami asked.

Tomoe hesitated, then looked around and fixed her eyes on Riko. “No, of course not. Protecting you may be my priority, Nami, but Asahi seems nice. I’m only a bit of a loner, not an absolute one, and I’ve already grown a bit fond of my peers. I wouldn’t forsake all of them for your sake. Just most of them.”

“Are you just trying to cover your ass?” Goro asked, “Because, you love Nami even more than I do! I can tell! And I would definitely let each and every one of these worthless sons of bitches perish for her sake!”

“Everyone’s trying to cover their asses,” Sayaka complained, “We can’t all be as honest as you! Well, they can’t, anyway. I won’t beat around the bush either. Right now, the ground is kind of shaky, cause I have two friends here… But if for some reason one of them died, I’d kill for the other! Not to mention, if one of them committed a crime to take the other away with him, I’d be on his side too. Is honesty really all that hard? Just admit it, you’re a piece of shit, me and you and we are all together, in a toilet bowl. Obviously I want as many people to live as possible, but... I won’t
deny the possibilities."

“Yamaguchi!” Yuuri complained, “You really had to throw Kyosuke and me under the bus there? That’s kind of shitty!”
“Am I wrong?” Sayaka asked, “You’re not exempt from my demands of honesty.”

“I…” Yuuri trailed off, looking around the room, then hardened his frown, “No, way, I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t kill everyone here for my sake, not even for yours or Kyosuke’s. I don’t fuck with that kind of thinking. Don’t drag me in just because you do.”

“Awh, yeah, okay, so you wouldn’t,” Sayaka said, but then grinned as she pointed around the now somewhat emptier room. “But Miss Kaguya would, and so would Randy, Mizuho too I bet. Shirogane sure would. Akamatsu? I dunno, but she’s got a kind of evil aura about her, I can tell these things. Hako could do it, sweet as she seems. The fuckers what already left, Akabane and Nozomi, no shit that they’d let the rest of us die. Personal connections are always gonna be stronger than group ones, yeah? That’s why it’s a factor this time. We don’t need to forget the existence of Killing Games if they put us in here with people we’d kill and die for even under better circumstances. Anyway, I’m going exploring in the Empty Wings,” Sayaka said, walking away before anyone could even think of a word to say to her.
4:00 PM / 1600 Hours

With Sayaka, Rei, and Shinjiro gone from the cafeteria, others began to pack up there too. Box and Mitsuru went off on their own, then Yuuri and Kanoshi after they'd packed up what was left of the cake. Riko wandered away on her own, armed with a whiteboard she hadn't even yet used, and Etsuko ran to find his friends. Randy went off with Kaede and Tsumugi, leaving only a handful of the Ultimates behind. Tsukasa approached Nami, "Hey. My boyfriend kind of ran off with the lesbians. You wanna come check out the Empty Wings with me? You seemed pretty chill."

"Hm? Yeah!" Nami said, then shrunk when she saw Tomoe's disapproving look in her direction, "Oh, but, my sister..."

"Kaguya!" Goro got Tomoe's attention, "You wanted to have a private talk with me anyway, didn't you? We can partner up to explore the wings, and once we've found a sufficiently secluded spot, I can tell you all about what Nami's amazing talent is. Does that work for you?"

"Ah, Bakura, you sure you want to go and be alone with somebody who makes no pretenses against hating you?" Tsukasa asked, frowning in his direction, "Not to be a buzzkill, but I am known far and wide for being the voice of reason when people are about to do foolish things. People usually being Randy, but, I'm no one-trick pony."

"It's not foolish!" Goro assured him, "Rather, I already promised Kaguya here that we'd speak on this matter in private. I'm actually being the most safe I could possibly be, by inviting her to do it now! If I gave her any time to actually plan for this discussion, she could surely plot to kill me while we were alone. Instead, I invite her just after the Killing Game has been announced. We are both unarmed, there are still fourteen others alive to hear a call for help, and most importantly, no true motive has yet been delivered! Not to mention, only a foolish person, and no relative of Nami is a fool, would commit such an obvious crime."

Tsukasa thought on that for a moment, then shrugged, "Oh, yeah, fair enough. Well, if that works for Kaguya, then there should be no further issue?"

Tomoe sighed, then gave a small nod, "It's... Yeah, that's fine, that's true. If we're going to be alone together for the sake of this conversation, now is the best time. Mizuho, behave yourself with Nami."

"I can't see how I wouldn't!" Tsukasa said, raising his hands up as if he was surrendering, "I have no intention of killing anybody, for one, and for another, I'm not at all interested in women. There isn't any other way I could misbehave with your sister, and as you can see, neither is at all likely."

"Very well," Tomoe said, then strode toward the door, "Come along, little boy."

Goro followed her out, leaving Nami alone with Tsukasa.

"So, Mizuho," Nami said, crossing her arms, "When we met before, Sempers sort of took charge of the situation and all... I actually can't say I know a lot about you."

"I can't honestly say that there's a lot to know," Tsukasa admitted with a slight laugh as he scratched at his cheek, "Being the Ultimate CEO... That doesn't make me a very interesting person, now, does it? I really can't even wrap my head around why Randy actually likes me."
"Maybe he's just with you for your money," Nami said, "Maybe he's just a gold digging spiderman."

Tsukasa blinked a few times before he spoke again, "You don't make much sense, Nami. But, I get the spirit, and he's not a gold digging spiderman. Trust me, I'd think that too, but the thing is, he never needed to pretend that he liked me to get me to give him money. I guess you could call me something of a hopeless romantic... Even unrequited, I probably would have kept giving him gifts."

"Oh, I see, so that's the kind of person you are. A cuck. I'd ask what your employees thought of you throwing money around like that, but since you are an Ultimate in that field, I guess that you paid them well enough too," Nami observed, "A profitable company... No, super profitable, if you were an Ultimate. So what sort of company is yours, anyway?"

Tsukasa flushed at the accusation, "I am not a cuck! That implies that I'd get sexual gratification seeing Randy with other men and I most certainly would not. If he wanted to do that I wouldn't stop him, but that sort of thing doesn't get me going at all, and we shouldn't even be talking about such things!"

"I meant it as the meme cuck, not the kink cuck, but okay," Nami said, "What's your company? Answer the real question."

"Oh, right," Tsukasa said, then took a deep breath before explaining, "Actually, it's a child company of Towa. So it's electronics, robotics, all that sort of thing. Not like it's public, that we're linked to Towa at all. With that name being associated with hope, we'd never survive if it was public knowledge. We research, develop, produce... All the same sorts of things, though. To tell the truth, if you've seen Despair's Monokumas out in the world at all, chances are pretty high they were actually made by my company. Sometimes, you have to lean into the evil sides of business in order to carry on with the good, you know?"

Nami nodded along, "Oh, yeah, I get it. Don't worry. I don't really care about all that Hope and Despair stuff anymore. I just wanna live my life, man... Dunno how I ever got convinced to be an Ultimate, since I forgot and all. As long as your company was prospering, what does it really matter what you did with it? It's not like Monokumas really do much harm anyway. They kill you or they don't. At least, outside Monokumas. This guy here's kind of different, but even so... It's the people you need to look out for."

"Mm," Tsukasa agreed, "People can do some truly awful things. It really shocks me... And the way these people here, act, too. I mean, aren't Ultimates supposed to stand for Hope?"

"Ultimate Despairs were all Ultimates once," Nami said, then shrugged, "But, also, nice doesn't mean good. Tomoe was never ever nice, but she was always good. And I know a bunch of the people she protected me from... Were nice, but not good. Nice is what you look out for."

"But, I'm nice," Tsukasa said, "Do you think that I'm bad?"

"I can't tell yet," Nami said, holding back a bit of a laugh as she walked towards the exit for the cafeteria, "But you do seem kind of normal. Less like an Ultimate. Like me. So, I'll hang out with you. Maybe then I'll figure out if you're good or bad. Let's go explore the Empty Wings."

"Right. Yeah," Tsukasa said, then followed after her, "Maybe us normies will be the ones to find something cool."
Nami returned to the maze of the Empty Wings, along with Tsukasa. Spending time with him was almost as relaxing as spending time completely alone, compared to the rest of the people in this place. He was the only other person even bordering on normal, which was how Nami felt without any memory of an Ultimate Talent. Often, she could recall, the most normal person took up the mantle of “Ultimate Luck”, but there wasn’t one of those here and there hadn’t been one of those for quite some time now. Ultimate Luck had always been determined through a lottery, and after Despair hit such a point that Ultimate became synonymous with standing up against Despair, being an Ultimate became something which couldn’t be considered lucky.

Ultimate Luck only existed for as long as Hope’s Peak Academy did, and when the burden of choosing shifted to the Ultimate Initiative instead, Ultimate Luck became a thing of the past. Still, not every Ultimate could have an explosive personality, and it wasn’t surprising that the Ultimate CEO would be the level-headed one here.

Nami did have one question, though.

“Hey, Mizuho,” She piped up, “Don’t you think it’s a little weird that there’s an Ultimate Heir and an Ultimate CEO in this Killing Game?”

“I guess,” Tsukasa said, shrugging, “There’s not a huge difference between those talents or anything, but what’s weirder to me isn’t that we’re both here, it’s that we’re the same age. So the Ultimate Initiative picked our very similar talents, in the same year.”

“Yeah, that’s really weird,” Nami agreed, “But I guess there’s a small difference there… Maybe once your Ultimate Wings are open, then the difference will be made more apparent?”

“It kind of feels like you’re dishing on me right now, but yeah,” Tsukasa admitted, “And maybe then we’ll know which is the superior title for an accomplished entrepreneur!”

“I bet it’s yours,” Nami said, “Cause CEO implies you did more to deserve your title. Heir is like, she stumbled into the role and just ended up being really good at it. CEO sounds like you actually had drive to get where you are today-”

“Actually,” Tsukasa said, with a nervous chuckle as he scratched his cheek again, “I sort of stumbled into my job, and happened to be good at it. I was given control of the company because it was on the decline and they wanted a scapegoat. Put a middle-schooler in charge, and then nobody will be surprised when the company goes under, and the original boss can go on to start a new company without a stain on his record.

“But, then I fixed the place up instead.”

“That’s a really sketchy business model,” Nami said, “How is that legal, anyway?”

“It’s not legal,” Tsukasa said, “But it’s not like the government’s been doing much for the past couple decades anyway.”

“That’s true,” Nami said, then stopped walking and looked up at the ceiling, “Ah… I…” She hesitated, but continued, “I just remembered something…”

“You did? What is it?” Tsukasa asked, sounding innocently excited about the idea that Nami could be recovering from her amnesia. Like a kid told he could get a cookie if he did his chores… It was kind of sweet, Nami thought, that he’d be so excited on her behalf. Maybe they could become friends after all. Though, befriending Tsukasa meant at least tolerating Randy, and she wasn’t sure
she could do that.

“I dunno why I’d know this, but,” Nami mumbled, “A while back… A few months before last year’s Killing Game would have started, I think about half a year, Despair was able to seize control of the Japanese government. But, they didn’t want to reveal that fact to the public right away, because they could change more from the shadows…”

Tsukasa’s excitement visibly drained away as he heard what it was that Nami had remembered, and when he commented on it, “Yeah, if they were keeping it quiet, how did… How could you have found out? How do you know that?”

Nami shrugged, “I prefaced it by saying that I don’t know why, ugh. If I had to guess, though, I’d say that my forgotten talent might have something to do with government, so I couldn’t really get away with not knowing…”

“But,” Tsukasa said, “If that was true, and you did find it out, then you would have told people, right? People would know. So, it doesn’t make sense…”

“Who says I would have told people?” Nami asked, “That seems like a lot of trouble, and I could have gotten killed for doing it, and it’s not like letting people know is actually that great an alternative. It’s despair either way, why not take the way that doesn’t endanger me or take any effort on my part? I can’t remember anything about the surrounding scenario, but I wouldn’t put that past me at all.”

Tsukasa sighed, “I guess that’s fair. I’ve been spending too much time with Randy, he’s got me always assuming that people would do the right thing. I won’t hold it against you or anything, though, I mean. There’s definitely been times when I didn’t do the right thing, for my own safety.”

“Your boyfriend is really intense,” Nami said, “Where’d he get away with that inflated sense of justice in a fuck-off world like this one?”

“His mentor,” Tsukasa answered, “He was basically raised by a woman who’s, I guess you’d call her a vigilante. Everything he spouts about protecting people was directly taught to him by her, and she was the sort who’d kill a Despair without a second thought if she even imagined that they’d go and hurt somebody. Luckily, he’s actually got a few qualms against going that far.”

“Oh, I see,” Nami said, “He’s the sort of person who had his moral compass tuned by somebody else his whole life. That explains it. Nobody making up their own mind would be that enthusiastic about protecting others, in this economy.”

“Yeah,” Tsukasa agreed with her, “But you know, if you get past all of that, to who he really is as a person… He’s still way too good for me.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to get to know him, after all,” Nami said, pressing her hands together, “In that case… Mizuho, do you wanna be friends?”

“Does being friends with you imply getting along with your sister, the same way being friends with me implies getting along with Randy?” Tsukasa asked.

“Getting along with Tomoe… That’s not really possible, I think, so, no. I’ll just get her to leave me alone so I can hang out with you,” Nami said, “How’s that sound?”

“Heh, sounds pretty good,” Tsukasa said, smiling at her, “It’s nice to have another friend in this place.”
Nami and Tsukasa wandered around the Empty Wings, feeling much less like it was a maze now that they had the maps on their Monopads. It was very rudimentary, just marking off where rooms and hallways were, but it also had a “you are here” marker, and kept them always aware of the easiest route to return to the main building, too. It was very convenient; Made exploring simple and easy. Monokuma evidently didn’t want to have punish anybody for being in the Empty Wings after curfew unless they did so willfully, and made every possible effort to ensure that nobody was going to get lost here once the atmosphere of doing such a thing was dropped.

5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

Nami and Tsukasa focused on getting to one particular point on the map- A few floors up, there was a room that seemed three times are large as the standard ones. They made their way up there, then opened the door only to find a layer of thick plastic directly in front of their faces.

“What a Hell?” Nami questioned.

“Why do you talk like that…” Tsukasa mumbled, then raised a hand and pushed his palm against the plastic, “Huh, I guess that kind of was a fitting exclamation, though. I don’t know what’s up with this.”

“Upupu!” Monokuma arrived, standing as a nebulous shape on the other side of the plastic, “It’s a special tool that will help us later!!”

“That never means anything good,” Nami said, frowning at it through the thick plastic sheet, “You can’t fool me. A special tool that will help us later? You mean a secret weapon that will hurt us later. That’s what it always means.”

“No, really! It will help!” Monokuma protested, hitting its paws against the plastic, “You see, this is the quarantine room! It’s exempt from the curfew on the Empty Wings, meaning if you’re in here when nighttime hits, you’re safe, but you can’t leave till morning. Plus, at a majority request of all sound-minded participants, other participants can be sealed inside. This will be useful if there was some sort of outbreak of a disease in the hospital. Or, if you find out an accomplice to a murder! Only the true murderer will be executed in that case, but an accomplice is kinda guilty too, dontcha think? This can be their prison, if you so desire!”

“But what if,” Tsukasa said, “Both scenarios happen? Are we supposed to lock the infected in with the criminal?”

“Well damn! That could be kinda twisted in its own right! A special, totally different Killing Game, where one person is a murderer but everybody else has gotten infected with some shitty disease that wiped six billion people off the face of the earth… Or maybe the murderer has it too! And nobody says that killing’s gotta happen, but in a situation like that, there’s no way that it won’t! Especially if someone gets to thinking that a disease death was actually a murder…” Monokuma said, “But, nope! That’s not the kinda game I’m running here! Teens killin’ teens, that’s my Killing Game and I ain’t about to leave behind a tried and true formula! If both scenarios happen, you gotta figure out your own solution. Whatever that may be.”

“That sounds weirdly familiar,” Nami said, “But, okay. So this room is just for quarantining people for whatever reason we might have to do something like that… Pretty dumb if you ask me, though! Couldn’t you be a little more creative than totally telegraphing that you’re going to use an outbreak
of disease as a motive, here, in this hospital setting? How fucking unoriginal can you get?”

“Hey now, Nami,” Tsukasa grabbed her arm, “Let’s not antagonize the evil bear, okay?”

“Mm?” Nami asked, turning to look at Tsukasa, and he let go of her arm with a start.

“Sorry! I know I shouldn’t have just grabbed you like that, but you were acting kind of impulsive like Randy does and my survival instincts just kicked in!” He apologized, waving his hands in front of himself.

“It’s not like I’d actually physically attack Monokuma, that’s against the rules and I don’t wanna get killed like that,” Nami said, “But I guess your boyfriend might have actually done something stupid after saying dumb things like I say, so I understand.”

“Thank you… I would hate to jeopardize our friendship by being so petulant as to touch you without permission!” Tsukasa said, dropping his hands to his sides, “Randy says that girls hate that more than anything.”

“That depends on the situation,” Nami said, tapping her own chin, “He’s not wrong, but also, you’re dating a guy so a lot of the normal dude rules don’t apply to you. Plus, all you did was grab my elbow. It’s not like that’s a creepy thing to do. Not like I’d probably kick up a fuss if it was, anyway.”

“But if somebody does something creepy to you, then you have to kick up a fuss or they’ll think it’s okay to keep doing,” Tsukasa protested.

“I just don’t care enough about that sort of thing,” Nami said, shrugging her shoulders, then looked to Monokuma again, “Why are you still here?”

“Waiting for you idiots to shut up so I can defend myself against your comment! It’s not unoriginal at all to have medical motives in a setting like this, it’s thematic! Fits the theme, I tell you!” Monokuma protested, “Besides, at least you know what to expect from the motives, at least a little bit. Imagine if you had absolutely no idea what sort of things I’d throw at you. At least now you know they’ll be themed!”

“I guess so,” Nami said, then turned around, “Well, this room was disappointing.”

“Disappointing?” Monokuma asked, “You found the coolest part of the Empty Wings! You know you could hide in here, too, if you were caught in the wings too close to curfew? This is about as far from the main building as you can get, so there’s a good chance you’d be closer to here than to there if something went wrong.”

“I never would have figured that out on my own,” Nami said, “Why would you give us that information?”

“Because,” Monokuma said, “You deserve a reward for being the first ones to investigate this place. It’s up to you if you’ll share that info or keep it to yourselves. Upupu…”
Sorry I'm back on my bullshit!!

Been reading another amazing fangan (Operation V.K.) and it inspired me to put actual times on these chapters so I also did that retroactively, hopefully that gives you all a better idea of when everything’s happening and how much longer it is to the next day

"Well, obviously," Tsukasa said, "We ought to tell everybody about this room."

"What?" Nami asked, "No, that's not obvious at all! Because I was totally just thinking that we shouldn't!"

"Are you kidding me? What possible reason could there be not to share this information, huh?" Tsukasa questioned, facing her as he tried to argue, “I mean, if somebody doesn’t know they can hide in here, then they could end up getting killed by Monokuma!”

“Ya, that’s true,” Nami said, but she shrugged, “But you or I could hide in here and not get killed by Monokuma. If we tell other people about this, think about it. Either one of us could be trapped in that room overnight with anybody. We could hide from Monokuma, only to get killed by somebody else once in there…”

“But if we don’t share the information,” Tsukasa said, “By your logic, if somebody did get murdered in that room overnight, then people wouldn’t know how it happened. And then if one of us revealed that we knew all along that it was possible to hide in the quarantine room at nighttime, then we’d look suspicious!”

Nami blinked. She chewed up that information, then she turned away from the room, “Yea, whatever. I’m not gonna tell anybody about the room, but if you want to, you can. That’s really the way to settle an argument like this, right? We both have the information, so we don’t have to agree on what to do about it.”

“Oh, that’s a good point!” Tsukasa said, dashing to fall back in step with her again, “It’s not like you’d hate me for telling people the room exists, even if you think it’s smarter to keep it a secret.”

“Of course not. That would be a really dumb reason to hate somebody,” Nami said, “And if we want to boil it down, I am the objectively faulty one in this conversation, aren’t I? Hinging my decisions on the idea that the Killing Game is going to happen. There’s no way it won’t, I mean, it is the fifty-fourth one. All the other ones still happened. Even so, I guess it’s counterproductive, not to spend even one day in the realm of blind optimism…”

“It’s normal to be scared,” Tsukasa said.

“Big mood,” Nami confirmed. Tsukasa sputtered, once again speechless in the face of her vintage memes.

They only needed to walk through a few more hallways before the pair of self-proclaimed normies came across somebody who was very decidedly not a normie, or normal in any way at all, to be
frank. That somebody could be none other than Sayaka Yamaguchi, the pint-sized hellion who immediately narrowed her eyes at the pair and voiced her disdain, “Oh. Here I was hoping that I wouldn’t run into anybody.”

“This place is big, but not that big,” Tsukasa said, “If you really wanted to be alone, why didn’t you just go to your room in the Hospice wing?”

“Ghk!” Sayaka made a noise that was somewhere between an exclamation and a grunt.

Nami stared at her for a moment before giving her own observation, “What a fucking tsundere.”

“That would imply that I have love for either of you idiots somewhere in my heart,” Sayaka said, “And frankly, I don’t even have like. But you’re right, that I didn’t actually intend to isolate myself entirely… I just figured it was more important to explore this place than to be left alone.”

“Nami and I found something,” Tsukasa blurted, “It’s called the quarantine room. Everybody can cast a vote to lock someone, or a few people, in there, but the important thing about it is that it’s exempt from curfew. If you can make it there before nighttime, you won’t get in trouble for being in the Empty Wings this late.”

“…Fascinating,” Sayaka said, “Well, the information isn’t. I mean, it’s fucking fascinating that you thought you should tell me that! Come on, that’s useful information. Wouldn’t you keep it to yourselves?”

“That’s what I said,” Nami said.

“Clearly, whatever your talent is, you’re smarter than the Ultimate CEO,” Sayaka said, then a devilish smirk found its way onto her face, “Not like that’s actually saying a ton! Everybody knows that businessmen are far from the brightest bulbs in the box. Hell, you may as well just be Ultimate Luck. That’s what it takes to be a CEO after all.”

Tsukasa shrunk away from her, “Hey now, you don’t have to be so rude about it… I won’t say that you’re wrong either, though.”

“So, the quarantine room…” Sayaka moved on.

“Yeah,” Nami said, “Monokuma said it was the most interesting thing in the Empty Wings, so I guess maybe that’s what it thought we would find if we were exploring here. It also said that the information that we could hide there if we wanted and be exempt from curfew was special knowledge reserved for us as the first people to find it, but Mizuho’s already decided to give up on that.”

“I bet you suuuuck at poker,” Sayaka elongated the word as she gave Tsukasa a meaningful look, that smirk now breaking into an absolute grin, “I mean, showing your hand so easily! That’s a big mistake.”

“Showing my… Good grief!” Tsukasa exclaimed, “It feels almost as if every single girl in this place has already decided that the Killing Game is going to happen! Where’s the optimism?”

“With Box Hako,” Sayaka said, rolling one shoulder back, “She’s probably the only girl who’s dumb enough to think that! As far as I can tell the rest of us are already totally resigned to it. Then there’s you boys, holding out hope almost entirely…” She rolled her eyes, “Patheeetic.”

Tsukasa turned a shade of pink as he tried to think of some rebuttal, but it was obvious that he found himself coming up short of anything useful to day or do. Nami recognized this too and
decided to pull the rudest possible move she could, to snub Sayaka on Tsukasa’s behalf. Not that she really cared to snub Sayaka, but when her friend couldn’t, she had to step up. So she did it. She took Tsukasa by the arm, and she silently…

Ollie.

Outie.
“Did you seriously just walk away from Yamaguchi?” Tsukasa questioned as he kept his steps quick to keep up with Nami. She was power-walking, and to keep up, Tsukasa was… Well, it was impossible to describe the way he moved his legs in this situation, but it sure wasn’t power-walking. He looked like a fool, “Yamaguchi of all people! We pissed her off! She’s gonna kill us as soon as she gets a weapon!”

“Shut the hell your mouth,” Nami said as she just kept on dragging him, “First of all, I pissed her off, so she’ll kill me. Second of all, I was rude to her in the effort of defending your honor, Mizuho! I could tell that you couldn’t think of any way to retaliate. If you walked away, it would be cowardly. But me walking away? That’s spite, babey!”

“Ahh, huh…” Tsukasa mumbled, “With rules that complicated, I don’t think I’ll ever understand how to properly insult someone… Not that I should normally be needing that! Randy can insult people for me most of the time, if it’s ever necessary, or he perceives it to be necessary when really it most certainly is not…”

Nami let go of his arm once they got to the hallway which connected Empty to Hospitality, then crossed her own arms and looked him up and down, “Well, you got two options here. Go find Randy again, or come with me to check out the Ultimate Wards. I’m curious about them.”

“Isn’t your sister’s one of the wards? Aren’t you worried you’ll run into her there?” Tsukasa asked.

“It’s not like I’m trying to one hundred percent speedrun avoid her,” Nami spoke nonsense again, but this time, Tsukasa was finding ways to interpret it, “And besides. She’s probably still busy with Bakura, wherever they went.”

“Oh, that’s true,” Tsukasa said, then startled and spoke all afluster once more, “But, wait! Isn’t it more concerning, the more time those two spend alone together? I still want to be optimistic about the Killing Game, but this triangle you three have going on is quite concerning!”

Nami just fixed him with a stare that said ‘drop it, bucko’, which simultaneously got him to drop it and implied that she had no legitimate rebuttal. In fact, she didn’t. Nami just wanted to believe that she wasn’t legitimately worth killing over, no matter what Tomoe claimed. Plus, the motives hadn’t been distributed yet. If Goro turned up dead at this point, this early on, then there really would be nobody else to blame. Tomoe wasn’t that dumb, if nothing else.

Ugh. Nami did not enjoy needing to debate herself on the likelihood of her sister committing a murder. That was what really rubbed her the wrong way about a killing game. Not the possibility that she’d be killed herself, but the fact that she now needed to worry about Tomoe’s moral fortitude like never before. No, maybe that wasn’t what rubbed her wrong the most. Mostly, it was that, if Tomoe killed somebody, and was executed as a result, Nami would be upset. Of course she would. But more than that, somehow, she worried that she’d somehow be held responsible for Tomoe’s actions by the others. Living with the ire of her classmates, with her protector dead? That was definitely frightening.

God, when did she get so desperate for the approval of others that having everybody hate her was such an unappealing prospect?

“I’ll check out the Ultimate Wards with you,” Tsukasa said, breaking Nami out of her thoughts. She must have looked especially dazed, because he felt the need to clarify, “To, answer your
question, I mean. I can hang out with Randy anytime. I want to get to know my new friend a little better. Plus, I was just starting to get the hang of what your personal language means.”

“What my personal language memes,” Nami corrected him, and he smiled to see that she wasn’t so out of it that she couldn’t continue being an insufferable bastard memelord.

“Yeah, exactly!” Tsukasa said, then took off at an awkward sprint. Ah, so that was it. He just couldn’t move in any manner resembling a normal human being at any speed quicker than a walk, could he? Nami shrugged, and did her best to imitate his unique gait as she followed after him. May as well both look foolish. Tsukasa seemed to appreciate it, as far as she could tell.

And they both looked even funnier going up the stairs. In any case, once they were in the main hallway, the signs for the Ultimate Wards were really easy to see.

“Hm, uh… Well, which one should we visit first?” Nami asked, putting her hands on her hips as she looked down the hallway. Her hair almost seemed to bounce as stood there deep in thought.

“The Tutoring Ward,” Tsukasa made the decision for her with more confidence than she knew that he could hold in his lithe and unmanly body. Not that he wasn’t very clearly a man, but rather, Nami had to imagine that in his relationship-

No, no, she shouldn’t jump to conclusions like that! If she started making theories about who was in charge in the bedroom, about her own friends? Then she would be no better than those people who shipped real life musicians! Or worse, Killing Game Participants! Right, that’s exactly what she would be doing. And that was a new memory, too. People shipped Killing Game Participants. Nami would never do that, though. And she certainly wouldn’t restrain herself from pretending like she shipped some rarepair just to incite people online.

Huh.

Did she like arguing?

“Tutoring ward, yes sir,” Nami decided not to argue this point, though, and made an even sillier walk than before for the short distance to the door. So silly, she thought, she ought to be indicted into some sort of silly walking hall of fame. A ministry of sorts, perhaps. Tsukasa laughed at her. Nice.

She reached it in just a few feet, and went to shove the door open, but instead hesitated a moment and looked back to Tsukasa, “Hey, do you think… Ruka will be in there?”

“If anyone is, it would be him and Kyousuke, I’d assume,” Tsukasa said, “Why?”

“I mean, I know he gave us cake, but isn’t he sorta scary?” Nami asked, giggles tinting her words, “I’ve been sort of goofing off with you, but he’s serious and stuff…”

“ Seriously?” Tsukasa asked, raising his eyebrows, then reached past her and pushed the door open anyway.
"Ah! Hi!" Nami called out into the tutoring ward, completely masking the fact that she had moments ago been entirely nervous to enter this area of the hospital. It was a lot larger than she had expected it to be, that much was certain. There were rows of desks, far more desks than sixteen students could ever possibly need, and bookshelves lining the back wall with labels. The first half were all workbooks, labeled for their particular years by unit and field of study by shelf. The second half appeared to be common reading books for each level of language proficiency, the top half in English and the bottom half in Japanese, for the purpose of improving language studies, it seemed.

Of course, by the workbooks alone, this room had to be worth some small fortune.

“Hello, Nami!” Kanoshi called out to her, standing up from the desk he’d been sitting in. Ah, it was one of the ones on the far end of the room, which actually had seats on either side of the surface itself. A desk designed specifically for one on one tutoring, it seemed. He approached her, “Ruka and I went to check out the Empty Wings for a little while, but then we got bored and came here instead. Isn’t it just the coolest?”

“Good God,” Tsukasa said, “Those bookshelves… Could probably buy majority stock in my company.”

“How the fuck could a bookshelf buy stock?” Yuuri questioned, also making his way over from the two-person desk, “It’s an inanimate object.”

“I mean, if you sold the contents in the shelves,” Tsukasa clarified, “Then you could afford majority stock. Workbooks are quite pricey on their own, and all of these reading books could probably fetch a pretty penny too!”

“Fetch a pretty penny?” Nami asked, then frowned, “With verbiage like that, maybe you could get along with my sister after all.”

Kanoshi just waved his hands defensively, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead, “Please don’t sell my workbooks! With these, I could probably teach anybody anything! It’s a super useful room and it was made for me, so…”

“Whoa! Kyousuke, I wouldn’t actually sell them!” Tsukasa said, “Besides, we’re trapped in this hospital anyway, so… where could I, even if I really wanted to?”

“Oh, right,” Kanoshi said, taking a deep breath as he calmed himself down. Yuuri rubbed his shoulder.

“Well,” Yuuri spoke up, “How could somebody even afford to do all this, then? In the empty wings, I just assumed that despair went ahead and took over an abandoned hospital, but if just the contents of this room alone are supposedly so expensive…”

“Er, about that…” Nami started, then glanced at Tsukasa. He nodded his reassurance to her, and she decided that she did need to reveal this information, “I did remember something. I don’t know why or how. It was totally without context, so please don’t hold it against me, but… About six months before last year’s Killing Game, Ultimate Despair got control over the Japanese Government. If that memory is really true, then they could be using taxpayer money to fund the Killing Game. Taxation is theft! Eat the rich!”
“What… the fuck is she on about?” Yuuri questioned, looking to Tsukasa for some form of translation.

“Well, the stuff about her random memory seems plausible, and I sort of prompted her to say it just now,” Tsukasa explained, “And then she started speaking in memes again.”

“Those weren’t any memes I ever fucking heard!” Yuuri snapped, and everyone around him flinched, even Kanoshi, but he jumped to Yuuri’s defense immediately anyway.

“Sorry! Ruka just has a bit of a temper,” Kanoshi exclaimed, throwing an arm out in front of Yuuri, like he expected Nami or Tsukasa to physically lash out, “He’s just stressed out, you understand, right?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, then leaned around to get a look at Yuuri’s face past Kanoshi’s arm, “Ruka, my memes are spicy vintage memes. That’s what they’re called. They’re older than I am! They’ve always been a hobby of mine. Huh, maybe I’m the Ultimate Memer…?"

“I severely doubt that the Ultimate Initiative would give out a title like that,” Tsukasa said, giving a nervous chuckle, “They may have scouted Asahi and I in the same year, but I still wish to believe in the integrity of the organization…”

“In any case, sorry about that,” Yuuri mumbled, like he didn’t really care about apologizing for his outburst but felt like it was something he was required to do, “Kyousuke’s right. I’m just, really freaked out here. I get I might not seem the type, but the thing is… Ugh, Kyousuke! You say it! I can’t just, admit that shit to strangers.”

“Which shit?” Kanoshi asked, blinking as he lowered his arm.

“What shit do you think!? The most mild shit!” Yuuri groaned, smacking a hand against his own forehead, “Nobody needs to ever know any of the other shit!”

“Okay, okay,” Kanoshi said, then sighed before explaining with a sheepish, unhappy smile on his face, “What Ruka means is that the Killing Game is stressing him out because he finally stopped wanting to die, and now he’s here, in a position where it might happen anyway.”

“Fuck! That’s…” Nami pouted, “Dumb as hell! Are you serious? Look at yourself! You’re a tough guy! You’re sooo in shape. Of the people in this room, you’re most likely to survive, so why worry?”

“Being the sole survivor, or, one of the only ones doesn’t exactly appeal to me either!” Yuuri hissed those words through his teeth, “Kyousuke was helping me get my life together. And Yamaguchi’s our friend too! What am I supposed to do if they’re not with me? I, fuck!” He shouted again and turned, kicking a desk so hard that it upended itself on top of the next one over. Nami didn’t hesitate to kick a desk too, at full force, and it did the same thing. She was weak, so that assured her that she didn’t actually need to be frightened about Yuuri’s capability to move a desk to that extent.

“What?” Kanoshi asked, looking between the two who’d just kicked desks, “Please stop destroying my ward.”

“Sorry,” Yuuri said, again, insincere.

“Sorry,” Nami said, sincere, then continued, “I wanted to see how hard it was to kick a desk like that. Not that hard. So I’m less scared of you now, Ruka.”
“You? Were scared of me?” Yuuri questioned, and all the frustration seemed to evaporate from his face, “Are you for real?”

“Yes?” Nami squeaked.

“Wow,” Yuuri fell back into one of the desk seats, “I uh, well. That’s sort of why I dress this way. Surprised to hear it actually worked… Why don’t you guys go somewhere else? I gotta think about this some more. Thanks for visiting, though.”

“Uh, yeah,” Nami said, then backed up and pushed the door back out into the hallway.
Nami and Tsukasa didn’t actually spend time in the hallway, instead progressing directly into the next ward that they wanted to investigate. Ignoring both Tomoe’s and Goro’s wards, the wandering pair instead found themselves opening the door to the Electrician’s ward. The owner of said ward, Rei, was the first thing they noticed.

She was sat at a table in the middle of the room, tinkering with something. On one wall there were all sorts of parts and wires, on the other, a collection of interesting tea blends? The middle consisted of several work benches by the door, and a few medical machines in the back. Nami couldn’t possibly place what they were, though. Cat scans? MRIs? Were those the same thing, or administered by the same machine? She couldn’t work that out.

Etsuko was also in this ward, at another workbench by the wall of tea. He had a kettle on a hotplate, presumably boiling water, and he was the one to notice that there were others in the ward, “Oh!! Nami! And Mit-zoo-how!”

“Please never pronounce my name that way again,” Tsukasa said.

“Okay, Mizuho,” Etsuko immediately corrected his evidently grievous mistake, then gestured to the kettle, “Do you two want some tea? Akabanny loooves tea, so there’s all types here in her ward! Isn’t that awesome?”

“I’ll take some tea. Is there any plum black tea?” Nami asked, already taking a look at the shelves for herself, “That’s my favorite kind. The only type I like without milk or sugar or anything! Plums forever and ever.”

Rei suddenly became keenly aware of the new visitors and shot up, clamping her hands onto both of Nami’s shoulders from behind and whispering, but at a volume that everybody could hear anyway, “Did you just say plum black tea is your favorite?”

“Yes, it is the best, my dude,” Nami said, not seeming to be put off by Rei’s demeanor at all as she referenced another meme that only she knew.

“I… Still am not fond of your sister, but please, Nami, allow me to grant you my permission… To call me Rei,” Rei continued, her hands shaking against Nami’s shoulders as if this were the most intense moment of her young life so far, “A fellow fan of the fabled plum black tea? I would trust you with my life.”

Rei Akabane will now die for you.

But, seriously, Nami freed her shoulders and turned around in reply, “Wow, thanks, Rei! It really is just the number one type of tea, isn’t it? Tomoe doesn’t agree with me though. She thinks the only tea worth anybody’s time is ginseng… But, wait!” She exclaimed, “Plum black tea will always be my favorite, but maybe Tomoe’s onto something for once? Doesn’t ginseng help with memory? If I drink one point eight cups of ginseng tea will I remember my talent?”

“I don’t think so…” Rei said, then tilted her head to one side, “Why one point eight?”

“That’s…” Nami groaned and hung her head in shame, “The most I can stomach in a sitting… In a whole week… It’s sooo gross my dudes…”

Daily Life: Day One (Plum Black Tea)
“Aww,” Rei said, then tapped her forehead to Nami’s before spinning… Spinning? Away, and poking Etsuko in the back of the head, “Etsukun! Add some plum black tea for my new friend, right?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Etsuko saluted, then ran off to fetch another teacup. He returned with two, “Mizuho! What! Would! Youuu… Like?”

“I’m usually more of a coffee guy, myself,” Tsukasa admitted, twiddling his thumbs where he stood, “But when I do drink tea, I think I usually like rose bases?”

“I bet you’d like strawberry rose,” Etsuko said, then fetched some of that for Tsukasa’s cup while he grabbed another serving of plum black for Nami, “My favorite is oolong! All types! It’s so energizing!”

“Boy. You do not need any more energy than you’ve got,” Nami said with a deep breath, then sat down at the tea workbench, diagonally across from Etsuko. Rei sat across from her, and Tsukasa next to her, then she spoke again, “So, this ward seems kind of personal, with the tea wall. There’s lots of electronic stuff here too, though. What makes you the Ultimate Electrician anyway, Akabane?”

“Hm…” Rei thought for a bit, then came up with an explanation, “Well, actually, it’s a weird title to have. I do all sorts of electrical work, but I think Ultimate Roboticist or something would suit me better. I can create advanced robot bodies, though I guess with my broad skillset and the fact I couldn’t program an AI to save my life, my actual title was the best they could give me.”

“Advanced robot bodies, huh?” Nami asked, “Can you fuck them?”

“Pardon?” Rei questioned, and the boys just stared in awkward, red-faced confusion at Nami’s brashness.

“Because, I mean, what sort of idiot makes a robot you can’t fuck?” Nami continued, “Not like I wanna fuck a robot. But it’s the age old question.”

“Oh, it’s a vintage meme,” Tsukasa observed, relaxing, “Akabane, she doesn’t expect a real answer. She just majored in historical jokes or something like that.”

“I see,” Rei said, then shrugged her shoulders, “Even so, I can’t imagine the robot bodies I’ve made are technically fuckable. The human form is difficult and unnecessary. Truth be told, if they hadn’t existed before I was born, the Monokumas are the sort of thing I easily could have made. Bipedal animals are much easier to give a thorough range of motion. I would only make a humanoid body if, for example, it was specifically for an AI who was likely to be body dysmorphic otherwise.”

“An AI who was likely to be body dysmorphic? You’d actually consider stuff like that?” Nami asked, tapping her fingers against the table, “That seems like a lot of extra work… Wow, you’re actually a total softie, aren’t you, Rei?”

“Wouldn’t one have to be, to tolerate both Shinji and Etsukun?” Rei questioned, leaning forward with her chin in her palm. Etsuko didn’t seem to take offense, or even really notice that she’d mentioned him. Nami guessed that was right. Etsuko got along well with enthusiastic people, being naive and oblivious. Meanwhile, Shinjiro seemed like a pessimist through and through, if an airy one. Tolerating those two extremes for as long as Rei seemingly had…

Wow, she really did have the patience of a saint.
“Damn, fair,” Nami decided to voice that agreement. With that settled, a comfortable silence settled over the room. Or, close to silence. Etsuko wasn’t the type to enjoy that, but rather than try to strike up a conversation that none of them wanted to hear, he just hummed something under his breath. It sounded nice. His voice when he was usually talk-yelling was crystal clear, so when he actually quieted down he actually had a soothing tone. When the water boiled for the tea, Etsuko poured some into each of their cups. Still without words, they slowly sipped, and just enjoyed this moment in the Electrician’s Ward. A pair of friends, a pair of best friends, and a pair whose friendship was fated by their mutual love of plum black tea.
9:00 PM / 2100 Hours

Rei, once finished with her tea, returned to tinkering, and Etsuko bid the investigating pair farewell. He didn’t seem to have any intention of leaving, which Nami thought was nice. As much as he buzzed with energy, he could stay in one place long enough to spend time with a friend who was preoccupied. And that, unfortunately, finished off the two Ultimate Wards that Nami was actually interested in investigating. The two remaining belonged to people who… Ugh.

After spending hours with Tsukasa, either of those two would be even more insufferable, wouldn’t they? Goro with his exuberant misery, Tomoe with her overprotective nature… Nami’s speech hadn’t accomplished nearly as much as she wanted it to. She wanted to convince Tomoe that she didn’t need to act like that, but instead, she’d let herself be led into an unwanted compromise. Guilt-tripped over problems that she didn’t even fully understand. Tomoe’s nature wouldn’t change, no matter how much Nami wished it would. Even so, she supposed she had to be grateful to Goro for giving her the opportunity to get a few hours with someone she could actually level with.

Even so…

“Do you even want to look at either of their wards?” Tsukasa asked, once more snapping Nami out of her own thoughts, “I mean. They could be there by now. It’s up to you, though, I don’t think I’d mind running into either of them.”

“I guess…” Nami looked between the two remaining signs, then took a deep breath and stepped towards the door to the Journalist’s Ward, “Tomoe would be upset with me if she heard I didn’t even look at her Ultimate Ward, you know. But you don’t have to join me.”

“I want to,” Tsukasa said, “I feel like, through the power of exploration, we’re bonding!”

“The real exploration all along was the friends we made along the way.” Nami said, then opened the door to Tomoe’s lab. Similar to the previous ones, it was some serious overkill. This time, the items that made up the majority of the floor space were printing presses. Rather than dividing the room, the other floor option, wide and wooden desks, made up a perimeter of the room, backs to walls. On the back wall had anything worth using on it, though. Stores of extra ink and extra paper piled high on crooked shelves.

That’s not to say the other walls were empty. Nami could tell at a glance that they were plastered floor to ceiling with pieces written by the legend herself, Tomoe. A healthy mixture of legitimate news, puff pieces, and exposés. The third item being the sort she enjoyed writing the most. Oh, did Nami just now remember that? With that in mind, the pile of papers next to the shelves were probably similar.

And Tomoe herself was sitting on top of one of the printing presses, one of two that wasn’t running. Also in the room (and wow, was Nami surprised anybody else was in the room) was Box, perched on the other inactive printing press, nose-deep in a newspaper as if it was the most thrilling thing she’d ever read.

“Hello, Nami,” Tomoe said, grinning from where she sat, “Did you have a fun time with the gay boy?”
“Ya,” Nami said without hesitation, “We’re friends now.”

“Sigh,” Tomoe said the word sigh out loud, “Well, I guess if you had to become friends with anybody, it’s not like he’s threatening in any way. I’ve been getting to know Hako, who should be everybody’s best friend, you know. After all, she knows the most about these things.”

“Technically, Bakura knows the most about these things,” Box said without looking up from her newspaper, “I never watched the games before I found myself in one, after all. He’s a true scholar of all things Monokuma…”

Nami somehow still had some trouble believing that Box really was the Ultimate Survivor of the last game, but who else could it be? Well, if Box was lying, it meant somebody else was a liar too. But then, with the nature of the other relationships, it seemed unlikely that it would be one of the others. Randy and Tsukasa didn’t seem to have any gap in their relationship, and with Kaede and Tsumugi being girlfriends too, it made no sense for any single one of those three to have been through a Killing Game before.

“Bakura…” Tomoe snipped, “Has always been a bridesmaid and never the bride! But you have, Hako. That makes you more of an expert on the topic than him, by far. You’ve truly experienced it all. The fear, the adrenaline. The rush of all sorts of emotions that overcome participants in the annual Killing Game.”

“I really don’t think any of that stuff happened to me!” Box said in earnest, then finally folded the newspaper on her lap, “Wow, Kaguya! I really never knew that so many celebrities and politicians had such scandalous pasts!”

“If that surprises you, just wait till you get to the ones about scientists,” Tomoe said, “Oh, or the papalry. Or…”

“Baseball,” Box said, eyes wide, “Baseball.”

“Yes! Yes, I have a full series on baseball players. Past, present, and even speculated future. You wouldn't believe what those boys get up to,” Tomoe said, jumping up from her press and running to the stack in the corner, returning only brief moments later with five newspapers, which she held out to Box, "Scandalize to your heart's content, dearie.”

"How do you even find all these things?” Box asked, immediately devouring with her eyes the juicy gossip.

Tomoe laughed for a good twenty seconds before answering, “I have my ways.”

“She does,” Nami confirmed, then walked up to Box and clicked her tongue, tilting her head to the side as she addressed her, “Hi, Hako. I wanted to say, um. Well, this is a weird statement to try and figure out a way to say, so instead, I’ll just say it factually and outright. I simultaneously want to apologize for disliking you so strongly when we first met, and also make certain that you’re aware of the fact that while I do like you plenty, I don’t trust you. I find it weird, somehow, that you’re the Ultimate Survivor.”

“Ah, you’re still on about that?” Box asked, not looking up at all from her baseball tabloids that Tomoe had so graciously gifted to her. “Well, it doesn’t really matter if you believe me or not, does it? This is a new Killing Game. I can’t imagine that what happened in the last one has any real bearing on us, and thinking that it’s more important than it is could only doom us!”

“Okay, cool, as long as it doesn’t matter to you, I’ll let it be,” Nami said, wringing her hands
nervously where she stood, “And, as for how much of a bitch I was when we first met… Look, I was stressed out, and you seemed like you weren’t. At all. So it really rubbed me the wrong way, and I’m sorry for that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Box said, turning away to show one of her radiant smiles to Nami, “I just want to be everybody’s friend. With all of my heart, that’s the only thing that I need. Anybody would be stressed in that situation! I’m just used to dealing with disasters, I’m the one who didn’t act in a normal way in that situation. All is forgiven.”

“Thank you…” Nami breathed a sigh of relief, then turned to Tomoe again, “Ah, did you see where Mizuho went? He disappeared there.”

“Ding dong!” Monokuma interrupted before Tomoe could respond, its voice filling the room with that terribly tinny tone, “Hey folks! The time is now 9:45 PM! Normally I make these announcements at ten, but just for tonight, I’m giving you fifteen minutes warning to go ahead and leave any areas that are off-limits at night. Motives are at breakfast, so you’ll really want to get some sleep to be in tip-top killing condition!”

Tsukasa’s disappearance forgotten, Tomoe escorted Nami back to her room in the Hospitality Ward, then departed to go to her own. Nami stared at her own door. Room number five. Nami Kaguya, the Ultimate ????. The plate above the knob read these words out. Next to the knob was what seemed to be an electromagnetic reader. Nami thought back on Monokuma’s words, and realized that he neglected to mention how to unlock these rooms. Time to experiment. She pulled her handbook from her sweatshirt pocket and tapped the lock.

It made a small beep, and she heard the lock tumble. Ah, that was easy. Not a real puzzle. She turned the knob and pushed the door open to her assigned room, and took a look around. Not personalized in any way, but for the purple bedspread. Otherwise, it just resembled a somewhat high-end hospital room, the kind that rich people would purchase when they needed to recover from surgery.

She didn’t do any further investigation, not even enough to find out that she’d been provided with pajamas, before she dropped onto the bed and let sleep steal her away.
Daily Life: Day Two (Breakfast)

Am I posting too quickly? Yeah okay maybe but I threw myself off by posting late at night and I want to get back on track with morning posts

Also, here's a reference collection if you wanna see them all in one place (also linked in fic start notes) https://sta.sh/2sjg1br9vj4
Yeah, some of those characters haven't shown up yet... :3c

“Good morning, you bastards!” Monokuma’s voice pulled Nami out of her dreamless sleep, “The time is now 6:00 AM! And you need to get your asses up! I said I’d give the motives at eight, right? Well, the cafeteria’s open! Hygiene, clothing, get your asses there! Especially if you think you might wanna cook something, yeah? It’s a great way to bond, if you make meals for each other! And only… Let’s see… Three of the sixteen of you bothered to eat anything before nighttime yesterday. Come on! If you don’t eat, you’ll never grow up big and strong! Monokuma, out!”

Nami rubbed the sleep from her eyes, then held her hand out in front of herself, three fingers extended for the three missives that Monokuma had offered up. Hygiene, clothing, get her ass to the cafeteria. Okay, time to actually investigate Room Five. Nami stood up and checked in a grid pattern. In the nightstand, she found a bible, a sewing kit, and a water bottle labeled ‘one billion monocoins’. That seemed more like a hotel room than a hospital room. Next, the rug. It looked at first glance like wall-to-wall carpet, but it curled up at the edges.

Then, the closet. She pulled it open and discovered in it several copies of her current outfit, and some simple pajamas. Black tank top, black yoga pants. There was a drawer labeled with an emoji, (>//o//8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

By the time everybody’s tea was ready, and the food was as well, people claimed their tables in groups. Yuuri, Kanoshi, Sayaka, Mitsuru, and Box occupied one of the tables. Randy, Tsukasa, Kaede, Tsumugi, and Goro (much to Nami’s surprise) took another. Nami’s own table was left with everybody else. Tomoe, Riko, and the Tea Squad.

And then, Monokuma, appearing from the ceiling and landing in a danish.

“Wow! Yep, breakfasttime! And you actually made a pretty good spread for the first day! Of course, that makes sense, mhm, mhm,” Monokuma crossed its arms and nodded through those words, then spread its arms out again in exaltation when it continued, “After all, once these motives have been delivered, you’ll be way too full up with despair to commit to shit like this!”

“We will not submit to your rotten whims!” Box exclaimed from her table, her voice clear as chimes. She was obviously trying to rally the students, to be a hero. Nami believed in her, even if she didn’t believe her. She sure didn’t believe in some of her other classmates, though.

“Too bad! On the screens of your Monopads currently, you will see the Medical Record motive! It works in kind of a funny way. Let’s use an example. The category is Job! Joe works at a button factory. So does Bill. Joe’s motive will say Job: Bill, and Bill’s will say Job: Joe. By which I mean,
the person listed in your motive shares something with you in a certain category! Also, it’s not like you’ll all have reciprocal motives, either, so finding out who the deceased’s motive linked to is not a reliable way to find a killer! Okay, look down now, and you’ll see!”

Nami almost couldn’t control her eyes as she turned to look at her Monopad, to see what it read.

**Body Count:**

Kanoshi Kyousuke
Body count?

*Body count??*

Now, that was a doozy.

Nami couldn’t tear her eyes away from the screen. Body count. She didn’t think she’d killed anybody. She didn’t think that Kanoshi had killed anybody. Neither of those ideas made any sense to her. Was the body count zero? It couldn’t be zero, that wouldn’t be a motive. Or was that what Monokuma wanted her to think? Did Monokuma want her to think that the body count couldn’t possibly be zero, when it was zero, when zero was the number of bodies? When the count was zero? Zero?

00000000000000000000000000000000000000?

“Nami!” Tomoe called out to her, snapping her out of her fugue state, “What’s your motive, sweetie?”

“Couldn’t you just look at my Monopad?” Nami asked.

“Nope!” Monokuma explained from where it still stood, “The contents of your handbook are private for as long as you’re alive and you haven’t left it in a different room from yourself. If anyone else tries to look, they just see a black screen. Oh, but during a Class Trial, the screen becomes truly and fully visible to anyone who looks.”

“How is that possible?” Tsukasa asked, but then took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, “Now, I know that Hako said we should share our motives, but given the nature of these ones…”

“We shouldn’t share them,” Box finished, standing up and putting her own handbook back in her pocket. “I completely agree, Mizuho. To share these motives is to out your own secret, as well as somebody else’s, and I believe that would create more tension than it would alleviate. You can share if you would like to, but I think consulting with the target of your motive before sharing with a large group would be wise.”

“Yeah,” Nami said, then grabbed Tomoe by the arm and pulled her over to the kitchen, crouching behind the counter to whisper, “Tomoe… My motive says that I share a body count with somebody. With Kyousuke.”

“With Kyousuke?” Tomoe asked, then frowned, “I can’t think of him killing anybody. And I know for certain that my darling little sister would never, ever dirty her hands so… So isn’t the count zero?”

“That’s what I thought,” Nami said, “But what if that’s just what Monokuma wants me to think? So I started to kind of… Lose it for a minute there. I’m really scared.”

“I’m here. There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Tomoe said, “And if you really think it’s possible, that you’ve both killed people before? Just stay away from him. Keep your distance.”

“And. Your motive, Tomoe?” Nami asked.
“Oh, it meant basically nothing. It said that I share my number of siblings with Asahi,” Tomoe said, shrugging as she gave Nami a soft smile, “Besides. You know the only thing that could motivate me is a threat to your well-being. We do need to find out whose motive targeted you, though. It may not be Kyousuke, and it may not be innocent.”

“Er, yeah, good point,” Nami said, grimacing, “So why don’t I just spend my time with people I already know are safe? You, Akabane, Yushu, or Mizuho, right?”

“Yushu?” Tomoe asked, blinking for a moment in surprise, then chuckling, “Honey… You don’t really want to spend time with such an exuberant young man, do you?”

“Not really,” Nami admitted, “But he can be quiet when he wants to be. I just mean, I know that he’s trustworthy, if everyone else gets busy.”

“Hako is trustworthy too,” Tomoe said, “She got all the way through her last Killing Game without killing, or being killed, after all.”

“Is that… The truth?” Nami asked, and her brain started to get foggy again. No, not this again. She stood up and interrupted her own train of thought, returning to the dining area. Much to her surprise, while she’d been conspiring with Tomoe, almost everybody had dispersed from the room. Riko was still sitting there, a plate full of danishes but untouched in front of her, her teacup nearby. She held up her whiteboard.

“Monokuma said the dishes would be cleaned up automatically,” Said one side of the whiteboard. Flip, and, “Could one of you please help me carry my breakfast back to my room? I can’t eat around other people.”

“Of course, Asahi,” Tomoe said, then gave a small but stupid-looking curtsy before she picked up the plate. Nami handled the tea and the utensils, and they walked Riko back to her room. Riko opened the door with her Monopad, then they walked in to set the food down on the desk. Before Tomoe could turn to leave, Riko poked her upper arm, then scribbled on her whiteboard again.

“Thanks. By the way, Kaguya. My motive was that you and I have the same number of siblings,” It read, and Riko almost seemed to be smiling behind her mask as she continued on to write a bit more, “Not really worth anything. I already knew that. See you later?”

“Yeah, see you later,” Tomoe said, “I suppose our motives were reciprocal, then. We’ll leave you to your meal.”

So Nami and Tomoe left Riko in her room. It was almost 9:00 AM now, but they weren’t the only ones sharing motives at that moment.

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“Mizuho,” Kanoshi said, staring across the tutoring desk at the Ultimate Heir in the otherwise empty Tutoring Ward, “I have a… Question. It’s regarding the motive that Ruka got.”

“Yeah,” Tsukasa said, seeming much more laid-back about it, “Mhm. His motive was reciprocal with Randy’s, I’m assuming. Randy’s was job, Yuuri Ruka, so…”

“Mm,” Kanoshi nodded, “Ruka’s was job, Randy Sempers. And so, with that in mind… Neither of you are going to tell anybody what that means, are you?”

“Neither of us were opposed to it before,” Tsukasa admitted, “If it ended up revealed, it’s not like either of us are embarrassed or anything, about his past, how we met. Any of that. But, if you’d
prefer that we kept it under wraps now that this motive tied Ruka to it…”

“Yes,” Kanoshi said, “I would definitely prefer if you kept it under wraps now that Ruka’s implicated. In fact, I have to tell you. This is technically an effective motive. If that information came out, I don’t know what Ruka would do. Maybe something rash.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry-” Tsukasa started.

“I wasn’t finished!” Kanoshi said in earnest, but his voice became cold again with the next words, “I do know what I’d do if you let that information get out. If you hurt him like that. Ruka’s my precious student, after all. I… I wouldn’t mind dying for him. I’d kill you both. You and Randy. Revenge is the only way a guy like that can feel better, but if he got it here, he’d die. So I’d do it in his stead. Do you understand?”

Tsukasa didn’t seem scared, or surprised in any way to hear these words. And his response reflected that fact, “I understand. I mean, it’s only natural to feel that way. Between you and me, death threats from anybody, even in this game… Or, especially in this game, don’t surprise me at all. None of us are truly innocent.”

“Ah!” Kanoshi’s demeanor shifted immediately, his eyes almost sparkling before Tsukasa at the realization, “You’re smart like me! You figured it out too!”

“Yeah, I did,” Tsukasa admitted, “But you can’t tell anyone, okay? I am smart like you, but a lot of the others aren’t. They’d panic. Anyway, if we’re done here, I’d like to go find Nami. I need to tell her something.”

9:00 AM / 0900 Hours

As soon as Nami and Tomoe left Riko’s room, they noticed something that nobody else had yet seen in the Hospice Ward. Across from everybody’s rooms there was a room marked ‘infirmary’. A strange thing to have in a hospital… And Monokuma immediately appeared to explain, “I bet you think an infirmary is a strange thing to have in a hospital! Well, there’s nothing useful in the Empty Wings, and since the Ultimate Ward that would provide things like bandages and medicine and stuff isn’t open yet, I figured you guys needed something to tide you over. So, a provisional infirmary! It’s about as good as what a high school would have, so it’s not hospital level or anything, but it’s something!”

“I don’t want to need that,” Nami said, pouting in its direction.

Monokuma vanished. Moments later, Tsukasa came downstairs. Halfway down, he called out, “Nami! I’m glad I found you! I needed to tell you, that you were the target of my motive!”
“Excuse me?” Tomoe questioned, whirling toward the stairwell, “What did you just say, Mizuho?”

“Uh, Nami was the target of my motive,” Tsukasa said, “But, I guess… You’d count too, Kaguya? Because the category was middle school. I had… Middle school, Nami Kaguya.”

“We went to the same middle school?” Nami asked, looking up at Tsukasa, “But I thought we grew up in totally different places…”

“I didn’t go to school in my hometown,” Tsukasa explained, “And if I lived in a city totally overrun by despair, and you lived in a town that was headed in that direction, it’s possible that they shared a border, after all. The thing is, as soon as I saw that motive, I remembered, but then something else important came up. Nami, in middle school, you…”

“I what?” Nami asked, “I remember it being very bland and boring. I certainly don’t remember ever meeting you. You’re a year older than us anyway, so we probably didn’t ever speak or anything.”

“But, we did!” Tsukasa insisted, “You were my friend! But, then…”

“We don’t need to be digging up ancient history, Mizuho!” Tomoe snapped in his direction, departing from Nami’s side to climb the stairs towards him, “Don’t you think that it’s better for Nami, if she was really able to forget that?”

“But if she finds out later, and we knew all along…” Tsukasa protested.

Nami decided to step in, “Nah. I won’t hold it against you. If Tomoe thinks I’m better off not remembering, I’ll trust her. We might have some problems, but when it comes to things like that, she’s usually right!”

“If you’re sure,” Tsukasa said, then turned to Tomoe, “But, you know, that’s not actually a motive, right? So it’s fine if I spend some time with Nami, right?”

Tomoe hesitated a moment, then sighed, “Yes, it’s fine. But if you tell her about that, I will find out, and I’ll kill you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tsukasa waved her off, “I keep getting promised I’ll get murdered if I reveal secrets today, what gives? I won’t tell her, though. Don’t worry.”

“Okay,” Tomoe said, “If you’re sure about that, then I’ll go and find Hako. She’s so fascinated by my writing… It’s quite the ego booster! Perhaps, we’re actually becoming friends… Farewell~!”

Tsukasa watched Tomoe go, then walked the rest of the way down the stairs. He looked at Nami carefully, examining her face for any hint that she secretly wanted him to go against her sister’s wishes. Instead, she just looked at him like he was crazy for staring at her. Right, it probably would seem that way.

“So, Nami,” Tsukasa said, “Is your motive an actual motive?”

“An actual motive…” Nami mumbled, “What does that really mean?”

“Well,” Tsukasa said, “Mine wasn’t an actual motive. Was yours something that could actually
prompt you to kill someone?”

“I dunno,” Nami said, “I’m not… Gonna. And I don’t think my motive was really supposed to make me kill somebody. I think it was just supposed to freak me out. Maybe to make me an easier victim or something like that? If Tomoe didn’t snap me out of it, I would still be in, a total daze, I think?”

“Oh, that’s not good,” Tsukasa said, “And I do know that some of the motives were definitely genuine, spur-to-murder motives. Mine wasn’t, but, well. I did mention that something more imperative came up, didn’t I? I was sorting that out.”

“Oh,” Nami said, “That’s a pain. I was kind of hoping all the motives would be, at worst, like mine.”

“Is that optimism I detect?” Tsukasa asked, “I thought that was reserved for the boys, and for Hako.

“I was being stupid,” Nami said, turning away from him and digging her teeth into her bottom lip. Why were her teeth so sharp? They hurt less than they should have, though, so Nami presumed that biting her lip was a common nervous habit of hers before she came here. Why was she forgetting so many different things? Was it all because of Goro’s theory that she got more of the oof ow ouch my memories, memory erasing juice? Or was there more to it? Was she actually repressing some things, like whatever happened in middle school? Tomoe’s baking ability?

“Wait, hey, no,” Tsukasa said, “That’s not it at all! I was just…” He paused, “I was just making fun of you for doing exactly what I’ve been doing this whole time. For stopping yourself from being cynical for a minute. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, Hey, Tsukasaaa!” Randy interrupted from up on the stairs, “So this is where you went! Hi Nami! What’s going on?”

Nami gritted her teeth, then looked up at Randy with a harsher glare than she’d fixed on anybody in, as far as she could remember, a while, “Apologizing to me for pulling a dick move, that’s what! And what the fuck was your motive, huh?”

“Not too bad, for me,” Randy said, “But kind of bad for the person it was targeting, so, I don’t wanna talk about it? It wouldn’t really make me kill anyone. But if I was a piece of shit about it, then it might make them kill me, for having the motive.”

“…So that’s what you had to deal with,” Nami said to Tsukasa, already softening, “I see. That’s the flip side of the motives, I guess. Knowing who has you as a target can also be a motivator, depending on the category. But how would you know?”

“You wouldn’t know, you just have to worry if you’ve got one of the reciprocal motives,” Randy said, “That’s what I figure, anyway. And Monokuma didn’t say how many of them would be reciprocal, so everybody can have that fear!”

“That’s smart, Randy!” Tsukasa said.

“…Yeah, it is,” Nami admitted, “I, um. I kind of want to be alone for a little while, so do you think that you two could go do. Whatever it is that you do?”

“Oh, we do all sorts of things,” Randy said with a devlish smirk.

“Not the time, Randy,” Tsukasa reprimanded him, then nodded to Nami before he climbed the
stairs once more and took Randy by the arm, leading him away.

And Nami was alone. The stairs in front of her. Dorms to the left, infirmary to the right. Everything that the Hospice Ward had to offer was within her sight right now. She wanted to be alone, she thought. But now that she was, she was going to lose it again. Lose track of herself. With no idea what that motive meant. With no idea what it could mean for her. Body count. Body count, body count. Zero.

0
10
100
0
Hey?
Not hey.
Rei.

“Rei Rei Rei Rei Rei Rei REI!” Etsuko was yelling. Etsuko was yelling? Where did he come from? Why was he saying Rei? Not her nickname? Not Akabanny?

Oh.

Etsuko collided with her, and she felt the wet smack of his wrist against her arm. She looked and saw blood. She didn’t fall over. He stood there, uninjured arm now clutching at the strap of her tank top as he looked up at her with horrified eyes, “Yumi? Yumi! Yumi. Yumi help me. Yumi. He did it again. Help me. Help me, help me. Help. Please. He did it again. I did it again. Because he did it again. Yuumi?”

Nami finally looked to his wrist. Ah. That was a lot of blood.


She wasn’t all there herself.

He was calling her Yumi, though.

She’d do what Yumi would do?

Yumi gently led Etsuko into the infirmary.
Once Nami had Etsuko in the infirmary, bandages on his wrist, she was herself again, in her own eyes and in his. But he didn’t want Nami there. He wanted Rei, and he wanted Yumi. Nami racked her brain for who Yumi could possibly be, and she finally remembered that Etsuko had called Shinjiro that, twice, yesterday when they first reunited. That made sense, too. Whatever connection those three had before getting stuck in here must have been pretty serious, if he was begging for them in this state.

Nami smacked a fist into her own palm at the realization, then took off up the stairs. Before Rei or Shinjiro, she found herself faced with Sayaka again. Ugh, she didn’t have time for this. But before she could tell Sayaka to fuck off, she had more important things to do, Sayaka had spoken herself.

“Nami… Why’s your fucking arm all bloody?” Sayaka sounded legitimately concerned with this request, even if she delivered it with such aggression, “Did something happen!?”

Nami looked to her arm. Yeah, that was a whole lot of blood. Back to Sayaka, “Yushu had a… He’s having a moment. I think he slit his wrist. I bandaged him up, but I need to find his friends. He won’t say anything meaningful to me.”

“Oh my god,” Sayaka said, and her voice began to quiver, “Nozomi… Was my motive. If that’s the case, and those three knew each other before, then they’ve probably, all… You… Have to help him!”

“I’m trying!” Nami exclaimed, pushing past Sayaka. She barely even processed whatever Sayaka had said to her. She was determined. Rei. Rei would be in Rei’s ward? Right? Nami hoped so. She ran through the halls, pain building in her chest. She didn’t do much running. Upstairs. She felt like she was going to throw up. Electrician’s ward. She threw the door open.

“Rei!” She exclaimed, forcing air through her breaking lungs to shout anyway, “Yushu needs you, down in the infirmary, in the Hospice Ward! He wants Nozomi too! Also what was your motive?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Rei said, standing up immediately from her workbench. At the sudden movement, the wires she’d been working with sent a shower of sparks across the table, but Rei didn’t even look back. She ran right out of her ward, then turned to the… Idol Ward? She opened the door, and, there was Shinjiro.

The Idol Ward was… Oh, Nami would deal with that later! She had no time to look at that shit right now! Rei said something to Shinjiro that Nami didn’t really catch, and before she knew it, all three of them were running again.

“Nami!” Rei got her attention as they practically fell down the stairs, “My motive target was Yamaguchi. We went to the same middle school. But, the thing about our middle school is, it wasn’t the normal kind. We went to a recovery school. A middle school, specifically created by Ultimate Hope… To rehabilitate all the children who had ever been rescued from the Cult of N.”

“I don’t know what that means!” Nami exclaimed through pained breaths. They were to the next set of stairs now. Just a little bit left, to Etsuko.

“The Cult of N,” Shinjiro explained, “As much as it pains me to admit it, is a particularly devout
section of Despair, dedicated to a certain Killing Game’s Mastermind. Their mission is to capture photographs of the ‘worst, most horrific despair possible’. Of course, what better way to accomplish that, than to photograph the instant that a child loses their innocence, in increasingly horrible ways?”

“So what you’re saying, is, Yushu’s episode… And why Yamaguchi was so freaked out when I told her about it…” Nami could hardly get the words out.

“Yes,” Rei said, “Chances are that something, probably his motive, somehow reminded him of what his keeper in the Cult of N did to him…”

“And for him!” Shinjiro added, “Such a thing is most severe, yes!”

“There,” Nami pointed to the infirmary, then frowned, “But, I don’t remember closing the door.”

“Maybe he closed it himself, for privacy,” Shinjiro said, then stepped forward and turned the knob. But, when he pushed against the door, it didn’t actually open, “Odd, it’s not… Locked.”

“Try knocking?” Rei offered, coming up behind him. Shinjiro did. Then waited. Waited a bit longer. Then, he turned to Rei, and Nami didn’t think that she’d ever seen such an awful look on anybody’s face. Not even Etsuko’s, when he knocked into her with a slit wrist just earlier that day.

“No… No way, No, it’s not…” Nami blinked, “Nobody passed me on the stairs or anything… He wasn’t alone for, long, at all. There’s no way!”


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01000011 01101111 01110101 01101110 01110100 00100000 01101001 01110011 00100000
00111111

“I’m going to find… Fujishiro,” Rei said, and left the scene. Shinjiro was frozen in place. So was Nami. Both of them were trying to process what they knew was true, probably. What had to be true. Why else would they be locked out here and he’s in there and they’re out here and he’s dead? He’s dead he’s dead he’s dead.

The Body Count was at least one.

It was at least one.

This was Nami’s fault.

Was her body count still the same as Kanoshi Kyousuke’s?

Was somebody dead somewhere else?

Shinjiro lost his friend.

Nami was losing her mind.

12:00 PM / 1200 Hours

Rei brought Mitsuru down to the infirmary level. She didn’t seem any calmer than when she’d left, Nami and Shinjiro hadn’t moved, and trailing Mitsuru was Sayaka. She must have been with him to help with his hospital fears. Was he there when Nami spoke to Sayaka? Was he? Yeah,
probably. Count, two. Two people were there. Mitsuru just wasn’t important in the moment. Now he was. He was the one person probably strong enough to open the door, whatever the issue was.

Nami resurrected, and stepped toward the door. Mitsuru lined up his shoulder with it, and ran full force to it, through it.

The door clattered off its hinges, and the barricade flew across the room. The cot. It reached the center of the room, then tipped over sideways, unceremoniously dumping.

Chunks.

The chunks of Etsuko.

Onto the ground.
“A body has been discovered!” Monokuma called out, “Er… If you can call that thing a body! Upupu ha… ha… It’s funny because it’s so very tragic! Anyway, report to the infirmary in the Hospice Ward that a bunch of you probably didn’t even realize existed! It’s right by the stairwell! I’ll mark it on your maps just in case you’re still too dumb to follow my directions.”

Nami stared at the chunks. Ten chunks. Ten. Body chunk count, ten?

Mitsuru had dropped to his knees in silence. Rei was screaming. She’d been screaming all the way through the announcement, not quite a scream of fear or shock. A drawn-out, agonizing scream of loss. Like she was cursing the world. Shinjiro was muttering to himself, something. Nami couldn’t hear it over Rei’s screaming. Sayaka, who shouldn’t have been shook by the sight of a body in this state, looked like she might cry.

Already?

Already, somebody was dead?

That wasn’t so shocking. Not when she spent the better part of a half hour processing it, while Rei searched for Mitsuru. The fact that someone died. Even the fact that Etsuko died.

But this.

This carnage.

It was a locked room mystery, wasn’t it? So shouldn’t it have been poison? Poison made sense. With poison, Etsuko could have barricaded the door himself, out of paranoia. With the cot. The incredibly heavy cot. Etsuko could do it if he kicked it, that was true. He had strong legs. He had them. Now they were thoroughly separated from his body, even if he was alive to notice or care. How did this happen?

Riko arrived. She didn’t make any sound when she discovered the body, but she turned around immediately, clutching her stomach. She seemed to have a weak constitution to begin with, and the state of the corpse wasn’t helping. It could only hurt. Moments later, Goro. He just put his hands on his hips and let out a perplexed, surprised, “Huh.”

Randy and Tsukasa returned, both of them making a similar sound. Relieved, but not quite. By the sound of the announcement, they probably thought it would be Nami, and then they’d be to blame for leaving her alone. Instead, it was Etsuko. Not that much relief to be had there, but a bit of it, in selfishness. Just enough that their noises were just the slightest bit less horrified than the others’ who made such sounds.

Tomoe was next. Nami knew this, because Tomoe didn’t make a sound, she just wrapped her arms around Nami’s waist, pulled her away from the crime scene, and held onto her for a while. When Nami’s breathing returned to normal… She’d been hyperventilating without realizing it? Tomoe made some soft shushing noises, then pulled away and looked her in the eyes as she whispered, “We’re going to have a Class Trial. You’re not allowed to forget this yet.”

“Am I in the habit of forgetting terrible things…?” Nami asked.

“You are,” Tomoe admitted, then let go of her completely, “But not yet, okay? Not yet.”
“Yeah…” Nami breathed, then turned to look at the stairs. A few more people had yet to arrive.
Yuuri was swearing up a storm before he even saw the body, and when he did, he kicked one of the
chunks across the room. Nobody bothered to say he was disturbing the evidence. Mitsuru already
did that by opening the room.

Kanoshi skipped the body completely and went straight to Sayaka’s side, trying his best to comfort
her.

Then, there was Box, coming from the dorms. She seemed to be in some sort of trance as she
moved, repeating to herself, “No, no, not this, no way, no, no, this isn’t right, no.”

And, Kaede and Tsumugi. Nami would have thought that the detective would be, at least
begrudgingly, on her way to investigate the crime scene. Instead, Tsumugi seemed to be thoroughly
dragging her.

“Everybody’s here now!” Monokuma proclaimed, “And now, your Monopads will contain the
Monokuma File. It’s everything you need about the body. Cause, well… Making students commit
to autopsies? That’s be deliciously cruel, but then you might never figure out the culprit, and I want
you to have a fair chance.”

Nami pulled her Monopad out, and found the file. Time of death, 1105. That was right after she
left. Well, it would have to be. They got back at 1115. Fifteen minutes to run there and back… That
seemed right, she was really out of shape. Cause of death, beheading. Nami assumed that meant it
was the first part done. If it was the rest of the dismemberment, he probably would have bled out
before beheading could be the cause, especially with what he lost to his self-harm. So, he didn’t
have to suffer. That was good. If anything about this could be good, it was that.

Rei was quiet now.

“Akamatsu,” Randy said, “It’s time to investigate, right?”

“You do it,” Kaede said, holding her arms close around herself, “I told you. I won’t be
investigating much in this game. I don’t want that on my head.”

“But… It’s okay if it’s on my head?” Randy asked, and Kaede flinched at the accusation, “Come
on, Akamatsu. If you and me and Shirogane all investigate together, then it’s nobody’s fault, right?
Right?”

Kaede pulled in a sharp breath through her teeth, but, “Okay. If we split the work, I guess, it
should be fine…”

“I want to investigate too,” Nami said, stepping away from Tomoe.

“Are you…” Tomoe said, “Sure that you’re in a condition to do that?”

“Yeah, I can do it,” Nami said, giving a nod in her direction, “It’s just my motive’s still screwing
me up. Yushu died because I wasn’t careful enough, leaving him alone in the infirmary. So, I need
to make it up to him by finding out who killed him.”

“Nice! I knew deep in my heart that Nami definitely had a keen sense of justice!” Randy said,
giving an ‘ok’ symbol with his fingers next to his cheek as he grinned, “So we should split up,
right? Four people investigating the same place is kind of overkill.”

“Here’s how we should split it,” Shinjiro said, “I’ll go with Nami. Reicchi will go with Shirogane.
Akamatsu and Sempers will work together as well, yes? Splitting it that way ensures that no team
of two will be able to conspire to tamper with the evidence. Pairing Reicchi and myself, or Shirogane and Akamatsu, would indeed run that risk… Nami, here. Let’s investigate the body first.”

“Right,” Nami said, glancing over as the other investigative pairs dispersed to other areas. This place was so large, that gathering all the evidence in whatever amount of time they were given would be a challenge. Time management on top of everything else. And it would just get worse as more Ultimate Wards became available. She wasn’t sure why Shinjiro wanted to be the group that had to deal with the body, but she wouldn’t complain. They walked into the infirmary together, and Shinjiro crouched down by the chunks, starting to go through Etsuko’s pockets.

Nami took to looking at the rest of the infirmary, herself. From one wall, two scalpels were missing, but that couldn’t have been the murder weapon. Couldn’t cut through bone.

The cot. Toppled onto its side, Nami investigated. There was blood all over the top, and dripping down the sides, so it was the location of the murder. She grabbed at it and shook, finding that it was ridiculously heavy for a cot. She became more impressed with Mitsuru’s strength. The cot had wheels, but they were locked in place, and as far as Nami could tell, had been the whole time she was in here with Etsuko too.

Though, there was a small, red string tied to one of the locking bits. Nami unlocked the wheel, then tugged on the string. It locked again. Curious.

Against the far wall was the chunk that Yuuri had kicked. One of Etsuko’s hands. Nami walked over and investigated; It was the one he’d slit himself, the cut to remove it from his arm slightly off from where he’d hurt himself, just proximal to where the bandages ended. Nami removed them again, and looked more closely at the self-inflicted wound.

“He had a scalpel in his pocket,” Shinjiro said, “I’ll assume that’s what he used to hurt himself with. You would agree, yes?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “The wound seems consistent with that. We should still check a few places, though. His room, the kitchen, for if it’s possible he used a normal knife… Or what the murder weapon was.”

“Oh, we absolutely should!” Shinjiro agreed, “I’d also very much like to speak with Bakura, yes… After all…” He held out Etsuko’s Monopad, and Nami read the motive listed there.

**Worst PTSD Trigger:**

Goro Bakura.
“If it was a reciprocal motive…” Nami breathed the words, “Then, hot damn, it’s Bakura’s fault that Yushu had that episode, huh? Let’s go investigate Yushu’s room, and you can tell me more about why that happened.”

“Yes,” Shinjiro agreed, turning to leave the infirmary, “Seeing as the cat’s already out of the bag on the Cult of N. I won’t be elaborating on anything about my time with them, of course. That isn’t something that I need to be discussing. Regarding Etsukun’s, however… He was only rescued a year before we met in middle school, he spent enough time there to develop Stockholm Syndrome. He was always talking about how he wished to go back, but there were a few things that reminded him that it really was awful, indeed…”

“And the worst one?” Nami prompted.

Shinjiro took a deep breath, then answered, “His ‘keeper’ would punish him for misbehavior by holding his head underwater until he nearly drowned. He would hold him by the back of the neck when he did this. So, being grabbed there would catapult him out of his blind loyalty and optimism, into a complete panic.”

Nami thought back to that time when Goro scratched the back of his neck in an attempt to seem casual and visibly cringed instead, “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

1:00 PM / 1300 Hours

Without speaking any more, they closed the distance to Etsuko’s room. Even though Shinjiro had Etsuko’s Monopad, he first tried the door without it. It opened, confirming the suspicion that the Monopads weren’t necessary to enter rooms during an investigation. The room was in more disarray than Nami expected that it would be. Definitely looked like there had been a struggle.

There were scratch marks on the door inside, the rug was pulled up more thoroughly in one corner. There was another scalpel by the doorframe. There was an indent in the bed’s pillow, an indent that didn’t seem typical of somebody having been asleep on it. The room’s loose contents were strewn all about.

“Hm,” Shinjiro observed.

“Hm,” Nami agreed, then walked further into the room and spoke again, pointing to the pillow, “I dunno what all happened in this room, but I think I can guess that Yushu was held against this pillow, face-down…”

“Yes, I would agree,” Shinjiro said, running his hand along the side of the bed’s comforter, then returned to the doorframe and picked up the scalpel, “This one has blood on it too. But, it’s more dried out. There are wood shavings too.”

“Wood shavings?” Nami asked, wandering over to take a look at it. Yep, thoroughly dried blood and wood shavings, “I guess this is what made those scratches on the inside of the door, though. They were between the knob and the doorframe, so I guess that whoever had this was trying to get the lock open? So it wouldn’t have been Yushu.”

“I’ll assume Bakura was trapped in here until the body announcement, until we find other information,” Shinjiro said, and at his statement of Goro’s name, he bristled, which only continued
into his next words, “What I can’t understand is… If they shared a trigger like that, what sort of person would purposefully use that against somebody, knowing how it feels?”

“Bakura’s kind of a Devil’s Advocate, though,” Nami admitted.

“Talking about me?” Goro asked, having walked in behind them.

“Ah!” Shinjiro whirled, then jabbed a finger into Goro’s chest, “So you return to the scene of the crime! Utilizing your reciprocal motive like that-”

“My motive? It has nothing to do with this case, though,” Goro said, pulling out his Monopad, “Here. Take this, and I’ll leave the room. Then you can see what motive I got! It has nothing to do with any of this!”

Nami took his Monopad, then Goro left the room again. It flickered to life, reading out…

**Trustworthiness:**

Box Hako.

Yeah, that really didn’t have anything to do with this case, did it? She opened the door and spoke to him again, “Sorry. We assumed the motive was reciprocal, because Yushu’s was… Category, Worst PTSD Trigger, target, Goro Bakura.”

“Well,” Goro took his Monopad back from her, smirking in Shinjiro’s direction, “Evidently, that’s not the case. Of course, if you think something like that is relevant to the case, then it’s possible somebody else had a motive that pointed to him in the same category. Necks are sensitive areas after all. Such a thing could be a trigger for plenty of people, right?”

“Oof, that’s true,” Nami admitted, then looked to Shinjiro, “So, Bakura’s not the target of your ire anymore?”

“Now I don’t have a target for my ire… I’d almost think that’s more troubling than being angry with the wrong person,” Shinjiro said, stroking his own chin, “This is… Frustrating. So now we have an unknown killer, and an unknown emotional attacker. I suppose they could be the same person, though… If not for the signs that whoever was responsible got trapped inside Etsukun’s room.”

“Well, good luck with that!” Goro said, but then hesitated and turned back around, “Ohh, I dunno if it’s important or not, but I do know that Hako’s motive isn’t a reciprocal one. My motive pointed to her, but her motive pointed to Akamatsu. I dunno the category, but I got the target outta her at least!”

“ Weird,” Nami said, “So far, the only reciprocal motives I’ve heard about are Tomoe and Asahi… I wonder if Monokuma emphasized their existence as a way to throw us off, when most of them actually aren’t?”

“Totally possible,” Goro said, then saluted, “I’ve gotta do some stuff, though! My own investigating. You’re done with the body, right? I can’t tamper with anything and raise suspicion on myself?”

“Right,” Nami said, then once Goro was gone, looked to Shinjiro again, “There isn’t any possible way, that he’s lying, since he showed us his Monopad… But, that just means he wasn’t responsible for that bit, right?”
“Ah… Oh. Ohh,” Shinjiro realized, then closed his eyes with a humorless chuckle, “I see. Yes, we should return to his ward. There were a few things about his ward that were strange, after all, when I was in there myself. We can’t neglect the possibility that he returned there at some point while you and I were standing in shock…”

“Anyone could have gotten past us at that point, that’s true,” Nami said, “But, it’s not like anybody would be able to count on that happening. Nobody here knows both of us well enough to know that we’d start dissociating at the idea that Yushu could be dead.”

“Fair point,” Shinjiro said, then walked back to the stairs, “I still think he’s suspicious, though.”

“Oh, yes, absolutely,” Nami agreed, “He might have planned on a murder before the motives were even delivered, too, and something that seemed trivial about his ward might mean something now that it’s happened…”

“Yes. That ward, and then the kitchen,” Shinjiro said, “And, hopefully we’ll have the time to do that! But I do trust, yes, that the other pairs will have covered all the areas that we can’t before time runs out…”

“Before we go there, I have one thing I want to check too,” Nami said, dashing down the hallway to open Room Twelve, Riko’s. Nothing strange about it, though. Her food was finished, the dishes sitting in plain sight on her desk. Moving on, Nami walked to the stairwell, and made her way up. She bypassed the Hospitality Ward for now, continuing up to investigate the Idol Ward. She approached it, and pushed the door open.
The Idol Ward was, in fact, incredibly strange. Nami didn’t know what she was expected a ‘talent development ward’ for a pop-punk idol to look like, or what she even would have expected if it was based only on Goro’s personality, and not his talent at all. Even so, whatever she didn’t know she was expecting, it sure wasn’t this.

Similar to the other wards, it had two different varieties of large object on the floor, and then items pushed up against the walls. It looked more like Tomoe’s though, only having substantial wall items on the back wall, the rest of them plastered up not with newspapers this time, but posters. The posters weren’t of Goro though, or even of anybody who was really in the same field as him. They were of other people in entertainment though, that much was obvious. A classical musician, a comedian, a magician… With their faces scratched out.

The back wall’s contents were candy shelves. The sort that would be at a candy store or certain movie theaters, filled with snacks. Mostly sours, gummies, those sort of candies, but not everything in there was candy. There were other things in there too. Raisins, popcorn, and… Ah, those were dried ants. Nami was less surprised by those.

Meanwhile, the floor items. The back area had one karaoke machine flanked by seats, while the front area had sewing machines, with piles of fabric and bins full of stuffing (both the fluffy sort, and polyfil beads) strewn about between them. Nami turned to Shinjiro, “So, are these sewing machines the reason you were in here earlier?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Shinjiro agreed, “There’s a surplus of fabric here… And I was trying to modify some of the kimonos from my closet as well. I only dress in that manner to utilize my talent, after all… I prefer a more masculine fashion in my everyday life, yes.”

“I think it looks better on you,” Nami said.

“Thank you,” Shinjiro said, then put a hand on her shoulder to get her to look at his soft smile, “You, too. It’s nice to see your shoulders. I understand being cold, but the sweatshirt look really makes you seem as if you’re hiding.”

“Ah-” Nami made a small sound, then brought her hands in close to her chest, “Well, I don’t know. I guess that seeing people like you and Randy helps me to feel a little bit more comfortable, with the way that I am…”

“People like me?” Shinjiro asked, then brought a hand to his face as he chuckled, “Well, Mister Sempers, of course. But I’m not transgender, Nami. I’ve got a dick.”

“Ehh?” Nami questioned, recoiling from him only in surprise, “But you’re so… I mean, what??”

“I can see how you might think something like that, of course,” Shinjiro said, folding his hands in front of himself, “The thing is, I am a man. And I was born with what most consider to be a male body. However, I also have a feminine name that I can hardly stand, and there are some disconnects with my appearance and my gender. Can I trust you not to tell anybody, if I explain the reason why?”

Nami nodded, “I mean, you won’t tell anyone about me, on the off chance that I’m actually passing, right?”

“Of course. Though, with Kaguya spouting on about how you’re her darling little sister, I don’t
think anybody would get the wrong idea about you anyway. I only figured it out because of the stark difference in your bra sizes. Not that I was looking,” Shinjiro said, keeping that tranquil smile on his face even as he dove into his explanation, “I don’t enjoy speaking about my time in the Cult of N, the time I had to spend with Tatsuya Minami. But I’ll explain his impact on my identity. I’ve always been Shinjiro Nozomi, but to him, I was Yumi. Clothing, hairstyles, even medication. Anything to shape me into the image of ‘Yumi’. In my time with him, I had my very gender violated. So, technically speaking, I am cis. But I can understand your struggles, in some way.”

“That’s… So not fair!” Nami whined, “A rich politician can get ahold of estrogen, just to fuck you up with it? But I can’t?”

“You haven’t?” Shinjiro asked, “You could have fooled me.”

“Oh… Huh,” Nami looked down at her own hands, and squeaked, just a bit, just softly, in her first moment of pleasant surprise yet, “Maybe I did. But I don’t remember it, and, ah, won’t the effects start to fade if I don’t keep getting it during the Killing Game?”

“Upupu! This is a hospital, isn’t it?” Monokuma interrupted, appearing out of nowhere, “You’ll obviously be provided with any medicine that you need. Anybody needs hormones? They got em. Insulin? Ya doi. I don’t want anybody getting sick or anything in a way that’s unrelated to the Killing Game! That’s boring and inhumane.”

“Killing Games are inhumane,” Nami said.

“Look,” Monokuma said, its eye glinting as it shook one paw in Nami’s direction, “You want it or not?”

“Of course I do!” Nami exclaimed, showing a little bit more emotion than she usually would. Her voice nearly cracked. She covered her mouth and glanced at Shinjiro, “Er, sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for here,” Shinjiro said, then turned back to the ward, “But, nothing in this room seems to have changed, since I was in here earlier. We should hoof it to the cafeteria if we wish to investigate the knife status before we run out of time!”

“Yes, the knife status!” Nami agreed, then turned and left the ward, instead making her way back down to the Hospitality Ward. She had no idea how much time they’d have to investigate, or anything like that. She and Shinjiro walked into the dining hall, and went directly to the kitchen.

“There…” Shinjiro observed, heaving a heavy sigh, “Are no knives missing. That’s a disappointment. I thought for sure, with the process of elimination, I could determine the murder weapon here… But, what else in the hospital could possibly make it all the way through like that? It doesn’t have to be strong enough to cut bone, just skin and ligaments, but even so, a large, bladed weapon would be necessary, especially with the brief period of time in which-”

“It probably was a knife,” Nami said from where she stood, next to the sink, “The culprit just managed to return it. The sink’s wet… Monokuma did the dishes, right? So if anybody washed off any cutlery or anything recently enough that this water wouldn’t have evaporated, it would have to be, that they were getting rid of the blood.”

“Ah-” Shinjiro exclaimed, then reached out and pulled several knives from the block, “In that case, I’ll bring to the courtroom… Any knife of a variety which could have been capable of such swift dismemberment. Perhaps having them at hand will still assist us in discovering the culprit. That water was a good find, Nami! You have a keen eye for such details, do you not?”
“I guess I do,” Nami said, swaying a bit in content at the praise for something she actually had control over, “And you have the knowledge of what sort of knives are suitable for swift dismemberment! We’re both helping.”

“Ahaha… When you put it like that, doesn’t it make me sound like a total creep, though?” Shinjiro asked, his voice still pitched up and breathy as usual. He didn’t come across as intimidating at all, with a tone like that. It sounded like he’d woken up a few seconds ago, all of the time.

“Maybe a little,” Nami said anyway, “But it’s still important, isn’t it? Even so, I hope that the others found more useful evidence than we did. I don’t feel like I have any idea who the culprit could be.”

“We’ll find the truth,” Shinjiro said, “Through the class trial we’ll reach an answer. I do not feel the need to hesitate at all. It doesn’t matter who it was… Somebody who would kill Etsukun truly deserves to be executed with impunity!”

“That’s what Mister Monokuma likes to hear!” Monokuma exclaimed, appearing again, then its voice came out of the intercom simultaneously to its address of them, “The time is now **2:00 PM**, a full two hours since the body discovery. Please report to the lowest floor of the Empty Wings, and we’ll get this Class Trial started!”
Nami and Shinjiro made their way to the location that Monokuma requested of them. Across to the empty wings, downstairs, and checking their Monopads proved that there was a new area. Well, not completely new, but the walls between a number of the smaller rooms seemed to have been knocked down. The pair walked into the new, larger room, and Monokuma was standing there.

It greeted them, “Hi again! I just saw you two! You’re the first ones here, but this is where you’re supposed to be. The courtroom is one story below this, and it’s only accessible when somebody’s died. Even if I wanted to get in there any other time, I wouldn’t be able to! The elevator demands blood sacrifice. Though, as I’m sure you already figured, it isn’t picky about virginal blood or anything!”

“You’re… Weird,” Nami said, then crossed her arms and sat down on one of the rickety cots that were still in the room. All the cots in the Empty Wings were flimsy things, nowhere near as heavy as the one in the infirmary, and didn’t have wheels at all. They were light enough for basically anyone to lift. But, they still sufficed as a temporary chair while Nami waited for the Class Trial to begin.

Shinjiro did similarly, sitting down on a different cot, but near enough to continue speaking with her, and he did, “Nami… About our conversation earlier. I realized, it may have been insensitive of me, to speak as flippantly as I did about what’s surely a serious problem you face-”

“I don’t know… If I’d call it serious,” Nami said, “I mean, on principle, it is. It always is. But, personally, maybe it’s just because of my amnesia. I don’t know if it’s ever caused me large amounts of grief or anything, it’s more like, an inconvenience. I don’t want to have to care about the way other people perceive me… The more apathy I can impress upon myself, the less likely I am to get upset about stuff, I guess. Thanks to Tomoe, it’s never been a big thing, though.”

“Ahh,” Shinjiro said, laughter tinging his words, “Yes, that’s perfectly understandable! But that sort of thing never works out in the long run. And I can see it in you. I bet that you want to dress cute!”

“I couldn’t pull it off,” Nami said, rubbing the side of her arm as she glanced away from him, “I’m better off just hiding. This right now that I’m wearing is just because I got kind of comfortable, around you guys, as people. I don’t think I could ever really show more skin than this… And I sure couldn’t look good doing it.”

“Hm, that’s understandable,” Shinjiro said, “I know that if I were asked to wear a tuxedo, even having certain advantages over somebody like Mister Sempers… Ahh, would I just look completely out of place, in something so strikingly masculine? So, I suppose, I can relate to that sentiment, yes! Even so, I believe that you could do it. You may not even realize how much your situation impacts you, but it’s clearly, if nothing else, sapped your confidence.”

Nami didn’t respond to this, just closing her eyes as she leaned back on her hands against the cot. Thinking about it, well, Shinjiro was kind of right about that. Tomoe had always protected Nami from what could hurt her… Well, excluding this mysterious incident in middle school. But Tomoe also held Nami back. Protected her from suffering, but also protected her from thriving. But, that made Nami think…

Who could it possibly have been, who always teased her by calling her Kaguya-hime? She knew it happened. That was one thing that was definitely lodged in her memory, even if it lacked in
context. She didn’t remember knowing anybody but Tomoe. Tsukasa said he remembered her from middle school, but somehow, she didn’t think that he would have joked about her being a princess.

It must have been… After Tomoe left?

“Nami,” Speak of the devil, Tomoe snapped her out of her thoughts, complete with a hand on her shoulder, “How did the investigation work out for you?”

“Pretty good,” Nami said, keeping her answer vague out of respect for Shinjiro’s privacy, “Nozomi and I could get along well, and we found a few things that will… Probably be useful, once the trial actually gets going.”

“And you’re okay?” Tomoe asked, “No more episodes?”

“No more episodes,” Nami said with a firm nod, “After I started investigating it was like… There were too many things to notice, for me to get hung up on the situation or anything like that. I just want to find out the truth, now.”

“Wow,” Tomoe said, smiling, “I’m… Impressed. Maybe you do have an Ultimate Talent after all, darling.”

“Huh?” Nami blinked at those words, “I thought Bakura told you what my Ultimate Talent was.”

“He did,” Tomoe said, brushing off her shoulder, “I can’t say I believed him, though. After all, I know you better than anybody, and the talent he told me was… Implausible, for you to have. I wouldn’t want to tell you what it was and have you thinking you had to live up to something you’re not just because some garbage celebrity has some delusional belief that this impossible talent is what makes you a Goddess. So, no. I don’t believe you have the talent he says you do, honey. You could have a different one, though.”

“I see,” Nami said, “I still don’t think I’d really have one, though. An Ultimate Talent seems like a really difficult thing to forget.”

Tomoe sat down on another cot, across from Nami, “It’s completely possible you awakened to some talent after I left, of course. But not the one Bakura seems to think of you. Speaking of him, have you considered that he’s a suspect?”

“Totally,” Nami said, then pointed a thumb back towards Shinjiro.

“Ah, that’s my cue!” Shinjiro said, crossing his legs as he leaned forward to address Tomoe, “He’s quite suspicious, as far as I’m concerned. After all, he was the target of Yushu’s motive. Though, he let us see his, and it wasn’t reciprocal.”

“Who did his motive point to?” Tomoe questioned. Randy and Kaede walked into the room, but neither of them said anything.

“Oh, it said that he shared ‘trustworthiness’ with Miss Hako,” Shinjiro said, “Which is, unfortunately, either a glowing commendation on his part, or a searing condemnation on hers.”

“Mmm…” Tomoe made a soft sound, cupping her chin in one hand, “Trustworthiness. That’s a hard thing to measure, isn’t it? Perhaps it’s more like, they tell an equal amount of lies on average. After all, Bakura rarely seems to tell an outright lie.”

“No, that’s what it is,” Nami said, with a short gasp of realization, “Trustworthiness… You can trust anything Bakura says to you, because he seems to always believe whatever he says, himself!
The only lies he’s told me are, lies by omission. Keeping my talent a secret. So maybe it’s not as extreme, right? Hako just keeps the same number of secrets as he does, however that’s being measured."

Tomoe stood up from her cot, “Even so, with Hako being the target of a man like that,” Yuuri and Kanoshi arrived to the room, silent as well as Tomoe’s voice went cold, “Monokuma, what happens if a second body is discovered after the trial announcement’s been made?”

“Eh?” Monokuma questioned, “Well, the investigation is extended. That’s only natural, right?”

“I see,” Tomoe said, “I’m going to go look for her.”

“Wait,” Nami said, reaching out to grab her twin sister’s wrist, holding her in place with a tight grip. She was scared. Somehow, she’d come to a sudden conclusion, and it had her heart racing, confusion filling her head as she voiced it, “You’re actually, seriously worried that Bakura’s killed Hako while we were all investigating? And… Since when is he a man, and not a little boy, huh?”

“Since,” Tomoe said, turning back to look Nami in the eyes, “He tried to kill me yesterday.”
“Bakura did… What… Now?” Nami questioned, her grip on Tomoe’s wrist tightening as panic began to overtake her, “He tried to kill. Kill you? He said he wouldn’t do that! He said he’d only kill you if I wanted him to! You know I wouldn’t! You know I need you, Tomoe! No matter how much you might be overbearing, I can’t imagine… If you were dead…”

“Well, then that’s one outright lie we know that he’s told, isn’t it?” Tomoe asked, and Nami finally let go of her wrist. She held it close to herself and rubbed at it with a frown, “Of course, that does imply that Hako’s lied to us too, now. What a motive… Bakura probably showed it to you specifically to get us debating over the meaning of trust like this.”

“Hello, everyone,” Seconds later, just enough that she probably didn’t hear what Tomoe said, Box walked into the courtroom lobby. Mitsuru and Sayaka trailed after her before she even spoke again, “I’m afraid I must report, I had no idea what I should be looking for, and instead spent most of the investigation drinking grape juice in the cafeteria. I ran into Fujishiro and Yamaguchi on the way here.”

“You weren’t in the cafeteria when Nami and I investigated there,” Shinjiro said.

“I said most of the investigation, not all of it, didn’t I?” Box asked, hands clasped at her chest and such a pronounced pout on her face that the words which should have come across as bitchy, instead just made her seem like a wounded bird, “I did find a set of stairs to the next Ultimate Wards that wasn’t there before, when I went wandering around a bit before the trial announcement, but they were barricaded off so I didn’t know if it mattered…”

“Ah, that explains it,” Shinjiro said, then looked to the door, “Ah, Reicchi. Shirogane. Where did you investigate that has you arriving back so late?”

“Top floor of the Empty Wings,” Tsumugi answered, “We didn’t think there would be anything important there to find, given that it’s plainly clear neither of us are much suited to conducting an investigation! As it was, though, we actually did find something. Not sure if it has bearing on the case… We’ll share it during the trial.”

“Good work, Tsumugi,” Kaede said, showing her a dumb thumbs-up as if she was a pop team epic character.

A few moments later, the three remaining Ultimates arrived in the lobby. Tsukasa, Riko, and Goro.

“You’re awful late,” Tomoe said, her words directed mostly at Goro, somewhat at Tsukasa, and not at all at Riko. She seemed to have become somewhat fond of the sickly girl. Probably also contributed to her willingness to let Nami do her own thing, if she was starting to get attached to other people here.

“Got Stuck,” Riko’s whiteboard read, with no further elaboration.

“By which she means!” Tsukasa cut in, “We discovered something super weird! Bakura helped us out. Asahi and I were going up the stairs, and she started feeling faint. When she leaned against the railing on the landing, it gave out, and she got completely trapped between the stairs and the wall! I couldn’t figure out how to help her out… Then Bakura showed up, he climbed down with her and found a panel that moved enough for them both to squeeze out. But it took a while.”

Riko nodded her affirmation. That was what happened.
Tomoe seemed sated, for now. Monokuma, on the other hand, was bouncing from leg to leg, antsy as all get out. As all get out!

“Come on, come on! You’re all here now! Let me give it a whirl with the fancy-schmancy Monokuma Courtroom Elevator reveal! The best, most impressive moment in any Killing Game! The first time that the participants understand that this place truly was built for killing!”

“You saying that before you reveal the elevator really weakens the impact, you know,” Box said, pointing two fingers at Monokuma almost like finger-pistols, but not quite, “Plus, we already knew that. Ultimate Wards and all. Could it be you’re getting sick of Killing Games, after fifty-three of them?”

“No way!” Monokuma exclaimed, waving its arms around over its head, “The Killing Game will never die! It’s the one thing with immunity! Even I could die, but the concept of the Killing Game won’t! There’s no way to kill a beloved tradition like this one! Besides, How could I get bored of engineering these things? It’s what I was made for! Like this building! Whoa-popo!”

“You are bored!” Box accused, “That’s not your signature laugh at all!”

“Well, I’m bored right now, cause you bastards are stalling! Come on, we gotta have a Class Trial! Class Trial!”

With that, the floor gave way. Luckily, everybody was sitting on cots, or close to the door, leaving them out of the way of the panels which slid away. A large box emerged, with two doors on the front of it. The elevator, which had just risen up out of the ground. Nami didn’t care what Box said, that still shook her. She didn’t have time to think about that, though.

“Fascinating!” Rei exclaimed, her voice full of awe but her eyes somehow blank. Without any sparkle, and it was probably Etsuko’s death that caused that, “No cable… Is this an electromagnetic elevator? I heard that a great inventor called Amami was making great strides on developing this technology… But, didn’t he go missing before he could ever take it out of the prototype stage?”

“This… This electromagnetic elevator has got nothing to do with that hack inventor!” Monokuma snapped, seeming genuinely annoyed at the mention of that name for… Some reason, “This is one hundred percent original Monokuma innovation, and don’t you fucking forget it!”

“Oh, okay,” Rei said, deflating.

“No no no!” Monokuma protested, “Rei, you’re not a hack for following his research or anything! You’re totally perfect or, whatever girls wanna hear. Now get in the damn elevator.”

“Yes, Monokuma,” Sayaka said, sarcasm dripping from her voice as she nonetheless broke the threshold, the first of the group to enter the elevator. She turned and rolled her eyes at the others, “Well? Don’t you want to know who the fuck killed Yushu, and on day two to boot? We won’t find that out up here!”

“His killer still didn’t break the last game’s record, though,” Goro said, “So, I mean. Either they’re a pussy, or we did a pretty good job on preventing deaths for a little while!”

“You’re not somebody who should be saying that,” Kaede said, glaring at him, “I was here, you know. I heard what you did.”

“Let’s save the deathglares and accusations for the courtroom, okay?” Goro said, waving a hand as if he was simply being accused of swiping a cookie, and not, you know, attempted murder.
Begrudgingly, everybody else piled into the elevator. Once everyone was in, there wasn’t even the opportunity for them to say anything. The doors slammed shut, and the elevator shot straight down, at such a speed that Box, Mitsuru, and Tsukasa all yelped in surprise. Nami was surprised that Kanoshi didn’t, but everybody else was definitely composed enough not to be started by Monokuma’s elevator being so speedy.

It clattered into the courtroom, and the doors slid open. There were podiums in a circle, each labeled with a plaque on the front that read off names.

“Technically, you don’t have to take the podiums labeled with your names, but you’d lose your podium to the dead placards if you did that,” Monokuma said from a folding chair, on a stack of boxes at the head of the circle, “By the way, I didn’t actually expect you to be super fast after last night’s fluke, so, my throne’s in the shop. I promise I’ll look regal the next time somebody dies!”

Nami spotted what he meant by ‘dead placard.’

It was morbid, the head cartoonishly disconnected from his torso, but at least it wasn’t grotesque or anything like that. Even the X struck through his desaturated portrait wasn’t quite the color of blood.

Nami went to the podium labeled with her name.
“Welcome, one and all, to the first case of the Fifty-fourth Annual Killing Game!” Monokuma exclaimed from on high, “The victim was Etsuko Yushu, the Ultimate Runner. His poor classmates were just barely scratching the surface of the fact he wasn’t as pure as he seemed, when he was brutally murdered in the hospital’s provisional infirmary. And the culprit? That’s on you to find. Rah rah! Take down the blackened!”
Trial Number One: Commence.

"Let’s start by going over what we know about the case!" Randy called out, then paused a minute, "It's okay if I take the lead here, right, Kaede?"

"Yeah, it's fine," Kaede said with a small chuckle, "You're off to a great start, Randy. Keep going."

"Okay!" Randy exclaimed, then continued on as instructed, "The victim was Etsuko Yushu. The time of death was 1105, the cause of death was beheading, and the location was the provisional infirmary. So obviously, the best way to get started on a case like this is to figure out alibis, right?"

"Yes," Sayaka said, "That's a bit complex, though. I think that I can give some insight on the matter, though. At 1101, approximately, Nami Kaguya came upstairs to the Hospitality Ward. Fujishiro and I were discussing the motives, as he’s very easy to talk to. We can vouch for each other. Until Nami returned from the Ultimate Ward with Akabane and Nozomi, nobody else came upstairs or went downstairs. The two of us stayed in that vicinity the entire time."

"So the only possible suspects are people who were already downstairs?" Riko asked, and everyone turned to stare. Huh? Upon looking, though, they saw that for the purpose of the trial, she'd been provided with a surprisingly advanced text to speech device. It sounded like she actually said it, not at all robotic, "That narrows the suspect list a bit, I believe. Unfortunately, it does cast doubt on me."

"Let's see…" Tsumugi chimed in, "We can determine who was where, by the directions they came from during the body discovery, right? So myself and Kaede are certainly on that list as well. We were in my dorm, Room number two, until we arrived on the scene."

"Bakura, Asahi, and Hako," Sayaka said, leaning against her podium, "Were the other three who came from that direction. Everybody else came downstairs. I was there for the discovery, and I was paying attention as other people arrived. It's just you five who are suspects in this case, given that this is not a murder which could have possibly been committed remotely."

"Well, let's see!" Box said, sounding more chipper than she should after being outed as one of the primary suspects in this case, "The five of us are full-blown suspects, of course. We have no alibi, access to the crime scene. Being in our own rooms, that gives us absolutely no excuse. Shirogane and Akamatsu are close enough, they'd vouch for the other in a situation like this, I have no doubt. Even through a murder those two would stick by each other. With that in mind, the suspect count is still five."

"We need to start looking for evidence that points in a certain direction, then!" Randy said, "I'll go first. Kaede and I investigated the gift shop, and all the Ultimate Wards but the Idol Ward. We didn't get to that one in time. Not sure how we lost track of time so badly, but we spent more time than we should have in the Journalist Ward. In the gift shop, we found that one of the pairs of woolen gloves for sale disappeared. We found said woolen gloves in the Tutoring Ward, hidden on top of some of the books on the top shelf. They were bloodstained. Kaede gets all the credit for this bit! She spotted them with her keen, natural detective eyes! In the Electrician ward, there was one packet of ginseng on the floor. In the Journalist Ward, we found some weird photographs. But I do know now, why those photographs exist."

"Yes," Tomoe said, "Those photographs are the proof of Bakura's attack on me last night. Given
that he's also a suspect now, that's quite incriminating…"

"That's true!" Kaede confirmed, then pulled said photographs out and passed a few in each direction, to go around the circle. When Nami got some, she realized something she wasn't expecting to. Goro was wielding a scalpel in these photos too. Tomoe seemed to have turned around and snapped pictures at the last minute, then used her lab to print them out.

"Ah!" Nami realized, "Hako, you were in Tomoe's lab with her last night, when she would have been printing these. Did you know anything about the photos ahead of time?"

"Yes, Box said, puffing her cheeks out in frustration, "And, oh, doesn't that just make me sound awful? It's totally possible, that I saw the photos, and planned to have Bakura framed because there was evidence that he had killing intent. Yeah, possible. I didn't do that, though."

"Well, aiming to frame Bakura wouldn't have ended up working out for you, if that was your plan," Nami said, "Not that I'm accusing you! I don't think we have anywhere near enough information yet, but… I do think that we can eliminate one suspect."

"And that suspect is Bakura?" Shinjiro questioned, "Why? He's the most suspicious person here?"

"Yeah, why?" Goro asked, leaning almost completely over the front of his podium with a grin splitting his face, "I tried to kill your sister, after all! I lied to you, so what could give you the idea that I wouldn't do this? Go on, tell us, Nami! Tell us!"

"So you admit that much," Tomoe said.

"Hard to deny when you have photographic evidence," Goro said with an exaggerated shrug, "Of course, I did it for three reasons! Reason number one was that I kind of hate you. Number two was that I wanted to break that record! And reason number three, for pop-punk idol Goro-kun's attempted murder of the ice queen Kaguya… Is private. I don't have to be forthcoming with everything, right? Ah, but sorry, Hako. I keep digging you an even deeper grave with statements like that!"

"What do you mean?" Box asked.

"Ah, we'll sort that out later. I want to know why Nami thinks I didn't kill Yushu!"

"It is…" Shinjiro spoke up, having realized it, "Because of that scalpel, yes, Nami?"

"Ya, this scalpel," Nami said, then produced the item in question, "It's got a bunch of dried out blood on it and stuff. It's the one you used to try killing Tomoe, isn't it? It also had a bunch of wood shavings stuck to it, and there were tons of scratches next to the doorframe in Yushu's room. So this is also obviously what did that. You still stabbed Tomoe after she photographed you?"

"Only in the arm," Goro said, "I noticed, and recalibrated!"

"So you confirm this scalpel, which was found in Yushu's room, and was used to scratch at the doorframe in there, was yours?" Nami asked, "Seems pretty sus. By which I mean, the opposite of sus, in this one case, because it proves you were locked in until the body announcement went off and unlocked all the dorm room doors. You do have an alibi, and it's being trapped in Yushu's room."

"I sure do!" Goro exclaimed, then brought his hands up and squished his own cheeks in an exaggerated motion, "Ohh, but Nami! Why was I in Yushu's room to begin with? Could we have been doing scandalous things, just before he slit his own wrist and ran out of the room?"
"If we didn't already establish you were there, the fact that you knew that was a dead giveaway…"
Rei mumbled, "Nami only told a few people…"

"Actually, bitch, I could also know because I investigated the body for myself when those chucklefucks were done with it," Goro said, "But, yes. I suppose that's how I know it was self-inflicted. Ah, and of course, it wasn't me who did it directly! My scalpel's blood was all dried out, and besides. I wasn't trying to kill him. I just wanted to see what happened if I did the one thing that nobody should ever do to either of us!"

"Grabbing you by the back of the neck, right?" Shinjiro asked, "But, your motive wasn't reciprocal. You proved to us that you shared trustworthiness with Miss Hako. How could you have known that about him? He wouldn't have shared it with you openly."

"Yeah, I wonder!" Goro exclaimed, "Come on! I know you can get this! Figure it ooouut~!"
"That's not hard to figure out at all," Tsukasa said, "Just think about what Monokuma said to us. The screen will display your motive if you leave your Monopad in a separate room from yourself."

"Leave it to the CEO to figure out the wording problem!" Sayaka said, and while her tone was exasperated, it almost sounded like she was congratulating him.

"Yes, and we know that Bakura was also well aware of that, indeed," Shinjiro said, "For, that's how he proved his own motive to us. He handed us his Monopad, left the room, then waited for us to retrieve him, having read the result."

"So if Yushu forgot his Monopad in the cafeteria when we all left..." Kanoshi said, "Then, any one of us could have seen that his motive was... Well, what was it, exactly?"

"Worst PTSD Trigger, Goro Bakura," Goro answered, giving a mock salute, "And it's just chance that I noticed. Akabane even would have known that, if she thought about it! I told her myself, that I was going to return Yushu's Monopad to him so that he wouldn't be stuck outside of his room. Oh, and everyone else should have noticed too, we stood out in the hallway for a good amount of time. Anybody who went into the dorm area would have known Yushu and I were in that vicinity."

"I'm going to assume," Tsumugi said, "That the small amount of blood Akabane and I found in a room on the top floor of the Empty Wings, was from your murder attempt, Bakura?"

"That's a very safe bet!" Goro said, then let loose with an unhinged sort of cackle, "But, anyway. I have a real alibi for this situation now. Let's see, do you want a real breakdown of what happened? We spoke in the hallway for a while, then I returned his Monopad and we both walked into his room. He was confused by my actions, but didn't keep me from following. He sat down on his bed. I reached out, grabbed him by the back of his neck, and pushed him down into his pillow. He immediately started panicking. Much to my surprise, he had a scalpel of his own stashed in his pocket! He pulled it out, slashed his own wrist, then ran out, trapping me inside until the body discovery announcement. It was an act of futility, but I did try to jimmy the lock with my own scalpel."

"F is for futility," Nami said, "As in, this futile string of investigation has no meaning. The details of Bakura's behavior don't matter at all. We need to be thinking about who the actual culprit is, and how they did it!"

"I mean..." Yuuri spoke up, "Not to make myself sound like an idiot, but I definitely am, uh. Doesn't it make the most sense that Hako saw the photographs and tried to frame Bakura? Especially if they share the same goddamned trustworthiness!"

"It's very odd, indeed, that Bakura and I would be put on such a scale next to each other..." Box said, furrowing her brow and looking legitimately stressed out for the first time since anybody here had met her, "Really, that's a bizarre motive. As far my opinion on the category's application, well, it depends on what it qualifies as trust. It could be a good thing, for example, the fact that Bakura and I would both be ready to lay down our lives for people we care about. 'You can trust me with your life' is a sort of trustworthiness after all. 'I enjoy telling lies' is another. 'I haven't told you the whole truth', is another. For the first, or the final, in that list, I wouldn't be surprised to find that Bakura and I are in a similar vein, but it wouldn't actually condemn either of us in a meaningful way."
“That’s what Nami and I thought,” Tomoe said, “That the nature of that motive was for Bakura to share it, and make us distrust you unwarranted. You’re right, that either of those categories don’t paint you in an especially bad light. I do think that the right person could trust either of you with their life, and I also don’t believe pressing the matter of ‘the whole truth’ is conducive to solving this case or passing judgment on you.”

“Thank you,” Box said, then scratched at the bottom of her chin, “Besides, Bakura’s motive and mine weren’t reciprocal anyway. I didn’t know he had me as a target until now.”

“What was your motive, then?” Goro asked, “I bet it’s one of the lame ones, like number of siblings, or middle school!”

“Middle school’s actually a pretty fucked up motive,” Sayaka said, “For this particular group, anyway. I’m not gonna elaborate on this, but,” She held up her Monopad, the screen proving her words. Right, Monokuma did say that during a trial the motives would display publicly, “The fact that I went to the same school as Nozomi… Implies certain things about the both of us. Akabane and Yushu as well.”

“My motive wasn’t lame at all, though,” Box said, “By any stretch of the word… There’s a reason I said that I didn’t want to share mine at breakfast, even if that was contrary to my own advice,” She held up her Monopad, “Deepest secret, Kaede Akamatsu.”

“H-Huh?” Kaede questioned, staring at the screen which confirmed Box’s words, “That’s… Well, that’s not important right now. I can definitely see how that motive could prompt you to kill me, though. Thank you, for… Not doing that.”

“I never would!” Box said, bouncing on her heels, “After all. Getting away with murder here, means killing thirteen more people, even with the extra escapee. And I could never do that. To be completely honest! It’s the trolley problem, scaled up. The real solution to that is to do neither. Kill nobody. The trolley is going to stop after it makes a collision after all, in this theoretical problem. So just jump out. It will stop after it hits you. And that’s my worldview. It’s not that I don’t value my own life! I don’t wanna die. I just would rather die than let other people die.”

“You could just be saying that to throw us off your trail!” Yuuri exclaimed.

“Technically, I agree, that’s possible,” Tomoe said, “But I believe her. Nobody could speak with such conviction about something they didn’t believe one hundred percent…”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Randy spoke up again, “What about the murder weapon?”

“Ah, yes,” Shinjiro said, then spread the knives on his podium, “Nami and I collected all possible knives for dismemberment purposes from the kitchen. None were missing, but the sink was wet, so Nami guesses that whoever used it, cleaned off the knife.”

“Huh… So we’re going with the theory that it’s a knife from the kitchen?” Randy asked, then smirked, “In that case, I know who the culprit is!”

“You do?” Kaede asked.

Randy shrunk under her gaze, “Uh, at least, I think I do. Do you think it’s impossible to know yet?”

“Not impossible,” Kaede said, “So why don’t you go ahead and explain?”

“Okay!” Randy stood back up to his full height again, “Look, think about it. We have four suspects
to start with! Kaede, Shirogane, Asahi, and Hako. Three if we knock Hako off based on her character. But even if we still included her, there’s only one person who could have gotten ahold of the knife unnoticed!” He exclaimed, then pointed at his suspect, “And that’s you, who helped make breakfast, Riko Asahi!”
“No,” Riko’s text-to-speech answered. It was calm, which was an actual indicator of her current demeanor. With no hint of roboticism, the device even picked up on her intended inflections. And she didn’t elaborate.

“The Hell do you mean, no?” Yuuri questioned, “Randy’s right! You’re the only person with access to the knives and access to the infirmary at the right time!”

“Well, first of all, proclaiming that you know the culprit at this point,” Riko said, typing it with her eyes closed in a serene and unbothered state, “Is to make a mockery of justice, isn’t it? After all, there are several things you have yet to determine the nature of. The woolen gloves with blood on them, for example. You found those in the Tutoring Ward.”

“I assumed that Bakura used them when he attacked Kaguya last night, right?” Kanoshi asked, hands clasped in front of himself, “If they were from this culprit, how could they have gotten to my ward, after all? Wasn’t it the first place that Akamatsu and Sempers checked?”

“That’s true, it was,” Kaede said, “Well, second, but we didn’t spend much time in the gift shop…I think… And anyway, we watched Akabane and Shirogane go to the Empty Wings, nobody else went past us when we were in the gift shop. As for who used them, well, Bakura’s not wearing gloves in those photos, so they’re probably relevant to this case.”

“Which means nobody could have hidden the gloves during the investigation, right?” Riko prompted, “And Hako was in the cafeteria most of the investigation, too, so the culprit wouldn’t have had the opportunity to return the knife during it either.”

“So what you’re saying is…” Kaede realized, “With the information we have, this case seems completely impossible. There’s evidence upstairs, but only somebody who was already downstairs could have committed the crime. Yamaguchi and Fujishiro were both watching the stairs at the time the crime occurred, and we know where everybody was prior to that thanks to Nami’s witnessing of anyone who went upstairs before she did, and those two standing guard.”

“Could there be an accomplice?” Tsukasa asked.

“No way!” Randy called out, “Even if there was an accomplice, that person would have been seen.”

“Unless it was Fujishiro and Yamaguchi, and they’re covering for each other,” Goro offered up, “Is that possible?”

“Well, before we try to work out that,” Tsumugi said, “I mean, that’s completely confusing! It’s getting in the way. Asahi hasn’t cleared her name right now. The fact that there’s evidence in implausible places doesn’t clear anybody, because it seems like nobody could have accomplished that. We have to consider that a question for later and work with the evidence that makes sense…Right, Kaede?”

“Yes,” Kaede said, “So, Asahi. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“It’s still not possible for it to be me,” Riko said, “Did anybody investigate my room?”

“I poked my head in,” Nami said, raising a hand.
“And what did you see there?” Riko asked.

“Exactly what I thought I would,” Nami answered, tilting her head to one side, “It was clean, except for the dishes that were still on your desk.”

“And that’s why I couldn’t have done it,” Riko said.

Kaede seized upon this, “Ah, that’s right! Asahi really is innocent, if the dishes were still in her room! What Monokuma told us about the dishes, after all, was that they’d be cleaned up once left unattended by the ‘owner’ of the meal which belonged on that plate, except in the case of an investigation, when such things would be put on hold. If Asahi’s dishes were there, it means she didn’t leave her room until the body discovery announcement.”

“Well,” Mitsuru said, “That’s all well and good, but you know, this places you and your girlfriend as the primary suspects now. We’ve eliminated Bakura and Asahi, and somewhat eliminated Hako…”

“It does seem to implicate us,” Tsumugi admitted, poking her own cheek with one finger, “But… I’m not sure about that.”

“Hey!” Randy called out, “I just realized, we totally didn’t even talk about this. How’d the culprit do the locked room trick with a murder method like that? They had to physically be there when Yushu died, that’s why we’re having such a time with the alibis and shit… But, the other bit… Would it have to be someone super strong?”

“No,” Nami said, “I know how the culprit did that. They unlocked all the wheels on the cot, rolled it over to the door, and locked three of them. They tied a red string from one of the room’s sewing kits to the lock mechanism on the fourth wheel. One wheel being unlocked was just enough to let the cot move a small amount, enough to open the door. Once outside, the culprit pulled the string, dragging that corner back into place and tripping the lock on the wheel once it couldn’t move any further.”

“Eh?” Randy asked, “You really figured all of that out?”

“I realized it as soon as I determined that a string could lock the wheel. The culprit couldn’t remove that string from the crime scene, after all…” Nami said, “It’s not a very clever trick, so it wasn’t hard to figure out. Anybody could have done that.”

“Not anybody,” Tsukasa said, “In an act of stunning sexism, Monokuma has only provided sewing kits to the girls. The boys’ rooms have a small pack of screwdrivers in different styles and sizes.”

“That doesn’t change much, though,” Box said, “As soon as Bakura was eliminated, all the suspects became girls anyway. It’s irrelevant.”

“I think it’s still relevant, though,” Tsukasa said, rubbing his chin as he thought, “Um, after all… Remember how Asahi and I talked about her getting stuck during the investigation? Isn’t it possible that somebody used that area?”

“To do what?” Randy asked.

“To hide, obviously,” Tsukasa said, “To give Nami the impression that they’d gone upstairs when they hadn’t actually done it yet. Depending on their athletic ability, somebody who was hiding down there could also climb straight onto the landing, completely bypassing anyone at the bottom of the stairs’ ability to notice them. Fujishiro, Yamaguchi. When did you stop watching the stairs?”
“As soon as Akabane, Nozomi, and Nami went back downstairs together,” Sayaka answered, “That’s why it took Akabane so long to find us after they realized the door wouldn’t open.”

Nami was starting to understand the implications of this line of investigation. Everything was starting to fall into place. Even so…

“Hey,” Nami spoke up, “I think that I… Might know who the culprit is now. But I don’t want to jump to any conclusions. So I think that the only course of action now is to establish motive. I think that everybody in this room should share their Monokuma motive. You don’t have to explain what it means or anything. Or you can tell a lie about what it means. I just want to know the general gist of everybody’s motives. As far as I’m concerned, right now, we have a how. And we have a who, even. But without a why… We can’t possibly pass judgment, can we?”
“Understandable,” Box said, “We should go in a circle, then. Kyousuke, you could start us off, couldn’t you? We’ll go clockwise from there.”

“Ah, okay,” Kanoshi said, “Well, my motive doesn’t do much.” He showed it off, “I share an opinion of children with Fujishiro. All that really informs me of is that Fujishiro, like me, believes in protecting kids.”

“That’s true!” Mitsuru agreed, “I have a younger sister, and I would do anything to protect her! I also think that children need to receive truly useful education, because it’s so much harder to learn as one gets older. Useless information is a waste of their ability!”

“I think the same way!” Kanoshi exclaimed, then looked around to the rest of the circle, “So, you see, that motive is both true and harmless. Perhaps because I have a more incriminating target position, and-slash-or, Fujishiro has a more incriminating motive.”

“I’m next!” Randy said from Kanoshi’s left, and received a side-eye from him for his efforts. He carried on nonetheless, showing his Monopad, “I share a job with Ruka. Or, shared, I guess? It’s not a big deal though! We’ve just both worked at seven-elevens in our lives!”

Nami felt like he was lying, but she did say that was allowed.

“I know it’s not my turn yet,” Yuuri said, but held up his Monopad, “Even so, my motive is reciprocal with Randy’s, so it makes sense to point that out now. Akabane, you’re up.”

“Right,” Rei said, showing hers, “You all already knew this because of Yamaguchi’s motive, though. I went to the same middle school as her, she went to the same middle school as Nozomi. We all attended the same school. It’s a bit redundant, at this point. Although, when I first saw my motive, I’ll admit that I understood how it could motivate somebody to kill. If I was truly concerned with keeping my past a locked secret, having somebody whose everyday motivations are unknown to me, be aware of such a thing… In any case. Mizuho?”

“Yeah, right, me,” Tsukasa said, pointing to himself, “I also got a middle school motive, they seem pretty common. Mine had nothing to do with you four, though. I went to the same middle school as Nami… I didn’t recognize her at first, but once the motive told me, I realized it. I disclosed my motive immediately to the Kaguya twins, and we mutually agreed it was unimportant.”

Nami remembered the events going more like, Tomoe decreed it was unimportant, Nami agreed, and Tsukasa reluctantly relented, but that was fine too.

“We’ve already discussed my motive in detail,” Hako said, and waved her hands toward Tsumugi, “Shirogane?”

Tsumugi held up her Monopad, with her other hand cupping her cheek, “This was an odd one. I share a dream with Akabane? I’m not completely sure what that implies. A sleeping dream, or a dream for the future?”

“A dream for the future,” Rei answered without hesitation from where she stood, “After all, I can only imagine that my dream is one that makes sense for you to have. I wish to go to space with the people I care about.”

“That… Is my dream, but, what? You want to go to space?” Tsumugi questioned.
“Yeah, with the people I care about,” Rei said, “I’m down one, thanks to this murder, but… I was in love with somebody who wanted more than anything to go to space. She was a scientist too, a botanist actually, but she wanted to grow plants in space. That was her dream. So my dream was to go with her… And take my friends too.”

“That’s really sweet, Akabane,” Tsumugi said, “What was her name?”

“I think she’s still alive outside, somewhere,” Rei said, “So if you get out and I don’t, you could find her and take her to space with you, right? Natsuki Nagata. That’s her name.”

“Don’t talk like that!” Tsumugi said, putting her Monopad away as she spoke, “I’m sure you’ll make it out of here! We should move on now though, right?” Rei nodded in agreement.

“Looks like it’s me,” Nami said, frowning, “I don’t really understand my motive, it’s been bothering me all day,” She showed her Monopad, and several people gasped before she even spoke, “My motive… Category body count. Target, Kanoshi Kyousuke.”

“That has to be zero, right?” Box asked.

“I…” Tsukasa said, quiet, “I’m not so sure. It seems more likely that it’s one, at least.”

“No way!” Tomoe exclaimed, slamming her hands onto her podium in a shocking display of discomposure, “Nami would never kill anybody! She’s perfect, pure, and flawless in every way!”

“You know as well as I, that isn’t true,” Tsukasa said, glaring at Tomoe, “I know you said you’d kill me if I told her. But I think, maybe, she needs to know.”

“It’s one, for sure,” Kanoshi said, holding his hands close to his chest, “I… I’m not proud to say this, but I did, one time. I was in a bad place, and I heard about a terrible thing that somebody did, and…”

“No,” Tomoe said, “Nonononono… She forgot it, that’s as good as not having done that, it was erased from her memory, erased from her history, it didn’t happen, Nami didn’t do anything! Nami didn’t suffer! Nobody hurt her! I didn’t let them! I’ve never ever failed to keep Nami safe!”

“Nami,” Tsukasa said to her, “I didn’t recognize you because you’ve already come so far from then. You were always cute, but you’ve really become a cute girl. You didn’t even have your name sorted out back then, though. I didn’t talk to Tomoe a lot. We were just bros back then. We played video games together.”

“Mizuho…” Nami breathed, her heart racing. What did she forget. What happened. What did she do. What did somebody do to her. How did Tomoe fail. Why did Tomoe fail. Tomoe never failed, right? That was why Nami forgot it. It didn’t make sense. It didn’t fit with the rest of her life. Something so absolutely horrible, so horrifying, so disgusting, that it stuck out from her coddled upbringing. It didn’t fit. So she erased it.

“The wrong teacher overheard you telling me, Nami,” Tsukasa said, “That you were a girl. And unlike all the teachers before who thought you were cute. Unlike all the upperclassmen who wanted to bully you for being the way you were. Tomoe didn’t notice him. She didn’t see it. Her talent failed her, just one time. And he hurt you. And you killed him.”

“I…” Nami stared down at her own hands, “I…” She couldn’t think to say anything. Body count one. One.

Not Zero.
“It was self-defense,” Tsukasa hesitated to say the next bit, but he forced it out, for Nami’s sake. She needed to know, he felt. Knowing would keep her from wondering about it any longer, “The day after it happened, he called you to his office again. You flipped, and you stabbed him in the face with a pair of scissors, at least, that’s what the crime scene looked like. And it’s what you told me. If I remember right, Tomoe took the blame for it, and I dunno how, but she never got into any serious trouble with the law.”

“I’m an investigative journalist…” Tomoe said, “I blackmailed them. Of course I took the blame. That let Nami forget it. That let Nami go back to the way she was supposed to be. She could forget I failed her. Forget that she did something terrible. She could forget that she wasn’t perfect and pure. And I could pretend to forget that I let it happen! That I let that fucking asshole lay his hands, let him defile my Nami just because he didn’t like who she was! My perfect twin sister! He tried to ruin her!”

Nami had retreated back into herself. Staring at the ground, tears in her eyes. Gripping the podium. Not present. Not there at all. Today, I will dissociate.

 “…Pardon me,” Kaede said, speaking up. She cut through the atmosphere of the courtroom with ease, her voice clear but not flippant, “We do have a trial to continue, don’t we? Here’s my motive. Category crush, target Riko Asahi.”

“L- Look,” Riko’s text-to-speech even stuttered, “I would never try to steal her from you or anything like that! But Shirogane is really cute. Ethereal, even.”

“Aww, babe, you have a crush on me?” Tsumugi teased Kaede, “That’s embarrassing.”

“We have been dating for…” Kaede trailed off, then furrowed her brow, “Wait, how long?”

“You forgot our anniversary?” Tsumugi feigned insult, then relented, “Yeah, I did too, though. It kind of just feels like we’ve been together… Forever?”

“ Weird,” Kaede said.

“What’s weirder,” Riko said, “Is that your motive points to me. I thought my motive, pointing to Tomoe Kaguya, was supposed to be reciprocal.”

“So,” Randy said, “Either somebody got left out of being a target, or Kaguya is lying.”

And Nami knew.

She didn’t want to know.

She knew now, though.

She heard enough to know, even in her current state.

“…Why?” She whispered.
“We still have got a few more motives to go through before we get to mine, though, haven’t we?” Tomoe questioned, tapping her own podium, “And, sorry Mister Sempers, but I do think you’d have an ulterior motive to accuse me of this crime. After all, you know I threatened to kill your boyfriend if he dared to remind my darling Nami of the worst two days in her entire life. If I’m not executed at the end of this trial, I suddenly become a serious threat to your relationship.”

“It could be either of them,” Nami muttered, “Randy and Tsukasa. Both of them. They both could have fooled me by using the hidden area under the stairs too, to make me think they went upstairs. Randy volunteered to investigate because he knew… And he could obfuscate the truth by… Taking on a detective role… Please, Tomoe. I need you to say something to prove to me it’s not you. It could be one of them. The sewing kit proves nothing.”

“My motive…” Mitsuru spoke up, moving the trial forward in spite of the fact that everybody already seemed to be aware of what the truth had to be, “Is that I have the same number of siblings as Shirogane. I have one younger sister, as I mentioned earlier. her name’s Akane. Akane Fujishiro. She has green hair, from our mother, way more hair than me. You can see it in my eyebrow.. I technically also have an indeterminate number of half-siblings due to my father’s… Ways, but I’m not in touch with any of them, I don’t even know their names, so they don’t count.”

“Older stepbrother,” Tsumugi said, “Though many aspects of him are missing from my memory, including his name, I do know that he loves me very much. We used to be very close… I don’t know where he is now that I’m here, but I’m sure he’ll be waiting for me, if I survive. We were going to go on adventures together, once he got better. He was sick, but he was doing okay. I became an astronaut because I wanted to make it possible, for somebody like him to go on a space adventure.”

“My motive,” Shinjiro spoke up, “Was also a quite innocuous motive. I share a crush with Tsukasa Mizuho, which, of course, who wouldn’t? Mister Sempers has got an irresistible allure, to anybody attracted to men. Again, like Asahi, I wouldn’t dream of interfering with your healthy relationship, though. Perhaps these motives were meant to spur jealousy, but they had no such effect.”

“You already know my motive,” Sayaka said, then turned and stared at Tomoe, “It’s down to you. Do you have anything at all to say, to defend yourself?”

“…No, I don’t,” Tomoe admitted, turning her Monopad on for everybody to see.

**Deepest Desire:**
Etsuko Yushu.

“Oh my God,” Sayaka exclaimed, clapping a hand over her mouth and taking a step away from Tomoe’s podium, “What the fuck, what the fuck, oh, jeeze, what the fuck?!”

“What’s the big deal, Yamaguchi?” Tomoe asked. She seemed calm, blank. The calm before the storm, Nami realized. Tomoe knew she couldn’t get out of this pit. She was going to break down any second now.

“I… You would only kill somebody for your sister’s sake!” Sayaka explained, stepping almost completely into the podium with Etsuko’s death placard on it, moving away from Tomoe like her life depended on it, “So, a motive like that, implies that. It implies that your deepest desire, has, something to do with… Oh my God… What the Hell… What the fuck…”
“What do you want me to say?” Tomoe asked, “Just admit it outright? I wish that I wasn’t related to my sister, because my deepest desire is to be with her? But, you’re actually wrong about that. I do love her. I love her more than any sister should, but I also know it’s an affliction. It’s all twisted up inside of me. It isn’t a real love in any capacity. I have no actual desire to be with her in a romantic or sexual manner, it’s a reaction to the unfortunate position we were in, growing up. The things I did just to protect her…”

“It,” Tomoe continued, her voice starting to break, “Screwed me up, completely. I thought to myself. If I’m doing this to protect her, it’s because of how much I love her. I love her so much. I’ll be with any man who looks at her the wrong way. I’ll satiate them so that they don’t touch her. So that they don’t defile her. My perfect… Pure… Nami! I would never want to be with her like that! It would ruin her! Ruin her! I know it’s just a psychological affliction! I know it’s not real love! I know it’s broken! That I’m broken!” She was getting progressively louder, “Papa told me to keep her safe! He told me the day he died! No matter what, protect your brother! My perfect lovely pure pristine flawless impossible sister… Turned into a trophy for me to preserve…”

“My deepest desire wasn’t to be with her,” Tomoe shouted, “It was to be free of my affliction! To not feel this way! To forget all about all the men I slept with and all the rotten things I did for her sake and just love her the way a sister ought to, not the way that the lecherous told me I had to! They said, why else would you do this, if you didn’t want her all to yourself!? It wormed into my brain! It… Fuck! My deepest desire was to ‘be free of Nami Kaguya’! For me, that meant falling out of love with her, but for Yushu, who knows what it meant? Did it mean to kill her? What did it mean? What could it possibly mean, what could it mean? So I thought… If I couldn’t escape the worms those men planted in my mind, in my soul… Then I could do this. I could get myself free. And Nami too. Or I could save her life one last time and die. There’s nothing else for me in this rotten world.”

“How miserable!” Monokuma said, “But, I still wanna hear all about how you did it.”

Kaede stepped in, “I’ll handle that. She shouldn’t have to.”

[Kaede Akamatsu’s First(?) Class Trial Final Argument.]

The culprit in this case, in the murder of Etsuko Yushu, utilized a perfect storm of variables to pull it off. Chances are the culprit was already aware of the secret compartment in the stairs. It started with breakfast. It was suggested to the culprit that they help make breakfast, an opportunity which they used to grab one of the suitable dismemberment knives and hide it on their person. At this point, they had no plans to commit a murder, and the knife was for self-defense in case Goro Bakura, who’d already made one attempt on the culprit’s life, tried again. The gloves were retrieved because, as evidenced by the culprit’s buttoned up coat, they were simply cold today.

Then, during breakfast, the motives were delivered. The culprit’s motive said that they shared a certain secret with the victim, Yushu, and this turned out to be an effective motive. The culprit and Nami went downstairs, escorting Riko Asahi to her room, as observed by Bakura. This was when the culprit would have noticed that Bakura and Yushu were both downstairs, and were talking to each other. The culprit pretended to leave Nami alone by the stairs, but instead jumped the landing to wait in the hidden compartment. The plan at that point was likely just to keep an eye on Nami.

The culprit’s true opportunity arose when Yushu started having a PTSD episode. He’d slit one of his own wrists. Nami took him to the provisional infirmary, bandaged him up, then went looking for his friends. This was when the culprit saw their chance. They went into the infirmary, removed their coat, and put on the gloves. They killed and dismembered Yushu with the knife, put the coat
back on, removed the gloves, and set up the locked room trick. Then, they returned to hide in the compartment under the stairs. After it took Akabane more than five minutes looking for Fujishiro, the culprit knew the coast was clear, and climbed back up to the landing, using skills likely honed in the art of investigative journalism. They hid the gloves in the Tutoring Ward, cleaned and returned the knife to the kitchen, then approached from upstairs when the body discovery announcement sounded, cementing a supposed alibi and giving the impression they had been upstairs the entire time. These complications gave the case an impossible angle, and gave the culprit the opportunity to frame any number of people, whoever we thought the evidence pointed to. And this culprit, was…

[Final Argument End-]

“Tomoe Kaguya!” Randy shouted out, then looked to Kaede, “I told you I’d share the burden, didn’t I? We all already knew it, but now you don’t have to point the finger. It’s on my shoulders too.”
“Yeah,” Tomoe said, “That’s how I did it. Perfectly. You got it right. I used my skills at sneaking about to do something like this.”

Nami was completely speechless, by everything Tomoe had said. Almost everything. It wasn’t really shocking to her, the way that Tomoe felt. But it was shocking how those feelings had come about. How the entire idea of Tomoe had been so twisted up, for Nami’s sake. All for Nami’s sake. Nami wasn’t worth that, she wasn’t worth it at all.

“This Killing Game was a real toughie for our friend Tomoe!” Monokuma exclaimed, laughing, “She spent years away, and she was finally starting to feel different about her sister! But then she shows up here. She sees Nami again after two years apart, and suddenly, Nami is waay cuter than when she last left her, too! And, what? She apparently has some Ultimate Talent too?”

“That’s all true,” Tomoe said, clenching her teeth, “Being an Ultimate… That was mine. It was my chance. I got to tear myself away from the situation, and… For the first time in my life, they wanted me. The Ultimate Initiative didn’t just want me because they couldn’t have Nami, unlike everybody else. They honestly wanted me. For my skills.”

“That’s a good segue!” Monokuma said, “For me to say this. The Deepest Desire that our victim and culprit shared… Had nothing to do with Nami Kaguya. It was much simpler than that. It was the desire to be wanted.”

“H-Huh?” Tomoe sounded weak. Weaker than Nami had ever, ever seen her before.

“Tomoe…” Nami spoke up, finally, “Even if you did feel that way about me… You knew it was wrong… That it wasn’t genuine. And I. I don’t want you to die! I, I always needed you. Without you, what am I?”

“Without me,” Tomoe said, “You apparently became an Ultimate. So obviously, it’s not that important. And when I was still there, you were assaulted and you killed somebody. I bet you’ll do way better with me gone.”

“I… That… I did…” Nami was shaking as she tried to get through her sentence, “But because of you, that only happened. One time. It only happened once. Without you, who knows. Who knows what my life would have been like. How much worse it would have been. You took all of it for my sake. It’s my fault. It’s because of me… That…”

“I was a substitute,” Tomoe said, forcing a smile onto her face, “I stood between the rest of the world and you, all this time, I took your place. So I guess I also took your fate. Thank you for reminding me of that much. I don’t regret being in your life, when we were growing up, I have that to hold onto. Without me, maybe this same… Fucked up, mixed up, love and resentment and all of it, would have been yours. I don’t want anybody else to have to feel this way. I had you to latch onto, but who knows. If I didn’t take your place, maybe you would have felt this way towards… Somebody who would take advantage of it. Who would see your obsession and use you, cruel, remorseless. As for you. You feel bad that I suffered for you, when you never even asked me to. For somebody to fall in false love with, you’re… By far, a lesser evil. Even if we are sisters.”

Nami realized she was crying. A lot.

“I don’t want you to go!” She wailed.
“I do,” Shinjiro butted in, fixing Nami with a sharp glare, “She murdered Yushu. She does deserve the penalty. This is a Killing Game. She started it. She created that disgusting, brutal, crime scene. She actively wanted to condemn us all, just so she could escape with you. For all you know, she’s just trying to cover her ass now, and she was fantasizing about how you’d fall in love with her too after she rescued you. She’s sick.’

“I am sick,” Tomoe said, “I’ve made no pretense about that. My feelings toward Nami are a sickness. A sickness I caught through a series of bad decisions and horrible experiences. Had I succeeded, I would have continued trying to recover. Chances are, I would have made sure Nami was safe, then returned to work until I was certain that my feelings had finally become genuine again. Until I saw her as a sister again. I didn’t relapse so far that I returned to thinking that this was a legitimate form of love, after all. And, anyway. Doesn’t what Monokuma said negate that anyway?”

“What Monokuma said?” Shinjiro asked.

“The deep desire that Yushu and I shared was completely beyond Nami,” Tomoe said, “It was to be wanted. Honestly, legitimately wanted. Even Nami never wanted me. She only needed me. Our parents didn’t want me. Nami was the child they wanted, and I was the extra. The parasite. Only the Ultimate Initiative ever wanted me. Me, Tomoe. And that’s gone too, because they still recruited Nami later, apparently. Since she’s here. Being wanted, that’s it. That’s what’s important to me. I fell in love with Nami because I was told that I was. I was even desperate to please the people I protected her from. Like it would make me more attractive to them. Like suddenly, they wouldn’t see me as Nami’s sister. As if they’d suddenly see me, Tomoe, and decide that they really did want me. That they weren’t just settling for me.”

“Kaguya,” Riko said, “You didn’t have to kill him.”

“I know,” Tomoe said, “I’m just an idiot. All around. I’m so stupid, and worthless. It’s no wonder there wasn’t anybody who wanted me. Even if I got away with it, how long would I even live, knowing that the Ultimate Initiative wanted Nami too? Nami alone, she’s not something to live for.”

“…Thank you,” Nami said, and it was completely sincere, “Tomoe, you know. I’ve been waiting to hear you say that. You can’t live for somebody else. If you hadn’t killed Yushu, you could have… Done something with that information. You could have become better.”

“Nobody wants me,” Tomoe whimpered, arms wrapped around herself, “I was foolish to think, I almost thought, that. Asahi, or Hako, maybe they’d want me. If I fell in love for real, I’d get over Nami, right…? But, they don’t. They couldn’t. All that time I tried to keep Nami pure, I was being ruined. Defiled. Filled up with everything awful. I. Became. Disgusting.”

“Tomoe,” Box said, “I’m, so sorry. I didn’t even notice that you were… You seemed so well put-together. Calm and composed and stuff. How could I have figured out? It’s my job to, but I still didn’t realize, you were hurting so bad. You’re really broken. Really, really broken. I’m supposed to fix broken people.”

“Shouldn’t be your job,” Tomoe said.

“I know. Clearly I’m bad at it,” Box said.

“No, I mean,” Tomoe protested, “My problems. You shouldn’t need to notice them. I should have asked for help, if I couldn’t handle them on my own. I. I think that it’s high time I died. It’s all I ever deserved.”
“Understood!” Monokuma shouted, and the podiums lit up with a voting screen. Everybody cast their votes. All for Tomoe, but Nami. She didn't want to blame anyone else. But she couldn't blame Tomoe either. She voted for herself. Fourteen votes to Tomoe, one to Nami. The last, Tomoe thought, image of the wanted and unwanted twins. A metal tendril shot out from the ceiling, wrapped itself around Tomoe’s waist, and dragged her away.
Trial 1 (An Execution Of Accusation)

[Tomoe Kaguya's Execution START: The Final Thinkpiece On The Character Of A Spineless Woman]

Two screens descended from the ceiling, showing a classroom. The tendril unceremoniously dropped Tomoe onto the teacher's desk at the head of the room, where she sat. At one of the school desks was a bright, golden trophy. Words flashed on the screen above her head, in a newspaper-like font, "Local Girl Makes Promise To Father To Never Let His Favorite Golden Trophy be Touched, Fails Miserably."

Tomoe looked up at the words, then took a deep breath and tried to stand up from the desk, only for the 'Father' word from the headline to fall down across her lap, pinning her in place. She struggled against it, but she couldn't move at all. The trophy fell off of the desk, clattering to the floor of the classroom. Despite falling in such a nonviolent fashion, the trophy acquired a large dent the moment it hit the ground. From the cup shape of the trophy's top, paper shreddings poured out onto the floor, more than it should have been able to contain, filling up the entire room like a sea, so tall that Tomoe's ankles were submerged in it. Nami knew, even with no ability to read them, those shreddings were of the stack of articles from Tomoe's lab. The whimper from Box reassured that assumption, with how much she'd enjoyed reading those things when they were intact.

"Is Tomoe Kaguya, Acclaimed Journalist, In Love With Her Own Twin Sister?" Another headline appeared, and as it did, the shreddings seemed to start moving around again, making waves in the room. Around her ankles, Tomoe was being cut up, and soon there was a swath of blood being mixed in to the paper sea. The word 'Sister' from the headline fell beside the word Father, pinning her to the desk even more thoroughly. Now, if she tried to struggle, she'd surely injure her legs. And she did; Even for somebody who thought it was time for her own death, Tomoe didn't want to go so easily. This execution wasn't just killing her, it represented her failures. Her shortcomings. As much as she knew she was a failure, she didn't want those things to dominate, to control her. She wanted to prove that in another life, she could have been better than this.

"Disgraced Journalist Tomoe Kaguya Kills Innocent Athlete," A new headline appeared, and Tomoe looked up at it in fear. She screamed suddenly, an ear-splitting, horrific scream. Nami thought it was even worse than Rei's scream earlier that day, and with that, Tomoe managed to push the first two words off her lap, and dove forward, into the sea of papers, just before 'Innocent' would have landed on her. She landed on her back among the papers, which immediately began slicing away at her. Even so, she wasn’t giving up. She climbed up on one of the desks, and all that she managed to lose in her brief time in the world of papercuts was her coat.

Now in her dress alone, and God how many bloodstains that dress had. Dismemberment was not a clean process, far, far from it. If Tomoe had continued to deny her involvement in the murder, all they’d have to do to catch her in the lie was ask her to remove her coat. As it was, she’d admitted it.

Just above her elbow was a deep, harsh cut, exposed now. That wasn’t a papercut, that was what Goro did to her. It was more severe than either of them had let on, even if it wasn’t life-threatening. Nami was impressed that with an injury like that, Tomoe had been capable of everything she needed to do to commit this crime. Unfortunate that the crime happened still, of course. Even so, for something that she never should have done, she did a good job of it.
As soon as Tomoe got onto one of the desks, it started to sink. And the desk was wailing, softly. Nami was surprised to hear that. It sounded like her own voice.

As the desk sunk, Tomoe moved on. And on, and on, and on. Each one of them sunk, making a sound that echoed, somehow, the voice of somebody in Tomoe’s life. After Nami’s, there were a pile of voices she didn’t recognize, until suddenly she did again. Box’s voice. Then, the voice of Riko’s text-to-speech.

No doubt, Nami realized. All of these voices were people who Tomoe thought could be her lifeline. Who she thought could save her, only to have her hopes of such a thing crushed. Somehow, though, she reached a desk that didn’t start to sink into the papers beneath her. A desk that maintained its integrity. Tomoe took deep breaths, and stood up straight on that desk. It was laughing at her.

This desk had Monokuma’s voice, and it was laughing.

Tomoe didn’t move. She had nowhere to go anymore. She took deep breaths, and looked up. Looked up to see one more headline.

“After The Long-Awaited Death Of The Journalist With The Least Integrity in History, Autopsy Finds Her To Be Heartless.”

Tomoe started to laugh along with the Monokuma desk. A broken cackle, because she knew it was the end of the line. Laughing in hysteria, because it wasn’t funny. It wasn’t fucking funny at all. A rotten life was coming to an end. No matter what she did, she thought. She was always going to die alone and unloved like this. Even before she started losing sight of who she was. Nobody ever wanted her to exist, from the day that she was born.

And then, she was impaled.

A spear shot out from the wall directly behind her, but it didn’t kill her immediately. Instead, it pierced straight through her chest, and there were just a few moments. A few seconds where she could see. Obviously, it was just an effect of the execution. Obviously, it wasn’t real. Even so, that was her heart, pitch-black, and dripping.
I'm filth down to my core.

Then she was gone.
Monokuma Theatre One: Etsuko.

Etsuko lay out on the grass, staring up at the stars. In one hand, he held the stick of a long-finished lollipop. In the other was the hand of his best friend in the world, Rei Akabane. They were stargazing together, out in the field behind their middle school. The N-Rehabilitation Middle School. Rei might have liked this better if Natsuki had joined them, but she was busy. Natsuki was always so busy. She was definitely going to become the Ultimate Botanist, or something, if she kept this up. Then again, N-Rehab was run by the Ultimate Initiative, so Etsuko thought even somebody like him might be able to become an Ultimate. He had the skill for it, but not quite the constitution. Even so, if he was able to be with all his friends, maybe he could manage something like that after all. Him, and Yumi- Shinjiro, and Rei, and Natsuki. Warriors of Hope against the darkness that once tried to claim them.

Even as that fantasy seemed lovely, Etsuko couldn’t help but…

Feel that way.

“Rei,” He spoke, and she knew that it was serious, because he used her first name, not the nickname, “Do you ever think about going back?”

Rei hesitated, but then she answered, “Not often. But, sometimes. Sometimes I think, maybe, this is too much trouble. Knowing what they did was wrong… Is too much trouble. If I could go back to not knowing, then I would. I never would have felt so awful, if nobody ever told me that what happened to me was horrible, I think.”

“They all talk about the bad stuff,” Etusko said, “Always the bad stuff. But it wasn’t all bad. He loved me, I think. I think I loved him too. I don’t know. They tell me I’m too young to say I loved him. That no matter how I feel, what he did was wrong. Maybe it is wrong. But I would have been happy if I stayed there forever, I bet.”

“I don’t think so,” Rei said, rubbing the pad of her thumb against the inside of his wrist, “When he hurt you, you wanted to die, remember?”

“Why do I still want to go back?” Etsuko asked, bringing his free arm across his eyes, “I miss him! I miss him so much, Rei! He really really loved me! Nobody else is gonna love me like he did, even if he hurt me sometimes! I wanna go back!”

“I know,” Rei said, turning away from him. She hated seeing him like this. She didn’t understand it. How he could understand what happened to him, and still be this way. Still think he wanted to return to the life of being a human pet, “But you can’t. He’s dead now.”

“I know,” Etsuko groaned, returning the arm from his eyes to the ground, “And I guess, if I could go back, I wouldn’t see you, or Yumi, or Natsuki, ever again.”

“Shinjiro,” Rei corrected, “It’s Shinjiro now.”

“All the adults still call him Yumi,” Etsuko said.

Rei sighed, “That doesn’t mean that you should. Shinjiro is his actual name. They just call him Yumi because that keeps him linked to Minami. Yumi was the poor slave rescued from the politician. Nobody wants to hear about Shinjiro’s rehabilitation. Who’s that? Even now that he’s in
high school, everyone just wants to hear about his success under that name.”

“I don’t really understand any of that stuff,” Etsuko said, “I just know you three are my friends. I dunno anything else about it! Just how I feel. You’re my friends. Marv loved me, I like to run. Everything else is just too complicated! Maybe grown-ups have to think about complicated stuff, like if a relationship is toxic or whatever. But I wanna be a kid a while longer.”

“Do you think we’re kids?” Rei asked, “Do you really believe that?”

“We can be if we wanna be,” Etsuko said, “Just cause we didn’t get to act like kids before, doesn’t mean we can’t take it back, right? I’m a kid. You’re a kid. That’s why it was tragic. Cause we’re kids.”

“You’re smarter than you seem, sometimes, Etsukun,” Rei said, and turned her eyes back to the stars.

And then, she woke up here. Her friend’s twin sister murdered her best friend.

And she felt empty.

She couldn’t be a kid anymore.

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Monokuma Theatre Two: Tomoe.

Tomoe wanted to die.

She wanted to die, die, die, die, die. In her second year of middle school. She was a teenager now. She was a teenager and she had all the complicated feelings of teenagerhood but none of the preceding innocence. Tomoe was well aware of what sex was. Tomoe knew all about that sort of thing. She never felt something like this before, though. Why did she feel this way? Was she warped by all the sick expressions of misplaced love she’d yet endured? Or was it something fundamentally wrong with her from the start?

Was she the evil twin, to feel this way about Nami? This festering, blooming feeling deep in her chest. She protected Nami for… Papa’s sake, right?

Mama died because of Tomoe. Because she was small, so small, too small to have two children.

Tomoe didn’t know what killed Papa. Some sort of disease. Some sort of fever. That’s all she ever heard about it, though. She and Nami were orphans. Orphans. Did that mean anything these days? People dropped dead all the time. People were dying left and right. That was this world. This despairing world. It was stranger, these days, to have two loving parents, than anything else.

The men who twisted her up inside didn’t think she protected Nami for Papa’s sake, though. They told her, Tomoe, I bet you’re just doing this because you want Nami all to yourself. They didn’t use Nami’s name, but it held the same meaning. Meant the same thing. So many of them almost seemed to hope that Tomoe had such nasty feelings toward Nami. She always thought she didn’t before. But now she was hitting that age. Hitting that age where desires and needs started to creep in.

And Tomoe knew she wouldn’t do anything with those.

It felt awful. It didn’t feel like love was supposed to, or even, she thought, how lust was supposed
to. It felt like ugly black tentacles reaching in and constricting all of her organs, tearing her apart. It was gross. Gross, gross, gross, gross.

She wanted to die.

She’d rather die than feel this way.

But if she died, what would happen to Nami? If she died, surely, she’d arrive in Hell and Papa would greet her and say, Tomoe, I’m so disappointed in you. Nami’s going to have a horrible life now that you’re gone. Now that you’re not her shield.

Tomoe didn’t want to disappoint Papa and she didn’t want Nami to ever feel sadness.

So she stayed alive.

She stayed alive even when everything screamed out, you failed. The one time she failed. When she didn’t get there in time. When Nami, who’d never had to suffer before, suddenly did. When Nami, who never even had a reason to learn to manage her emotions, to handle misery or anger or the sheer mix that came with what happened to her… Couldn’t manage them. When she snapped because she’d always been coddled and protected and suddenly she hadn’t been. And she was so confused. Some part of her, probably, should have been jealous, right? Jealous that somebody else got to be with Nami? But there was no jealousy to her anger, even as much as she thought there ought to be. So much anger. Betrayal, maybe, but not jealousy. She didn't want to be the one to do such a thing with Nami at all! She didn't want anybody at all to do such a thing with Nami! Nami was supposed to stay, just as perfect as ever, the flawless reflection. She was everything Tomoe was not.

When Tomoe failed, she really, really did want to die.

For two more years, every morning, she didn’t know if she’d make it to sleep that night. She was adrift, living the same life as ever but with so many more internal complications. She kept it hidden from Nami, kept it hidden from everyone. She couldn’t make friends, she didn’t. It wasn’t as if somebody like her deserved it. She existed only for Nami. Just to protect Nami. Nami was her everything.

Until the Ultimate Initiative.

Until Tomoe finally got recognized for a skill she could call her own, the one thing she ever enjoyed doing, the one thing she was ever good at. She didn’t want to die anymore.

She didn’t.

She didn’t want to die.

But she’d still die for Nami in the end.

It was the only reason she existed after all.
"And that’s the end of our first class trial!" Monokuma exclaimed, hopping down from its makeshift throne, “Let’s go back to our everyday life now. So, the cute runner boy got killed, yeah yeah, wasn’t he kind of boring anyway? And I bet all of you were rooting for that bitch to get executed too!”

“Shut up,” Nami said, clenching her fists as she glared at Monokuma, but Tsukasa and Rei both sped to her side, grabbing one arm each. At a moment like this, even she could forget the rules and attack Monokuma. What, strangely, snapped her out of her tunnel-vision fury was the fact that one of the people who came to hold her back was Rei. She turned to look her in the eyes, “Rei…”

“Your sister’s actions don’t reflect on you. I know you didn’t want Etsukun to die. Just because Kaguya said that she did it for you, doesn’t mean that’s correct…” Rei said, adjusting her hold on Nami’s arm to be less like a restraint and more like a hug, “You’re still my friend. You’re my friend, Nami. No matter what.”

“And you’ve always been mine,” Tsukasa confirmed from her other side, “Even if I didn’t recognize you for a bit. I wouldn’t hold her-”

“Shut up!” Nami yelled this time, not at Monokuma, but at her friends, “I don’t want you to still care about me in spite of Tomoe! She’s not that bad! She could have… She could have gotten better. She knew she could. She wanted to. And no matter what reason she had, or what she did, she kept me safe all this time!”

“Ah-” Tsukasa noted, but he didn’t let go of her, “I’m, sorry. I didn’t mean to…”

“I know,” Nami muttered, staring down at the floor and trying to keep her breathing level, “I just… Let’s just go upstairs, okay?”

“Okay,” Tsukasa said, and let go of her. Nobody else said anything as they made their way back to the elevator, and upstairs. As soon as the doors opened, Nami left the elevator, leaving everybody behind. Before anybody could even realize which direction she went, she was already on her way upstairs. Without looking back, Nami made a beeline for the Quarantine Room. She wasn't shocked at all that Tomoe felt that way about her, and yet she'd never questioned it before. If she questioned it… Maybe things would have been different. She could have helped, right? She could have told Tomoe that she didn't need to be doing all this, didn't need to put herself on the line for Nami's sake. Could have rejected her.

Tomoe would have accepted that.

Nami understood Tomoe, maybe a little more than Tomoe ever thought. Nami knew that Tomoe was the sort to keep things bottle up, to let them become worse and worse. But if Nami knew Tomoe just well enough to actually understand the situation, a true, firm, no, would snap her out of it. Drain the bottle. Maybe it would take time to fade, but it would. And probably faster than removing herself from the situation, as she eventually decided on, would have drained it. It was unfortunate. Unfortunate. So unfortunate.

Nami took a deep breath.
Tried to rationalize it.

Tomoe could have gotten better, but she didn’t. And as far as a Killing Game went… Somebody who could get better was still somebody who wasn’t very great. Nami didn’t know what sort of secrets her peers could have, but at least if someone had to commit murder, it wasn’t somebody who definitely had happiness in their future if they hadn’t squandered it. It was Tomoe. Tomoe was really important to Nami, and probably to other people. Like her coworkers, some of those desks’ voices that Nami didn’t recognize. But Tomoe might not have had a happy life.

Nami knew that.

With a past like Tomoe’s it would take a lot of work to be happy. Nami never realized that Tomoe felt like she was secondary to such an extent. With that in mind, Tomoe’s entire life, she never really got to be who she was meant to be. Nami didn’t even know, with Tomoe that deep in that pit, what the real Tomoe could be like, underneath all of it. Nami consoled herself not with the idea that Tomoe deserved to die for what she’d done or who she was.

Instead, she used the idea that Tomoe didn’t deserve to live nearly as much as the others, for what her future held. Normally, anybody had the potential to become happy without hurting anybody else.

In a Killing Game, just taking the chance to become happy meant sacrificing somebody else’s potential happiness.

Even so, Nami wondered. What if she let the motive get to her? What if she’d reacted to the body count motive in a violent way, and killed somebody instead, killed Kanoshi or something? That would have been better, right? Nami would be dead, so Tomoe would be free of her. Tomoe finally could have been free. Free and alive. With Nami gone, everything toxic about her would fade away, right? Tomoe could have been happy. Could have been. Could have-

Kanoshi Kyousuke walked through the plastic of the quarantine room, holding a plate in each of his hands, “Nami?”

“…Kyousuke?” Nami asked, looking up from her knees to confirm. Yes, it was him.

“I brought you some dinner. Would you mind it, if I ate with you?” Kanoshi asked, holding out a plate in her direction, then flushed in embarrassment as he noticed the look of confusion on her face, “Um, Mizuho told me that this was probably where you went. He said it was a little bit of a pain, since everyone would have agreed to quarantine Bakura in here. Given he, you know.”

“You can do that,” Nami said, “If there’s anybody he won’t kill, it’s me. Just lock him in here with me. It’s fine.”

“No way,” Kanoshi said, sitting down next to Nami as she took her plate from him. Rice, curry, and korokke, “Nozomi made it. He said that cooking helped get him out of his own head.”

“Why did you come?” Nami asked, “Why not Rei, or Mizuho, or… Anybody I’ve actually had a one-on-one conversation with?”

“Ruka kind of is always there,” Kanoshi admitted, starting to eat from his own plate, “But I came to see you because I wanted to talk to you, as a tutor, and as the target of your motive. That trial was pretty rough on you, wasn’t it?”

“I had to see a mutilated body, find out that something awful happened to me, find out I killed a guy, then find out those same things except replace the personal pronouns with ‘my sister’. And
Mizuho totally outed me to anyone I might have been passing to, so,” Nami groaned, picking up some rice on her spoon, “I guess you could call it rough.”

“Hey,” Kanoshi said, “I am the Ultimate Tutor, after all, that kind of goes beyond just helping kids understand academics. I know you’re uh, technically older than me, but. You can talk to me.”

“I want to know,” Nami said, “I want to know about the person you killed. I know that what I did was an accident. I know that it was the product of me, and Tomoe, both being fucked up nearly beyond repair when we were growing up! But you. I share a body count with you. So tell me, okay? I need to know.”

“Okay,” Kanoshi said, “I killed Ruka’s mother.”
"His mother?" Nami asked, "Why did you do that?"

"It was a long time coming," Kanoshi said, looking up at the ceiling, "And I promise, I'm really not the killing type at all! I don't even like to hurt bugs when I find them inside, or anything! But, when it came to Ruka's mother. One of us was going to do it. Me, or Yamaguchi. I just got the opportunity first. It wasn't really planned or anything, but we both just... Knew, you know? That if either of us got the chance, we wouldn't be able to turn it down. Maybe Yamaguchi was planning something, I don't know. I wasn't. I was just in the right place at the right time, to push her down the right number of stairs."

"That doesn't tell me why," Nami frowned.

"If I explained the reason why she deserved to die so badly, it would be a violation of Ruka's privacy," Kanoshi said, shaking his head, "I can't just do that. If I ever hurt him, then I'd be awful too. It's just, when somebody's hurting one of your best friends in the world... It suddenly doesn't feel like right and wrong mean anything anymore."

"Ah..." Nami gasped a bit, and her voice started to lighten, just the tiniest bit, "Do you think that's how Tomoe felt?"

"I don't think anybody could understand how she felt. It kind of seemed to me like her feelings were so messed up, even she couldn't understand them herself," Kanoshi admitted, "But, probably, at least a little bit. There was definitely an aspect of, she cared so much about you that she was blinded to ethics. I can only tell that because I've felt that way before."

"I wouldn't have taken you for the type," Nami said, "I totally thought, that my motive... The count had to be zero. Not because of me. I kind of knew it was possible, with my memories screwed up, but because of you."

Kanoshi took a deep breath before he spoke again, "Everyone kind of thinks, looking at me, and watching the way I act day-to-day, that I'm kind of just a flustered idiot all the time. But that's not true. I just have anxiety, and a mild personality. That doesn't mean that I can't have rotten feelings. I'm human too. And with what Ruka's mother did to him, when I saw my chance, I could have stopped myself. Said that it wasn't the moral thing to do. Instead, I said, I can live with this. I can have this on my conscience. And I pushed her."

"At least you got the choice," Nami muttered, putting her chin her palm, "I apparently killed somebody when I wasn't even aware of it."

"You mean, even after what everybody said, you don't remember?" Kanoshi questioned.

Nami shrugged, "I remember what happened to me. And I remember him being dead. I don't remember doing it. There's no way that I didn't do it, but I guess, I probably won't ever remember doing it. If what I'm told is true, I did it completely on impulse. I wasn't even there."

"Oh..." Kanoshi noted, but he sounded a bit discouraged, rather than confused. He elaborated once, again, Nami wore her confusion on her face, "Ruka has that too, I think. Some people call it an out of body experience."

"No, that's called dissociation, and I know what that feels like," Nami said.
Kanoshi shook his head, “No, no. I mean, I guess it’s kind of like, a more extreme version of dissociation, though? Ruka describes it as being, well. Dissociation feels like he’s not physically present, he still feels what his body is doing and can control it, but he’s disconnected from it. But an out of body experience, that’s when he feels like he can see what he’s doing, and he can’t feel it, and he can’t move or anything. It sounds really scary.”

“That… Maybe,” Nami said, “I think I’ve had that a few times in my life. And if it was ever gonna happen, it was at a time like that. Thanks, Kyousuke. You helped me.”

“I’m glad that I could. I really wanted to,” Kanoshi said, then stood up with a groan, “By the way, Monokuma said that it’s going to give another set of motives tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Nami questioned, furrowing her brow, “Can’t that shitty bear at least give us a day? Rude.”

“Are you going to come back down with me?” Kanoshi asked.

“No,” Nami said, “I’m sleeping here tonight. You can quarantine Bakura here too, if you want, though. I really don’t care.”

“I won’t,” Kanoshi said, shaking his head, “That’s unfair to you. But you’ll join us back in the cafeteria for breakfast, won’t you?”

Nami nodded. Kanoshi left, and she was alone again. She didn’t feel quite as alone this time, now that she’d talked to him. Her murder was unconscious. Kanoshi, who she didn’t have any ill will towards, had made the decision to kill somebody. If she could forgive him so easily, surely she could be forgiven too. Nami didn’t know what it was that Yuuri’s mother did, but it sounded like she’d been awful. So Kanoshi was forgivable. Nami was forgivable.

Tomoe wasn’t forgivable, honestly. Nami couldn’t just say that she missed Tomoe without acknowledging that Tomoe killed somebody innocent, and gave up her own life in the process. Nami was angry, and she’d stay angry, any time that she thought about wanting Tomoe to be there or anything like that. Tomoe threw her life away, and that pissed Nami off.

The fact that she was able to feel this anger, though, meant that she was making some progress. Recovering from the death of a family member was not a quick process, even if that family member tried to become unsympathetic prior to dying. In a Killing Game, however, it couldn’t remain a slow process either.

Nami knew she couldn’t dwell too long, as much as she wanted to. She’d go to breakfast. For now, though, she needed to be alone here in the quarantine wing. It wasn’t nighttime yet, so technically, going to sleep wouldn’t be safe. Anybody could walk in at any time. Even so, Nami was tired. Emotionally, physically, exhausted in every way. She dozed off.

“Hey party people!” Monokuma’s voice roused her, “The time is now 10:00 PM! That’s right, it’s nighttime. Nobody got caught out of bounds or anything, so we’re all set! I wanna sincerely thank you bastards again, for putting on a great show with today’s trial… And you had better be looking forward to the new motives tomorrow! Upupu, gotta kill fast! Goodnight!”

Nami was going to roll over and go back to sleep, but she noticed something. On one of the other cots, Riko Asahi was asleep. Nami sat up just enough to squint at what was written on the whiteboard, propped against Riko, written small enough to fit but large enough to read, “Hope you don’t mind, Nami. I came to make sure you’re safe. I miss Tomoe too. Sleep well, -Riri.”
"Good morning, fuckers!" Monokuma woke Nami up again, and she sat up right away, bringing a hand up to feel her own bedhead at the back of her hairstyle, "It's a bright new day, and **6:00 AM**! It's day three for everybody! Day three! Two hours from now, you get a new motive delivered to you! Best make some breakfast first."

Nami rubbed the sleep from her eyes, then looked across the room, "Morning, Asahi. What was with the signature on that note last night?"

Riko raised her whiteboard, "Riri… Is what I kind of wanted Tomoe to call me."

"Why?" Nami asked, staring at her.

Riko scribbled again, "Because I kind of liked her. Riri is a cute nickname. I wanted the person I dated to call me it."

"You liked her?" Nami questioned, frowning, "But I thought that your crush was on Shirogane."

"You can have two crushes," Riko explained, "Besides. Shirogane was my crush. Tomoe was the girl that I'd kind of be into. There's a difference."

Nami could almost feel the shine in her eyes at those words, "The girl that you'd kind of be into?"

"Yes," Riko's whiteboard answered, "Not somebody who makes your heart skip a beat when you look at them like a crush, but somebody you think you'd maybe have a good relationship with someday."

"That phrase is a meme, though. You do know that, right?" Nami asked.

"Of course," Riko answered. They were on their way to the cafeteria now, as they conversed, "Nami isn't the only scholar of the ancient arts in this hospital."

"It's good to know that I'm not! I like that," Nami said, giving Riko a bright grin, "It's like… Same hat! We can bond over our love of vintage memes."

"I wouldn't say I love them," Riko said, holding her whiteboard incredibly steady for her movement, "But yes, I am aware of them. And will occasionally use them. They're more Yui's thing, though. She's much more sociable than me. Being able to talk can do that, though."

"That reminds me!" Nami smacked her hands together in her realization, "I think I should learn sign language. It must be a pain needing to use that whiteboard all the time, right? And I know you get the text-to-speech during trials but, here's the thing. Even before I knew how you felt… Tomoe said that you were one of the people she wanted to have in her life. One of the people she wanted to want her around. So, I want to be your friend. And the least I can do as your friend is learn the method of communication that's easier for you, right?"

"That's a lot to do for a friend, but that would be nice, thank you," Riko said, accompanying these words with smiling eyes. Her mouth was obviously not visible through the mask, but her joy was made evident.

Nami and Riko walked for a little while longer, but just before the cafeteria, Nami gently grabbed her arm and stopped her for one last question that she wouldn't dare to ask in the presence of
anybody else, "I'm curious, about that mask."

"It's a heavy-duty surgical mask, to protect me," Riko explained, "The reason I can't speak well is because of an illness I had as an infant. I have a compromised immune system, so if I get sick, it can really mess me up more than other people. That's why I only eat in my room too. I can't take it off around other people."

"Because we're all such petri dishes, huh?" Nami chuckled, "Any one of us could be really contagious at any minute, but what we're spreading around is harmless to anybody with the immune system to fight it off."

"Exactly," Riko said, "I just hope everybody here is vaccinated. I know that the world is a mess, but I know at least some doctors are still devoted to upholding herd immunity."

"Well, I am," Nami said, "There was this traveling doctor. Weird guy, he wore one of those plague masks all the time. He showed up to our school and made sure we all got our shots, though, so a good guy, I guess. Now that I think about it, I wonder if he was an Ultimate…"

"Maybe," Riko said, then pushed the door open to the cafeteria. Surprisingly enough, they weren't actually the first ones there, despite having no showers to take or clothes to change with their abnormal sleeping location.

Goro was there, and so was Box. That made Nami suspicious. Just because a trial had happened, didn't change the fact that those two apparently shared the same level of trustworthiness. With that in mind, Nami wouldn't trust either of them as far as she could throw them. Yuuri was also already awake, and in the kitchen. Riko didn't even stick around to greet the suspicious pair, instead joining Yuuri. She seemed to immediately understand what he was doing, and she set herself to busywork that any sous chef would be capable of. She wouldn't interfere with the Ultimate Baker's work, but she could help out.

That left Nami to handle the other two. She sighed, and approached the table they were sitting at, "And what brings the two of you absolute rays of sunshine to the cafeteria this early?"

"Ruka was assigned to keep an eye on Bakura," Box said, "And I was assigned to hold onto Bakura's Monopad, while Ruka had mine. The three of us will basically be a unit, at least for a little while."

"That… What?" Nami didn't really understand what Box just explained. Well, the explanation was simple, but the reasoning didn't parse.

Box giggled at Nami's cluelessness, then explained in more detail, "Ruka has to let me out of my room, then I have to let Bakura out of his. With a setup like that, there's no way for any two of us to conspire, so Bakura will be kept track of at all times. That was our solution to the fact that he's an attempted murderer. As for why me, I noted that I didn't mind if Ruka would decide to kill me in my sleep, that's it. I'm involved because I'm willing to die. Of course, that would be a dumb thing for Ruka to do, he'd be the only suspect. Even so, it's good to be cautious and put your cannon fodder in the line of fire first!"

"Hako!" Goro whined, "Don't call yourself cannon fodder!"

"In a Killing Game, isn't being cannon fodder the very best… You might even say, Ultimate way to be of use to my peers?" Box prodded, and Goro didn't seem to have a reply to that.

Nami didn't either, so she abandoned that table. She somehow didn't believe it, when Box said
she'd be willing to die for the sake of her peers. Not that Nami thought Box was unlikely to do such a thing based on the personality she'd observed in her so far, but rather, that if Box was apparently so ready and willing to lay down her own life, then how did she survive to the end of her previous Killing Game? On top of that, Nami didn't even know how Ultimate Survivors were selected. It wasn't the last man standing, that much was for sure. After all, Killing Games usually concluded with multiple people left alive. So what was it? Nami assumed it had to be the person that Monokuma suspected would be the most interesting in a second Killing Game. If that was the right measure…

If the mascot of Despair determined that Box Hako would be the best choice, to put through the gambit again…

Then Nami could never trust her. Unlike Riko… Box was someone who Tomoe liked, but who Nami wouldn't be eager to get close to in her sister's wake.
Nami took a seat at a different table, avoiding Goro and Box on her own. She had no idea who would decide to sit with her today, though. Two of her tablemates from the previous breakfast had died since then, after all. She felt her heart sinking, her brain fogging, starting to-

"Nami?" And there, she was brought back down to Earth, by… Oh, it was Kaede.

"Akamatsu!" Nami shot up out of her seat and grabbed Kaede by the shoulders, "I have a question for you! Your motive was that you shared Asahi's crush, but the thing is, I found out today that Asahi liked two people. Shirogane, and Tomoe-"

"Oh, yeah," Kaede freed her shoulders with a shrug and a good-natured laugh, "Just because I ordered my meal doesn't mean I can't look at the menu, you know? And even if she was an absolute disaster who, truth be told, I would never want to have the sort of relationship where I had to deal with that with… Forgive me if I'm crude, but Nami! You have to admit that your sister had a totally rocking body!"

"I feel like, given the way she died, it would be in super bad taste for me to say that she had a totally rocking body," Nami said, "After all, if she was alive to hear me say that…"

"I'm not sure about that," Kaede said, frowning as she looked away from Nami, "I don't think she really knew how she felt about you, no matter what she said. I can almost imagine that if she heard you say that, she would be shocked, and maybe disturbed at how little joy it brought her to hear that. You saw that execution. You heard everything she said. The only thing she seemed certain of was that you were a trophy to her. It might be brash of me to say this, but I am a detective after all! I think that Tomoe was probably not actually a sexual person. She may have been led to believe that she had romantic feelings toward you, and maybe she did, but there's no way that they were sexual in nature."

"Oh yeah," Yuuri joined the conversation from the dividing counter, "Sorry, you're loud, so I overheard. Thing is, when Kyousuke asked Kaguya if she was straight, she answered 'that sort of thing isn't enjoyable at all'."

"Well," Nami said, "There's no Ultimate Psychologist here or anything like that. So I guess we'll never know the truth about my sister. Can we stop talking about it now? It's not going to help me to move on, if everybody around me just keeps making up theories about whether or not she was really in love with me! Let's just leave it at, we had a really fucking weird childhood which put both of our mental healths through a blender, and now she's dead and lost her chance to get better and I'm really confused and I don't know what I'm going to do without her and it doesn't matter to me! I'll feel the same way about her death either way, because no matter how she felt about me, she was still Tomoe and the Tomoe I knew and nothing would change that!!"

Nami realized she'd had an outburst, and looked up to see everybody looking… Awkward. They weren't trying to pity her, and they weren't shocked by what she said, but they really didn't know what to say. Probably, Nami considered, they were trying to reconcile the fact that they'd all been thinking bad things about Tomoe, of varying degrees. Nami knew how to diffuse the situation, "But, okay. Even I had the thought that if it had to be anyone, in a Killing Game, it could have been worse than her."

That made them relax. So she was right. Kaede reached out and rubbed her arm in reassurance, "Hey, Nami. I've… Actually lost a twin, before, myself. I know it hurts. It will take a long time to
"Yeah," Yuuri said, "The sort of stuff she protected you from, well. That's not about to happen here. You're going to be alright, kid."

"Thank you," Nami said, her breaths measured as she tried to recover from her outburst. She sat back down, leaning against the table with her head in her hands. Goro and Box had both stayed out of it, probably both having the emotional aptitude to realize anything either of them had to say wouldn't be helpful.

Nami was still trying to calm down when Shinjiro walked in, and he immediately noticed her. His tone was as light as ever, even as his words themselves were harshly crafted, "Ah, mourning the murderer, are we? I have more important things to concern myself with, yes. The death of the murderer lifts the weight of Etsukun's death."

"Show a little restraint, Nozomi!" Kaede reprimanded him, "No matter what somebody's done, there's always someone who cares about them! There isn't such a thing as a perfect murderer…"

"Let him be mad," Nami said, "I get it. He can."

"I thought you two became friends during the investigation, though…" Kaede said, pouting. So despite her own lone wolf habits, she really did want her classmates to get along.

"The topics we discussed, and that which we bonded over, I won't easily part with, no!" Shinjiro assured, with a wide smile, "However, I cannot reconcile those feelings with the ones I have toward somebody so closely related to my friend's killer! Thus, while our prior friendship is maintained, any future chances of such are moot. I was deceived to Miss Nami's… True nature."

"Hey now," Kaede's pout grew deeper, "Nami didn't even do anything… It was all Tomoe."

"Didn't do anything? We know that isn't true. Miss Nami's own murder may have been in self-defense, but… As far as I am concerned," Shinjiro said "To fraternize with cold-blooded killers is similarly disgusting. And to cry over a well-deserved execution? How utterly worthless, no?"

"That sort of thinking is way too black and white!" Kaede protested, now seeming almost as if she had a personal stake in this argument, "Especially in a Killing Game, you can't really say anybody is a cold-blooded killer!"

"Not to interrupt," Goro chimed in, "But I should remind you that I did try to kill Tomoe without any motive even being delivered yet! So you should hate me! Definitely not Nami!"

"That fact only makes me more wary of Miss Nami. Two people willing to kill in her name…" Shinjiro shook his head in disappointment, "You never hear such a thing about a good person, no."

"Ah-" Kaede almost argued again, but Tsumugi walked into the room, stepping past Shinjiro to approach Kaede.

"Kaede," Tsumugi said, grabbing onto her arm, "It's fine, isn't it? I only caught a bit of that, but… It could be true, right? Plenty of people could judge it to be that way, anyway." She winked.

"Mmph. Fine," Kaede relented, then glanced at Nami again, "You're okay, Nami?"

"Not yet," Nami admitted, "But I will be, don't worry…"

"Okay," Kaede said, then she and Tsumugi went to sit at another table, leaving Nami to sit by
herself. In fact, everybody decided to give her space, sitting elsewhere, even Tsukasa. Except for one. One who got a confused, almost betrayed look from Shinjiro across the room when she sat down.

Rei.
"Hi, Rei," Nami said, locking eyes with her across the table, "Nozomi probably doesn't want you sitting with me. Something about how I'm a bad person because of what Bakura and Tomoe both did 'in my name'."

"Shinji can be like that sometimes," Rei said, rolling her shoulders where she sat with a heavy sigh, "I don't make my decisions based on his opinions, though. Just because we became friends, and could bond over our pasts, we have different relationships with those pasts. Shinji may decide that having a connection to somebody who did something bad makes you bad, but I don't believe that. If I did, then I'd be writing off myself, and Shinji too. He seems to overlook that fact, though."

"What do you mean?" Nami asked, "I wouldn't call being the kidnapped victim of somebody, being connected to them."

Rei shook her head, "I'm not referring to our kidnappers. I'm referring to Etsukun."

"Huh?" Nami was very confused.

"I'm only telling you this because," Nami realized just how quietly Rei had been speaking, when she said this, "You'd never accept me as your friend unless you understood my reasoning. You'd keep feeling guilty, wouldn't you? But Etsukun... He was probably, to tell you the truth, just as twisted up about love as Kaguya was. At the same time, he was hopelessly in love with his kidnapper, and was the one to kill him."

"What?" Nami questioned, leaning in closer to Rei, "Yushu? Really?"

"Similarly to your own experience," Rei said, "He forgot that he killed him. Poisoning his food. I don't remember exactly what it was but later that day, I think something like eight hours later... Marv just suddenly stopped breathing or something... By that time Etsukun had already forgotten his own plan, so he was really shocked when he dropped dead in front of him. It was hard to get details when Etsukun didn't even want to think he'd done it. In fact, Shinji and I constantly had to remind Etsukun, that Marv was dead. If not for the reminders, he probably would have run away to try and find him again. He had Stockholm Syndrome something bad, but just not badly enough that he passed up the opportunity to escape, when it presented itself."

"I see," Nami said, lacing her fingers underneath her chin, "Hm, you're right, you know. I probably would have felt super guilty if you kept trying to be my friend after my sister killed somebody so important to each of us. And now you're both gone. In the aftermath, I dunno. Maybe it would make sense for us to become best friends with each other!"

"Won't Nozomi feel, I dunno, scorned?" Nami questioned, "If you're all like, friendship ended with Yushu because he's dead, now Nami is my best friend, totally skipping over the guy who's known you longer?"

Rei gave a slow blink, "Ahah, well. Shinji and I are close, for sure, but you need to have a certain sort of kinship with somebody to consider them a best friend. I doubt I'd ever love you more than I
love him, but he can't be my best friend. I mean, the man drinks Earl Grey. Nothing against the beverage, nor the space captain who pioneered its popularity, but you understand, don't you?"

"Plum Black Tea lovers have at least one degree of complete incompatibility with those who get their fix from bergamot," Nami said, glowering, "I'm well-versed in the tea code! I dunno how that happened, though."

Rei laughed a bit, but her face quickly failed in that effort and started to frown instead, "I sure can't imagine… Having amnesia as spotty as yours. I'll admit, it isn't as if anybody here has an especially good memory, but it seems really stressful to keep coming up against skills that don't have any memorable origin. At least I know how I started off as an electrician."

Nami thought about that for a minute. Stressful… The memory loss, honestly, wasn't the most stressful part of this for her. Regaining certain memories had proved troublesome, sure, and Monokuma seemed to play on that. But what Rei said, not knowing the origin of certain aspects of Nami's self? That wasn't a big problem, she didn't think. Truth be told, she might have honestly preferred if she hadn't remembered about middle school. Not because she would have been better off confused and constantly losing it over the ambiguity of 'body count', but because it was one of the only times in her life she'd ever really needed to suffer.

Even the physical trauma itself wasn't impacting her hugely. Maybe she was just too much in shock to process it. Maybe she'd already gotten closure by killing the guy. What got her was the catalyst to her assault. When she came out to Tsukasa. Tsukasa, who she'd entirely forgotten was ever in her life. Tsukasa, who was so much her own friend that Tomoe didn't recognize him. The fact that she'd actually gotten so dysphoric that she confided in him. That was one of the only moments in her history that her gender identity actually reared its head in such a manner, the only time that she could recall it being an actual issue.

Because Tomoe didn't let it be an issue before! That was the thing that Nami couldn't shake. She couldn't recall truly being face-to-face with her identity, because Tomoe seemed to figure it out before she even had. "If you're so miserable all the time even though nothing's happened to you," Tomoe had said, "Maybe it's something about you. What if I start calling you my twin sister instead, just for a little while? To figure out if that's what you need?"

成実

Nami. That name, spelled that way, was something she came up with in her first year of high school. Just a bit before Tomoe was selected to be an Ultimate. Nami didn't have a name before then, not really. Through elementary school, her old first name was what everybody called her. In middle school, after Tomoe figured out what was eating at Nami, they became Kaguya-san for Tomoe, and Kaguya-kun or Kaguya-chan for Nami, depending on if the person she was talking to was aware. But then she found her name. Nami, spelled more like Narumi but Nami nonetheless, with the characters for 'formation' and 'real'. Nami chose her name as an anchor. She was real. She existed.

As Nami. Not as anybody else. And she just remembered that, when she picked out her name. When, after years of knowing, she finally seized upon the truth for herself. She shouldn't have remembered that bit either. Now she was crying.

"N…Nami? Are you okay?" Rei questioned, and Nami looked up to see a genuine distress on her face.

Nami took a deep breath, then explained, "I keep remembering random things. I remembered how I picked my name. Ah, it's… Every time I remember something, about how I became who I am
"Ah, why it's spelled with those characters?" Rei questioned, "Instead of meaning 'wave', your spelling basically becomes 'foundation of reality', right? I thought it was kind of narcissistic, that you'd name yourself that…"

"It's not," Nami said, "About that. It's, I knew I was a girl for years before I figured out my name. So, when I did. I became real. I'm not calling myself the foundation of reality, I'm calling the name itself the foundation of my personal reality."

"That's… Quite nice, actually," Rei said, tilting her head to the side as she gave Nami a bright smile. It was dazzling, given Rei's previous reluctance to show much emotion visibly, "Don't worry, Nami! Now that we're best friends, I'll make sure that you always feel real. I'm good at that sort of thing."
8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

"Upupupu! Hello! Fuckers!" Before Nami could even thank Rei for her kind words, Monokuma had made its arrival, "It's time for another motive? Already, Mister Monokuma? You might ask? Well, I did warn you, so probably not. But I bet you're real annoyed that you're already getting another motive anyway. But this is so excited! And wasn't that last trial such a blast? The most emotional first trial that the Killing Game has ever seen, Fo Sho! Bet you're real mad, Bakura, that Tomoe's the one that got to set that precedent and not you!"

"Eh," Goro said, shrugging, "I didn't want Yushu to die. I just wanted to see what would happen. I didn't think he'd get murdered. So, I don't really care about that record."

"Damn! That sounds super out of character!" Monokuma said, "And that's because I just afflicted you with the newest motive as an example! But I'll lift it from you for the day. You're Off! The! Hook! Bakura! That's right, the newest motive is the Lie Serum! Like truth serum, but the opposite. Anyone I choose to be afflicted with the lie serum will, until breakfast the next morning when the targets change, be compelled to tell as many convincing lies as possible! I'll be afflicting two people at random every day. And of course, because the serum compels lying, you won't be able to admit if you're someone who's been hit with the serum!"

"How is that supposed to be a murder motive?" Kaede asked.

"Well..." Monokuma fidgeted where it stood, "Coming up with unique motives after fifty-three games is super hard, you know? Plus, last time's motives are still technically in effect, and the whole, two people can escape thing, so I'm cutting you a break! You're just gonna experience daily chaos on top of the rest! But at the same time... the serum will stop being administered, and be lifted, as soon as a body is discovered. If these abundant lies come to fuck you over, maybe you'll really wanna make it stop!"

"Obviously, nobody will do that," Nami said, but it wasn't what she meant to say. It was the opposite of what she meant to say, but it still sounded like her. Ah, so that was Monokuma's aim? It afflicted her. So she wouldn't be able to rely on what she said, "It can't be that chaotic."

"Oh, just you wait," Monokuma said, pointing at her, "Oh, and of course, the afflicted will still be able to speak normally outside of lies. Objective facts, for example, will remain untouched, and truths that you couldn't possibly lie about in a convincing manner as well. Toodaloo!"

And Monokuma was gone.

"Well, that was... A thing," Tsumugi spoke up, "In any case, now that the trial is over, the stairs to the new Ultimate Wards should be open, shouldn't they? After breakfast, it's probably best if we investigate."

"How do you know they'll be available now that the trial's done?" Box asked, tilting her head to one side.

"I assumed, since the stairs were visible during the investigation, then following the end of the trial the barrier would be removed," Tsumugi said, "But I could be wrong. I don't have any way of knowing, after all."
"If they are open now, though," Kaede said, leaning a hand against her cheek, "Then Tsumugi's right. We need to check them out."

"I agree," Nami said. That was a half truth. She wasn't honestly curious, but did think they should be investigated. By other people. But, thanks to the serum, it seemed she'd been roped into being involved personally. Well. This motive was already starting to prove her right, that somebody could definitely be motivated just to stop it from happening.

"Is it okay if we investigate together, Nami?" Goro asked, "We only got to spend some time together when we first met, you know! Of course, Ruka would come with us too, to keep an eye on me and everything."

Investigating with Goro and Yuuri? That sounded incredibly unpleasant. Nami wasn't fond of Goro, and Yuuri still intimidated her. Especially now that she knew that the person Kanoshi had killed was Yuuri's mother, a secret she would surely see consequences for if she let slip. Maybe the lie serum would keep her from even being able to let the secret slip, yet? Even so, she couldn't prevent what she said next, "I guess that's fine. Since Ruka will be there too."

Yikes. Now she actually had to do that. Deal with them and everything. What a pain. It wasn't that Nami actually disliked anybody here, necessarily, but there were definitely others she would have preferred as company when investigating new areas of the hospital. Like Rei, or Riko, or Tsukasa. Oh well. It was just one day, she could handle the lie serum. In fact, she had a small advantage over the others. She only had to be concerned that there was one person who would be consistently telling her lies, unlike everybody else who, not being afflicted, had to be concerned with two others.

Goro, excitedly, popped up from his seat, only for Box to pull him back down with a reprimand that Nami didn't quite catch. She glanced down at her plate, and realized the reason; She hadn't touched her popover, english muffin, or croissant yet. Hm. There was a bigger assortment of pastries made, but somehow, she'd ended up with her favorites from the bunch. She glanced over to Tsukasa, who smirked back at her and gave her a thumbs-up. She couldn't help but turn a bit pink, surprised that he now remembered something like that about her, and looked back to her plate. She picked up the english muffin and spread butter over the top, glad it was still warm enough to melt.

Maybe, she wondered… Tsukasa was with Randy now, obviously, but had he maybe had a crush on her in middle school? If he was gay now, until a certain point, he'd seen her as a guy, probably while in the midst of figuring that very sexuality out. So, it wasn't out of the question… Unless, he could tell even then that she was a girl. She certainly never fit the stereotype of one, being, as far as she figured, quite a dumpy girl. Never even doing anything especially feminine, though, she didn't do especially masculine things either. She never really did anything, at all. What were her hobbies? Video games with Tsukasa, apparently. Vintage memes. Arguing on the internet? Ooh, yikes. That felt somewhat like her lung was being stabbed. Those were masculine hobbies, weren't they? If anyone realized she didn't have anything so egregiously girlish as to balance those out, then they might stop taking her seriously, might-

She took a deep breath, and kept eating. She was being silly. In other company, maybe she would lose her 'girl cred' over something that trivial, but here, they knew her as Nami. She'd always been a girl named Nami to them, and no matter her interests or fashion sense, that was who she was. They weren't going to rescind her womanhood just because she didn't fall into a stereotype. She finished the english muffin, then the popover, and scooped up her croissant. She'd eat it on the way.

"Bakura, Ruka, I'm ready to go," Nami lied.
"Alright, team," Yuuri teased, taking the lead as Nami and Goro stepped in behind him, "I'll show Randy that he's not the only impulsive blonde guy with investigative skills, just you watch."

"You don't seem too bright," Goro chimed in as they left the cafeteria, "So I bet that Nami is going to be doing most of the actual investigating! That's the reason that I wanted her to come with us, after all. She's so smart about those things."

"Oh, here I thought you invited her along because your greatest goal in life is to suck her dick," Yuuri said, rolling his eyes. Ah, so he wasn't completely fond of needing to keep watch over Goro. And... Was he not completely fond of Nami?

"Hey now!" Goro stood up for her, his voice cracking slightly, "I'm gay! So I wouldn't actually wanna be with Nami, you know? I just think she's super amazing! Saying that I'd like her that way, it's kind of a douchebag move, you know... Right, Nami?"

"It's fine," Nami said, and even surprised herself that that would be the lie. Since when did she care? She hadn't cared before she started remembering more, but now Yuuri's words actually did rub her the wrong way. Of course, she couldn't admit that with the lie serum altering her words, and she might not have even admitted it without that factor. She didn't want to kick up a fuss.

The group made their way to the new set of stairs, and went up. Nami read the signs out loud, since the lie serum couldn't harm objective facts, "Runner Ward, Waitress Ward, Baker Ward, and Heir Ward..."

"That's right!" Monokuma appeared, "But, the Runner Ward is inaccessible, since its owner died prior to its reveal. So actually, you only get three new wards. But it's okay! There's something new and interesting in the Empty Wings too! I'm a good headmaster, so I'm always gonna reward you for committing cool murders, with brand new enrichment opportunities! If you don't keep your students enriched, after all, they might escape and start eating people!"

"Shut up," Nami complained, crossing her arms as she looked away from the bear.

"Something new in the Empty Wings too?" Goro asked, then propped his weight back on one foot and appeared deep in thought for a few moments, "I bet it's a pool. Pools usually get introduced after the first case, if they're going to at all! So I bet, you gave us a swimming pool! Though, having the pool isolated within an area that's restricted by a curfew does limit the amount of compelling murders that could occur in there..."

"There are too many murders linking to pools, or changing rooms, et cetera! Last game didn't need one and this one doesn't either! But... Yeah, you get a pool in the Empty Wings," Monokuma
admitted, "And, because it wouldn't do anything for our ratings to have another changing-room related murder, your Monopads will open whichever changing room aligns with who you actually are."

"Thanks," Nami said, nodding in Monokuma's direction. So it at least had that level of basic human respect, even if it didn't always in previous games. Not like Nami would be going swimming herself, of course. She couldn't really imagine anything more embarrassing than a swimsuit. Trunks and a rash guard would look dumb, probably. Even with baggy sweatshirts and the like, Nami at least wore jeans that hugged her legs to some amount, gave off some idea of a feminine shape. On the flip side, an actual nice swimsuit… Her ability to pull that off clocked in even further below her ability to pull off wearing a skirt.

"Sweet! We gotta throw a pool party!" Goro exclaimed, then pointed finger-guns at Yuuri, "Will you help me convince the others that it's totally a good idea?"

"…Only because I actually do think it's a good idea," Yuuri admitted with an exaggerated shrug, "You little shit."

"Heheh," Goro giggled, then stuck out his tongue in Yuuri's direction before he twirled and brought his palm to rest against the door to the Baker Ward, "Thanks sooo much, Ruka! So why don't we check out your ward first?"

"Ah," Yuuri seemed a bit off-put by that suggestion, as if he'd forgotten about the fact that one of the new wings was actually his. Even so, "Yeah, that should be fine."

Nami thought for a minute. Maybe Yuuri was actually also afflicted with the lie serum? Could Goro tell, and that's why he isolated the liars? It was a command to lie convincingly, though. So there really was no easy way to tell, and as far as Nami knew, Yuuri could be telling the truth. She didn't know him well enough to make a judgment like that.

"Oh, but first," Goro hesitated, but kept his hand against the door, "I wanted to say something, to both of you! Thanks for coming along with me! And like, that's sincere. I know that I did something super bad. I know that I deserve to be hated. I know that other people hate me. I know all of that! But, I still want to be your friend. As rotten as that may sound. I promise, I really am more than the Killing Game! And, I wanted to say that, honestly, because I don't know… If I'll be able to tell the truth ever again. I could be hit with the lie serum every single day after today."

"Ever again?" Yuuri questioned, taking a single step backwards in his surprise, "Are you seriously trying to imply that you don't think this motive will get cancelled out? Monokuma said it ends if someone dies!"

"That's true," Goro said, and one of those too-wide smiles split his face again, "But I'm not a fan of a motive like this at all! It doesn't line up with my own personal ideas. There's no record to break and no Tomoe to hate! And this motive doesn't do anything for my third reason, either. So, I dunno. Maybe it won't end. Maybe nobody will die, and we'll just have to worry about lying forever. I wanted to take this opportunity to tell the truth while I can!"

"I see," Nami said, and there wasn't any way she could be forced to lie about this reaction. Not convincingly, anyway, so instead, her real feelings came forth, "I still don't like or trust you, but it means a lot to hear you feel that way."

It was nice, to have such a sincere emotion that even Monokuma's motive couldn't twist it up. And strange, that Goro was the one to prompt it.
Daily Life: Day Three (Tryharder Monokuma)

Goro opened the door to Yuuri's ward, and they were greeted with exactly what they'd expect from him. It was laid out more like Tomoe's, having the room arranged with a perimeter of one object and a center of others. Said perimeter were marbled countertops, perfect for working at, and the center was composed of all variety of baking materials and appliances, far more than the kitchen offered. The back wall included pocketknives, behind a locked glass door. The walls were plastered again as well, this time with newspaper clippings about fights.

"Hm… Oh, I get it!" Goro exclaimed, "I figured it out! The first ward whose medical application is apparent!" He ran forward, then pulled out a specific ingredient out of the baking supplies, "Cooking laxative. For making laxative chocolates and stuff with! And," He rummaged some more, "Yeah, this is super obvious. There's a whole lotta stuff here to make multipurpose sweets with…"

"You mean you don't know the medical purpose of your own ward?" Nami asked, and oh, yikes. Here came the compulsive bluffing, "I figured that out right away. The sewing stations included suturing thread, you know. Why's there sewing stuff in your wing anyway?"

"Oh, yeah! As the Ultimate Idol, I make a lot of my own costumes," Goro explained, "I also reaally like plushies! So, that's what my ward can be used for in a medical perspective. Stitches! That's pretty funny. Y'know, cause I totally stabbed your sister. Should've stitched her up in penance or something. Not that it matters now."

"Stop being a dick," Nami reprimanded him.

"Hm," Yuuri seemed preoccupied with the wall of knives, "Monokuma? Get your ass in here."

"Be gentle with me, daddy!" Monokuma exclaimed as it arrived, then struck an obnoxiously cutey pose, "Just kidding. I'm well aware the only reason you and Kyousuke haven't boned yet is cause you're both bottoms. So, what you got for me?"

"Shut up!" Yuuri hissed, and looked as if he was about to kick Monokuma, but stopped himself in time and just asked his question instead, "These knives… What's the deal?"

"Well, they're for you!" Monokuma said, "Cause you like those pocketknives and stuff! Buuut, I actually took some precautions with those. Only you can open the cabinet, and if a knife leaves your possession, poof! Moi-nokuma arrives to snatch it right away. These knives are so unique, they'd never make a compelling trial."

"Isn't it counter-intuitive to do something like that in a Killing Game?" Goro asked, "All weapons should be available to us!"

"Ratings, buddy," Monokuma answered, chuckling with its paws on its own belly, "As it currently stands, nobody can use that murder weapon but Ruka, so it won’t be used. As much as I wanna see this Killing Game to completion, I also gotta make sure that it’s sitting pretty with all the entertainment value it ever could need!"

“Understandable,” Goro said, “I guess it could be pretty boring to let a pocketknife be the murder weapon. Still, doesn’t that kind of spit in the face of the Killing Game?”

“You all already know it’s an effort of despair being broadcast to the world!” Monokuma exclaimed, “So, who gives a shit! I’m not the one who wanted you to have all this fucking
“So, the Mastermind wanted us not to forget the existence and meaning of Killing Games?” Yuuri questioned, frowning, “So, I guess that… Acting in ways based on the standard set by previous games could cause us more despair, than the usual cluelessness would?”

“What the fuck, Ruka?” Monokuma asked, “You’re not supposed to be smart! But I guess since you figured that out I’ll give you one other little hint.”

“A hint about the Mastermind? This early in the game?” Goro asked, “I guess you really do want it to end early, huh?”

“Nooo!” Monokuma protested, “I don’t! I sure don’t! And you squandered your chance, because I’m not gonna tell you now. So there. Bye-bye!”

And Monokuma was gone. Nami fixed Goro with a silent, annoyed glare, which he only replied to by sticking out his tongue, as if he’d just pulled a prank rather than ruining their chance at cutting the game short. But it did prove that Nami could act in body language independently from the lie serum.

“Of course, it’s annoying as fuck that I get this ward now…” Yuuri scoffed, “How am I supposed to use it at all, if I’m stuck babysitting the attempted murderer?”

“Aww, I wouldn’t mind hanging out in here!” Goro proclaimed, then hesitated and tapped his cheek, “Not till we see the other two wards we have available to us, though. If anyone else decided to commit a murder, after all, I’d wanna know what they had available!”

Yuuri agreed, “For sure. So, those two wards, then back here? I’ll use the equipment to make some more impressive pastries to share at dinner. That’s when I’ll offer the pool party idea, too.”

“Great!” Goro said, “Sounds like a perfect plan to me. Of course, Nami can go do her own thing if she wants. We wouldn’t force her to also stick around here for hours, right?”

“Not sure I want to be left totally alone with you, dude,” Yuuri said, then glanced at the wall of knives again, “Or, maybe in this room it’d be fine…”

“Hm? Oh yeah, only you have access to those knives, so you have a big upper hand if I somehow decided I wanted to attack you,” Goro said, then laughed, “I mean, if I ever wanted to kill you, Ruka, it’d take a lot of effort! Some special circumstances, probably.”

“That’s… good?” Yuuri wasn’t sure what else to say, but he pushed past the other two to get back to the door, “Well, then I guess we should move on, so I’m not stuck with two of you idiots any longer than I have to be…”

“Ruka,” Nami grabbed at his wrist, her posturing aggressive, affectedly so. Even if it somehow came out as a lie, he’d realize her anger, “Why do you suddenly hate me?”

“Hm?” Yuuri questioned, then just smirked back at her, “I fucking gotcha. Screw Monokuma, surprised that I said something smart. Just cause I almost flunked outta middle school doesn’t make me a real idiot. Don’t hate you at all, Nami, you’re cool as shit. But for today? You’re a damn liar.”

She couldn’t say out loud that he was right, of course. But she could still confirm his suspicion. Her body was still in her control.
All she had to do all along was *nod*. 
“Oh my God,” Goro observed, “The serum doesn’t impact body language! Ruka, how the Hell did you figure that out?”

“I may be a dumbass, but I’m not an idiot. Let’s not get into why, but I’m actually damn good at reading people. That, and baking, s’where my smarts lie. When Nami whole-ass agreed to come with us,” Yuuri explained, “I got suspicious. When I acted like a dick earlier, she flinched, but said it was fine. The fact that when I kept treating her like shit she ended up yelling at me proved it. She was hit with lie serum, but it has no effect on body language or physical movements.”

“So, we gotta use that!” Goro exclaimed, “We can just tell people at breakfast. ‘Raise your hand if you were hit with lie serum today’, right? So it’s not really a real motive at all!”

“Is that too easy?” Nami asked, her question benign enough to be asked untouched.

“Monokuma never said that there’s not a way to counteract motives,” Goro explained, “In fact, it actually mentioned that there’s one ward which can directly cancel out a later motive. So we know that’s a valid mechanic in this Killing Game. Still, it seems kind of half-assed! After all, Akamatsu will probably figure it out, too. If she hasn’t already. What a fucking faulty motive.”

“Upupu! So you figured it out!” Monokuma arrived again, “But it’s not faulty! You really think I’d make a mistake like that after last year? I’m being way careful! Covering all my bases. It’s true that you can actually figure out the daily liars with that kind of method… But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t have the ability to cause a murder.”

And it was gone, but in seconds, Goro was hit in the head by something. He turned to see what it was, and found Riko’s whiteboard on the ground. He picked it up and read its contents aloud as Riko watched from the doorway of her own ward, “Sorry to overhear, but I know how it could still be a motive. The lies are still convincing, but truths are also still allowed out if it’s not possible to convincingly lie about them. So you could hear an actual truth and assume the opposite is true, because almost every other statement is that way. If that opposite is something bad, it could be a murder motive.”

“Good point, Asahi!” Goro grinned as he held her whiteboard back out towards her, “But, could you maaaybe try not eavesdropping in the future? Or at least not throwing the fact that you were eavesdropping, literally, at the back of my head?”

“Tough titty,” Riko responded, glaring at him, “A whiteboard to the head is the least you deserve after trying to kill somebody for no reason.”

“If I’d succeeded, though,” Goro said, “Then Yushu would be the one still alive, with both us Killing Game Bad Seeds dead and gone!”

“Mad at you for trying. And for failing. You’re right but you shouldn’t have tried killing someone for no reason to begin with,” Riko chided.

"Ahh... I guess I can't argue with that," Goro admitted, then stepped toward Riko, "Sooo, your ward got unlocked, huh? Also, in case you missed it. Nami's got a case of the liar-bug today!"

"So that's how you figured it out," Riko observed, then looked past Goro to Nami, and back to him, "Yes, my ward is unlocked."
"Cool! Can we take a look?" Goro asked.

"No."

"Awwe, why not?" A pout found its way onto Goro's face when he read that response, an exaggerated show of being upset. He even stomped one foot a little bit, which drew Nami's attention to the floor and she finally observed the footwear of some of her peers. Riko wore black ugg boots. Her own were black combat boots, and still black were Yuuri's, which were covered in buckles and not at all unsurprising from him. Goro's, meanwhile, were still boots but weren't black. In fact, they were pink knee-high go-go boots. They matched his aesthetic so well that Nami only now noticed how actually strange that attire was.

"Because I don't like you," Riko's answer was simple, "Even though I like the people you're with. Anyway, it's very uninteresting. Mostly just heavy texts."

"Heavy texts, huh?" Yuuri asked, "What does that mean?"

Riko thought for a moment before giving an explanation, "Law books, fiction that goes beyond the school-measured reading levels in complication, things like that. I think because my talent is abstract and my hobbies are already represented in other wards, mine just got to be the library dump."

"Can I take a look, alone?" Nami asked.

"She won't be able to even give us any reliable information on the inside, since, you know!" Goro exclaimed, "Though, I mean, it sounds like a super boring ward, too... So I don't really care about it! I bet Nami doesn't either, but the lie serum made her ask if she could take a look. Am I right, Nami?"

Nami shook her head. She actually did want to see the effective library ward. She wasn't sure why she wanted to see it, but it wasn't a lie that she asked to.

"Oh," Goro seemed incredibly disappointed. Nami felt a bit of smug satisfaction at that fact; Clearly, he thought that he knew her better than she knew herself, "Well, okay, but I totally thought that wouldn't be interesting to Nami at all until later on!"

"What's that supposed to mean, some sort of reference to that mystery talent of hers?" Yuuri questioned.

Nami ignored the bickering boys, even though she was the target of their bickering (she always thought if she'd ended up in that position, it would have been when she got cute enough for straight boys to fight over her...) and brushed past Riko into the Ultimate Heir Ward. Riko wasn't lying that it was bookshelves. The walls were fairly boring, and the room was split front and back between aisles of heavy, aged bookshelves, and armchairs that appeared equally as geriatric. She approached the nearest bookshelf.

A law book... She reached out and pulled one off the shelf, opening it where she stood. It didn't feel like she'd read it before, but the terminology didn't throw her for a loop. Did people exaggerate how complicated 'legalese' was, or something? She shrugged, and put the book back, then went for something in a different genre. Medical research paper... A little more confusing. Heavy fiction book, about the same was the law book. Maybe she just had a naturally high reading level, or something. Well, she shouldn't keep the others waiting. She returned everything where it was meant to be, then rejoined Goro and Yuuri outside.
11:00 AM / 1100 Hours

The moment that Nami got back into the hallway, Riko left the scene without so much as a wave goodbye, prompting Nami to turn and glare at the boys. Both of them played innocent. Nami rolled her eyes at them, then turned to the final ward-

Oh, right. The Waitress Ward. Now, there was no telling if Shinjiro would actually be in there, but it did make Nami hesitate in front of the door, a frown set into her face.

"Oh, right, Nozomi totally hates your guts now, doesn't he?" Goro asked, "I bet that's also why it got under your skin, when Ruka was trying to be enough of an asshole to figure out if you were hit by the lie serum, yeah? Nozomi already went from being your friend to being your enemy, so if Ruka was gonna do the same thing..."

"Oh, shit," Yuuri said, "Nami, I swear, I totally didn't mean to, at all, I was just trying to experiment, I didn't even think about-"

Nami shrugged, trying her best to portray that it was no skin off her back in a way that couldn't possibly become warped. Of course, she assumed that to keep Riko involved with the motive, Monokuma's statement that it 'only included words' also applied to writing. Luckily, it seemed that Yuuri understood this as an acceptance of his apology. Nami didn't hold it against him, but much to her chagrine, Goro was right. Nami probably wouldn't have been so hurt by Yuuri's insults toward her if not for Shinjiro's one-eighty on her, throwing all of their bonding right into the trash.

Even with her hesitation, Nami took a deep breath, and pushed open the door to the waitress ward-

"What the fuck!?!" Sayaka's shrill voice sounded out, and before Nami could even process it, Sayaka was hiding behind Mitsuru. When had those two gotten to be good friends, she wondered?

"Hi, Yamaguchi," Yuuri greeted her, "Uh, what's going on in here?"

"N-n-nothing!" Sayaka protested, her voice still high and shaky in her surprise, "And even if there was something, Kyousuke was supposed to be watching the door so you totally shouldn't be in here!"

"Wow, we didn't see Kyousuke at all, and we've been on this floor for a while! Maybe he's got the lie serum?" Goro wondered aloud, trying to lean around Mitsuru to spot Sayaka, but finding that he worked as a formidable and quite opaque wall, "Wow, you two, though? I mean first off, I totally thought you were a lesbian, Sayaka! Second off, how the fuck would it even work between a dude who almost breaks seven feet tall and two feet wide, and a legal dwarf of a loli?"

"I assure you," Mitsuru said, "No such thing is in play here. The matter which is embarrassing Miss Yamaguchi is one which would not be embarrassing to most. And as for my own part in the situation, well, I've got two girlfriends who I am quite committed to, so why would I jeopardize that?"

"Committed to two girlfriends? Isn't that kind of a contradiction?" Yuuri asked.

"No!" Mitsuru proclaimed, holding a hand to his chest in honest shock, "Not a contradiction at all! Sasane, Iwako, and I have all been through the fire and the flame together. The three of us share a bond so deep, that it only makes sense to be romantic as well, even if such a connection is
unconventional to most people's sensitivities."

"Iwako Same?" Goro asked, blinking. "And. Wait. Sasane Ikimura?"

"Yes! Have you heard of my wonderful girlfriends?" Mitsuru asked, his demeanor changed in an instant. He was excited, but kept on guarding Sayaka from view.

"I have!" Goro said, taking a step forward, "Ah, they're quite high in the tier list of Ultimates, after all! Doctor Same, the Ultimate Pharmacist... And Ikimura, the Ultimate Linguist... Of course I've heard of them! They survived their own Killing Game a short while ago, didn't they?"

"Yes," Mitsuru confirmed, "But, denying convention, they stated they would prefer to return to work with the Future Foundation, than to change alliances to stand with their rescuers, Ultimate Hope."

"Ahh, that explains everything," Goro said.

Nami didn't get it at all. It showed on her face.

Mitsuru noticed, and launched into an explanation, "Ah, see, snad is a codename of mine. I created it when I was very young, but it stuck. Theology is my passion, but my actual job is to serve as an agent of the Future Foundation. Sasane and Iwako were recruited at the same time I was, which is how we ended up knowing each other so well. I am, however, the only person in this game who is allied with the Future Foundation this year, and I promise, I won't behave in the rather unsavory manner that's historically typical of those with my affiliation."

"I trust you," Yuuri said, and Nami nodded her agreement. He continued, "By the way, Nami's got lie serum right now, but it doesn't affect body language. So if you could both just, shake your heads if you're not afflicted, or nod if you are?"

Mitsuru shook his head, but Sayaka shouted out from behind him, "Letting you see me shake my head would require coming out of hiding, idiots!"

"You still haven't changed back?" Mitsuru asked.

Sayaka's voice jumped an octave and ten decibels, "Say that and you're going to fucking reveal the issue! And of course I haven't changed back! I'm not going to undress in front of Nami, or Bakura for that matter!"

"How... Are you comfortable enough to undress in front of Fujishiro, though?" Goro asked.

"He's a trustworthy man in a committed relationship, and he's got a little sister that I know he wants to protect and doesn't have any bad feelings toward because he has the same opinion of children as Kyousuke, who I know super well! Knowing super well is also why I could undress in front of Ruka! But not you two!"

"If those two left the room, could you show me that you don't have lie serum, then I can relay the message?" Yuuri asked.

"God! Fine!" Sayaka shouted, then stepped out from behind Mitsuru. She was wearing a kimono that fit her quite well, which was surprising given her height. It was red and grey, but balanced such that it didn't look like Shadow the Hedgehog, and she even had a matching spider lily pin in one of her pigtails, "Are you happy now? Gazing upon my pure, youthful, maidenly form?? When I saw that Nozomi's lab had kimono's in everybody's sizes, I asked Fujishiro to help me put one on..."
"Why is that embarrassing?" Nami asked. She knew why it would embarrass her, of course, but Sayaka?

"Yamaguchi's never worn a women's yukata before," Yuuri explained, stepping in for his friend whose face was so completely beet red that it didn't seem she could speak in this moment, "As the Ultimate Little Sister, after all, she was always doing everything just like the rest of the members, not like the 'women' of the mob. So, I'd guess that's why it's so embarrassing to her."

Sayaka just nodded in agreement with Yuuri's statement.

"Well, the reason you came out here," Goro said, "Yamaguchi, are you afflicted with lie serum today?"

She shook her head denying the question. So that was sorted out. Nami finally took an actual look around the ward. The back wall had racks of kimonos, but they weren't obvious from the doorway, since they were partitioned away from the rest of the ward. It was styled to look quite a bit like a restaurant, but without actual tables for eating on. That made sense, it would be a bit redundant given the dining hall and Yuuri's ward both existed. Instead, the dining tables were set up with all variety of calligraphy supplies. So that was a hobby of Shinjiro's...

"I think you look cute, Yamaguchi," Yuuri added, then looked to the others. Goro agreed verbally, Nami nonverbally, so he continued, "See, everybody does."

"W-w-what are you guys... Fucking lolicons..." Sayaka's accusation didn't have any fire behind it, she just wasn't used to taking compliments without deflecting with her height as a way to get angry instead of needing to be flattered. But coming from Yuuri, she couldn't quite convert her emotions in the usual manner, "Go away..."

"Do you want me to guard the door in Kyousuke's place, until you can change back into your normal clothes?" Yuuri asked.

"Yes..." Sayaka squeaked out, and the three accidental intruders left the ward. Nami was just relieved that the ward's owner hadn't been there.

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"So," Shinjiro had observed upon arriving to the new floor of the hospital, "Etsukun's ward is unavailable to us, due to his untimely death..."

"Oh, yeah," Kanoshi agreed. He was currently standing guard in front of the door for Shinjiro's own ward, having made his way up here only moments after the motive was announced, at Sayaka's request. Mitsuru had come along too, and the pair had decided to take advantage of one of that ward's features. Nobody else had yet come upstairs, besides now, Shinjiro, "Sorry, your own ward, um... Yamaguchi asked me to keep watch and make sure nobody goes inside right now..."

"Ah, I have no worries about that, no!" Shinjiro assured him, "But, since you are locking me out of my ward, I think you owe me a favor. Don't worry, we won't be leaving this hallway, so you will not fail to keep watch! I just would like some assistance in seeing if I cannot break into that Ultimate Runner's Ward."
Once Sayaka had changed back, she and Mitsuru walked into the hallway. The moment they did, Goro and Yuuri took off for Yuuri’s lab so that the latter could start working on 'pastries for dinner', abandoning Nami to deal with the two remaining.

"I'm deeply sorry you had to see that, Nami," Sayaka said with an exaggerated bow, which looked ridiculous combined with her height. Nami held back her laughter, though, "In fact! Um. Fuck, Fujishiro, I really gotta do this?"

"Yes," Mitsuru said, "Come on. It was your idea."

"Right..." Sayaka groaned, then locked eyes with Nami again, "I wanna say I'm sorry for being a bitch to you before and really I don't hate you at all or anything like that, and now was a good time for me to be honest with you cause you can't be honest with me in return, and basically. Uh. For some reason I just kind of assumed that you and your sqicky sister never suffered or anything and that I was allowed to hate you but I was wrong, and it's really weird for me to be in a group like this with no outlet for my anger."

Nami just nodded along, though she was surprised that Sayaka was apologizing.

Sayaka stood up straight, took a deep breath, then spoke again, "There isn't anyone here who I can hate, I realized that. Everyone here is a victim, there's no one that I can just hurl abuse at and nobody that I can attack. I was using you and your sister and Mizuho, but I was wrong. The three of you went through some really bad stuff too, and I'm a fucking idiot!"

"You're not an idiot," Nami said, smiling. An objective fact could make it through unharmed, after all.

Sayaka turned red again, and went to hide behind Mitsuru's arm. For somebody who tried to be so intimidating, and could definitely commit a murder, she seemed kind of... Emotionally immature? Yeah, Nami decided that was the description she'd use. It was better than her first thought of 'you are like little baby'.

“I think that’s something that we all need to remember,” Mitsuru spoke up, “No matter what sort of differences in opinion we may have from each other, we are Ultimates. Beacons of hope in a world of despair... That’s what the foundation always taught me was the purpose of the Ultimate Initiative. If in the war against despair, Future Foundation are the soldiers, Ultimates are the warriors.”

“What about that Ultimate Hope you mentioned?” Sayaka asked, “The uh… Rescuers at the end of a Killing Game?”

“They’re the vigilantes,” Mitsuru finished his metaphor at Sayaka’s prompting, arms crossed over his chest, “They haven’t done much besides reclaim Towa City, though. I think that’s why Despair is willing to let them keep breaking into the Killing Games to grab the last few survivors. If they did too much more, then Despair might start just killing everybody…”

“Ah, wait, I know this one,” Sayaka said, “Hope comes to rescue the survivors once the Mastermind is named, right? How do they time it like that?”

“The working theory Future Foundation has,” Mitsuru said, “Is that’s also a bit of mercy on the part of Despair, that as a reward, they release the location of the Killing Game to Ultimate Hope
once the participants figure out who among them is behind it. After all... The heads of both groups were friends, once. As awful as Despair is, the entire setup of the Killing Game points to them at least wanting it to be a battle on an even playing field.”

“Oh, so,” Sayaka stepped into the open again, hands on her hips as she smirked, “We were going about this totally the wrong way! A group like ours totally couldn’t get away with ‘not killing anyone’, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t set a record for most survivors! We just have to track down who the fucking rat is! I’m gonna go find Akamatsu and Sempers, I bet they can help me with that!”

Before Nami or Mitsuru could say anything, Sayaka was gone. She could move unbelievably quickly, Nami noticed. Almost like she was made for physical activity. The small size seemed counter-intuitive in some ways, but in others, it could actually be an advantage to her nimbleness.

“So,” Nami decided to lead with another question, the only way she could honestly carry a conversation today. This was a truly annoying motive, even if she at least had the position of being a known liar on her side, rather than just needing to mislead her friends for twenty-four hours straight, “How’d you two get so close so fast?”

“We have a lot in common,” Mitsuru said, “If you think about it. We both spent our youth training for something bigger than us. In her case it was crime, and in mine it was the long arm of the law, sure, but it’s a similar situation nonetheless. She also shares an incredibly rare genetic trait with somebody I’m close to... And, her personal relationship to the Shinto faith is quite interesting to me as a theologist. Is it really that surprising that we’d get along? She’s already promised me that if she escapes, she’ll kill my father for me.”

“You want your father dead?” Nami asked, then continued, this time spouting out a lie, “Myself, I’m catholic actually.”

“Ah, so you’re an atheist,” Mitsuru picked up, with a soft chuckle, before returning to a serious demeanor, “And, yes. In fact, Yamaguchi is one of the only people who could possibly do it. My father’s a high-profile politician, after all. Even a cult-related scandal couldn’t keep him down for long, in fact, he’s recently gained traction in a bid for Prime Minister.”

“Of course he has, Despair took over the government,” Nami blurted, then put her hands to her mouth in surprise. That was the truth. But, was it truthful enough to be considered an objective fact? “That was a lie,” she said.

“So it’s true,” Mitsuru was really good at interpreting this stuff, huh? “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, though. Future Foundation believes... At this rate, Japan is doomed, and we should be focusing on other countries. Towa and Okinawa are the only parts of Japan that are really holding up to Despair.”

“Goodie,” Nami said, “Is your father... Tatsuya Minami?”

“Ah!” Mitsuru was a bit startled, but quickly composed himself, “Well, yes, he is. It’s... Because of his position, that my childhood was an unfortunate one. My mother was in such a position where she wasn’t meant to be having sexual relations, but accusing a man like him of misconduct at that point in time never would have worked. I was the victim of a conspiracy by my grandmother, to protect my mother. Certain groups may have believed that I was... The second coming of Jesus Christ.”

“What the fuck.” Nami stated, deadpan.
Mitsuru waved his hands in front of himself, defensively, “It’s not my fault! I was a toddler! Grandma had connections to Future Foundation and had access to technology that could give the impression that I was hearing the voice of God. Unfortunately, the earpiece exploded on live television, and that’s why I look like this now. And why I used that shitty codename, too. As far as those groups were concerned, Mitsuru Fujishiro, the false messiah, was dead.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Nami questioned.

“Ah…” Mitsuru froze, then burst out laughing, “I guess Yamaguchi and I are alike in that way too! I figured I may as well be honest with you, when you’re incapable of being honest with me. It really is the exact same reason. I wanted to… I’m sorry, I used you as a brick wall to vent my troubles at. Why should I even do such a thing, when I just explained my past to Yamaguchi too…?”

“I dunno,” Nami said, but she did know. She understood. Mitsuru, based on what she knew about him, never had the chance to complain like this before. It made sense that he’d want to take the opportunity to lament his past if it was given to him. Still, Nami realized, she was really learning a lot about these people…

Oh, was that it?

Her own dirty laundry had been hung out in front of everybody at the trial. Thanks to that body count motive, everybody here knew that she was trans, that she’d been assaulted and killed somebody, that she’d been in danger of that happening all her life but Tomoe served as a substitute for her in all those situations. Everybody knew everything they probably never wanted to know about the Kaguya twins, so they were being compelled to confess, to Nami, their own shit as well. To put them on equal footing, right?

Maybe so, Nami decided. Probably so.

“Anyway, um, I think I’ll hang around with you for a bit,” Mitsuru said, “To make sure that anyone else we run into knows that you’re lying today. Is that alright, even though I just said all of that dumb stuff to you? And well also because, you know, I don’t wanna split up and walk around this place alone and all.”

Nami nodded. Why would she object?
12:00 PM /1200 Hours

Mitsuru and Nami were about to go downstairs, when the door to the Ultimate Runner’s Ward burst open.

What???

Shinjiro and Kanoshi tumbled out of the door, and it swung closed, clearly locking again behind them.

Double what?

“Uh… Hello?” Mitsuru said, “Kyousuke, you were supposed to be watching the door.”

“I sure was!” Kanoshi confirmed, his voice cracking in clear annoyance, “But Nozomi asked me to investigate this door with him, which I thought was definitely fine! I wouldn’t be going inside or anything! But uh… Something went wrong? Somehow we got stuck in there.”

“Upupupu!” Monokuma appeared! “You sure did. See, in the last game, there was this total fucking dumbass who I hate so much his stupid goddamn grin and that idiot eyepatch- anyway! He kept breaking into the labs. That’s what the wards were called last time. So I decided naughty children who try to get into the sealed wards get punished! This time, it was just a few hours, but don’t test me! I’ll start trapping you for even longer if you keep trying!”

“But, that does mean that we are technically allowed to enter the sealed labs, assuming that we’re willing to sit around for the duration of the time-out?” Shinjiro asked.

“Ya technically,” Monokuma said, “But yeah, breaking in consequence-free isn’t allowed anymore. Of course, time-outs will be cancelled early in the case of mandatory events. So if somebody you love gets stuck in time-out, just kill somebody! They’ll be let out for the investigation!”

“Another dumb side-motive?” Kanoshi asked, “You’re really desperate for something to stick…”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Mitsuru spoke up, “The lie serum doesn’t do anything to your physical movements. Ruka figured it out by observing Nami earlier today. So, could you nod or shake your heads to indicate if you’re a liar today?”

“Mmmphmmgmm,” Monokuma made noises then left.

Shinjiro and Kanoshi both shook their heads, narrowing the suspect pool for the remaining liar even further.

“I see,” Mitsuru said, “And so, that was also the truth about how you ended up inside that lab. Care to explain what you saw there?”

“It was definitely incomplete,” Shinjiro said, “Ah… Just a handful of treadmills, and some interesting bottles on the shelves. As far as I could tell, the bottles were simply filled with water, yes.”

“Yeah, he tasted one with reckless abandon,” Kanoshi confirmed, “What if it was poison or
something! That was scary. Anyway, um… Fujishiro, where’d Yamaguchi go?”

“She went to find Akamatsu,” Mitsuru explained, “Something about, we can end the game early if we figure out the Mastermind?”

“You’d think in the history of Killing Games, somebody would have already tried that, and we’d have heard about it, no?” Shinjiro asked, “Though I suppose that garbage killer Bakura might have more information for us, with his freakish knowledge of past games!”

“He didn’t actually murder anyone, you know,” Kanoshi said, “If he had, and somehow gotten away with it, I wouldn’t even trust him to be supervised by Ruka…”

“We never know, hm? You and Nami both had committed murders prior to the Killing Game,” Shinjiro gave an airy, condescending chuckle, “Somebody like Bakura? I mean, if somebody like you, Kyousuke, still has a past as a rotten murderer, then surely he does. Do you honestly believe that he’s never watched the life bleed out of somebody?”

“That’s a really worrisome description!” Kanoshi proclaimed, his voice cracking again, “I didn’t watch the life bleed out of somebody!”

“Sure you didn’t,” Shinjiro said, then finally stood up, brushing himself off before he looked to Mitsuru, “I’ll be leaving the murderers in your care, Fujishiro. I trust you have the moral fortitude not to get attached to them. Then again, since you were apparently having secret activities with the literal assassin, perhaps you’re… What did that execution call the culprit? Spineless, after all.”

Shinjiro was gone before anybody could refute him, but Nami was able to at least get in a glare at his back as he went. When he was just hating her, she could handle it, but he was really just acting like a dick in general now. He had a valid reason, sure, but she could still be annoyed. And wasn’t it hypocritical for Shinjiro to act like this, with what Rei said about Etsuko?

Oh well.

“Er… Anyway. You doing better, Nami?” Kanoshi moved on, getting to his feet. Nami nodded, which prompted a smile from him, “That’s good to hear. I was worried.”

“We all were,” Mitsuru agreed, scratching the back of his neck, “But, you know, I believe in Yamaguchi. I think that maybe, with her determination, this is almost over. There have been Killing Games that ended early before, for various reasons. Nozomi was wrong. The history of Killing Games is an imperfect one.”

“Thanks, Fujishiro,” Kanoshi said, taking a few deep breaths between his words to calm himself, “That was a stressful morning… Did things go alright for you and Yamaguchi?”

“We did get walked in on, by Nami and Ruka and Bakura, but it’s not a big deal. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” Kanoshi sighed in relief, “And, how’d she look?”

“Cute, of course,” Mitsuru said, chuckling, “But isn’t it a fact, that it’s impossible for anybody to look bad in a yukata?”

“Good point,” Kanoshi agreed.

“It’s very possible,” Nami lied. Kanoshi almost looked like he was going to protest for a moment, before remembering that she was objectively incorrect in almost any statement that she made
today.

Even so, some of these lies were pretty convincing. Nami honestly did believe that nobody could look bad in a yukata, though, even if she personally felt she couldn’t pull it off. It really wasn’t that she thought it would look bad on her. Just that she wasn’t good enough for what a garment like that deserved.

Not good enough…

Yeah, that was Nami’s problem. She wasn’t good enough to be a cute girl. She wasn’t good enough to keep Tomoe alive. She wasn’t good enough to have not killed somebody. If she were just a little bit better, then that could be enough. But she wasn’t. She was just Nami. And Nami wasn’t enough.

How unfortunate indeed.

"Nami? Are you okay?" Kanoshi asked.

"Yes," Nami lied.

A lie like that? A lie like that? That sort of lie? Why?

Why could it be a convincing lie for Nami to say that she was fine?

She was fine often. Most of the time. Most of the time she really was, right? She didn't think she'd had the opportunity prior, to lie about being fine. To say she was fine when she wasn't. So how could that be convincing? How could a lie that took practice, upon practice, be convincing from her mouth without any?

How many times did she need to lie?

How much of her life had she forgotten, where she wasn't fine?

Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy?

Why would she forget these things? She hated it, she was really starting to hate it. Under what circumstance was it better for her to forget any and all miserable moments, only to be so lost in her own head now? She knew that at least in some amount, it was natural amnesia. Repression. Why'd she have to go and be prone to such a thing? She only had herself to blame, of course, her memory loss wasn't a vehicle of the Killing Game. Some amount of it was, but not like this. Not where she forgot that she had ever been in such a state before that she had to say she was fine when she wasn't.

Those states should have been plenty, before, right?

She couldn't remember she couldn't remember.

Why? Why was this happening? Why was all of this happening to her? Why was-

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"Kaguya-hime!" Kira ran up, hands deep in the pocket of her light blue and rather preppily stylized hoodie, right up until she pulled one from her pocket to grab at Nami's arm, "So how did it go today, hm?"

"Ah!" Nami startled at the sudden capture of her arm, then frowned, "It... No, not well. Even with
your help. I'm supposed to be an Ultimate, and I can't even get something this simple right?"

"It's not your fault, princess~!" Kira insisted, leaning more into Nami with a disarming giggle. To anybody else, this upbeat behavior might have seemed flippant, but it actually helped to get Nami out of her head. Kira wouldn't act this way otherwise. For her, a bubbly personality was just a mask to be put on like any other personality, and she knew that this mask was the right one for right now, "It's society that's to blame! But don't you worry about it! Soon enough, we'll enter a hopeful golden age again!"

"Forgive me if I don't think that's very likely, Kira," Nami groaned, fumbling for a nearby parkbench to sit down. She crossed one leg over her knee, and Kira joined her on the bench as well, leaning against her shoulder, "It kind of just feels like this is... The new world order. Not that I really remember, before. But a lot of people I know do."

"Well," Kira pouted against Nami, "I guess... I've been thinking about this for a while, but I didn't know if I should tell you."

"Uhm... What?" Nami asked, a bit frightened. Kira told Nami everything. The fact that she was even considering not doing so, with anything at all, made Nami worry that it was serious.

Kira waited a minute before speaking up, "I think that somebody needs to do something really radical. I mean. Despair took over the world with Killing Games and large-scale terror attacks, right? But now, those sort of things have become the norm. Somebody's gotta do something even more radical than that. Something that totally shakes the world to its core."

"Something like what?" Nami asked. She wasn't scared. Kira could never scare her, no matter what she said.

"Something like... I dunno. Removing the major operatives."

"The major operatives?"

"Yeah!" Kira nodded, having pulled away from Nami. Her eyes were sparkling, just like her name implied. Kira Kirara, "I mean, the people who are in charge... Of everything. Despair, Hope, Future Foundation, The Ultimate Initiative. Remove those constants and let the new variables take over. Ruin the game between the factions by taking their kings and queens! End the Killing Games, end the war... Radical."

"That is pretty radical," Nami agreed, stretching back over the bench, "It's just conjecture though, right? I mean. Just another one of those theories of yours. There's no way you could implement this."

"Yeah..." Kira sighed, dipping her head, "That's the problem with being an Ultimate sometimes! I see the solution! I know, technically, how everything could get fixed, and stuff, but there isn't any method to it. Removing the major players would at least get the wheels turning for something to change. The problem is, there isn't anybody who's capable of doing such a thing, right? So... It's more like a lost cause. It would take an all-new faction, with their own motivations. One person couldn't do it. Two people couldn't either, especially not you and me."

"Not without a real motive," Nami agreed, "I mean. I love that you wanna solve this shit. Props. But why should I really give a shit now? I'm doing my part. You convinced me to. And that's all we need, yeah?"

"Mhm," Kira agreed, and leaned in to Nami again, "After all, we're both old enough now. I don't
need to worry about us getting separated by a Killing Game~! Maybe in the abstract, I really wanna end the Quiet War. And I really wanna stop the Killing Games. But realistically, ah. You're right. There isn't a reason to care. I have my Princess Kaguya, and I can help people this way."

"Does that make us terrible people?" Nami asked, "To just want to do my job and be a Big Gay and not think about things like Monokuma or anything like that?"

"It kind of does," Kira admitted, "But it's okay, isn't it? I just need you to promise me one thing, Nami."

"Anything," Nami said, "Kira."
Daily Life: Day Three (Consequence Of Memory)

5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

Nami woke up in the provisional infirmary. Her head was pounding. Kanoshi and Mitsuru were both gone, but that didn't mean she was alone. Tsukasa and Rei were both there. Her closest friends here, so far. Not her closest friends alive, though. Hopefully. Probably. Kira had to be alive, right?

"Nami!" Rei exclaimed, "I was so worried about you! Kyousuke said that you lied about being fine, and then you uh... Passed out, sort of? Those were his exact words. He also said that you've got lie serum, but..."

"Actually," Monokuma arrived and interrupted, "The lie serum has been shifted from Nami to Nozomi for the remainder of this motive period."

"Why would you do that?" Tsukasa asked.

"Because," Monokuma said, giving an exaggerated shrug, "It had an unintended effect. I may be a Monokuma, but I'm not a monster. The lie serum triggered an episode in Nami, which developed into a flashback, if her vitals are anything to go on. I don't want my motive to have that sort of impact. It's supposed to prompt murder! Not psychological breakdowns! That's for later!"

"I..." Nami sat up, holding a hand to her head, "I... What... the fuck?"

"You don't have to tell us anything if you don't feel up to it!" Tsukasa assured her.

Nami took a deep breath, trying to get her thoughts in order, then voiced them, "I, figured out who used to call me Kaguya-hime. Her name was, Kira Kirara. And I think she was my girlfriend. When I was an Ultimate."

"Did you remember your talent?" Rei asked.

"No," Nami said, "It was just a small flashback where we talked about the world, and stuff. It felt really normal though, like that's what we always talked about. And I was disappointed because I failed at something related to my talent, but I, don't know what that was."

"That's... Wow," Tsukasa said, "Well, at least now you know for sure that you really do have an Ultimate Talent? That's an upside."

"It's all an upside," Nami said, "Honestly, I think, it all is. I had a talent. And I had... Kira. I wasn't alone. She better be alive. I hope she's alive. She was twenty-one, though. That's old enough that she wouldn't have been considered for this game..." She thought for another minute, "Ah, and I was dressed, way cuter too, then... I dunno how I..."

"I bet that being around Kira gave you more confidence in yourself," Rei said, tilting her head, "And when she was around, you felt like you could wear stuff like that, right?"

"Probably," Nami agreed, then glanced to Tsukasa, "It's not really fair that I get to be exempt from the motive just because I'm fucked in the head, though. Nozomi's going to hate me even more for that."

"That's probably why Monokuma was willing to do it," Tsukasa said, "It gives you a break, but
also doesn't lessen the impact of the motive on the group dynamic. So, about this Kira...

Nami felt her cheeks heating up at the interrogation, "Ah! Well, I only really, remember, a little bit, but. She always knew just what to say to get me out of my own head, and she had all of these big ideas... I think it was something related to her talent, she was kind of a compulsive problem-solver. She figured out, she said, a way that the Killing Games could be stopped forever... But only in theory. It would be impossible to pull off in reality."

"She sounds really smart!" Rei said, and her cheeks were dimpled with how wide her smile was, "I'm so glad to hear that you have somebody like that waiting for you on the outside..."

"I hope that she is, anyway," Nami mumbled, staring down at her own palms, "I mean. If she watches the Killing Game. If she sees me, the way I've been acting. The way things have been here, how much of a mess I really am-"

"Nami," Tsukasa snapped, "Anyone whose opinion of you would change so easily isn't worth your time anyway! And I do trust that your taste in girls is such that you wouldn't be interested in somebody like that! I bet your girlfriend is great and will be really happy to see you when all of this is done."

"Huh..." Rei mumbled aloud, "That's weird though, isn't it? I mean, the number of people who are already taken. Nami and Kira, Akamatsu and Shirogane, you and Randy... And, I have a crush who's not here."

"Fujishiro has two girlfriends, too," Nami added in, "You're right. Usually more people in a Killing Game are single, at least at the beginning."

"I'm not doubting it's the case, of course," Rei said, "Just an observation. So, Nami. you were out for a really long time. It's almost dinnertime. Are you hungry?"

"Starved," Nami said, and thought back to breakfast. She'd never finished her croissant. Did she drop it somewhere? She didn't have any idea where it ended up. She swung her legs to the side of the cot and stood up, "I'm sorry to worry you... I bet I ruined your days."

"You didn't," Rei said, "Well, we were worried, but you didn't ruin our days. Mizuho and I didn't spend the whole time you were out here with you, we took turns. Just both happened to be here when you actually woke up."

"That makes me feel better about it," Nami confirmed.

Tsukasa propped her up on one side upon noticing that she was a bit wobbly, and the three made their way up to the dining hall. They were, unsurprisingly, greeted at the door by Shinjiro. He didn't say anything, just glaring straight through Rei to project his anger directly into Nami's soul.

"S-Sorry," Nami rarely stuttered, but under Shinjiro's ire, she couldn't help herself.

"Oh, right, about that," Tsukasa announced to the room, "Something went wrong with Nami having the lie serum, so Monokuma transferred it to Nozomi for the rest of the day. That's why he's really extra mad at her now, and also, that's the current situation. Did we ever determine who else had it?"

"Tsumugi did," Kaede said, "Independently, I also realized that body language wasn't impacted by the lie serum. It wasn't very hard to do, especially when Tsumugi was the one who was affected. I know her so well, she could never actually lie to me convincingly, no matter what Monokuma thinks!"
"Ah-" Box made a strange noise from her table. Nami looked around, and determined that Yuuri had already shared his pastries, and it seemed like Rei made tea again. Kanoshi was in the kitchen, making some simple meat and vegetables to round out the meal.

"Yes, Hako," Kaede's response brought Nami's attention back to their interaction, "That does make the opposite true. The secret that we share, Tsumugi also knows. But she'll keep it, don't worry."

"Thank you," Box said.

Nami nervously moved past Shinjiro to sit down at a still-empty table, where she was joined by Tsukasa and Rei for dinner.
Once Kanoshi finished adding to the meal with something besides Yuuri's pastries, everybody was seated and eating. And that was when Yuuri stood up and addressed the room, "Okay, everybody. Some of you may already know this, but Monokuma's added a pool to the Empty Wings. So, it might be a good thing, to have some sort of organized pool party. Or at least, organize use of the pool. Have people reserve times to use it, et cetera."

"The party bit was my idea!" Goro exclaimed.

"Parties are never a good idea," Sayaka chided him, "You of all people should know this! Something always goes seriously wrong at any sort of party or performance in a Killing Game. People use the excitement as cover!"

"But until things go horribly wrong, they're fun parties..." Goro complained.

"We can't open ourselves up to tragedy like that," Kaede said, "So I agree, a party's kind of out of the question. As much as I would totally love to be able to see everybody here in swimsuits! We need to be reasonable."

"We should have sign-ups for the pool on three-hour intervals, with half an hour at the start and the end for changing, so there's no chance of overlap or walking in," Mitsuru offered, "And sign up as groups. That way, we'll always know who's meant to be there at any given time. We won't worry that they've died, and if something did happen, there will be guaranteed alibis from whoever signed up with them. Not to mention, it keeps people swimming with those they're comfortable around."

"Thanks, Fujishiro!" Sayaka said, "That's a great idea!"

"Nami," Rei said, nudging her elbow, "Could I convince you to swim if it was just a few of us, and you didn't have to put on a swimsuit around everybody else? Your choice who."

"Ah," Nami hesitated for a moment, then nodded, "I think so... If it was, you and Asahi, that might be okay. Nobody else, though."

"I'll go ask her!" Rei said, then got up from the table and bounced over towards where Riko was sitting alone and not eating. Nami thought that Rei actually seemed more upbeat in some ways since the last trial, almost like she'd previously restrained herself to make a good, responsible example for Etsuko. Or maybe she was trying to be more like him in his honor. Either way, Nami thought that it was a cute look on her. After Riko's table, Rei went to Mitsuru, and back to Nami, "Okay! We have the pool from three to six in the afternoon, the day after tomorrow. I was too slow to get it any sooner if I wanted it to just be us three."

"Thanks, Rei," Nami said, then started actually eating her meal. Once she got going, she didn't want to stop. Kanoshi's contribution was pedestrian, but Yuuri's ward granted him the ability to really make some great pastries, even better than the breakfast ones, "That gives me some more time to mentally prepare myself, anyway."

"Come on! Do you really need that much mental preparation, now that you've remembered that stuff?" Rei asked, "I mean, I get it... But you know, if you were able to pull off cuter clothes in the past, that's proof you can do it now."

"That's a fallacy," Nami said, then failed to elaborate.
“What?” Tsukasa asked.

Nami shrugged, then explained, “Just because I did it doesn’t mean I pulled it off, you know. I could have just been overconfident because of Kira, and I actually looked like a stupid idiot the entire time. So, let’s drop it, okay?”

“Well, alright,” Rei said, then stretched out and craned her neck to look over toward where Shinjiro was sitting, “Ah, Nami? I think… I should probably say something to Shinji.”

“By all means,” Nami said, “Please, get him to stop hating me as much… It feels really weird to have you hanging out with me so often when he’s all bitter and stuff.”

“Yeah…” Rei agreed, then stood up and walked across the dining hall again.

Nami and Tsukasa were left alone at the table then, and to avoid thinking about how there should have been more people, she just returned her attention to her meal. Way too much attention to her meal. She caught herself eating the corn one kernel at a time in her utter, ridiculous focus. Even so, it was easier to think about eating corn one kernel at a time than thinking about how Tomoe was dead, Etsuko was dead, and Shinjiro hated her-

And, she thought about it anyway. Why couldn’t she just, stop caring? She thought that was something she was good at, apathy. Even that memory reinforced that she was apathetic to the problems of the world, but apparently, she just wasn’t good enough at apathy to cut it in a Killing Game.

Maybe that was a good thing

--

“Shinji,” Rei said, sitting down at the table across from him, where he’d been sitting alone. Her eyes were locked to his immediately, “You need to stop acting like a dick, you know.”

“Me? I can’t even begin to imagine what you could mean by that, Reicchi,” Shinjiro said, hand held to his chest in a melodramatic motion, “I’m merely treating others in the manner that they have proven they deserve to be treated, no?”

Rei frowned, “They don’t deserve that, though. Nami, what she did, it was just like Etsukun. Self defense. It wasn’t a real murder and she doesn’t even remember doing it. Can you seriously just write off people who would prefer to get along with you, because of something like that? Sometimes, things happen, and there’s no way to avoid them…”

“My disdain towards Nami has nothing to do with self defense,” Shinjiro said, lifting a hand to his own cheek, “It has to do with her sister, and with Bakura. I do not believe that Miss Nami has an unfortunate character due to the single incident in which she killed her own attacker. In fact, I admire her for having the fortitude to protect herself in such a way. Rather, I don’t trust her for those she associates with. I wasn’t lying before.”

“She doesn’t even really associate with Bakura, though,” Rei said, glancing away, “Shinji… She associates with me. And with Mizuho, who, well, does he give you the impression that he’s done a single thing wrong in his life?”

“Well, no,” Shinjiro said, “Excluding the fact that his talent revolves around greed, that is. Though, I suppose that it’s not entirely his fault.”

“See?” Rei said, “Just because there are people willing to kill for Nami… Doesn’t mean she wants
them to. So you can stop being rude-”

Rei froze, remembering something suddenly. Right. Shinjiro was… Lying. She’d somehow forgotten when she came over here, that the lie serum had been transferred to him. But anything he said could be a lie. In fact, he was probably lying about his reasons for disliking Nami. He clearly also disliked Tsukasa, then. Rei sighed internally. This man had too many convictions.

But she could use the serum to her advantage.

“Shinji,” She said, tilting her head to one side, “You’re used to lying. Anything out of your mouth can be a convincing lie. So, there’s no way I’d get any real truth out of you, is there? At least, not speaking to you normally.”

Shinjiro said nothing.

“You hate murderers. You hate all sorts of people. In fact, a part of you resented Etsukun for what he did, even if you know he had to do it…” Rei said, “But you can be a hypocrite, too. So don’t try not to answer me this question, Shinji. I need to know. Even with the opinions you hold, would you kill for me?”

“Absolutely not,” Shinjiro said, staring straight through her.

“I knew it,” Rei said, then took a deep breath before continuing, “Well. Now that you’ve said that, of course, you can’t go through with it. If you tried, then of course, I’d call you out right away. I wouldn’t want my freedom at the expense of anyone’s life, or your integrity.”

“Reicchi…” Shinjiro breathed.

“It’s really broken, isn’t it?” Rei asked, standing up from her seat, “We can’t fix it. Not today. Tomorrow, though. If we’re both truthtellers. There’s one more important thing I need to talk to you about. And after that? I don’t know. Maybe without Etsukun, you and I, could never get along after all.”
Rei left the dining hall immediately after finishing her conversation with Shinjiro, a move that gave Riko the social pass to take her plate of food and abscond to her room with it. Nami turned to Tsukasa, both of their plates empty, “Did you hear what Monokuma said about the Runner’s Ward?”

“No, I didn’t,” Tsukasa said, “What about it?”

“Apparently if the owner of a ward dies before it becomes available, the ward is sealed to the rest of us. But also, last year, those ‘labs’ kept getting broken into and stuff. Like there was an Ultimate B and E in the game or something? Anyway, now we actually are allowed in to those wards, but we’d also get locked in for like… A lot of hours.”

“I see,” Tsukasa said, “Let me guess. You want to go get locked in to Yushu’s ward?”

Nami gave a slow and deliberate nod.

“I’ll get Randy to come with us,” Tsukasa said, “I mean, if that’s okay?”

“I sort of thought he was annoying, but then we had that trial,” Nami said, “I mean, I wasn’t doing too well that whole time but, he did a good job. Earnest. A special boy trying his best.”

“Isn’t he?” Tsukasa asked, his voice shifted into a dreamy tone for those words before he came back down to earth, “But, yeah, I thought you might figure that out. I know that his optimism can come across as annoying at first, but he really does believe everything that he says.”

“Heyy!” Speak of the devil, Randy appeared behind Tsukasa, “Are you talking about me?”

“I am,” Tsukasa said, looking up with a grin, “Nami’s warmed up to you.”

“Of course she has,” Randy said, throwing a peace sign, “I’m the fucking best! And that’s not arrogance, it’s self-confidence, there’s totally a difference there.”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “If you used to think you were the fucking worst, right?”

“Mhm!” Randy vocalized, “I did think I was the fucking worst! I was angry and sad all the time, but then I met my mentor and she taught me how to point my anger in a useful direction! Plus, I figured out a bunch of stuff about who I am and who I’m supposed to be and all of that stereotypical stuff.”

“That makes sense,” Nami said, “I wish that when I figured out who I am I stopped hating myself.”

Randy frowned, “Well, I mean. It’s not like I’m a hundred percent secure now, but! I think it’s probably the amnesia for you. You’re getting more confident already, I think… But you just, lost all the memories you had of being validated before!”

“That sounds so fucking dumb,” Nami said.

“It is so fucking dumb!” Randy agreed, “But I don’t think that I’m wrong, either.”

“Okay,” Nami said, “Do you want to be locked in a room, the three of us, for an indefinite amount of hours?”
“Do I ever!” Randy said, “Why though?”

“The Runner’s Ward can technically be entered, but only if we’re willing to be stuck there for hours,” Tsukasa relayed Nami’s earlier explanation, “Maybe you and Nami can talk about gender stuff, or something? Not that I think that’s the only thing you have to talk about, but it’s something you have in common, isn’t it?”

“That’s fair,” Nami said, “I mean, in common in reverse, but that is technically correct. I’m sure it would be enough conversation to keep us going through being locked in a room for several hours though.”

"Definitely," Randy said, then took off, running towards the door. Nami and Tsukasa walked, sharing a look that communicated quite well the shared confusion they had over the fact that people kept running around here. So Randy still did things that confused Tsukasa, huh? That was kind of funny, Nami thought.

It didn't take long for the three of them to make their way up to the new floor and find themselves in front of the door labeled for the proper ward. Tsukasa reached forward, only to be stopped by a loud noise from behind, "Hey!"

The trio turned to see Sayaka and Kaede standing there, the former being the one to make the prior exclamation.

"What's going on?" Randy asked, putting his hands on his hips, "You ladies need something?"

"Well," Sayaka said, "Me and Akamatsu have been investigating something!~ So we were going to spend some time in the punishment room, just so we could get a look at what's inside and stuff."

"You've been investigating?" Randy asked, then turned, "Kaede, how could you? I thought that I was your apprentice! Your disciple! Your platonic Doctor John Watson if Shirogane is your romantic Captain Arthur Hastings!"

"Uh... Sure?" Kaede couldn't keep herself from laughing at Randy's comparison, "But, you're right! You are my apprentice, Randy. The thing is that Yamaguchi approached me for my help investigating something. So, I'm not teaching her anything! I'm just helping her out! It's not a murder mystery or anything, so it's fine, right?"

"Yeah," Randy said, "That makes sense."

"We had dibs on the punishment room first though," Nami said, leaning forward, "We all were ready to sign away hours of our lives to sate our curiosity. So..."

"Sure we had dibs, Nami," Randy said, "But, don't you think that we can just all get trapped, the five of us? Shit, that makes it a party!"

"I did say I wanted to get to know you better, Nami," Sayaka admitted, scratching at the back of her neck, "And since the lie serum got lifted, I guess this is as good a chance at any. Really, if ya think about it, refusing the offer to combine our investigative parties gives off the impression that somebody in either party was planning a murder in the punishment room! Not that I think that's true. Assuming we'll all go in. Right?"

Nami hesitated a moment, but then agreed, "Right, right. That makes sense."

She was actually kind of looking forward to the original arrangement, but Sayaka had her there. She couldn't refuse without making herself look suspicious, though she wasn't a fan of the fact that
Sayaka would even be suspicious in that way.

"Let's go inside, then," Sayaka said, and reached out for the door. Nami didn't actually feel like she moved, but the moment Sayaka's hand connected, all of them found themselves inside. Monokuma fuckery, she assumed, and didn't question that aspect. Shinjiro and Kanoshi had been telling the truth about the room's contents. Treadmills, and shelves full of bottled liquid that was apparently water. Above the door, there was a timer.

Ah, how long they had to be in there. Five hours... Oof. That would keep them in here past the nighttime announcement, but that was okay, Nami planned to sleep in her own room again tonight anyhow. Even so, five hours locked in here with these people...

"Hey, Monokuma," Sayaka called it forth, and it arrived in the room, "What would happen if somebody else came in the room while we're already here? Would the timer reset, or get more time, or what?"

"Ahh, I couldn't work out a satisfactory way to resolve that!" Monokuma admitted with a heavy sigh. "So, the thing is, as soon as a group of participants are in the punishment room, I can't punish anybody else who tries to get inside... The door's officially one hundred percent impenetrable to everybody!"

"Okay, thanks," Sayaka said, then reached out and wrapped her arms around Monokuma, restraining it in place with just enough force not to count as attacking the headmaster, "So, of course that means, you're stuck here with us, right?"

"Eh? No way! That's not possible! I got stuff to do!" Monokuma protested, straining against Sayaka's restrictive hug, "Important stuff! What if somebody else has a question for me? Besides! I don't use doors so that doesn't apply to me!"

"But... You're a participant too, right?" Sayaka asked, "A group of participants, that's what you said, bitch."

"Shut up!" Monokuma shouted.

"Important stuff to do?" Kaede asked, then leaned down to be at eye level with the restrained Monokuma, "That's really funny! After all, you're not unique, are you? There's a whole bunch of you in this hospital. One copy of you can stand to hang out with us for a few hours! Unless... You're a one of a kind Monokuma?"
"Eh? Eheheh? Ehhh?" Monokuma floundered for words, wiggling in Sayaka's arms, "I dunno what you're talking about! Ahahah! Why would there be more than one of me? I'm the same Monokuma as ever, but I'm totally unique! The only reason there'd be another of me would be if I! Got killed! And then there'd be a copy! Isn't that natural and normal?"

"You keep screwing up your laugh, Monokuma," Kaede said, pouting at it, "Are you even taking this at all seriously? And, of course there has to be more than one of you. I mean, what if somebody was breaking a rule across the hospital when you were in the middle of some important announcement, huh? After fifty-three Killing Games, an oversight like that seems super out of character!"

"Ohh, what would a goody two-shoes detective like you know about my character anyway?" Monokuma questioned, "You never even paid attention to the Killing Games, right?"

"Yeah, but Keiko had the volume up high enough that I should at least know about Monokumas, right?" Kaede asked, then sat down on the floor. Sayaka followed her lead, crossing her legs and holding Monokuma in her lap. Nami sat down as well.

She decided to join the conversation, "Mm, who's Keiko?"

"My twin sister," Kaede explained, turning to Nami with a bittersweet smile, "She became despair, then got killed by a really good friend of mine... So that's how I know that you'll eventually move on from Tomoe's death."

"Ah, you mentioned that earlier. Keiko and Kaede... That's not very creative," Nami said.

"Hey!" Kaede protested, "It is too! Picking names that start with the same letter for twins is normal, the originality comes in what those names actually are! And what about your parents? Does your deadname start with a T?"

"Uhm," Nami didn't even feel offended, necessarily, at the question, because it brought with it a wave of confusion, "No, I mean... I don't remember what my parents named me. I don't think it matters though. I bet they would have hated me if they knew who I grew up to be anyway."

"Oh, that's sad," Kaede said, "Not that you forgot the name, that's actually fortunate, but that you think your parents wouldn't love you for who you are... My family was kind of a mess towards the end there, but at least we all loved each other, through everything."

"Towards the end?" Nami asked.

"Kaede's parents got killed," Randy chimed in, "By the Despairing Ultimate Gunsmith, just a few months before he was killed in his home by one of his own servants! But before that, they were both super miserable. Despair, but not, you know. The dangerous kind. Hope it's okay, Kaede?"

"More than okay," Kaede said, "I hate telling the story myself, but it's probably important for people to know as much about each other as possible. Motives can play on making us believe false information about our friends, after all. The more real information there is, the better chances we have! I wanted to hide at first, but I think it really is better to be friends. Somebody important to me once said... Real information is the only defense we have against gaslighting. If the false
memories overlap what we already know to be true, the real information will always feel, even if it's just by a little bit, more true."

"Whoever said that sounds really smart," Tsukasa said from where he still stood, near the timed door which now read 04:30. Half an hour had gone by since they'd trapped themselves in here, "As for Nami's deadname, I won't say what it is, nobody needs to know that, but it wasn't similar to the name Tomoe at all. Sorry to ruin your argument, Akamatsu."


"Akamatsu," Sayaka said, "Weren't we busy interrogating this bear?"

"Ah, right!" Kaede exclaimed, turning to Monokuma again, "So you're a unique Monokuma. That's pretty weird. Are you not powered by AI or something?"

"I don't want to indulge you!" Monokuma said, "So I'm gonna answer you the most cryptic way I can think of! There is exactly one AI in this hospital!"

"I see," Kaede said, then blinked a few times before offering a question that nobody could understand the origin of, "Is that AI Motherkuma?"

"Motherkuma isn't an AI, it's just a program! You really think that big ol' lout with no personality actually has an artificial intelligence behind it? AIs develop, and a Motherkuma can't change, or it'd ruin everything!" Monokuma protested, then paused a moment, "Hey, wait. Motherkuma's in the CEO Ward. You can't have met it yet!"

"So you are still AI-powered," Kaede said, then turned to look at the confused faces around the room, and sighed, tucking a bit of hair back behind her ear and adjusting her beanie before she spoke again, "I'll trust everyone in this room with my secret. Yes, I've met Motherkuma. I didn't meet it at this hospital though. The truth is, Hako isn't the Ultimate Survivor."

"It's you?" Nami asked.

Kaede nodded before she continued, keeping her voice level, "Tsumugi and I both, actually. I didn't want to admit it, so we made up that lie about how the previous game ended. What I'm more curious about, now, is why you helped Hako cover for us, Monokuma."

"It helped her cover?" Randy asked, "Wha- How?"

"A few ways," Kaede explained, "It used a Flashback light to erase the lie we told from memory. Back when the lightbulb broke in the cafeteria? And further corroborated that idea by stating another lie about how the previous game ended; That the mastermind wasn't even executed, to match Hako's pacifist nature. So, Monokuma. Why did you do it?"

"I don't have to justify myself to you heathens!" Monokuma protested.

"Yeah, you do," Sayaka said directly into its ear, and oh, joy. Nami hadn't heard that tone of voice from Sayaka before. It was chilling.

"Okay, jeeze," Monokuma whined, "It all comes down to ratings, okay? I decided to let Box cover for you, and covered for her with my own information, because having you fight over some dumb Ultimate Survivor bullshit isn't interesting at all! Nobody liked the last Killing Game, nobody! So if the first murder hinged on suspicions relating to the previous game... Then we definitely wouldn't make our budget for next year's Killing Game!!"
"Seems dumb," Sayaka said, pouting, "That's a dumbass reason. I thought it'd be something worthwhile."

"I mean," Monokuma said, "Only two people have died so far! You really think anything worthwhile would be coming out of my mouth until the final hour? I'm Monokuma! Ahaha! Upupu!"

"Do we really have to keep that thing in here with us this whole time?" Randy questioned, "I mean, I was not counting on that! And look, Monokuma, I'm sure that you're a fun guy-"

"Not a guy," Monokuma corrected.

"A fun bear! But I can't really be friends with someone who wants my other friends to die, can I? And I wasn't expecting you to be here. I was gonna get some quality bonding time in with my boyfriend's childhood friend!" Randy explained, hands on his hips, "So, like, am I allowed to tell this thing to fuck off?"

"I guess," Sayaka said, rolling her eyes as she released it from her grip. Monokuma immediately took its leave from the room, and she groaned, "That dumb bear is... God."

"You said it," Kaede said, then took another look around, "So, I guess. I completely lost everybody's trust, eh?"

"Nah," Sayaka said, waving her hand in a noncommittal gesture, "I don't really care about that sort of thing, anyway. I'm just really curious. How'd the two of you get selected? How did your game end, and stuff? Thanks to Monokuma, somehow, your lie had no consequences, so I don't think it matters."

"We're friends! So I don't mind," Randy said, "I kinda already figured it out anyway. Cause I'm smart. As heck."

"You're not and you didn't," Nami said, "But, Akamatsu, I don't care about shit anyway. The reason I distrust Hako isn't actually because I thought she was the Ultimate Survivor, though that was part of it. I second Yamaguchi, though. How did you get selected?"

Tsukasa didn't say anything, but it was clear he'd agree with whatever opinion Randy had.

"I don't know how we got picked as Ultimate Survivors, exactly..." Kaede said, "They wouldn't leave me with a memory that thoroughly exposes a mystery like that, you know! But," Her face fell, "I'm sorry, but I can't help but feel like it's possible Tsumugi is here just because I'm here, that I dragged her down with me, somehow... Which makes me think, maybe. I'm the Ultimate Survivor because when Hope came to rescue us, they didn't want me?"

"I'm sure that's not true," Nami said.

"I'm not a very good person," Kaede admitted, dropping her hands to her sides, "I don't mean I tend to do bad things or hurt my friends, but I also can't shake this feeling that, I'm forgetting some very bad mistakes that I've made."
"Are you stupid?" Sayaka questioned, her voice harsh but not in that disturbing tone, "No, for real, Akamatsu! Are you a fucking idiot?"

"What do you mean?" Kaede asked, shrinking away from Sayaka.

"My literal Ultimate Talent is to break peoples' bones! And sometimes kill them!" Sayaka continued, waving her hands around animatedly, "And I'm also like, a walking cactus. If these people don't hate me after all of that, what makes you think they're gonna hate a girl who wants everybody to get along who just has some sort of vague feeling that she's not perfectly virtuous?"

"Well, Nozomi-" Kaede started to say.

"Nozomi hates everyone," Randy was the one to interrupt this time, "Like, he hates Nami! And Kyousuke! Who hates them? He's a dick."

Kaede had to laugh at Randy's eternal enthusiasm. Nami could tell that Kaede did consider herself a relatively optimistic person, but the only person who ever could have compared to Randy was, probably, Etsuko. Oof. Now Nami was kind of sad again.

"A-Anyway," Sayaka spoke up again, stammering. So she was about to say something she considered dumb. Nami tuned in, "We should split into groups, right? I wanna talk to Akamatsu some more, and didn't Randy and Nami wanna talk too? If we go to opposite ends of the room then we won't, overhear each other or anything."

"Good idea, Yamaguchi!" Randy exclaimed, "Yeah, let's do that!"

Tsukasa raised his hand slightly, "Uh, where do I fall in this?"

"You'll be with us, of course," Nami said, "I mean, that's what I thought was going to be the case when we decided to come here, so..."

"Right," Tsukasa said, then they committed the aforementioned split. Nami, Randy, and Tsukasa sat down together at one end of the room, with Nami sitting on the edge of one of the treadmills and the boys both sitting on the floor.

"Anyway," Nami said, turning to Randy, "I'm super curious. You seem like you'd be a chronic egg, so how'd you figure out that you're a dude?"

"Me? A chronic egg? What could ever give you that idea?" Randy questioned, then laughed before answering for real, "It's so fucking true. Anyway, it's actually thanks to Tsukasa! See, he was dating this really shitty dude, and I was like, you know, I could be a way better boyfriend than Nate. But like, why was I thinking I could be a better boyfriend if I was supposed to be a girl, huh? So that's what made me figure it out that, you know, maybe I was a little bit wrong about who I was supposed to be, and it wasn't long till I could fulfill my dream of being the best boyfriend for Tsukasa ever!"

"Amazing," Nami said, "I was kind of an egg too, though, don't worry."

"If you were an egg," Randy asked, "How did you, like, ever figure it out? Cause, I mean, you're smart. But you're also kind of a fucking dumbass. No offense."
"None taken you're totally right," Nami said, "I mean, I didn't even think of it or anything. I basically just said 'I don't know why I'm so miserable all of the time' and Tomoe said 'maybe you're a girl' and the rest was history."

"Yeah that makes sense," Randy said, "I honestly can't imagine any other situation in which you actually figure out what's making you miserable."

Nami pouted, "Yeah, that's probably true. I needed somebody to spell it out for me. Or, I guess, just tell me that it's possible. Cause Tomoe was definitely right..."

"Ah, I've actually heard that sort of thing before," Tsukasa said, "For a lot of people, it's not possible to think of something until you learn that it's possible. And that the reason there are more LGBT people isn't because there actually are more, but because people who never would have known there was any other option are now getting the opportunity to understand?"

"Yeah, that makes a lot of sense!" Randy said, "Despair kinda set that sort of thing back, but it's still true. What's funny too is, like, okay. So Nami. Is your sexuality like, linked with your gender, sort of?"

"I mean, no," Nami said, "I'm bi, so it doesn't really matter. Plus, I was already socially transitioning in middle school, so the gender came first."

"Huh," Randy said, "That's cool. Me, I totally thought that I was like, asexual, while I was an egg and all. But as it turns out, I'm really totally not at all. But, like, I could only actually be gay as a guy, y'feel?"

"Again, I can't say I really get it..." Nami said, "But it does make sense, technically. Mizuho, thanks for being so apparently alluring that you caused Randy to figure out his true self."

"Apparently?" Tsukasa asked, "Didn't you just say that you're bi?"

"I say apparently, because you're not attractive to me. You look pretty generic from where I stand," She explained.

"What's your type anyway, Nami?" Randy asked.

"My type..." Nami thought for a few moments before giving her answer, "I like girls with long hair? Glasses look nice on people, too. I guess if I had to explain in terms of the people we know, I think that the cutest people in this game with us are Shirogane and Ruka."

"Ooh!" Randy leaned forward, "So when it comes to guys, you like when they've got some muscles, but they're not like, hulking brick walls?"

"Basically," Nami confirmed, "I don't really think 'could crush me like a soda can' is an especially attractive trait, but if I'm gonna date a dude, I'd feel like shit if he wasn't stronger than me..."

"That makes sense," Randy said, "Except, being able to crush me like a soda can is definitely an attractive trait! Though, also, totally unnecessary. As long as he's a take-charge kinda guy!"

Nami turned and stared at Tsukasa, "...Really?"

"If you think that he's not a take-charge kinda guy, you just don't understand what sense of the term I'm-!" Randy was cut off by Tsukasa clapping a hand over his mouth.

"That's a little, what's the word, tmi, don't you think?" Tsukasa muttered to him.
Nami couldn't help but laugh, and tease them both, "Ohhh, I see how it is."

"You really shouldn't!" Tsukasa protested, "This guy just doesn't know when to shut up!"

"You're not denying that my assumption is correct," Nami said, giving them a nasty grin, "But, I mean, I totally knew what you two were up to anyway..."

"Given my talent-" Randy started to speak again as soon as Tsukasa removed his hand, only to be silenced again.

"What does fisticuffs have to do with...?" Nami questioned.

"Damn it, Randy," Tsukasa groaned, then sat back to address Nami, "Look, that's not something that we should be talking about. Can I implore you to please forget that dumb quip?"

"Sure," Nami said, and gave him a thumbs-up.

--

On the other side of the room, Sayaka was getting to know Kaede. They were working together to try and find out the Mastermind before anyone else died, but that wasn't what they were talking about right now.

Right now, they were doing something that Sayaka considered a rather foreign concept; Making Friends.

The only way that girls like them knew how: Talking About Girls.

“So, how did you, I mean…” Sayaka asked, stumbling through her words because, wow. Her three ounces of whoop-ass weren’t any of them used to talking about frivolous things like this! “Get with Shirogane?”

Kaede thought about that question, then shrugged, “Um. To be honest, I never asked her out… And she never asked me out… We just got really close and kind of ended up together? We definitely did start dating though, because I held myself back from flirting with other girls as much after we did.”

"Flirting with other girls?" Sayaka questioned, "Uhm... How?"

"How?" Kaede asked, "Yamaguchi..."

"I'm!  The epitome of a useless lesbian, okay!?” Sayaka protested against Kaede's scrutiny, "How do you talk to cute girls!  I can barely talk to anyone!  I can only talk to you cause you're totally off the market!"

"Well," Kaede said with an exaggerated shrug, "My strategy is basically just to act like a perverted grandpa... I never really thought that strategy could get me a boyfriend, let alone a girlfriend, but I guess Tsumugi just likes somebody who wants to look up girls' skirts? I wouldn't exactly call it an effective way of flirting."

"...Yeah, I sure wouldn't either," Sayaka deadpanned, "I'm pretty sure that being too scared to talk to girls at all is still a better method of flirting than that! How'd you ever get a girlfriend? Jeeze... Maybe you just took the one girl in the world who doesn't care about flirting methods..."

"Maybe I did," Kaede teased, "Maybe I really did just get that lucky."
Daily Life: Day Four (Morning)

9:00 PM / 2100 Hours

It didn't take long for the novelty of being locked in Etsuko's lab to wear off. Not that any of those present expected it to be a pleasant experience, of course, but they weren't expecting it to become so boring so quickly. Nami tasted one of the bottles, just one sip that she immediately spat out. It was definitely water, but Nami had a bit of a picky palate. It was water that tasted stale. Super stale. It didn't taste fresh, in fact, it kind of tasted like rocks. Incredibly gross water. She was picky enough to dislike anything that came out of plastic, so water this awful was utterly worthless to her. The others who tried it seemed to agree, so even when Sayaka and Randy decided to both take runs on the treadmills, they didn't touch the water from the wall. Nami took a nap.

11:30 PM / 2330 Hours

The door opened and released the group back to the rest of the hospital. None of them dawdled or bothered to say anything else, they'd exhausted all conversation topics while trapped together. For five people to think of things to talk about for as many hours was a bit difficult, especially all in one location, with no meaningful stimulation. Maybe if more of them were already friends, it would have worked out, but there weren't quite enough combinations to make them capable of entertaining each other with no third party influence, like a party game, to keep them going.

Nami returned to her room and didn't hesitate to go to sleep, though she did change into pajamas this time. Even though she was exhausted, she wanted to actually be comfortable. Plus, she needed a shower in the morning before breakfast anyhow, so she'd be changing clothes regardless. May as well make her sleeping experience a little bit nicer than usual, right?

Only after she was changed and lying in bed did she realize that they hadn't heard Monokuma's nighttime announcement from inside Etsuko's ward, in spite of the fact that they were certainly in there past ten. The clocks on their Monopads confirmed it, the clock on her nightstand corroborated, and simply doing the math on the timer above the door left them with no doubt as to what the time was. Were there just no intercoms in the ward, since it was unfinished and technically inaccessible? Nami found that a bit odd, but nothing to think too hard about. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

"Wake up! Wake up! Good morning, you heathen bastards!" Monokuma's announcement didn't fail to ring in Nami's ears in the morning, "The time is now 6:00 AM! And you know, even though I totally already gave you the currently relevant motive, I do have an announcement to make at the same time as usual, so you all had better be there or be totally cubular!"

"Cubular?" Nami questioned out loud, though the only person to hear it was, of course, herself. She took a deep breath, then climbed out of bed to face the day. Then, she called out into the room, "I'm Nami Kaguya and I have no idea what my talent is!"

Great, she didn't get the lie serum again today. With that sorted out, she grabbed clothes for the day and went to shower. Of course, as opposed to the first morning she'd spent here, she was a little bit more reluctant. The first morning she'd spent in this place, she was slowly gaining some amount of confidence through the fog of amnesia, but now... She had seized upon some memories, and where she'd previously felt apathy was being replaced with dysphoria. Why was she like this? Why couldn't she hold onto the feeling of hardly caring what her body looked like, when she knew
who she was?

Was it because she'd lost one of her longest-standing confirmations of self?

Was it because she couldn't be Tomoe's sister anymore?

She shook her head, as if that would banish the thoughts she was having. She didn't want to dwell on this, she didn't want to be feeling this way. She turned on the shower, a bit warmer than it should have been. Not because she wanted it to hurt, nothing like that. She got undressed despite her reluctance, then knelt down in the shower, under the spray. From this far away, it was a pleasant temperature. Sitting down rather than standing, somehow, felt different. Like she wasn't as present, like she didn't need to feel it as much. There wasn't any reasoning behind it, but if it helped, why question?

After she left the shower, she got dressed, wearing a similar outfit to the one she'd already been wearing, but this time, she wore the short-sleeved button up under the tank top. It was technically showing less skin than before, but she felt like the layering actually gave a somewhat cuter effect.

With that, she was prepared to face the day. Whoever had the lie serum at breakfast... Oh, right. It didn't change overnight, but at eight. Somehow she'd forgotten. So, she wouldn't actually know until then if she was capable of telling the truth today. Annoying.

Well, there wasn't anything to be done at the moment, so she just walked out of her room. Nobody was in the hallway, so she just made her way to the dining hall on her own. Today, to her surprise, Sayaka was behind the counter, taking Riko's place for the morning as Yuuri's sous chef. It was a bit surprising to Nami, just how many people here seemed to actually enjoy some variety of culinary pursuit. With that out of the way, though, Nami took a seat across from Rei, who was already seated and on her own.

"Good morning, Nami!" Rei exclaimed, pressing her hands together, "How did you sleep? I've brought some tea from my ward, if you want some with breakfast."

"I slept fine, once I got to it," Nami said, "I did go and lock myself in a ward, and all."

"Wait, what?" Rei questioned.

Nami shrugged, "Yeah, after dinner, five of us went to let ourselves get locked in the Runner's Ward so that we could investigate it for ourselves. But, it was exactly the way that we were told it was. I dunno what I was expecting. Anyway... What could Monokuma possibly have to announce to us today?"
8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

Everybody was a little too nervous that morning. Nervous for what else Monokuma could possibly say to them, nervous for who was going to be afflicted with the lie serum when it was distributed at the top of the hour. Before Monokuma could arrive to make any announcements, Mitsuru took charge to request test and a raising of hands from anybody who fell victim to today's motive. Everybody said simple things to each other, to see if it would be twisted into a lie. Goro raised his hand, of course he would get it after he was granted immunity the previous day. The other victim was Kanoshi.

"I see," Mitsuru said, then announced, "So, keep that in mind for today. Bakura and Kyousuke have the lie serum. Also, today's pool schedule is on the counter between us and the kitchen, feel free to check it to remind yourself if you're planning to swim today. Thank you."

With that, Mitsuru sat down. A few people stood up to check the swimming schedule, but not Nami. She knew that her time to swim wasn't scheduled for today, thank goodness. She still wasn't sure that she'd even be able to do it, when the time came. She wanted to be able to look cute in a swimsuit, and still couldn't predict if she'd be able to.

Not long after Mitsuru's own announcement was finished, Monokuma made a grand entrance, dropping down from the dining hall's tall ceiling to land on the swim schedule. It bowed where it had landed, then stood up straight and called out into the room, "I bet you bastards thought you could get away without my breakfasttime announcement if you made one of your own! Too bad! I just waited a few minutes, and here I am with deliverance from sin!"

"...What?" Rei asked.

"The fuck is that supposed to mean!?” Sayaka questioned the bear, and it seemed a bit put off by her shouting.

"Come on, Red! I thought we bonded last night! I guess that the hour we spent in embrace means nothing to you!” Monokuma complained, then continued on, "Anyway though, I totally do mean deliverance from sin! Cause the announcement I have is about your ability to escape from this place! See, I already told you that when the culprit gets away with murder, they can escape with one more person. Or, as your Monopads report... Upon the determination of a faulty culprit, two people may escape, as chosen by the true culprit. I thought I oughta call your attention to this fact! Cause, you see, it means that if you really don't care about escaping, but you care about other people escaping... You might still commit a murder! Upupu! Haha! Bye-bye!"

Monokuma was gone before anybody could try to argue with it.

Nami thought, however, that it was entirely out of character for Monokuma to call attention to a loophole like that, even one that might prompt an otherwise unlikely murder. Pointing to loopholes in its own rules didn’t really make the Ultimate Despair Headmaster look good. In fact, it really did make Monokuma seem like it was scraping for ways to make the game continue on, as if this wasn’t a group of people completely capable of perpetuating the Killing Game without four different motives in play at once. Did it just want things to go quickly?
Even so, Nami thought, a motive like that probably wouldn’t do anything. After that first trial, it became obvious that getting away with murder wasn’t a real option. Even if Tomoe hadn’t confessed, it all pointed to her, even with the attempts she made to point the blame somewhere, anywhere else. Randy, Kaede, Riko... To some extent Nami herself, and most of the others. There were just too many people who were smart and valued finding the truth. Her monopad stated that one culprit couldn’t kill more than two people, or else they would be executed immediately with no trial. That meant that even if somebody did want to target valuable trial participants to increase their own chances at getting away with it, there was no way to actually get rid of everyone with that ability in one case.

That helped. Though, was it actually even possible to do something like that in any Killing Game? Despite certain talents, such as Detectives, lending themselves wholly to the discovery and takedown of culprits, there were always others who could find the relevant information and connect the dots. If there were a time limit on trials, perhaps then eliminating the person who could most efficiently solve the mystery would be a viable strategy, but as it was, Monokuma would let them just keep arguing forever until they came to a conclusion with confidence.

Well, of course. Long trials could be edited down to the juicy bits, but having a culprit get away with it and end the game prematurely was bad television. With what Nami knew of the Killing Game, that really was the point. Television that was entertaining and spread despair, because knowing how the game eventually ended, it wasn’t to actually turn its participants to despair. The survivors were rescued. The point was to eliminate those who could stand against despair and show it off to the world, spreading more despair. But people would only watch and be led to despair if it was entertaining.

Yeah, that seemed right. What other point could a televised Killing Game hold anyhow?

9:00 AM / 0900 Hours

Today, Rei and Shinjiro were both unaffected by the lie serum. As soon as breakfast was over, they met up in one of the Empty Wings’ miscellaneous rooms. Shinjiro started the conversation, “I’m sorry I’ve been such a hypocrite. Please let me explain myself.”

“That’s not what I want to talk to you about,” Rei said, taking a seat on one of the terrible cots, “It’s something completely different. The reason that you got passed the lie serum is because Nami’s having it triggered a painful flashback in her. She passed out for hours.”

“Ahh… Yes, and what about that?” Shinjiro asked.

“Spit it out, Reicchi.”

“Nami Kaguya used to know Kira Kirara,” Rei did in fact spit it out.

Then, silence. There was silence in the air around them as Shinjiro processed that information. He knew Kira Kirara. In his first year of high school, she was a third year, after all. They went to the same school and shared with each other the secrets of their natures. That they were both Ultimates. And somehow, at the same moment, he completely blanked on what Kira’s talent actually was.

Nami knew Kira?

“What… Was their relation?” Shinjiro asked.
“Yeah, see,” Rei said, “That’s the thing. They were close. Nami even thinks that it’s possible they were in a romantic relationship. So, if you keep hating Nami… You’re not just disagreeing with me, but with Kira, too. Do you really want that?”

“I…” Shinjiro breathed, dipping his head, “No. I don’t hate her, either. With the lie serum, it’s hard. I couldn’t possibly tell you how I actually feel. Reicchi, you need to understand. I don’t hate anybody. But. What am I supposed to do? Etsukun is dead and we’re surrounded by murderers. Even the ones who aren’t murderers scare me. Ruka has… those eyes. I just. Reicchi. I wouldn’t kill for you. That was the truth. What I want is to die for you.”

“I don’t,” Rei said.

“Why?” Shinjiro asked.

“Because,” Rei said, “I don’t want you to die. And I don’t want anyone else to die. I won’t escape this game on the lives of others. If people die… Then I’ll be sad, but I won’t stand for the deaths of everybody just so two people can escape. Five can escape if they make it to the end of it all. I like those odds better. Don’t you?”

“There’s no guarantee you’d be in those five, though,” Shinjiro said.

“There’s no guarantee I won’t,” Rei said, “And no guarantee you won’t be right there with me. Even if we can’t get along without Etsukun. I still don’t want to lose you.”

Chapter End Notes

It's November!! You know what that means! I am kind of on a small hiatus while working on my actual book for nanowrimo! Thanks folks!
Nami wandered off after breakfast. She actually didn’t have any idea of what she ought to do today. Part of her just wanted to go back to sleep until tomorrow, because she had plans tomorrow. Plans that she was very nervous for and every moment that she spent awake was a moment she had to spend with this horrible pit in her stomach wondering why she ever agreed to Rei’s idea. She did want to start getting over her fears, she did want the chance to go swimming with friends who wouldn’t judge her, but at the same time, she couldn’t just shake off the fear of wearing a swimsuit.

“Oh, Nami?” She was snapped out of it by that sparkling voice that could belong to none other than their local astronaut.

“What’s up, Shirogane?” She asked, sounding cool as a cucumber in spite of herself.

“I was wondering… Kaede’s busy doing something with Randy and Yamaguchi, so would you like to spend some time getting to know each other better?” Tsumugi clasped her hands in front of herself, “I understand if you wouldn’t, of course, seeing as I’m such a boring person all on my own, but… Ah, you sort of seem, how should I put it? Easier to approach than most of the other people who are free today. And some of those people are liars. So getting to know them would not be very effective.”

“Oh! Yes! Sure, certainly, indeed,” Nami wasn’t cool as a cucumber anymore, but she got herself together as she turned around, “You really wanna try and be my friend?”

“Of course. What’s so strange about that?”

“Well…” Nami pressed her fingertips together, “I’m already friends with Tsukasa and Randy and Rei and Asahi, you know! That’s four whole friends.”

“So you, don’t want to?” Tsumugi questioned, panic leaking into her voice for some reason.

“No! I mean yes! I mean, I wanna!” Nami flailed, “But four friends is a lot of friends! So it’s, surprising. If somebody else also wants to be my friend. I’m not a very impressive person you know!”

“I think you are. The fact that you’re still standing after that first trial is a testament to your abilities!” Tsumugi assured her, “Plus, you know. I think you already have more than four friends, even if you don’t realize it.”

“Bakura… Doesn’t count as a friend,” Nami deadpanned.

“Besides him!” Tsumugi laughed, “I mean, at least he does care about you, even if it’s excessive. Though, Kaede certainly considers you one of her friends. I can imagine that others do too, although I haven’t spoken to many of them myself. You’ve been quite socially active.”
“I… Guess I have,” Nami admitted, “Huh. I wasn’t planning on that or anything.”

“You must just have,” Tsumugi made a circle with her hands, “A magnetic personality!”

“What’s this supposed to be?” Nami imitated the circle.

“A magnet,” Tsumugi said.

“Aren’t magnets more like horseshoes?” Nami asked, making that shape instead, “I mean, circular magnets exist, but circles don’t make me think of magnets.”

There was a beat of silence, then both of them burst out laughing.

"Ahh, Anyway," Tsumugi said as her laughter subsided, "The gift shop has a bunch of DVDs... Want to have a look with me? I think that one of the best ways of getting to know somebody is to watch a movie that they like, after all."

"Umm," Nami thought for a second, "I don't watch a lot of recent movies, so I dunno if I'll find anything, but okay. The rooms don't have DVD players though, do they?"

"Most recent movies don't ever get made into DVDs anyway, they just get streamed," Tsumugi noted, "So I guess you really don't watch recent movies if you didn't know that. Oh, and the auditorium has a DVD player hooked up to its projector. Somebody else might come and join us, sure, but it'll be a nice viewing experience!"

"I've never been to a cinema..." Nami observed, "So, yeah. That'll be fun. If I can't find any of my movies at the gift shop, though, you're picking."

"I am okay with that!"

With that, Nami and Tsumugi went to the gift shop, which Nami hadn't actually investigated for herself yet. The back wall had a few shelves of liquor and cigarettes, the contraband cabinets. Then, it was split into aisles in the middle of the floor. Savory snacks aisle, candy aisle, random bits aisle (lighters and headphones alike populated that one), Accessories aisle where Tomoe got her gloves, DVD aisle, a toy aisle with a bunch of cute plushies for some reason, and a freezer case with popsicles in it. Nami ignored everything else and made a beeline to that one, "Nobody told me there was... An ice cream case."

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Tsumugi said, "It seems to rotate its selection between morning and afternoon, too. Morning has popsicles and wrapped cones, afternoon has got pints of ice cream, ice cream sandwiches, and spoons. Everything in the gift shop rotates between morning and afternoon, actually, but the case has an obvious theme to its rotation... Ah, the savory snacks always include popcorn, though. And there's a microwave in the corner. If you'd like some with our movie, I mean."

Nami procured one of the popsicles from the case and held it up, "Sanic."

"Huh... What?" Tsumugi questioned.

"Sanic," Nami repeated, waving the popsicle, "It's a vintage meme about everyone's favorite rapid hedgehog! And it's about one of these popsicles! Because they always look bad!"

"I... See," Tsumugi said.

Nami pulled the wrapper off and chuckled at the inaccurate blue hedgehog snack, then took a
gigantic bite that went all the way from the top of the popsicle to the first of the two bubblegum pupils. Then she clutched her head at the brain freeze for a few seconds before giving Tsumugi a thumbs-up, "It's also delicious!"

"Eating a popsicle at nine in the morning..." Tsumugi noted, "I did wonder why the case's rotation behaved in the way it does, but I suppose that it was for your sake."

"Ya," Nami confirmed, then took a bit of time to chow down on the rest of the popsicle. She tossed the stick in the trash then investigated the DVDs. The selection was... Strange, to say the least. It seemed completely randomized. She found what she was looking for, though. Shrek the Third. Neither of the first two Shreks were here, and Shrek the Third was technically not a very good Shrek as the Shreks went, but she doubted that Tsumugi had seen Shrek before anyway so she wouldn't have a point of comparison, and it was a sin for anyone to go their whole life without becoming acquainted with the memetic green ogre.

And, Nami was hit by a pang of complete sadness. Etsuko was isolated for most of his life... He probably never even heard of Shrek before he died. That was super tragic.

"Are you okay?" Tsumugi asked.

"Ah!" Nami exclaimed, and wiped with her wrist the small tears that had been summoned by that thought, "Yes, I'm sorry! It's just... I really like this movie series. And I think it's super sad that Yushu died without probably ever seeing any of it..."

"...Hm," Tsumugi thought for a minute, "So, it's a special tragedy when somebody dies without watching..." She leaned over and noted the title, "Shrek?"

"Yes! It really is!" Nami confirmed.

"In that case..." Tsumugi said, "Anyone who isn't busy, we should invite them to watch it with us, shouldn't we? And here you thought you wouldn't find any of the movies you like."

"Well, technically, one and two are way better, but those aren't here," Nami said, "I don't think the plot's thick enough that you can't understand three without the first two. So, um... Yeah. I wanna have a Shrek Party. Is it okay? I know we were going to hang out, the two of us, but..."

"This is more important than me," Tsumugi said, reaching out and wrapping her hands over Nami's on the disc case with a soft smile, "Let's split up and find everybody to invite, then we can meet back up in the auditorium. Right?"

Nami gave a resolute nod, "Yea! Thank you, Shirogane..."

"It's really important to have meaningful times with people," Tsumugi said, "And share the things you love, with those you care about. If you never share what you love, then they'll have nothing to remember you by... So, I think that this isn't just something we ought to do. It's something we have to do!"
Nami kept the DVD in her hand as she ran off from the gift shop. The unfortunate thing about this hospital was just how large it was; Anyone could be anywhere at any time, even completely random rooms in the Empty Wings. She assumed that Tsumugi would meet back up with her at about half past nine, though, since any longer would be a little ridiculous. Rather than go searching through the Empty Wings, especially since a number of the people who would have bothered to go that direction were those who had signed up for the pool, Nami decided to check the Ultimate Wards.

Nobody was in Kanoshi's. Goro was in his, using one of the sewing machines. Nami leaned in, "We're gonna watch a movie in the auditorium... Do you wanna join us?"

"Huh?" Goro looked up from what he was doing, and gave an exaggerated head-tilt of confusion, "You're really inviting me to spend time with you, Nami?"

"I'm inviting everyone I find..." Nami said, crossing her arms, "But, yeah, it's not like I hate you. And I want you to watch the movie! What are you doing?"

"Making some clothes for myself," Goro said, waving it off, "I'm already mostly done, though! So, I got time to watch a movie. Hey! Booox!" He turned and called into the room.

Box seemed to appear out of nowhere, bouncing to the front of the ward. She was holding something, though, so she must have just been at one of the other sewing machines. It was a medium-sized plushie, a cat. It was white, with a green collar. Well-made. And it reminded Nami of Etsuko.

"...That's," She forgot to ask Box to watch Shrek, distracted by the stuffed animal.

Box nodded, "Yeah, it is. I'm pretty good at making plushies, cause, I volunteered to do a lot of that sorta thing, to make toys or clothes for kids in need! So, since the supplies are here, I kinda thought that it would be nice to make something to remember our friends by. And plushies are the perfect thing to make too, since we're gonna meet somebody who really, really loves to collect them!"

"What?" Goro asked.

"Nothing," Box said, "I just remember Akabane saying one time, that her friend on the outside, Nagata... Yeah, I bet it was her, is a plushie collector! And since the three of us are all gonna survive, we'll meet her!"

"Wait," Nami paused for a second, "Ah, Bakura, you have the lie serum today, right?"

"Don't worry," Box said, "I'd tell you if he said anything that's a lie! He hasn't yet. We do in fact have time to watch the movie. Really, the serum doesn't seem to do a whole lot! A lot of what Bakura says are objective facts, or maybe he's just super bad at lying so he can't do any convincingly?"

Nami blinked a few times, then noticed there was a bandage wrapped around Box's hand that didn't seem to be there before, "Um, what happened to your hand?"

"Nothing you need to worry about," Box said, "I just sewed my hand to my work, haha... Just cause the final product comes out good doesn't mean I got there in a good way!"
"...Don't, do that," Nami said, now concerned for Box's safety, "But, anyway. You two will watch the movie? Meet us in the auditorium. If you wanna make a big batch of popcorn in the gift shop, that'd be bomber, too."

"Oh, of course!" Box said, raising her free hand in the air with the Etsu-cat plush clasped to her chest with her other arm. Then, she ran off. Goro waved at Nami, then ran after her, since he wasn't supposed to be left by himself at any given time, after all.

So Nami had already retrieved two people for her Shrek Party. That was nice. Not good enough, though! She checked Tomoe's ward next, though she didn't expect anyone to be there, and nobody was. Rei's was empty as well. Upstairs, then. She wasn't about to try and check if anybody was in Etsuko's ward, obviously, but there was Yuuri's and Shinjiro's. Yuuri's first, and Sayaka was in there... Using the equipment.

"...Go," Sayaka demanded, but Nami didn't.

"Hi Yamaguchi," Nami waved, "Do you wanna watch Shrek The Third?"

"Why would I wanna do that!? I haven't seen Shrek the First or Shrek the Second!" Sayaka snapped.

"If that's the case then you absolutely need to come see it. Everyone has to see at least one Shrek in their lifetime. In a Killing Game, that has to be today. Come on," Nami said.

"I'm in the middle of making macarons," Sayaka said, "Dummy."

Wow. So not only was Yuuri the Ultimate Baker, but Tomoe had liked to bake, Riko liked baking, and Sayaka too? Seemed to be a common hobby.

"Come to the auditorium after you make the macarons," Nami said, "And share them."

"Pdfdfj," Sayaka somehow said out loud, then continued, her voice cracking, "Fine! But only because you asked me to!"

"...Yes, I can imagine so," Nami said, then flashed another thumbs-up before absconding from the ward. Next was Shinjiro's. She opened the door, got glared at by the owner himself, then closed the door. Unlike Sayaka, who refused for refusal's sake, Nami had no chance at convincing Shinjiro to watch the movie, so she wouldn't even try. She'd want him to see it, of course, but if she was the one asking, then it wouldn't happen. Unfortunate. She wished he didn't hate her.

Well, there was nothing to be done about that, though. Nami returned downstairs and walked into the auditorium. Box and Goro had made an excessive amount of popcorn, with four gigantic bowls set upon a table at the corner of the auditorium, and a stack of plastic bowls next to them. They'd also brought along a good amount of candy, for a true movie watching experience. Nami knew she could count on them to do this. The Etsu-cat plushie had been set down in one of the seats, with a bag of skittles in front of it.

Tsumugi was back too, and it seemed that she'd gotten three people to come along; Mitsuru, Randy, and Tsukasa. Nami realized something a little weird, and approached Tsumugi, "I thought you said you were hanging out with me because Akamatsu was busy with Randy and Yamaguchi, but Yamaguchi's..."

"Yeah," Tsumugi admitted, "If you looked at the swimming sheet, you'd know I was lying, actually. She got signed up with Rei, Yuuri, and Kanoshi to swim laps. I poked my head in and told them to join us if they wanted when they're done, though."
"Why would you lie about that?" Nami asked.

"Because I didn't want you to ask why I wasn't also swimming," Tsumugi admitted. "Please still don't."

"Okay," Nami said, "Anyway, Yamaguchi is gonna bring macarons down here when she's done making them. She's the only other person I got to agree."

"I found these boys," Tsumugi said, gesturing to the three of them. Nami glanced over and saw that Mitsuru was investigating the snack table, while Randy seemed to have stopped at the gift shop himself and was eating a popsicle while staring at Tsukasa, because he just wouldn't stop.

"Oh!" Tsukasa ignored Randy's behavior and turned to Nami, "Guess what! I tracked down the first two movies, also. So we can have a marathon instead! If, you've got time for that."

"Yeah, I do," Nami said, "T'uno what else I'd do, anyway. People can just come in and out. Maybe with all three, everybody can get to see at least one of them..."

"That's what I thought," Tsukasa said, then revealed the DVDs, "I mean, I've only ever seen the first one myself, so I'll probably stick around for all three of them. I'm not swimming today or anything."

"Noice," Nami said, then Tsukasa went to get the first movie set up.
2:00 PM / 1400 Hours

People came in and out throughout the marathon of the first three Shrek movies, which Nami was happy to see. Almost all of the excess of popcorn actually got eaten, and thanks to Rei's help, Shinjiro actually spent about twenty minutes in the room during the second movie. There wasn't a single person who didn't see at least part of the Shrek movies, which was satisfying enough to Nami. Goro and Box had taken off after the first movie, probably to get back to work on whatever they were doing in Goro's ward. Nami didn't hold leaving against anybody, given that there were plenty of other things to be doing here.

As everybody started to disperse who was left at the end of the third movie, Nami watched them go. Randy seemed annoyed for some reason, Sayaka hurried to catch up with Kaede, who was leaving straight away. Riko and Tsumugi hung back with Nami to get things cleaned up. While removing the bowls was unnecessary and Monokuma would handle that as soon as the bowls were left alone, they didn't know about the candy wrappers, and any uneaten candies could be claimed or put back in the gift shop. Nami grabbed for herself the nearly-untouched bag of caramels, and Riko took the strawberry hard candies.

"This was a lot of fun, Nami," Tsumugi said as she continued picking up empty wrappers in her arms, "Thank you for helping me experience this. Those movies certainly did help me to understand more about who you are as a person... Though, we'll need to spend some one-on-one time at some point, still. I'd say we should do that now, but Kaede and I have reserved the pool for just the two of us quite soon."

"That makes sense," Nami said, "What's she up to, right now, though?"

"I think that she's checking the gift shop to see if there are swim caps. She said that while there were a lot of swimsuit options, there weren't any swim caps or anything, and she's worried that the chlorine might be weird with my hair," Tsumugi explained.

"Shrek 2 was the best one," Riko gave input on her whiteboard. She'd arrived about halfway through the first movie, and stuck around for the rest of them.

"Hey hey!" Monokuma appeared, "Aren't you guys gonna thank me, too?"

"For what?" Tsumugi asked.

"For adding the first two movies to the gift shop so even you big ol' bastard dummies could have a fun time!" Monokuma exclaimed, waving its paws around wildly, "You really think that Mizuho is better at seeking out memes than Nami is? Of course not! I put those movies in there! For your sakes!"

"...Thank you, Monokuma," Nami said.

"Aww," Monokuma flipped its attitude immediately, putting on a demure affect, "It was nothing, really..."

"You were literally just demanding that we thank you, though..." Tsumugi said.

Monokuma shrugged, then disappeared again. Riko tapped Nami on the shoulder and showed off her whiteboard again, "Since Shirogane is going to be busy, do you want to keep me company
while I try out Ruka's equipment? He offered it to anybody who wants to use it, not just Yamaguchi."

"How many pastries can one group of Killing Game participants eat?" Nami rhetorically questioned, "Yeah, though. I could hang out. I mean, everyone kind of just did the thing I wanted to do, so. Even if I didn't wanna, I wouldn't refuse, after you all humored me that way."

"We weren't humoring you, Nami," Tsumugi assured her, "We all had a nice time. And it's all thanks to you knowing which of those old movies in the gift shop is actually fun to watch. I wouldn't mind doing this again, if we get the chance before the game is over."

Nami just blushed in embarrassment at the idea that she'd had a legitimately good idea to help her friends to have a good time, then waved to Tsumugi as she followed Riko out of the auditorium and upstairs to Yuuri's lab. Yuuri himself was in there too, and he looked up, giving the warmest smile that Nami had yet seen from him.

"Oi, Asahi! Gonna give my ward a try?" He asked. She nodded, so he continued with his next question, "Whatcha gonna make?"

"These," Riko answered, and under it she'd drawn a picture of cupcakes.

"Yo, nice!" Yuuri said, chuckling a big, "Lots of desserts here, though, aren't there? Don't worry, though. If nothing else, Hako'll eat it all."

"She will?" Nami asked. Box didn't look the type to eat a ton of sweets.

Yuuri nodded, "Yeah, I was worried that by letting other folks try out my lab we'd end up with too many sweets and shit, but Hako told me last night that she'd eat all the extras. Apparently she actually does tend to eat a lot of food, but she lost a lot of weight recently because she got sick. That's all she said about it."

"Huh," Nami said, "That's weird. She seems healthy to me."

"I dunno," Yuuri shrugged, "But it's what she told me. I don't really need to snoop too much into anybody's shit."

Nami stared at him for a few moments before she spoke again, "Ah, Ruka... You aren't even curious?"

"I don't want to know that bullcrap," Yuuri answered, running a hand back through his hair, "I wouldn't want anybody trying too hard to figure out what I've 'been through' or anything like that, so why should I be curious about other people? I'd be a hypocrite if I wanted people to keep their noses outta my business but I kept on sticking mine into theirs."

"I guess that makes sense," Nami said, "I'm kind of curious, though, cause everybody already knows all my business. Some people figured that out, though? Kyousuke told me some stuff and Fujishiro told me some stuff. I guess they felt bad knowing stuff about me."

"Kyousuke told you shit? What'd he tell you?" Yuuri seemed a bit on edge now.

"He said who he killed," Nami said, "He didn't give me any details on why, he just told me who and how. He said that he's probably worse than me, cause it was a decision he made. And I didn't choose to do what I did. That's all. He was just trying to make me feel better."

"...Yeah, that makes sense," Yuuri said, "Really, I don't think you did anything wrong, Nami. Wish
I didn't have to hear all about that shit, you know? Didn't deserve to have your dirty laundry all put out for everyone to see."

"...Thanks, Ruka," Nami said, then found a corner of the room in which to sit while Riko got to work on her cupcakes. She had no idea how they were expecting to actually communicate while Riko's hands were busy, but really, she was just there for company. Riko spent a lot of time alone. Even without any method of conversing, it was nice just to have somebody there.

Nami could understand that. While she couldn't in her actual memory remember being alone, without Tomoe, there were a great many times that she felt distinctly alone when Tomoe was right there, when she was with Tomoe. There wasn't any way not to be alone with a twin sister who never really understood who Nami was. Still, this was nice. To have her presence wanted. To spend time with a friend.

Quite nice.
Nami sat in the room with Riko for a few hours. Yuuri had gone just a bit after Riko had gotten the hang of all the options that his ward presented her with, the impressive and industrial kitchen. She almost fell asleep while sitting there, but she hadn't had any desire to leave. Once Riko's cupcakes were ready, she helped carry them down to the dining hall, and she decided that she'd just stay here until dinner anyway. Once the cupcakes were set down she decided to go into the kitchen area on her own, although she really didn't know the first thing about cooking. Behind the counter, she was surprised to find that she was surprised by Mitsuru's presence. Somehow, she hadn't seen him before.

"Ah, Nami," Mitsuru greeted her, "What's going on?"

"...I try all the time," Nami couldn't resist giving the idiot response before offering up a real one, "Anyway, um. I just wanted to take a look at the kitchen. I've never cooked before or anything. Are you making dinner?"

"Yeah, I am," Mitsuru said, "I dunno if you'd be interested, but I could use some help."

"How can I help? I really haven't done any sort of cooking at all before..."

"Well, I can toss things your way. You can mix some stuff up for me. I'm making a meatloaf, if you don't mind the texture of meat, then you could mix it while I work on the broccoli."

"I can do that," Nami said. She didn't mind touching weird textures with her hands, usually, "Can we have carrots also?"

"Sure, why?" Mitsuru asked.

"Cause," Nami said, "Broccoli is gross. I like carrots better. Superior vegetable."

"Huh, alright," Mitsuru noted, "Anything else that's gross?"

"All green vegetables except for snap peas," Nami said, "And not just green peppers, all colors of bell pepper. Also, mushrooms. They all taste like dirt. And I used to hate miso broth cause it's too salty, but I think I like it now... I dunno why."

"Oh," Mitsuru said, "That's probably because spiro makes you crave salt. The testosterone blocker you're probably on. But, jeeze. You're a picky one, aren't you?"

"Sorry..." Nami admitted, "I've been lucky so far though! Everything's been good and nice and doesn't hit my sensibilities!"

Mitsuru chuckled, "Well, I'll keep those sensibilities in mind anytime I'm cooking. I used to have to exclude ingredients all the time when my sister was little. The same kind of ingredients, actually."

"I'm pretty sure at least one person once said that I have the palate of a child," Nami admitted, "Or if they haven't, you just did."

"I meant no offense! However, it does seem to be true."
"Rude. I'm an independent woman with the tastes of an adult," Nami said, "And all you other adults are just dumbasses who like when things taste like grass and dirt."

"These things... Really don't taste like those," Mitsuru said, then started to pull things out. He set a large bowl down in front of Nami, then started dumping things in. Two packages of ground beef and one of ground pork, a bunch of breadcrumbs, a few eggs cracked into it, and a pile of spices and sauces. Nami was surprised at how good it already smelled. Meatloaf was another one of those standard things that picky eaters didn't like, but she thought she'd like this one. The way that Mitsuru didn't even hesitate to throw it together implied it was something he'd made many times. Plus, Nami was really fond of meals that combined beef and pork. Her go-to beef bowl was the half and half with pork as the other half, evidently.

"Alright, so all you have to do here is squish all this stuff together with your hands," Mitsuru said as Nami turned and washed her hands at a nearby sink, "Until it's all mixed up good. Could technically mix this up with a utensil, sure, but it just works out better if you use your hands. Funny enough, I used to have Akane do this for me too..."

"You make this meal a lot?" Nami asked.

"Yeah," Mitsuru said, his voice fond as he recounted, "It was my grandma's meatloaf recipe. I'd do the vegetables and cook the loaf, Akane would mix the meatloaf up, and our mom would make mashed potatoes... Guess I gotta handle that bit myself this time around, though."

"A very American meal," Nami observed.

"Hah, I guess so. My family's got a lot of traditional Japanese stuff going on, so maybe that's why our special family meal's something like this. The rest of the week, we usually had pretty typical Japanese meals, but on Saturday nights, we'd make meatloaf, and broccoli, and mashed potatoes. Except when Akane didn't like broccoli."

"What did you make when she didn't like broccoli?" Nami asked.

Mitsuru leaned against the counter she was mixing at, so she could see his face, and smiled right at her, "Carrots."

She turned pink again at that, and focused her attention on mixing the meatloaf. Geeze! She really reminded him of his little sister? She didn't know how to feel about that. On the one hand, was it just because Tomoe had cemented her as such a 'precious younger sister' type? Or was it actually because Nami shared some traits with Akane Fujishiro? If it was the latter, she'd actually find it kind of sweet. Especially since it meant that Mitsuru didn't hesitate to see her as a young girl. Though, there was...

"How'd you know that thing about spiro?" Nami asked, changing the topic.

Mitsuru crossed his arms, "I mean, Iwako is the Ultimate Chemist. She knows about that sort of thing. I can't say I remember why she mentioned it to me, though. Akane's not trans or anything."

"Maybe it was you," Nami teased.

"No way!" Mitsuru exclaimed, "I am comfortable in my masculinity! Besides, if I was at all inclined to be a woman, it's not like I could ever stand a chance at passing. I mean, look at me! It was definitely about somebody else. Like, we were having a guest over, and she was on spiro so we made all the food a little extra salty? I guess that's actually a kind of insensitive thing to do. I'm trying to think of who it was, though."
"Thanks for the reminder that just because I have the spottiest memory here, doesn't mean that I'm the only one who can't remember shit," Nami said, then spoke up again. "So, I really remind you of your little sister, even though she's not..."

"Yeah, you do," Mitsuru said, "I mean, I guess it's kind of weird, since you're older than her. But I guess that I look at a lot of you here and think, hey. These kids are younger than me. Even if it's not by a lot, I feel like I want to protect you. And a lot about you, Nami, makes me think about Akane when she was younger. It's cute."

"Wha- I," Nami fumbled for words, "Who. Who else do you wanna protect?"

"Yamaguchi, of course. I know she can defend herself, but she's still so small. Hako and Bakura, too. I feel like they're both kids who got themselves into shit that was over their heads... And Randy. He kind of seems like he doesn't know if he wants to be an adult or still be a kid, which is definitely a confusing position to be in," Mitsuru explained, "And I mean, everybody, but those ones and you in particular."

"I know how Bakura was in over his head. The idol industry is fucked," Nami said, "But what about Hako?"

"Well," Mitsuru said, sighing, "Like I said, I knew her before. She was always trying to do everything she could to help people, no matter who they were. I met her because she was almost killed in a Future Foundation bombing. She'd gotten wind that it was going to happen somehow, and she was trying to convince the Despairs inside to evacuate. She said it was because she was friends with some of them, before they ended up Despair, and she knew that they could change, and be good again."

"...She really did something that intense?" Nami asked.

"That and more," Mitsuru said, "There's just one thing that everyone who knew her before the game knew about her. No matter what, Box Hako will always do whatever she perceives to be best for the people she cares about."
"I get it," Nami said, "She's... Really weird, but she's way too sweet to be stuck in this Killing Game, I think."

"Yeah, she doesn't really socialize like a normal person," Mitsuru admitted, "But, wouldn't you have trouble too, if you honestly thought deep in your heart that everybody around you was your best friend, and that it was your responsibility at all times to make sure those friends were happy and safe?"

"That sounds like Hell," Nami agreed, "So, I guess I respect her a little more now? I didn't really trust her before. Still might not trust her, since she's as trustworthy as Bakura and all, but. She is just another one of us, stuck here, yeah?"

"Yeah," Mitsuru said, "I'm glad I could help you understand. Now, I need to put some focus into these vegetables."

With that, the conversation ended. Nami managed to find other ways to help once she finished mixing the loaf, too, but they didn't really start talking again. While they worked, Mitsuru was humming something that Nami could just barely feel like she recognized, but couldn't place. Eventually, when Mitsuru let out the universal breath of 'well the hard part of the job's done', she decided to ask him.

"What was that you were humming?"

"Oh," Mitsuru said, "It's a folk song. Takeda Lullaby, I think, is the one I got stuck in my head, so that's probably it."

"Takeda Lullaby..." Nami noted.

"Yeah. That's the one that's about a young girl being sent to work for a rich family, and take care of their baby even though she's practically still a baby herself... It's kind of depressing."

Nami frowned, "Yeah, it is! The tune is, too. How do you get something like that stuck in your head?"

"I don't know, I guess that it's just the sort of thing that I think about," Mitsuru said, "Ah, that just makes me sound like a depressing person..."

"Well, I'm not sure about that, but I gotta say," Nami looked up at the ceiling, "A baby, forced to take care of another baby. That kind of sounds like Tomoe and me, doesn't it? Do you think that I... Am too much of a kid? That it's because of me that she had to be the adult?"

"That's a strange conclusion to make."

"So you think I'm looking too much into it?"

"Not quite. You might be right, I don't know. I could only really know if I'd seen it unfold," Mitsuru noted, "But, consider. It doesn't matter."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Mitsuru said, reaching out to put a hand on the top of her head. His
hand was huge, the whole top of Nami's head very nearly fit in it, "Nobody can travel through time. This is the kind of thing you'd worry about if your sister was still alive. Being concerned now is just a waste of time and thought. Focus on other things."

"Isn't that kind of callous?" Nami asked.

"There's a difference between being callous to others, and putting yourself first, you know. And there's absolutely no shame in putting your own well-being over the abstract concept of respecting the dead," Mitsuru said, "I mean, sure, you can think about that stuff, it's hard not to. But you don't need to worry about it. Nobody can change the past. The best you can do is make amends if there's anybody to make them to."

"Anybody to make them to..." Nami trailed off, then turned and gave Mitsuru a smile, "So, I can make amends to Tomoe by making sure that I never rely on anybody as much as I relied on her?"

"If you think that's a good way to make it up to her," Mitsuru said, "Then you absolutely can."

"I think, maybe, it's the only way I can make it up to her," Nami said. Then, she and Mitsuru worked together to actually serve the dinner that mostly Mitsuru had made, but that she'd helped with. Box and Goro were sat at a table together, and across from them were two plushies on top of the table. One was the Etsu-cat from earlier, and the other looked like some sort of lizard. It had yellow eyes, and a purple notebook in one of its grasping lizard hands. Nami squinted at it.

"It's Tomoe," Box said.

"Yeah, I could tell that much," Nami said, setting down plates for Goro and Box.

"She's a skink," Box elaborated slightly.

"A what?" Nami asked.

"That lizard," Box said, "They're cute. Like snakes with legs. I didn't know what type of animal Tomoe liked. So I just made her look like something I thought was cute."

"...She would love snakes with legs," Nami admitted.

"I said she should be a raccoon," Goro said, "But Box said that she needed to keep that free, because if I died that's what she'd make me!"

"That's awfully morbid..." Nami frowned.

"I don't expect that Bakura will die," Box said, leaning her chin in both of her hands, "But if he did, I'd make him a raccoon. Cause of his eyes, you know? He looks like he hasn't slept in days, even though he gets a solid eight hours every night!"

"It's true, I do. Eight hours or more of uninterrupted sleep! I guess it's just some really shitty sleep that I'm getting?" Goro said, "Such is the way of a poor traumatized boy such as me! Or maybe I just still haven't slept off all the time I spent being overworked. I never once passed out on stage though, through sheer power of will!"

"...Good work, Bakura," Nami said, then moved on. Soon enough, everybody had their food, and she glanced around to try and decide which table to tack herself onto. Rei was sitting with Shinji again, so that wouldn't work. Riko was with Sayaka, Yuuri, and Kanoshi. Tsukasa was with Randy, Kaede, and Tsumugi. Mitsuru decided to join Box, Goro, and the plushies of the dead.
So, Nami took the seat on the other side of Tsukasa, "Hi. I helped make dinner."

"Huh, for real?" Randy asked, "That's super cool! What did you do?"

"I mixed the meatloaf and mashed the potatoes," Nami admitted, "I didn't cut anything up or actually cook anything... I have no idea how to do any of that stuff. It was kind of fun, I think?"

"Cooking dinner is a nice thing to do," Tsukasa said, "I wouldn't really say that I cook as a hobby, but anyone can appreciate being able to offer somebody something that you made for them yourself."

"Since I was still in school when we got together, Tsukasa sometimes made me lunches. He's such a nerd," Randy laughed, "They were really simple, but they tasted great because he made them with love!"

"Who's the nerd now?" Tsukasa teased right back.

"That's sweet," Tsumugi said, leaning against her hand, "I can hardly make anything... Though, as part of my talent, I work with vegetables a lot, so given the opportunity I could certainly make a mean salad."

"I can only cook anything interesting in strange circumstances. I had to eat canned and frozen food only for a year. I got bored very quickly and started to get creative... But that isn't anything I'd want to share with anybody!" Kaede added in her own two cents to the conversation on cooking for other people.

"Share it with me!" Randy exclaimed, "That sounds like a [cool] and [unique] skill!"

"Random English words? Really?" Tsumugi asked.

"He's American," Tsukasa explained.

"He speaks fluent Japanese, so that's no excuse!" Tsumugi protested back, her tone joking.

"The mark of a true detective is in the flair! Kaede has her [fashion], so I'll have my [English words]!" Randy continued, now playing it up.

"Hey!" Kaede protested, and Tsumugi started to smirk as if she was on her side, but really, she was just playing along, "Who says that my flair is in my [fashion]? I thought the flair was that my talent's so spectacular, I was picked as an Ultimate before I'd even [solved a case]!"

"Not you too!" Tsumugi complained, grinning.

"Now now, Randy. Some of us don't even have one Ultimate Talent," Nami joined in, "How come your mom lets you have two?"

"Aww, I ain't never met my mom, she can't stop me from doing shit!" Randy joked right back, "I can be the Ultimate Fisticuffs Detective if I want!"

"What exactly does that entail, though?" Kaede wondered, "Do you find the bad guys, then beat them up? Judge, Jury, and Executioner?"

"Noo! I only beat up the bad guys if they throw the first punch! I'll be like Sherlock Holmes that way," Randy said, "Yeah, yeah! Kaede, if you're Poirot, then I'm Sherlock, cause he did boxing matches and stuff too!"
"Huh? Ah, yeah," Kaede said, "That's not super common knowledge, though... Have you actually read the stories?"

"Front, back, and center!" Randy exclaimed, "I read them in English a bunch of times when I was younger, so I read the Japanese translations to help me learn, cause I already knew the story and dialogue enough not to get lost when I didn't know a word."

"I'm... Impressed," Kaede admitted, giggling a bit to herself, "Just how skilled are you, Randy?"

"My only natural talent is my Ultimate Talent, but I'm super devoted and stuff," Randy said, "So, I can train up other skills too. I want to be somebody who people can be proud of, y'know?"

"Aww," Kaede said, "We're all already proud of you, Randy."

"Really?" Randy asked, suddenly sitting up straight, reminding Nami somehow of a prairie dog.

"Of course," Kaede smiled.
Daily Life: Day Four (Let's All Do The Dissociation Again)

6:00 PM / 1800 Hours

After dinner, which was great, and Riko's cupcakes, which were almost as wonderful as Sayaka's macarons but which Nami enjoyed much more because, good grief, she really did have the palate of the child. Cupcakes were simpler and therefore better as far as she was concerned, and for most, the reverse was true. In any case, after those things, Nami decided to check the gift shop again. Tsumugi was right that most of the rotations weren't conspicuous, excluding the ice cream case. Nami did notice a few things, though. Bee Movie was in the DVD aisle, so she snatched that up. Just to have it. Just to have a copy of Bee Movie.

And, the accessory aisle had a cute little pig plushie on a keychain. Remembering what Box had said about how they'd meet somebody who collected plushies, she decided to hold onto that as well, for Natsuki. Though, Box's statement that it was Natsuki seemed a little wishy-washy, Nami would believe that there was somebody who would appreciate it.

It wasn’t that Nami didn’t want to trust Box, after all. And it was sweet that she’d made that plushie of Tomoe, too. Nami completely hadn’t expected that Box would, after making a plushie reminiscent of the victim, also go ahead and make the culprit. As much as they were simplistic animal representations, and far from high-quality ones, it was the thought that mattered. Nami did believe that Box only had people’s best interests in mind, the way that Mitsuru had said.

The problem of course, was that Nami had no idea what Box’s idea of best interests was, especially when she already said that she wouldn’t mind dying if it would help somebody, though she clearly didn’t want anybody to get away with murder and get everybody killed, either. What was ‘best’? That’s what kept Nami from dropping her wary attitude.

On the wall, even the alcohol had rotated. Nami wasn’t a fan of that, though. At least, not what she’d tried. In spite of being underaged, it seemed like Tomoe had leveraged her ‘connections’ with older men while they were still in middle school to occasionally get wine. Nami tried it and it was gross. Tomoe said it made her feel elegant to drink it, and now knowing what Tomoe had actually been doing all that time, Nami couldn’t help but wonder if it was also to dull the pain. Oh, that was a really depressing thought. She shouldn’t have thought that. God, why couldn’t she just take her brain out from her skull for a few hours, have a break from all these thinking thoughts she oughtn’t have? She guessed, maybe the first day here had been that. A break, before she started remembering things and losing the apathy she thought was a character trait.

She had only made herself apathetic back then, in active memories with Tomoe. It wasn’t like she wasn’t still thinking things like this all the time, but she never expressed them and she tried her best not to feel anything about them.

Most people, she guessed, would be miserable in her situation. Apathy served as a solution. Apathy and forgetting. How would a normal person handle being raised by, controlled by, completely relying on a twin? How would a normal person handle being too insecure in her femininity to even try to show off a feminine image no matter how much she wanted and needed to? How would a normal person handle being assaulted, and killing their attacker in a dissociative fugue? Well, that wasn’t something that Nami could rightly consider. These days, the idea of a ‘normal person’ who would handle or fail to handle the kind of things she distanced herself from… Didn’t exist.

A normal person? Yeah, right.
There were people who made it through those kind of things, like she did, like she managed. And there were people who didn’t, who became Despair or who died. That was an exaggeration, of course, because the Quiet War didn’t touch everyone. Still, her thoughts were limited to Japan, and she knew that her home country was almost entirely a lost cause. Maybe there were normal people who’d have normal coping mechanisms for the kinds of things that Nami had suffered, but they weren’t any people she would ever have a chance to meet.

Box Hako was a girl who was very good at communicating without speaking out loud. A smile here, a blink there, leaning forward or backwards just the right amount, crossing her legs at the knees or at the ankles, clasping her hands in all different positions. Thus, this motive didn’t really prove to be a challenge for her at all. As an apparent expert in body language, she could figure out if any statement was the truth. And further, as luck would have it, she was already assigned to spend time with one of the two people who were liars today. She could understand everything Goro intended to say.

This was just another skill her talent granted her.

Ultimate Volunteer was a funny kind of talent. It didn’t have a particular skillset, and it wasn’t a ‘field’ which anybody could be at the top of. It was the sort of talent that the Ultimate Initiative just made up, as an excuse to make somebody an Ultimate. After all, the criteria for an Ultimate wasn’t actually ‘the most prodigal in the field’, not anymore. The criteria was ‘has the power to stand up against Ultimate Despair’. While most people who had that power were the kind who were thoroughly devoted to one skill, who threw themselves into being the best at something, an ambition that shone through the darkness…

Box wasn’t like that at all.

She could read body language well, and manipulate her own to a greater extent than most. She could sew very simple plushies and clothes, because the goal was to make as many sturdy items as possible from as little material as possible. Passable, but not amazing. That was how a lot of things went for Box Hako. She herself was passable, but not amazing. Not like all of these other Ultimates. Not like Goro, or Nami, or Rei…

Or Sayaka.

Box perceived that what was best for Sayaka was something that went against her own rules, though. She wasn’t supposed to do something like that. It was selfish, wasn’t it?

Box Hako would always do what she perceived to be best for the people she cares about.

Ah.

She cared a little too much, sometimes.

More than an Ultimate Volunteer should, for sure, even as she was being overwhelmed by the paradox. Sayaka needed somebody. Sayaka needed somebody! Somebody like Box? No, no way! Box couldn’t do that! It wasn’t okay, for her, to do that. It would make her too happy. She was a tool for them to use. She existed for other people. She couldn’t indulge. She couldn’t entertain something like a crush. Even if she perceived that dating somebody would be best for somebody and she could fulfill that or at least try to, she couldn’t…

Oh. Dear.
Box Hako fainted on the floor.
Goro Bakura was completely caught off guard when he saw Box, who had been walking along next to him lost in thought, fall to the floor all of a sudden. He crouched down to check her out, and she seemed okay. Rosy cheeks, breathing fine, there didn’t seem to be anything wrong. He unwrapped her bandage, and the wound seemed fine too, starting to heal over, no sepsis or anything as far as he could tell. And he could tell. He’d dealt with it plenty of times himself.

There was absolutely nothing to indicate why Box had passed out without any warning. He wasn’t strong enough to actually move her any distance on his own, so all he could really do was sit on the floor next to her and wait for her to wake up, or… Something.

Unfortunately, from a distance, the scene didn’t look nearly as innocent as it was. Kaede was the one who rounded the corner, and she called out, “Hey, what the Hell are you-!?”

“It’s fine,” Goro interrupted, raising both hands above his head in a surrender motion, “I didn’t do anything! We were just walking down the hallway and she passed out. You’re a detective, you got any clue what’s going on?”

“Just walking? You didn’t say anything to shock her poor, innocent, mind?” Kaede asked as she got closer and saw that Goro was right, “Because, you know, I wouldn’t put that past you! You say a lot of dirty stuff, and she is a poor fragile flower…” Kaede trailed off and then mumbled, mostly to herself, “Who still wears polka-dotted underwear…”

“Wow! Akamatsu, how rude must you be, to peek at the panties of an unconscious girl? Years from now, that’s gonna come back to bite you when she comes out about her oh-so-touching story about how the world-renowned detective Kaede Akamatsu sexually harrassed her in the midsts of a Killing Game!” Goro taunted, but lost his joking tone as he turned back to look at Box again, “No, but really, now’s not the time to make observations like that… There just wasn’t anything that happened, and she fell over.”

“There’s no better time to make observations like that than when you’re about to panic…” Kaede’s voice was shaking as she explained, “But there… No, there isn’t any poison available here, is there? And there certainly shouldn’t be any without at least one dose of an antidote, yeah, my ward isn’t available yet, that’s where it would be, that-”

Box made some noises, opened her eyes, then sat up.

“Hako!” Kaede exclaimed.

“Were you guys…” Box blinked the haze away, “Worried about me?”

“Obviously! You passed out without any warning! And Akamatsu looked up your skirt!”

“Hey!” Kaede took offense to being called out that way.

“That’s fine, if it’s even true… But, you really shouldn’t, worry about me,” Box said, and before they could protest, she raised her hands up in front of herself, “No, really! I fainted because I was worried you’d worry about me!”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Kaede said.

“Does it have to?” Box asked, then glanced at Goro, “You didn’t think it was his fault?”
“I did at first, but he told me that it wasn’t him. And I could tell that it wasn’t him because even if he’s afflicted by the lie serum, he’s an awful liar. Somehow, I doubt he can tell a convincing lie. Has he even told one all day?”

“Not as far as I know,” Box said, then giggled, “Rotten liar.”

“Then the only one he’s told was when Monokuma made an example out of him when it announced the motive, that he didn’t care that Kaguya set the record for most brutal first murder,” Kaede noted.

“Yes,” Box agreed.

“Huh. What a worthless motive,” Kaede said, then stood back up, “Anyway, I’m really glad you’re okay! I do need to get going, though. I was on my way to the gift shop to pick out a movie to watch with Tsumugi.”

“Need somebody to watch the door so you don’t get interrupted?” Goro asked with a devious grin.

“No!” Kaede exclaimed, then snickered, “There isn’t any rule against spending the night in somebody else’s assigned room, you know. We don’t need to risk getting caught.”

Box was turning very red, up to her ears.

“Who’s saying things too risque for the innocent flower now?” Goro questioned, putting his hands over Box’s ears before he gave his own risque reply, though, “That makes me wish there was a guy here who’d want me, though. Too bad I already attempted murder and ruined my chances with the only single dude!”

“Oh, well, Ruka and Kyousuke aren’t together,” Kaede said, “I think that Kyousuke kind of wishes they were, but they aren’t actually dating.”

“Ohh… Interesting, if only either of them were my type,” Goro said, then let go of Box’s ears, “Well, have a fun movie, Akamatsu!”

Nami decided to eat more ice cream. She had spend way too long standing in the gift shop, clutching a pig keychain and a copy of bee movie, dissociating. Kaede had come in and picked out a DVD, and Nami had even said a few words to her, but she hadn’t really, she wasn’t really there and she certainly couldn’t remember a single thing she said. After having a time like that, well, she deserved to eat multiple ice creams, a bag of caramels, three cupcakes, and one macaron all in a day… Um, well, most of that was before the dissociation, sure, but it wasn’t like she was on a diet! Anyway, she glanced down at herself. Estrogen did cause fat redistribution, so maybe if she put on some weight, she’d get actual curves… So, that actually made her want to overeat in some amount. Or at least, it was an excuse for the number of desserts she’d eaten today. She’d go with that. Anyway, it wasn’t like she picked out the worst ice cream there. Vanilla with red bean paste. Not to worry, though, her childish palate was still preserved in the way she thoroughly wrinkled her nose at the sight of matcha ice cream.

That too, tasted like grass, the one time she’d tried it.

Armed now with ice cream, Nami returned to her room to hide for the remainder of the night. She didn’t see any reason to do otherwise. She had definitely had enough of socializing for the day, and besides, nobody needed to see her eating what was, by her count, the seventh dessert of the day.
Daily Life: Day Five (Morning)

6:00 AM / 0600 Hours

Today was the day.

Nami would have to wear some kind of swimsuit when she later joined Rei and Riko at the pool in the Empty Wings, and she woke up with that hanging over her as a form of dread. Maybe dread was a strong word. Or maybe it wasn’t. She was, honestly, very anxious, but at the same time some part of her was excited. She knew how to swim, of course. She’d learned a long time ago, before her father died and before everything in her life changed.

That wasn’t to say that she hoped he hadn’t died. And that wasn’t to say she was glad he had died. Rather, thinking about it, well.

With her father alive, she would have lived a normal life, but it wouldn’t have been as Nami. She would have stayed oblivious, probably. If she did figure it out, she’d eventually have hit a breaking point in the closet and either died or come out, and in the latter case, probably become homeless at best. With Tomoe, her life was a mess, but she was Nami. She had a chance at the future this way.

Neither course her life could have taken were great, but this one, well. She knew that right now in her life, she had a shot, and there were people who would stand and help to steady her shoulders as she aimed it. So she could wear a swimsuit. She’d go swimming for the first time in just over a decade. Today, she’d do it.

With that, she peeled herself out of bed, and she got dressed, tank top and jeans again. Not only was the less-layered outfit easier to change into and out of, but if she was going to build up the confidence to show that much of her unfortunately far less soft than she’d like it to be skin, she had to get a headstart with her shoulders.

She’d shower after swimming, to get the chlorine out of her hair. Showering in a real way prior to going swimming didn’t seem very productive to Nami at all. Shampoo would be rendered pointless, for example, the moment pool water touched her hair.

Getting dressed took far less time than Nami expected, and there was still a good hour and a half until Monokuma’s designated ‘breakfast time’. Now that she thought about it, neither last night’s bedtime announcement nor the morning announcement were things that she’d really processed… They happened, but she failed to hear the words. Oh well. If anything was said that she should worry about, somebody would bring it up at breakfast.

Was there anything she could do until closer to eight? Not really. There wasn’t any internet here, which made sense, given that even the strictest filters could let something unwanted through, a way for somebody on the outside to track down the Killing Game’s location. She had neglected to find any books she was interested in reading from either Kanoshi’s lab or Riko’s. And, the only place to watch DVDs was the auditorium. Nami… Needed another hobby, didn’t she? Preferably something portable, so she had something to do besides going to breakfast absurdly early on days like this and going straight to bed when she got tired of socializing.

She’d ask around. Surely, some of the others had hobbies outside of their talents. Goro and Box both sewed… Though, Nami couldn’t imagine spending enough time around either or both of them to learn.
Cooking, she’d tried but she felt like she just wanted to help out, and besides. That, like baking, was something which could be hobbled to excess, and with three people who had baking as their hobby already, neither was another baker or another hobby to excess needed. Nami wondered, what sort of hobbies did Randy have? He didn’t seem to get bored much.

Maybe she’d ask him.

Even so, all this thinking about things wouldn’t eat up too much time. Well, unless she dissociated, but that had enough downsides that she wouldn’t try and use it for its own upside, and anyway, it wasn’t like she had any clue of how to induce it in herself. Thinking about unpleasant things sometimes did it and sometimes didn’t and she wasn’t going to try and make herself think about things when the rest of her life she had her fingers crossed that she wouldn’t think about them at all.

Well, absurdly early to breakfast it was, then. She went upstairs and made her way to the dining hall, and at least in her attempt to delay, she wasn’t the first one there. Yuuri, Box, and Goro were all early birds again, although not by as much, given that all three of them still had wet hair from showering. They probably discussed it the previous night.

Yuuri, however, wasn’t behind the kitchen counter this morning. Instead, Shinjiro seemed to be hard at work on breakfast, so Nami would stay well away from that. She had one other option, and that was Rei, sitting at a table by herself. She probably also decided that showering prior to going swimming was a fruitless endeavor. Nami sat down across from her.

“Morning, Nami,” Rei greeted her, and tilted her head to the side with a smile, “I’m sorry I wasn’t around a whole lot, yesterday. I was trying to talk some things over with Shinji.”

“Has he stopped hating me yet?” Nami asked.

“I wouldn’t say he hates you, no,” Rei said, “But, I also wouldn’t go trying to talk to him? He’s kind of decided that he wants nothing to do with you, but he wishes you the best in your life.”

“I guess that’s okay,” Nami said, “Thanks for getting him to come to my Shrek party.”

“Your Shrek Party was a good time, even if I didn’t stick around for the whole thing,” Rei said, “And today… We’ve got our swim session planned. Are you looking forward to it?”

“Kind of,” Nami said, “But I’m kind of nervous, too.”

“Don’t worry.” Rei said, “I scouted out the swimsuits, and I picked out one that I think you’ll like. It’s cute, and kind of modest? So I bet it’s the kind you wouldn’t mind wearing, as much. Who knows, maybe you’ll even like it enough to wear it around some more of the others!”

“That’s incredibly unlikely,” Nami said.

“I know,” Rei admitted, then looked to the door, “It would be kind of a pain if one of the three of us got the lie serum today, though. Maybe it wasn’t the smartest thing, to make plans two days in advance.”

“We can still have fun if one of us is a liar,” Nami noted, “Besides, nothing really came of Bakura or Kyousuke having the lie serum yesterday… It isn’t a very good motive.”

“It isn’t,” Rei agreed, “And that’s nice. I’m glad that nothing bad’s happening because of this motive. I know that we’ve said that this isn’t the right group of people to go without death… But, there’s no reason, really, to kill anybody right now. We’ve already begun to get closer with other
people, enough to not try and escape with somebody at their expense, at least.”

“If a Killing Game ever did end like that,” Nami noted, “I don’t think the culprit would last long on the outside. Too much guilt. I feel guilty just for still being alive when two people aren’t. It’s a bad time.”

“You’re really sensitive, huh, Nami?” Rei laughed at her a little, “When we first met, I wouldn’t have expected that at all.”

“I could say the same about you, you know!”

“Maybe so,” Rei said, “But, I prefer having a friend like you at my side. I’d still be visibly depressed, probably, if we hadn’t bonded over plum black tea. I guess that this sounds dumb, but, the fact that we get along so well… You’re keeping me going.”
Daily Life: Day Five (Hobby)

People started to make their way into the dining hall while Nami and Rei talked. Kanoshi joined the table Yuuri was at. Kaede and Tsumugi arrived at the same time, and soon after, Sayaka sat with them. Riko joined Nami and Rei, then Mitsuru did as well. Randy and Tsukasa sat on their own. With that, everybody was situated, and it wasn’t long until Shinjiro gave everybody their breakfasts and took his own seat at a separate table.

Nami started eating, and really, Shinjiro was the best cook among them. Not that meals made by other people were bad, and to say nothing of the baked goods, but when it came to actually cooking food, Shinjiro was king.

Rei seemed to be especially fond of his cooking, even managing to convince Riko to give up her plate so she could have seconds. Riko was fine with it, because she wasn’t a huge fan of breakfast in the first place. And, well, by the time it was socially acceptable to leave, the hot food wasn’t so hot anymore and wasn’t as good. She’d feed herself from the gift shop or something instead.

At 8:01, the question of lie serum was raised once again. Today, Kaede was afflicted, as was Mitsuru. Being at the same table as him, Nami was privy to the statement he made to determine if he was lying today. He directed it to Rei and said he’d been trying a new recipe with the meatloaf yesterday. Convincing enough for her, but Mitsuru and Nami both knew that he was lying, and it proved that he wasn’t truthful for the day.

After eating breakfast, Riko left to do just that, and Nami stood up. Their swimming session was scheduled for later in the day. In the meantime, she decided, she was going to seek out a new hobby. She went and found Randy first.

“Hey, Randy,” Nami said, “I have a question, uh. What’s your hobby? What do you do for fun?”

“Well,” Randy said, “A lot of the stuff that I like to do is hard to multitask with, so I took up one that was basically made for multitasking…”

“You can tell her,” Tsukasa said with a soft smile, “It’s Nami, babe. She’s not about to judge you or anything.”

“Oh, right, yeah. I’m being dumb,” Randy said, and knocked his knuckles against his own skull, “I knit. I know, I know, it’s not the most manly of hobbies for a guy like me to have, but it keeps me busy! I have so much energy, I just can’t ever sit still and do nothing.”

“Ah,” Nami said, “Is that why you were so agitated on the way out of the Shrek Party?”

“Yeah!” He exclaimed, “I was super antsy! I wasn’t about to take my knitting outside of my room around people, cause they’d make fun of me… And Tsukasa was so focused on the movie that he didn’t even wanna fool around, even though we sat in the back row!”

“Randy!” Tsukasa blushed, “She doesn’t need to hear about that!”

Randy stuck his tongue out at Tsukasa, then continued to Nami, “It was annoying. You get it, right?”

“Hm…” Nami mumbled, “Well, I guess I understand, but I’m not actually sure how anybody could get in the mood while watching Shrek. I didn’t think ogres were anybody’s type.”
“That’s what I thought, too,” Tsukasa said, then furrowed his brow as he turned to Randy again, “But, you know. Nobody would make fun of you for knitting in front of them.”

“Nozomi might,” Randy frowned, “And, I dunno. It kinda feels sometimes like anybody who’s not, super duper supportive, is just waiting for an excuse to say that I’m faking it.”

“I have short hair and I don’t wear skirts,” Nami said, “If anyone was gonna get accused of faking it, it’s me, and nobody’s done that. So you’re fine, I think.”

“Yeah,” Tsukasa noted, “I think that anyone here who’s mean, doesn’t really think to target who you are, but what you’ve done.”

“Yamaguchi and Nozomi both seem to have that prerogative,” Nami admitted, “Anything Bakura says is just bullshit… Yeah. You’re Gucci. Gotta say I’m kinda surprised, though. You seemed… Loads confident. Like, wasn’t I supposed to be the insecure trans person here?”

“You can be a confident person and still be insecure in your masculinity!” Randy defended himself, “Besides, well. It’s not like I’m actually insecure in my masculinity, exactly. But I still feel like I have to avoid giving people excuses to attack it, too.”

Nami thought for a minute, then nodded, “Okay, that makes sense. Like, you don’t actually feel like less of a man when you knit, but…”

“But other people could totally use that to think that I’m a fake!” Randy confirmed.

Tsukasa gently grabbed at Randy’s arm and chuckled, “Hey, as long as I’m around, I won’t let anybody think that you’re ‘fake’. I am, after all, very gay.”

“Ah…” Nami noted, “That’s, really nice.”

“Hm?” Tsukasa wondered.

Nami lifted a hand to her own face and giggled, just a bit, softly, before she voiced her observation, “It’s just nice to see some proof that somebody doesn’t have to be bisexual to like a trans person. That’s the kind of thing I’ve worried about, I guess?”

“I don’t think there’s any way that I could be legitimately attracted to a woman,” Tsukasa said, “I mean, I think that it’s possible that I could ending up liking a trans guy who isn’t out yet… But I just, you know, don’t vibe with actual girls that way? That’s probably why I never had a crush on you, even before you came out to me, Nami.”

Ah, so he didn’t. Somehow, that too was validating. Yeah, Nami felt very valid in this conversation.

“Well…” She brought the topic back, “Randy, do you think, maybe, you could teach me knitting? I need something like that to do, too, and I don’t really… Have anything like that. An idle hobby, I mean.”

“Huh? Yeah, I could totally teach you, but it kinda takes a while to be any good… Could be boring, too,” Randy said, “So, you sure? There’s loads of better hobbies out there!”

“Well, yes. Like video games and the internet. But neither of those things are here,” Nami said, “So, I guess knitting is the next best thing.”

“Well, okay,” Randy said, “When do you want to start learning?”
“...Right now?” Nami offered. Tsukasa shrugged his indifference, so Randy grinned.

“Yeah, sure thing! I think Monokuma knew I use this kind of thing to keep from getting too antsy and stuff, so my room came with plenty of supplies in the closet,” He said, then paused, “Hey, wait a minute. Tsukasa’s room came with origami paper… Shouldn’t your room’ve come with something too, then?”

“I never really looked too hard in my room’s closet,” Nami admitted.

“Well, we should go take a look, now, right now!” Randy exclaimed, then took off in the direction of the hospice wing. Nami and Tsukasa followed at somewhat more reasonable paces until they got back to Nami’s room. Nami used her Monopad to open the door, after which Randy made a beeline for the closet. He dug around, then appeared again with… Strings? In his hands.

“Nami!” He exclaimed, “You did have stuff! Look, it’s colored elastic. You weave them together to make cool patterns for keychains or bracelets or whatever!”

“Huh?” She questioned, then stepped up and took the elastics from him. Once they were in her hands, they did feel familiar. She grabbed three strands and, managed to make a knot at the bottom of all three. She knew how to do this. Not necessarily well, her knot looked sloppy… It surely wasn’t a talent. But it was what she’d been looking for. An idle hobby.

She started to weave the three together, then looked back up at Randy, “Hey! Do you want a friendship bracelet??”

“...Yeah, I’d love one. How about green, blue, white?” He smiled back.

“Those are good colors for you,” Nami confirmed with a bit of a laugh.

She had a hobby.

She’d had this hobby, before, and she remembered how to do it even if she hadn’t remembered what it was.

It was a silly, childish sort of hobby. Exactly the sort she’d expect of herself.

Finally, something concrete to remind her that she was a real person.
Nami was a little bit too excited to discover that she’d had this hobby before ending up in the Killing Game. She took a bunch of the elastics with her, stuffing them into the pockets of her jeans as she left her room. She evidently didn’t need Randy to teach her anymore, at least, not during the Killing Game. He seemed kind of relieved. Nami, meanwhile, wanted to go and find as many people as she could and reveal the information about their closets. Randy had clearly believed that everyone knew about this, and Nami revealed that they didn’t.

So they parted ways, and Nami went to wander aimlessly around to see who she could run into. And the first people she ran into… Goro and Box, again. Good grief. Why were the two people who made her most uneasy joined at the hip these days? Box didn’t need to be Goro’s chaperone all the time, he just couldn’t be left alone. It was deeply unsettling to have to see these people who were both quite cute and quite creepy in the same place all the time.

“Hey!” She greeted them nonetheless, “Did you guys know? That there are hobby supplies in the closets in your rooms? I just found that out. I have these elastics.”

“Oh, for making friendship bracelets?” Box asked.

“I guess,” Nami didn’t want to make a friendship bracelet for Box.

“We didn’t have any clue about hobby supplies in the closets, though,” Goro said, “I dunno what I’d have as supplies in mine… Huh… Let’s see, what’d I ever do before I fell into that inescapable pit that is idoldom? I guess I liked cross-stitch. That’s how I ended up good enough at sewing to make my own costumes, yeah. Maybe I have some of the stuff for that!”

“Cross-stitch?” Nami asked, then admitted, “That’s… Cute. Could you make me something?”

“Something with cross-stitch? For sure!” Goro proclaimed, “Anything for you, Nami!”

“Don’t make it weird,” Nami mumbled, “But, could you, maybe, cross-stitch something really dumb for me? Like, a rat, with words?”

“Yeah, what words?” Goro asked.

“Ahh,” Nami was regretting this already. But, neither of these people knew memes anyway, so it wasn’t like she was embarrassing herself any more than she usually did, “Rats, rats, we’re the rats, we prey at night, we stalk at night, we’re the rats?”

“Catchy! I’ve carved it into my heart!” Goro said, “And I will most definitely create that for you, on one condition!”

“What’s that?” Nami asked.

“You hang it on your wall! Somewhere visible. Doesn’t have to be above your bed or anything, but it would be nice if you’d see it sometimes and think of me, your great friend Goro!”

“...I can do that, but I won’t exactly think of my great friend Goro. I’ll just think of my acquaintance Bakura.”
“Ohh, I’m wounded!” Goro dramatically grasped at his own hair, “If I’m just your acquaintance, then why did you make me a friendship bracelet?”

“I didn’t, and I wasn’t planning on it!” Nami said, “You can have a keychain or something, but not a friendship bracelet. You haven’t gotten enough points with me for that yet. They’re prestigious things!”

“Well,” Goro said, his expression turning devious, “Maybe I didn’t get enough points with this version of you, but I did it once before!”

“What?” Nami asked.

Goro struck a pose as he pulled one of his fingerless gloves off. It didn’t just reveal scars that Nami wasn’t surprised to see, but also revealed, pressed against his wrist, a bracelet with three strands. Pink, blue, black. Exactly the same shades of each that Nami had in her current kit. She took a step backwards.

“I told you. We knew each other before, Nami!” Goro proclaimed, “And now that you’ve remembered about the friendship bracelets, I can prove it to you! You gave this to me on the last day that we ever spoke, before the Killing Game! I’ve cherished it ever since, waiting for the day I could meet you again!”

Box stared for a minute, then said the words that Nami was too shocked to say, “If that’s really true, why wait till now to say it? And why keep hiding her talent from her?”

“Trust me, Hako,” Goro turned to her and, while keeping his arm in the air and fully visible, used the other to pet the top of her head, “If I told you everything, then you’d agree that it’s best for Nami to rediscover her talent all on her own. As for why I kept this secret, well, the girl’s got amnesia! Claiming she gave me a friendship bracelet when she doesn’t even remember being able to make them would just give off the impression that I’m a raving lunatic!”

“I got that impression anyway,” Nami said.

Goro pouted and lowered his arm, “Come on… Well, maybe soon you’ll remember your talent, and then we can be best friends!”

“I doubt we were ever actually best friends,” Nami said.

“Okay, maybe not, but I sure wanted to be!” Goro proclaimed, “You told me, when you gave me this bracelet… It’s not much of an apology, but you like these colors, right? Except, I never thought you needed to apologize for anything.”

Nami frowned and crossed her arms, “Why won’t you just tell me? What does being cryptic do for you?”

Goro laughed, “It doesn’t do anything for me! Not really. But, Nami. It really is best if you find that talent on your own. I know you can! And it’ll be so amazing when it does, I just hope I’ll still be alive to see it!”

“If Bakura thinks that… Then, I’ll believe him,” Box said, then reached out and grabbed both of Nami’s hands, locking eyes with her, “And believe in you. A talent like that... It must be bright and shining and wonderful! I too, will hope I live to see the day you can show it off to us!”

Nami wanted to protest, but at the same time, she couldn’t really bring herself to, anymore. Goro and Box were just both so convinced that she was secretly amazing. Maybe Goro was just lying,
and Box was buying into it, but at the same time… This was the first time that Nami had seen Box quite this earnest, and she wondered if this was actually something that Box wanted, not something she thought other people wanted. So she wouldn’t rain on that parade, of Box Hako feeling like a genuine human being for a moment.

“I’m sure it won’t be long.”
Following her bizarre conversation with Goro and Box, Nami continued to wander through the hospital in search of others to inform of her discovery. It wasn’t long at all before she checked Yuuri’s ward, to find that Yuuri and Sayaka were collaborating on something, while Kanoshi kneaded dough at one of the counters as well. He was the one who looked up to see her.

“Ah, Nami! What’s up?”

“I wanted to make sure you all knew about something interesting,” Nami said, leaning against the doorframe, “In the closets in our rooms, there are actually some supplies, behind the drawers, for hobbies. Tsukasa had origami paper, and I had colored elastics… Which was pretty cool, because it gave me back the memory that I know how to use those.”

“Ehh?” Sayaka asked, “I totally didn’t know that! I bet that there’s leatherworking stuff in my room!”

“That’s a cool hobby,” Nami observed, then looked to the other two, “What about you two?”

“Me? Uh, probably…” Yuuri thought for a moment, “Well, damn. What’d I ever do except baking and getting in fights, anyway?”

“How about beads? Didn’t you make jewelry before your mom took your supplies away?” Kanoshi asked, then went on, “I actually did know about that, though, I kind of thought everybody would have investigated their closets as closely as I did. Anyway, I found a hanoi tower set!”

“Don’t those things take forever?” Nami asked.

“It’s relaxing, to sit for a while and solve the puzzle,” Kanoshi said, “And, besides. It doesn’t take too long if you’re working with a lower number of rings… It’s not what I would actually, you know, ask for my hobby item to be, but if Monokuma actually cared about what we want, then I’m pretty sure you and I both would have had video games.”

“That’s fair,” Nami said, then looked to Yuuri, “You used to make jewelry?”

“Yeah, I did. Mostly stuff with really big, cutesy beads, and I’d go and sell ‘em for cheap in the Harajuku district. Stores there got kinda pissed at me for it. It was fun, though,” Yuuri admitted.

“So,” Nami said, “What are the three of you making, anyway?”

“We’re creating…” Sayaka paused for dramatic effect, “The Ultimate Fairy Bread.”

“Excuse me?” Nami asked.

“It’s usually white bread with sprinkles on it, but we’re making sweet bread,” Sayaka gestured to the dough Kanoshi was kneading, then continued, “And making it into dinner rolls, each with a piece of soft candy inside. I’m making strawberry and cherry and raspberry! Ruka is doing lemon and red bean and,” She curled her lip in disgust, “Apple.”

“You don’t like apples, Yamaguchi?” Nami asked.
“No,” Sayaka said, “I like all red foods except for apples! In fact, I love them all except for apples! But apples are gross and I don’t get how anybody likes the things…”

“Understandable. I think green vegetables taste like grass and mushrooms taste like dirt,” Nami admitted, “Why are you making even more desserts right now, though?”

“But…” Yuuri trailed off, blank.

“Because we’ve never had access to equipment like this to make our own soft candies on a large enough scale to accomplish the Ultimate Fairy Bread!” Sayaka explained, “Plus, it’ll last for days. We could even freeze some of it.”

“Good excuse,” Nami chuckled.

“Right?” Sayaka laughed as well, flipping one of her pigtails back, at which Yuuri elbowed her and she turned to him, “Whup, sorry. Look, it’s not my fault that this ward didn’t come with hairnets…”

"I don't mind eating Yamaguchi's hair," Nami said, "I mean, if it happens to get in the food, I'm not too worried about that kind of thing. I'm definitely not saying that I want to eat hair. Just that it's not a big deal if I do."

"That... Makes sense," Yuuri admitted, "But, that doesn't mean she should be throwing her hair around and increasing the chances it'd happen..."

"I won't do it again!" Sayaka assured him as she got back to work on her assigned flavors of candy.

"Well... Um, I hope that the bread's ready for dinnertime. It sounds really tasty," Nami said, grinning, "Well, that's all I really wanted to say! So, I'll see you soon?"

"Sure thing," Yuuri said, and flashed her a quick thumbs-up before he too focused in on his work once more.

And so, Nami left the room.

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Location: Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 14th
Time: 1200 Hours

It should have been a victory.

For Makoto Naegi and Kyoko Kirigiri, the very first embodiments and the figurehead leaders of Ultimate Despair, to finally reach Hope's Vestige in Towa City, it really should have been cause for much rejoicing. It should have been the success that they'd been waiting for all this time. Hope's Vestige would fall, they'd reclaim the Neo World machines once more, and Despair would again have control over the course of the Killing Games. That was what they thought. Ultimate Hope would, in recognition of their ability to get to that point, relinquish it to them. Ultimate Hope would never kill Ultimate Despair.

That was the idea, anyway. But the grins fell from their faces as soon as they walked into the building. Junko wasn't there, Mukuro wasn't there. A woman in a lab coat leaned against one of the Neo-World pods. A blue-haired girl in a frilly maid dress crouched next to another one. A boy who couldn't have been older than thirteen was fully sitting on top of one, fiddling with a handheld
game console. A young man was squatting by the far wall, and in one hand, he held what appeared to be a meat cleaver, stained with blood at many different states of drying. Makoto could tell at a glance, that some of the stains were incredibly old, but some were certainly new. Quite new. Not from this day, but not from further back than two days. His heart sunk.

"...Where are they?" Kyoko asked before he got the chance to say anything.

"Dead," The woman in the lab coat answered.

"How?" Naegi asked.

"What, like it's hard?" The man with the cleaver questioned.

"They were Ultimate Hope. With every as-of-yet researched talent instilled in them," Makoto said, evidently in shock.

"Well, obviously, nobody had researched the talent of self-reliance yet," The same man said, dismissively, "Get one of them, the other's small fry. Anyway, we were expecting you. You're kinda late."

"Who are you people?" Kyoko questioned.

"We're," The girl in the maid dress stood up and struck a pose with peace signs, "An elite rescue team of concerned friends and family! Just kidding, I mean. Who ever heard of something like that? A Killing Game can't be stopped until a Win Condition is met, so rescuing is kinda impossible. It's more like... We do know some of the people inside, but we just didn't have anything better to do than come here and try to kill Ultimate Hope."

"They're gone," Makoto mumbled.

"Yes, do you need your ears checked?" The gamer kid said.

"That means, this is..." Kyoko was equally as subdued.

"Not fun anymore, right?" The woman in the lab coat asked, "It is, after all, no longer a game of cat and mouse. We thought as much would happen, if we killed those two. Two birds with one stone, as it may be. Who knows if her plan will work, especially if she's not even here to guide us, but I'll choose to believe in that girl's ideas."

"Two birds with one stone?" Makoto asked.

"Removing the major players," She explained, "No more Ultimate Hope, no more Ultimate Despair... As we speak, one of the loves of my life is removing the leaders of the Future Foundation. So, Ultimate Despair. I offer you a choice. Would you prefer to die? Or to join our cause? Either way, you'll be removed as a major player."

"Are you... Wait..." Kyoko said, "You're seriously trying to save the world?"

"Save the world?" The young boy asked, then grinned at them both, "I don't know about that! We just wanna take it out of stalemate. We're following her plan, you know. The Ultimate Psychologist Kira Kirara's Ultimate Plan To End The Quiet War! Surely, you've heard of it?"

Makoto had, of course. Such blatant proclamations of the Quiet War being a game played between factions, with unnecessary civilian death and suffering at the hands of all sides, that could be stopped if only the leaders of those factions were all replaced, or better yet, removed altogether.
An end to Killing Games, an end to Future Foundation's bombings, an end to this battle the world had been trapped in for decades... All dismissed as hack ramblings of a young girl who, Ultimate as she may be, had no real understanding of politics.

Even so, it had earned itself some believers. And, furthermore were people like these, who found details hidden in the work that she had no business knowing. Details like the exact coordinates of Hope's Vestige, and the fact that it was the base of all recent Killing Games. With all of this in mind...

It was no surprise that Kira Kirara's Ultimate Plan was the final research that she published before her death.
Makoto Naegi finished processing the information, and spoke up again, "So, you're some of the people who were able to interpret the secret details of that paper?"

"Not any of us in this room," The guy with the cleaver said, scratching at his own chin, "My name's Nate, by the way. Nate Harper. Maybe you heard of me. But, nah. It was that Shoyu guy who was first decoding the paper, the stuff about Hope being responsible for the Killing Games, then he got in contact with Akihiko, who got most of the rest of us roped in. The old folks with the wacko names are the ones who found the coordinates to this place though..."

"None of that was really shocking to us," Kyoko said, then strode forward with her arms crossed, "We knew the majority of it already, though we'll admit, we used that paper for its coordinates ourselves. As for you, Nate... Ultimate Despairing Environmentalist..."

"Formerly," Nate said, raising a hand up, "I was, what'd they call it, malicious-type Despair?"
Totally of my own volition, tch. But I'm along for the ride to see if I can't get my boys back. Maybe one of 'em will survive, and be overcome with gratitude that I came looking. Awfully ulterior of me, I know, but these people wouldn't expect any better."

"What I'm curious to know," The young boy said, then paused a moment to give his own introduction, "Oh, right, Kizuto Orihara. Newly selected Ultimate Completionist and the one friend of Tomoe Kaguya's that could be tracked down. Still here even though she died already, because, what sort of completionist would I be if I bailed? Anyway, I wanna know how Kirara got all this super confidential information to encode."

"Oh, you didn't decode that part?" Kyoko asked, bringing a hand up to her own mouth in surprise.

"Not all of us are the Ultimate Fashion Girl slash Analyst, Kirigiri," The woman in the lab coat said, "Myself, I'm Iwako Same. Ultimate Chemist, and that's it. I'm here for the other love of my life, the poor dear getting himself wrapped up in a game of his own."
"Well then," Kyoko said, "I'll gladly explain for you. She received the information through discreet online contact with one of the Failed Ultimates."

"The what now?" The maid asked, then frowned at the fact she was the only one who still needed to be referred to in such a way and decided to give an introduction as well, "Ryouma Kobayashi, Ultimate Performer, reporting, by the way. I'm employed by the same agency as Goro Bakura, and we've been onstage together before. So, I got let in on the truth about Kirara's Plan, and decided I wanted to help. By the way, we're sticking around here 'cause somebody needs to let them out after the win condition is met."
"The Failed Ultimates are a group of escapees and Deserters. Junko complained about them all the time..." Makoto's statement just proved what these people already expected, that this whole thing was like a game between these factions, that they were honestly still friends to some extent, "Even though she always got mad at Mukuro for calling us, once it happened, she'd call to whine all the time about how the last game's survivors, two Alter Egos, and one other AI all turned their backs on Ultimate Hope."

"Then, some members deserted too," Kyoko added in, "I'm surprised you didn't know. You were expecting us, but you should be expecting them to come, ready for a fight. I can only imagine that they wish to rescue Akamatsu and Shirogane upon completion of the Killing Game."

"So," Iwako spoke up again, "Can I assume, since you're giving us all of this information, that you would rather cooperate than die?"

"The jury's still out on that one," Makoto said, "But we won't fight you. We used the Ultimate Plan as well, so we can respect you for wanting to follow it. And, honestly. Without those two, there really isn't... Any point."

"There is one point," Ryouma said, "Getting the opportunity to live some part of your life free from Despair. Free from the pressure of being the people who represented Despair in the first Killing Game when you were seventeen. I know if I was in your position, I'd wanna experience that at least for a little while before I died."

It was as if Ryouma, without a moment's hesitation, had come to an understanding of Kyoko and Makoto that none around them, not even their rivals in the game for the fate of the world, had been able to grasp. The Killing Game wasn't their idea, and they only took the stage of it in the final
hour to serve as mouthpieces for their organization, which had commandeered the Killing Game from the outside. An Heir and a Fashion Girl... The truth was, at that time, 'Ultimate Despair' was an organization which they couldn't fully understand, and their membership stemmed from the fact that their families made large donations to the group. Abandoning a facade like that would be cause for their own executions or worse, so they'd somehow become the figures of Despair. It was no surprise that the despair subgroup, the Cult of N preferred to recognize Komaru Naegi and Kanon Nakajima, who were known to have commandeered their Killing Game all on their own, with no outside help or influence.

Ryouma could tell that Makoto and Kyoko were kids who got in over their heads. Who got in over their heads and just had the only other people they could call friends killed by this group, killed by the True Radicals. So many organizations... Even so, knowing that this was a gesture of honest forgiveness and even friendship, Kyoko wanted to accept it. She was sure Makoto felt that same urge.

"I guess..." Kyoko said, reaching out to hold onto Makoto's arm, "That wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

"Cool," Kizuto said, waving a hand dismissively, "Well, we were the half-friendly half-intimidating welcome wagon, so I guess, go into the rest of the place to meet the others and get settled in. At the rate this Killing Game is going, we'll be in here for a while."
Nami had three hours left before she was going swimming. Three hours until all of her anxieties came to fruition, except, she knew they wouldn't. There were plenty of concerns she had that logically stood no chance at actually happening, so at least she could blot those from the supposed inevitability.

Three hours... Three hours anxious was very different from three hours with nothing but another three hours waiting at the end, and as much as Nami was happy to have discovered her hobby, sitting and doing nothing but that for three hours was truly something which could only doom her to catastrophizing, thinking up all these worst case scenarios that some part of her would believe no matter how absurd. She would have to multitask, yes, that was the solution.

She still had, in her room, that copy of Bee Movie. She retrieved it, then went to the auditorium, and found it empty. If anyone had been watching something already, she would have just joined in on that. She wasn't especially picky. The only reason she'd gotten the meme-filled ancient movie from her room was in case of emptiness like this, she wouldn't need to leave again and find something to watch. With this emptiness, however, she swiftly set up the movie she wanted to watch, sat down in a seat towards the middle, and started to weave her elastics together while that telltale opening to the script played. While she needed to watch what she was doing as she tied the knot to get a piece started, she could then keep her eyes on the movie and her hands would do all the work.

Clearly, she'd done this many times before. It was strange to think she had no active memories of doing so, but at the same time, she was somehow certain that it was a hobby she'd picked up sometime before Tomoe left to devote herself to her journalistic pursuits. It wasn't something that was locked behind "the time when Nami had an Ultimate Talent".

At some point during the movie, Mitsuru wandered in all on his lonesome, and took a seat, watching as well. Neither of them greeted each other or anything, focused on the movie, but it was nice for Nami not to be sitting here alone, and she hoped that Mitsuru, who had indeed come here by himself, felt the same way. She wondered if it was difficult for him to be here, not just afraid of being left alone, but without anyone to rely on to prevent that. He went from a man with two lovers and an extensive family, to somebody whose only prior friend was assigned to play watchful eye to an attempted murderer. There wasn't anybody who Mitsuru could rely on.

2:00 / 1400 Hours

When the movie was finished, Nami stood and approached Mitsuru, standing right in front of him before she greeted, "Fujishiro... Hi."

"Hi," Mitsuru said, looking up at her, "How's it going, huh?"
"Fine. You like the movie?" Nami asked, tilting her head to one side, "And why are you alone?"

"Yeah, it was pretty cool. I think it's good to watch older animations every once in a while... It might not look as nice as the modern stuff, but a lot more work had to go into making it look good," Mitsuru said, "Even in this kind of world, entertainment's arrow marched on... All those old movies were really wrong about the end of the world, huh? And, well, I'm alone because nobody wants to be alone with somebody who's got the lie serum..."

"Oh. Well, but you aren't a very good liar at all. I think you care too much about your own opinions to convincingly say otherwise, so I'll believe what you say. I guess while most people can lie about opinions but not information, you could be the opposite. Anyhow... the Quiet War isn't the end of the world," Nami said, "It's exactly what a large scale war is actually like, not like the ones in those sorts of apocalypse movies, you know? Everyone goes about life as normal, still, we really do. Civilians don't need to be involved, except, for when they die. None of us would have been involved, either, if we weren't Ultimates. Or, for you, if you weren't in the Future Foundation. We're like... Soldiers of the quiet war? Civilians just, live life, and maybe they get killed or turned into Despair. But it's not like society's fallen apart."

"People seemed to always think it would," Mitsuru said.

"The ends of the world that old movies talk about," Nami said, her voice growing softer, "Really do predict that society will, fall apart. But whenever I watch those kinds of movies... It doesn't seem so bad at all. I've never really liked, that we live in a society? That in spite of the chaos and misery everywhere, all the same institutions are still in place?"

"I like the fact that what humanity's built up isn't so fragile that something like this can destroy it," Mitsuru said, and stood up from his seat, "I think it's a testament, to what we're capable of."

"I guess," Nami admitted, "It is, that. A testament to what humans can do. But, it's a testament that people like me don't really get to be a part of. Sorry to get all serious on you like this..."

"It's fine to be serious sometimes, Nami. Just because you put on some particular image, doesn't mean that you need to act that way all of the time. Say whatever you need to say. It does seem you need to say it."

"It's really easy to say these kinds of things to you," Nami admitted, "Well, it's just. I know I have some Ultimate Talent, even if I'm forgetting it. But the thing is, whatever that was... I can't help feeling like, because of who I am, I'll be erased in some way, from history. Like they'll talk about me, but nobody will ever hear that I was trans. Or they'll just never ever talk about me at all. Either my achievements will overshadow my identity, or the other way around, and somehow, I don't want either of those things to happen... If I manage to make a real name for myself in my life, I don't want it to be as if I never had another name. Because, like... I haven't heard of people like me doing cool stuff very often at all. I wanna hear about that. So I want other people to hear about me, if I do anything."

"Nobody wants to be forgotten, or to have their image twisted up," Mitsuru said, "Trust me, as somebody who needed to hide my identity from the world for years, it isn't any fun. There isn't anything about me that should make it matter if my memory lives on in history, and I can still feel that way. I think it's very noble for you to have a reason such as representing yourself and your identity, to hold on to in this case."

"I don't know about noble..." Nami gave a sheepish chuckle.

"What about it could be called anything but noble? It's a selfless reason. If you were being selfish,
you'd surely prefer it if you made it into the history books with the details of your identity omitted. For as long as your identity's recorded, there will be people who remember you as something other than a woman."

"Those... Aren't the kind of people who should remember me at all," Nami said, "In fact, I wonder if... My talent is even something which people like that would care to learn about."

"Are you starting to, by any chance, remember what it could be?"

"...No. If only I could."
3:00 / 1500 Hours

It was time.

The hour that Nami had been waiting for, waffling between her dread and her excitement, since she woke up this morning… No, since they’d scheduled it. At three, the pool belonged to her, and Rei, and Riko. She wasn’t watching the clock precisely, so she arrived to the pool in the empty wings at about ten past. Rei greeted her at the door, already there, already in a swimsuit that really didn’t leave much to the imagination. She was an impressively curvy girl, and she wore a white bikini that wasn’t especially lewd- no more so than a standard pair of panties and a bra, neither of which qualified as lingerie.

In fact, the swimsuit was more like a two-piece than a bikini, or would be on anybody else. It was just the strength of Rei’s natural curves that made what would be a perfectly normal two-piece on anybody else resemble a bikini when on her body. Strangely enough, Nami didn't actually find herself put off by this. Rei looked nice, and...

Well, it wasn't like Nami was emotionally unstable enough that witnessing anybody's natural femininity would trigger a wave of dysphoria. Rather, she'd spent so much time comparing herself to her naturally gorgeous, unmistakably womanly sister that she didn't have too much capacity to compare herself to anybody else anymore. It was personal dissatisfaction, not comparison, at this point. In most cases. It probably also helped that she thought, even if she had a body like Rei's, she would wear a more modest swimsuit than that herself, so there was no jealousy on the capability to wear such a thing.

"Nami! You made it!" Rei exclaimed, then grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged her toward the changing rooms at the side of the pool, "Come on, I need to show you the swimsuit that I picked out for you. I promise, you'll love it."

"That's a big claim," Nami said, "Are you shore about that?"

"Yes, I'm 'shore' about that!" Rei said, then turned Nami around to push her instead of dragging her, still in the direction of the changing rooms. Once they were back there, Rei opened up one of the lockers, and pulled out a swimsuit that was attached to a hanger. It was two pieces, but nothing like the one that she herself wore. The top resembled a tank top most closely, with a bow where the small of her back would be and small ruffles at the sleeves; While the bottom resembled a pair of shorts to midway down a thigh, this one with its ruffles around the waist. Looking at it still shot fear through Nami's heart, at the idea of wearing it, but at the same time...

Rei had clearly put a lot of thought into it. This was a swimsuit which was cute and feminine, but at the same time, without even daring to get close to the idea of something which was too revealing for comfort. The fear of wearing this that Nami felt wasn't a fear of a swimsuit at all, but a fear of wearing something… So cute. Like her concerns with wearing a skirt or a dress and looking like a clown. It was still a concern, but it was nothing like the concern she would have had for this situation otherwise.

"It's... Great, Rei," Nami admitted, taking the hanger from her, "It hardly looks like a swimsuit at all."

"Yeah, and that's perfect, isn't it?" Rei asked, paused to clear her throat, then spoke again with a
gentler sort of confidence, "The way I convinced you to do this, I felt kind of bad, you know? So I put all my effort into tracking down a swimsuit that wouldn't necessarily feel like one. If it's just like a girly outfit, then it's not as big a step, right?"

"That's exactly it," Nami agreed, then turned to the nearest curtain, "I guess that I'll, just go ahead and get changed. No point delaying, right?"

"Of course," Rei said, "I'm going to start swimming, though, so I'll meet you back out there. Yeah?"

"Sounds good," Nami confirmed, then took the swimsuit with her behind the changing curtain. She heard Rei greeting Riko on her way back to the pool, so they were all there who were supposed to be right now. Nami poked her head back out of the curtain for a moment to let Riko know she was behind this particular curtain, then retreated and got quickly changed.

Not like she thought that either Rei or Riko would, at this point, walk in on her changing... But it was somehow still stressful to be getting undressed to the extent that allowed for changing into a swimsuit, in a location that had any form of potential to be walked in on, even if it wasn't plausible. It seemed like Riko had similar reservations, though, because they both emerged in their suits at about the same time. Riko's resembled a school swimsuit, but in black, and the slightest bit lower cut at the top. She still wore her mask, of course, and she was holding a book. It seemed she didn't actually intend to swim, but she'd changed in solidarity with the girls who were. Her whiteboard was nowhere to be seen, though, so she just showed Nami, in her eyes, a gleeful look, then gestured toward the direction of the pool.

Nami hesitated, and Riko didn't react to that at all, waiting for Nami to take the lead. There wasn't any judgment there, Nami could tell, of what she was wearing. No judgment either way. Neither was Riko suddenly compelled to size Nami up as a potential romantic partner, nor did she seem put off or appalled to see Nami in attire like this. Even so, if Nami went to see Rei, that was crossing a threshold nonetheless. Letting Rei see her in the suit she'd picked out.

And in some part, what was concerning about it was... The reaction that Nami found herself hoping for. Supposedly, she had a girlfriend waiting for her on the outside. And supposedly, Rei had someone there too. Even so, Nami had only one memory of Kira, and her heart, at the very least, thought that Rei was beautiful. She wanted Rei to think she was beautiful. She shouldn't, right? But she did. And so, she was horrified both by the fact she would want this beautiful girl to look at her and think, similarly, that she was beautiful... And the fact that such a thing may not happen.

But, she took a deep breath, and with Riko right behind her, returned from the changing rooms to the pool.

Such a thing would not happen.

And Nami wouldn't need to worry about having unfaithful thoughts anymore.

It was, some might call it, exactly the kind of worst case scenario that Nami had dispelled as being impossible. Even so, this particular worst case scenario had never even crossed her mind.

There was something very distinctly different.

Between a person who was swimming, and a person who had drowned.
"Attention, one and all! A body has been discovered!" Monokuma exclaimed, its voice painfully grating through the speakers of the building, "Everybody, please report to the Empty Wings swimming pool!"

No.

Oh, jeeze, no??

It was only the three of them here. Everyone knew that. Nami knew that certainly, and that was why her first thought when the body discovery announcement sounded was… Rei really was dead. But, then, something was strange.

Three.

That’s the number of people finding a body it took for the announcement to sound, right? So why? Why why why why why? Maybe it wasn’t Rei after all, right? But she was there and they were staring staring at Rei and there wasn’t even any blood, but-

Nami locked eyes with the third witness, crawling from under one of the poolside deck chairs. Oh. Oh, it was Sayaka. What? Huh? Why?

"Yamaguchi?" Nami questioned, "What are you…"

"...I was hiding out here. I wasn’t gonna look at you or anything," Sayaka explained, "Just, listen. Because I got... worried."

"Worried about what?" Nami questioned, not even fazed by the fact that Sayaka was currently seeing her in this swimsuit.

"Worried that Rei was gonna kill one, or both of you," She explained, "Believe me or don’t, I guess, the trial will bring the truth to light... but I really was just trying to prevent a murder. She's been conspiratory lately, you know? And insisting that you come to the pool with her, Nami, when you weren't gonna come here at all in the first place... So, since I had the slot before you, I just hid. And before you ask, I didn't see anything about this! I heard one weird splash, looked up, and all I saw was Rei, already... Like that."

Riko took up somewhat of an offensive stance, but Nami stuck an arm out as if holding her back, "I believe her. For now, anyway. Yamaguchi, could you... Could you keep other people out of the changing room while I get my clothes back on?"

"Yeah, I can," Sayaka said, "Hurry up."

With that, Nami ran back into the changing rooms. She changed quickly enough that by the time she returned, only Tsukasa and Kaede had arrived. Huh, seeing both of them here without Randy was an oddity, he was usually with one of the two of them. Tsukasa immediately locked eyes with Nami, walked over, and wrapped her in a hug. He didn't ask if she needed one, but she did, and he was the only one right now who could give it. She leaned against his shoulder, feeling... Empty. The initial panic of getting changed before people arrived had worn off, as had the initial shock.

Now, it was just... Rei, facedown in the pool. Rei, dead. That girl who reached out to Nami. That girl who called her a best friend. The first time in Nami's entire active memory that she'd had a
friend like that, a girl who shared her taste in tea, who'd try to dress her up in cute clothes, who was dead. Rei was dead. Rei was gone.

They say that when people die the memories of them live on, but Nami... Was already feeling her happy memories with Rei slip, not like she'd forget them, but like she couldn't remember them as happily anymore, those memories were just the start of a friendship which had now been cut short, and something that Nami had missed before she ever even had it. And now, when she did have it, she lost it again. Lost it in days. Tsukasa was her second closest friend here, and he held her, steady. Gentle. Until she could stand on her own again. Until she could look around.

Sayaka was restless, but not panicking. Distressed, but ready to face what was ahead. Kaede, meanwhile, was frantic. She had her arms wrapped around herself, staring not at the body, but at the girls who had triggered the announcement. She looked betrayed. Nami could only imagine that as a detective, Kaede felt it had to be one of the three of them at first glance... And didn't want to suspect anybody, but Sayaka, who wasn't supposed to be here, who had been making some mysterious plans with Kaede herself that had likely led to bonding between them, was the primary suspect.

Of course Kaede would feel betrayed by the thought that somebody she clearly trusted above other people here could possibly be the culprit who would kill Rei Akabane.

"The Monofile..." Kaede mumbled to herself, then pulled it out. Nami fished out her own Monopad and checked the file. Time of death: 1526. Cause of Death: Lungs Filled with Fluid. So she had drowned. The Monopad didn't indicate any other injuries, though. No bump on the head, no bruises like she was held under...

"Hey," Nami said, "Hey, Monokuma, umm... Does the body discovery still sound for accidental deaths?"

"Upupu..." Monokuma appeared, "In the case of an accidental death, the procedure for a murder will still occur. All deaths excluding those caused by breaking the rules will have a body announcement and a trial. Upon end of trial voting, the conclusion to state that you've determined it to be accidental is to vote for the victim. That's not to say that's what happened here, of course. I guess you could say for a case like this, your first order of business will be to determine if it was a murder or if it was an accident. After which, if it was a murder, you search for the culprit. A double-layer cake case! If that's what's going on here. It really is all up to you to figure out, but them's the rules."

"Thank you, Monokuma..." Nami said, then turned to look at Kaede, "We don't have to suspect anybody, not yet. We just need to investigate. If we can't find anything that points to it being a murder, then... We can accept that it was an accident."

"Akamatsu," Randy joined the conversation, having just walked into the room, "Uh, I get that, Nami, but the thing is... That's not a responsible way to investigate. To say that no evidence it was murder, equals it was an accident? That sounds like it makes sense at first, but really, the thing is... You can prove it was murder with evidence, but you can't possibly prove it wasn't murder from a lack of evidence, because the culprit might have just done a really good job of hiding it."

"Randy... That's smart," Kaede said, "I'm sorry Nami, but he's right. As nice as it would be, to work on some other assumption and not have to suspect anybody, that's not something that a responsible detective can do."

"I guess I saw something like that in a video game once," Tsukasa added in, "Nami, you were invoking, what's it called... Something with a raven, which is the only functional response to a
Devil's Proof, which is what the statement of 'this couldn't be a murder' would fall under. But, really, isn't a Devil's Proof more sound reasoning when it comes to practical application than the raven thing?"

"It is," Kaede said, "At least in a situation like this, where our lives are on the line if we get it wrong. So, Randy. You and I will be investigating with the idea in mind that some culprit committed this crime, and we need to find them. Nami. You, and Mizuho... And Yamaguchi. The three of you can keep your eyes on each other, and I trust in your abilities. Investigate as if this were an unfortunate accident."

"That's a good idea," Sayaka said with a short nod, "Then, during the trial, we can compare what we've collected. By splitting our investigation based on our own assumptions, we can avoid all of us missing something crucial based on those assumptions."

"Alrighty!" Monokuma called out, "Since you are, in effect, investigating two different cases here... The case where this is a murder, and the case where this is an accident, I'll give you extra time on the investigation. Previously, you had different teams investigating the same case, but this time your two teams need to investigate an entire case each, so... Yeah, extra time! And as always, all relevant doors are unlocked for the sake of the investigation. Yushu's lab is included; You can enter consequence-free during the investigation period. Okie dokie! Best of luck, Ultra Detec Squad!"
While the others had been talking, Riko went to change back into her own clothes, then she left the pool area before everybody had even gotten there. Even though Monokuma had given the 'start' whistle on the investigation, Kaede's team and Nami's were both reluctant to actually begin snooping about the scene when there were still so many people who hadn't yet seen it in the state in which the body had been found. So, without even speaking these concerns, everybody waited.

Goro arrived along with Box, as he was wont to do lately. Neither of them screamed or shouted at the sight, but Goro turned and locked eyes with Nami immediately, "You don't deserve this."

"Huh?" Nami asked.

"You don't deserve it. I tried to kill Tomoe, but you didn't deserve for her to die. And you don't deserve to have to see somebody else you care about die now... " Goro explained, "I dunno. Sorry. I just thought, you probably need to hear that? It's got nothing to do with you!"

"He's right," Box added in "Don't you dare start thinking, 'the people in my life keep dying, so it must somehow be my fault'. It's a Killing Game... As awful as it is, it's coincidence."

Nami did need to hear those words. Of course she did, because anybody who had lost first a twin sister, then a best friend, would start to wonder if it was some divine fate screaming 'those who love you are doomed'. Hearing it from Box and Goro shouldn't have meant much, and it didn't take a lot to realize that those words were what she needed, not so much that she'd be impressed by those two having the idea. Even so, it helped to hear it.

Neither of them really knew Rei, so jumping to comforting Nami instead was a sensible move on their parts.

Mitsuru, freed from the lie serum, arrived as well. He stood there, staring at the body for a good few moments before he could think of something to say. He did, though, "This can't actually be a murder, can it?"

"We're investigating both possibilities," Kaede explained, "Randy and I will cover looking for evidence that this was a murder, while Nami, Yamaguchi, and Mizuho are on looking for evidence that this was an accident. That's what it boils down to, anyway."

"I see..." Mitsuru said, and that explanation was enough for him to understand that there would still be a trial, that the burden of proving that this was just a tragedy and not a crime was on the participants. His view was clear, though. It was an accident.

Kanoshi, too, arrived alone.

The thing was, Rei might not have done much to befriend anyone other than Nami, but everybody still looked at her fondly. She was cute, and nice, and she had helped most everybody figure out exactly what sort of tea they liked most. So, even though he had never been her friend, Kanoshi still muffled a scream of shock through his hands.

The horror that 'somebody would kill' was absent from this scene. Some assumed it was an accident, but even those who continued to entertain the idea of murder weren't surprised it could have happened that way. There was still, no matter the outlook, the horror that somebody was
dead. That somebody who had been a constant presence in their lives was now completely gone. That was a horror that could never truly be erased. It could be eased by losing sensitivity when a lot of people started dying at once, but erased? That took forgetting the dead's humanity. Imagining that they weren't even really a person at all. I never talked to her, so why should it matter to me? But nobody tried that. To the end, Rei was real. She was a bright and human presence. And gone.

Of all people, Shinjiro was the last to arrive.

He walked in, and he froze. He froze more than anybody else had, staring, until he began to shake. Trembling, fists clenched, he whirled on Nami, "Why was it her!?"

"Huh?" Nami blinked.

"It could have been you! Or Asahi! Why was it her!?" He continued, approaching her with fury in his eyes, "Did you kill her!? Did you fucking kill Rei!?"

"No!" Nami exclaimed, "You don't think that, do you?"

"I," Shinjiro started again, but then took a deep breath, a step back, like he was standing down, "No. I think it was an accident. But if it were an accident, it could have been you. Or Asahi. I thought it would be, when I heard the announcement. Rei..."

"I don't know what happened," Nami said, "Asahi and I walked out of the changing room, and she was dead."

"It should have been one of you," Shinjiro repeated, "It should have been."

"Nozomi," Tsumugi chided him, "Stop. Trust me, I know how it feels to think it should have been somebody else who died. How it feels to suspect somebody... You don't need to do anything about it, though."

"What am I supposed to do? Can I do anything except just stew in it? If I let her know, then at least I, at least, it's not like I'm..."

"What are you even trying to say?" Tsumugi questioned, then reached out and grabbed Shinjiro's wrist, "Claiming that 'it should have been' anyone else isn't going to help you. You won't feel better. You'll just make that person feel worse."

"What if I want her to feel worse!?" Shinjiro questioned, pulling his wrist back, "Of the three of them, Rei is the one who least deserved to die! Why shouldn't I make sure those people know it!?"

"Because it's useless," Tsumugi said, "All that lashing out will do is make everybody hate you when the dust clears. You don't honestly want that, do you?"

Shinjiro took a few deep breaths, then closed his eyes and crossed his arms before he mumbled, "Making everybody hate me would be a good way to end up dead, wouldn't it? God. Rei... I'm a fucking liar. It shouldn't have been either of your friends. It should have been me."

"There's no point saying who it should have been," Tsumugi assured him, "Because it was Rei. All we can do now is determine what happened."
Deadly Life: Day Five (A Hunt For Clues)

Nami started to investigate the area around the pool. It was tiled, but not the sort of tile where anything could actually get underneath them; More like, a single floor with grooves cut into it to emulate tile. She was down on her hands and knees, small puddles soaking through her jeans in some amount. It felt awful, but she didn't care. The feeling of water and chlorine sopped into denim was universally understood as a terrible one, and any other time, it would be overwhelmingly uncomfortable... But she had something more important to do right now.

Looking for evidence.

A poolside was always going to be gross, in some ways. There would be bits of hair, maybe dirt too. But none of that was evidence. Unless...

"Monokuma," Nami summoned it forth, "How often is the pool cleaned?"

"Every night," Monokuma answered as soon as it appeared.

"I see," Nami said, then pulled out her Monopad and snapped a photo of the floor. Sure, she was looking for evidence that this was an accident, but she did need to collect *anything* that could serve as any form of evidence. She didn't know, right now, if it would be useful for either of their causes, but there could be something fussy going on if a present hair color didn't match somebody who was scheduled to be here today.

That was the only thing that stood out at the poolside, though. It really didn't seem like anybody else was here. And the lack of any other injuries on Rei's body... Just what was going on here? It was actually quite confusing. The fact that there weren't any other injuries at all... Seemed to contradict both the possibility it was a murder and the possibility it was an accident, because weren't human bodies supposed to have protections against this sort of thing? For people who were able to swim, it took some outside force to drown. Unconsciousness, or being dragged down by something, or treading water for too long.

So what? What could have happened? Nami needed to find it... Find the truth. Sniff it out. For Rei's sake. Whether it was avenging her, or proving that nobody had enough ill will to kill her. Either way, Nami would do it. Rei was her best friend. She didn't know what else she could do, if she could do anything, but she could try. She could honestly try her best. She had to. She didn't have skills. She wasn't very smart. But if she could even a little bit help with this trial, she would.

The poolside probably wasn't really the place to look for evidence, though. There wasn't a sign of anybody else being here, as of right now. Sayaka only heard a splash, not a door opening. She didn't see anybody there when the suspicious singular splash made her look up. How could a murder have been committed with a witness who saw nothing? But how could it have been an accident if the Monokuma File didn't report any other injuries? What?

"Hey!" Sayaka called out to her, "I think that if we're investigating this as an accident, we should probably go and check Rei's room, and see if there's any reason this would have happened, right?"

"Uhh. Right, yeah," Nami agreed, standing back up and brushing herself off, "That's probably a good place to start."

"Yeah. Just because there's no other injuries doesn't mean no outside force was involved," Sayaka explained her reasoning, "She could have had a bad reaction with some medicine that she took, or
maybe she secretly hasn't been sleeping at night. Looking in her room should give us some insight on those kinds of things."

"It should, yeah," Nami agreed, then walked out of the pool, into the empty wings. She started to make her way back towards the Hospice Ward, but paused when she noticed something on the wall. She blinked at it a few times as she was thinking about it. What... Was this? A chunk taken out of the drywall, in the hallway of the Empty Wings, as if somebody had punched it.

"Nami?" Tsukasa asked, then followed her eyes to where she was looking, "Oh, wow. How'd you notice that?"

"I dunno... I was walking, and I saw it," She noted that there really wasn't any reason for anybody to stop at this part of the hallway, so what about this? "It looks like someone punched the wall here."

"Why would somebody stop here and punch it? This is just a hallway," Tsukasa said, "It's not even near a room or anything, it's just along the path between the pool and the main building."

"If that's the only reason somebody would be in this hallway, then it's probably relevant," Nami said, then took another Monopad photo.

"Yeah," Sayaka observed, getting up on her toes to examine the damage more closely for herself, "Huh. Doesn't look like punching a wall usually looks."

"It doesn't?" Tsukasa asked, "How does it look?"

Sayaka pouted in confusion, "It's got the imprint of the front of the knuckles. Walls are usually punched with the side of the hand, in frustration. There isn't any reason to punch straight at a wall, normally. Enough so that we can probably assume that it was aimed at something other than the wall."

"Do you think it's related?" Nami asked.

"Well, no," Sayaka said, "Not at face value, anyway! Rei didn't have any other injuries, which means that she didn't punch the wall... But she could have been in a fight with somebody, and avoided getting hurt. The earlier fight could be considered as a motive."

"Mm," Nami agreed, "But, it wouldn't have any bearing on the case if it were an accident. In that situation, we could probably count on somebody admitting to damaging the wall once the trial starts, though."

"Yeah, that's right. Worrying about this shit right now is... Useless."

With that confirmation from Sayaka about how trying to determine the nature of the damage done to the wall was useless, completely useless, the accident investigation team continued walking, and nothing else held them up along the way to the Hospice Ward. Once there, they found themselves in front of what had been Rei's bedroom.

What was inside was... Surprising.
The surprising thing about the room wasn't in its level of cleanliness, and it wasn't that somebody unexpected was in the room. What could be surprising about it at a glance was the walls. All over the walls, in fact, were sheets of light blue graph paper. Written on them were all variety of things.

Some were math equations that Nami could never hope to solve, looking at them, but the general gist of it was...

"Good grief," Sayaka voiced annoyance rather than shock, "All of this, just because I told her what Monokuma said?"

"Huh?" Tsukasa turned his head and questioned.

"The Ultimate Electrician... With a specialty in robots. She said she's got nothing like skill in programming, but I still thought she might have some sorta insight to that statement. There is exactly one AI in the hospital," She explained, "So, I guess that she got to work on who that could be."

"Wasn't it Monokuma?" Nami asked, reaching up to take one of the papers and examine it more closely. It was captioned with 'Goro' and listed some traits about him, such as 'contrary motivations' and 'devoted to a single person'.

"I'd think so, yeah," Sayaka said, "And it looks like Rei did too, but she entertained the idea of any one of us being an AI. According to this stuff... Ah, there it is. Monokuma exhibits certain behaviors that are atypical with the general learning patterns of an artificial intelligence. However, none of the humans here exhibit behaviors that are wholly typical with the standard of AI. Therefore, unless other evidence comes forth, it can be assumed that Monokuma represents the singular AI present."

"That's a mess," Nami said, "Why even think about this stuff?"

"She hasn't been hiding away in her room," Sayaka noted and approached the bed, "And, the bed's not too rustled? So, I guess we can assume that she has been staying up late to work on this... Yeah, that makes the idea it could have been an accident way more plausible, doesn't it? She could have fallen asleep right where she stood..."

"Wouldn't hitting the water have woken her up, though?" Tsukasa asked.

"Not if she was tired enough... But, really, this just gives us some evidence to use to argue during the trial that it could have been an accident. At the same time, we've just discovered another potential motive for murdering her," Sayaka frowned, "If, by some chance, Monokuma isn't an AI... Then whoever is, could have killed her to keep her from finding the truth."

"God," Nami groaned, "I thought that saying it could be an accident would help, but instead, it's even harder to figure out what could be true... Rei..."

"We will find the truth," Tsukasa assured her, "No matter what it is, we'll find it. You believe me, right?"

"Of course," Nami said, "We're working hard, and so is the other team. I just. I really want to know what happened to my friend, as soon as possible, and it feels like the more evidence we collect the less I have any idea of what that could be."
"We're still working," Sayaka assured her, "Evidence never points in the right direction while it's being collected. It sure wasn't last time. If this is a murder, then it continues a trend of culprits wanting to confuse us... It's our responsibility to cut through the haze!"

"Thanks," Nami said, then continued looking around Rei's room. There weren't any signs she'd taken any medicines or anything, but Sayaka was right to say that the room didn't seem as technically lived-in as it should have. Rei's room was probably the most different than anyone's had been upon arrival to the hospital, but that was different from lived-in. She hadn't slept enough, wasn't taking care of herself.

And the whole time, acting like everything was fine.

Nami... Should have noticed, shouldn't she? She wasn't the only person who should have noticed, of course. If nobody else, Shinjiro should have. He was Rei's friend too, he also had that responsibility that Nami held herself to but failed at fulfilling. Neither of them succeeded, and now Rei was dead. If it was an accident... Maybe it was worse after all. If it was an accident, then Nami could feel like she could have prevented it, and feel guilt, so much guilt that she didn't.

If it was a murder, then somebody could be held accountable. And that Hell of wondering what she could have done differently... she'd be spared from it. If somebody else was at fault...

God, Nami didn't want to see anyone else be executed, and she didn't want to think about anybody killing Rei, but she couldn't deny that it would actually be safer for her emotional well-being if that were the case. Did that make her a bad person, to acknowledge that fact? She wasn't hoping it was the truth, by no means, just that if it was... She'd be less shattered.

With that in mind, Nami's investigation got more fervent. The idea she'd had was ignorant of the idea of a Devil's Proof, as Tsukasa called it. It was possible to prove it was a murder, but not possible to prove that it wasn't. The lack of evidence towards murder was not evidence of an accident. And so, evidence was necessary, in any direction. Nami had to find evidence. Evidence of anything.

That was when she came across it. Under the coffee table in Rei's room, kind of hidden, but clearly meant to be found. Not somewhere that Rei would have put it, under normal circumstances. Nami's first thought wasn't that this meant anything about Rei, but rather, that... Was somebody else supposed to die, and Rei was meant to be framed for it?

It was a plushie.

One of Box's plushies, and Nami wasn't sure if it would have been more or less creepy were it actually based on Rei. it wasn't, though.

It was a pink rabbit wearing a black surgeon's mask.
"Eh? Ehh? Huh?" Sayaka reacted to seeing the rabbit, her demeanor shifting to one of absolute confusion. Her voice jumped up a pitch, and she gave off the impression of a little kid who'd just seen their dog hit by a car and understood it was awful, but nothing else about it, "That's... What? That's one of Hako's plushies? It's Asahi?"

"...Yeah," Nami confirmed, then stood up, holding the thing in both hands, "She's still alive, so her plushie shouldn't have been made yet. So... Hako thought that Asahi was going to die?"

"We shouldn't jump to conclusions like that," Tsukasa said, "For all we know, Hako didn't even actually make this one."

"But it's... No matter who made it," Sayaka protested, "It's scary... Something like this... I don't think we can keep arguing that it was an accident."

"It still could be," Tsukasa reminded her, "It's Asahi. Somebody could have been planning to kill Asahi and frame Rei, but then Rei died in an accident before it could happen that way."

"I guess, that makes sense," Sayaka said, then crossed her arms, "But, it's still... Why would somebody be planning a murder with something like this? Even if the purpose was to try and frame Rei or Hako or something, it's... Awful. Trying to turn something really nice and sweet into a prophet of doom? Even I'd never do something like that!"

"Even you?" Nami questioned, "I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have ever even thought you'd do something this cruel..."

"Then you're forgetting my Ultimate Talent," Sayaka snipped, "I've done some really awful things... But... No, plushies are crossing a line. They're friends. You can't destroy them, or use them to set up something horrible. It's not in their nature... I think that this is just disgusting."

"No wonder you had such a strong reaction to it, then," Tsukasa said, and reached out to set his palm flat against Sayaka's back, his attempt at a comforting motion, "If it goes against your own principles this strongly..."

"Ye... Yeah," Sayaka admitted, hanging her head in embarrassment, "There's not a lot of things that can shake me, you know. Even really horrible things like pointless torture and child abuse, I'll just react the way I normally would. Really awful people like that deserve to die, and so, that's just what happens to them. Whether I do it or someone else does, they die for what they've done. It's karma in the world of criminals. But... Some things are just... Smaller, but worse for me. Like this. Like defiling the name of something that makes children smile."

"Yamaguchi..." Nami mumbled.

"I guess it's really dumb. I guess it's stupid. It makes me look like I never grew up or something," Sayaka said, "But... I mean, I still look like a kid, don't I? And sometimes I guess I still think like one... I only spent two weeks, with a member of the Cult of N. But maybe that was enough to mess me up this way. So, things that make little kids happy... Things like plushies and candy and books with pictures in them... Should stay the way they are. Should keep on being happy things, no matter what."

"I understand that," Nami said, "Don't worry. It makes sense."
"I'm sorry. We should be investigating, and I'm making this all about myself just because of one little piece of evidence that we found..." Sayaka took a deep breath, then stood up straight again, all 49 inches of her, "I think that, since Yushu's lab is available, we gotta check it out."

"Mm, that's right," Tsukasa agreed with her, "Since Rei was his friend, there could be something there. Did she ever spend time locked in there, though? I know the three of us all did, plus Randy and Akamatsu... And Nozomi and Kyosuke did before."

"I don't know if she did," Nami said, "I don't exactly know what Monokuma's method is for determining how long somebody is trapped in a ward, but it's not unlikely that she spent a few hours somewhere that nobody could find her."

"I can't imagine that she wouldn't have been curious enough to check out the ward for herself at some point," Sayaka said, "I know that if Kyosuke or Ruka had their wards in the same situation as Yushu's, I wouldn't be able to resist checking it out for myself. A ward like that is all that remains of a dead friend, right? It'd be some dumb shit to ignore it."

"I agree, Rei definitely would have been there at some point, just the type of person she is," Nami said, then turned to the door and took a deep breath, "And, I want to get out of her room anyway. It's hard to be here right now."

"That's understandable," Tsukasa said, then took the initiative to lead the way out of Rei's room.

Nami followed without any hesitation, but Sayaka stayed back for a moment. Then, she brought the plushie with her, holding it under her right arm in a gentle way, like a toddler might walk around with their favorite plushie before they learned to go places without it; A kind way to hold an inanimate object. It was evident that Sayaka really did have a soft spot for these kinds of things, and Nami thought that it was kind of cute. It was hard to imagine Sayaka acting on her Ultimate Talent, being brutal, being an Ultimate Little Sister in the sense of being a mafia goon. Then again, maybe that made her more frightening. Somebody who could be so brutal yet appear so innocent...

Nami wanted to believe that Rei's death was an accident for certain reasons, too. Maybe it would be better after all, for her to shoulder the guilt of failing to prevent Rei's accidental death, than for her to be stuck suspecting people. Sayaka was the biggest suspect in this case, if it really was a murder. Nami said she'd suspend her disbelief and trust Sayaka's reason for being at the pool, but it was difficult to deny. She wasn't supposed to be there. Somebody was dead. And, to think of it, wouldn't somebody with an Ultimate Talent like hers be able to avoid leaving any extra injuries on a drowned body?

Why...

Why this Killing Game? Why did they need to suspect each other? Why bring together all these people who were bound to become friends, only to encourage murders, force them into suspicion? There was an answer. It existed. But it wasn't satisfactory.

How could 'for the sake of suffering' ever be a satisfactory answer?
Nami trailed behind as Tsukasa and Sayaka led the way to Etsuko's ward. Upon arriving to the fourth floor up of the hospital, the second floor of Ultimate Wards, she noticed immediately that the door was wide open to it. That made sense, in case anybody had missed the statement that it was open. With the door not closed, it would imply that they wouldn't be trapped upon entering. And they did enter.

Nami didn't see anything out of place, though. The ward looked exactly the same as it had when they were locked inside of it. That was... An exhausting, but good evening. A group of friends, hanging out in a weird place, remembering a friend who'd already been lost. But now, Nami had those memories tainted by suspicion. Sayaka was supposed to be her friend. Sayaka should have been her friend. But she was a primary suspect. If this wasn't an accident. Let it be an accident.

Nami would rather blame herself than blame Sayaka.

Please. Please. Be an accident.

--

Randy Sempers was always fond of playing detective. Even so, this was unfortunate. This was miserable. This was something that only someone who placed the art of detecting above their own emotions. He didn't place the art of detecting above his own emotions at all. When he played at these sort of things before, there had only ever been one time when the case was anything recent. Solving cold cases could only be good, putting the souls of the dead to rest. Experiencing a mystery in real-time was something he never would have wished for. He'd only done it twice before. Once in this Killing Game, and once before it.

So this would be the third mystery he was actually caught up in. In spite of the nature of his Ultimate Talent, Randy didn't plan on making that his career. He wanted to be a private-eye, somebody just like Sherlock Holmes. Somebody who could solve mysteries and still hold his own in a physical fight. It was a far-off dream, though, and he was starting to wonder if he was cut out for it in this situation. He hated the fact that somebody had died, and now he needed to find out why. Finding out why was fun when the victim's been dead for so long there was no way to feel like it could have been helped. Finding out why wasn't nearly as much fun when he worried that the evidence would have been there before the incident.

When it felt like if he'd only been a better detective, then the victim could have survived. Even Kaede, the Ultimate Detective, clearly had it take a toll on her. Randy understood, knowing that she had been in a Killing Game before this one. She'd already been put in this position several times before, for one. For another, he also got, with that, why she didn't want the weight of finding the truth to be on her shoulders. Knowing Kaede to the extent that he already did, he could really assume that she saw the executions as blood on her hands.

He wouldn't hold that against her. He couldn't imagine anybody would. Killing Games were extraordinary, nightmarish circumstances. It was hard to even say that blood was on the hands of a culprit who committed murder in this situation, let alone the detective who solved the cases.

But that wouldn't keep Kaede from feeling that way, of course. So Randy wouldn't allow her to feel any worse. Even as his dream of being a modern day Holmes was being slowly crushed by reality, he'd play the role of an ace detective so that she wouldn't have to bear that weight all on her own. He'd do it, not just for that old dream, but for Kaede's sake. That was something that he
could easily commit to without hesitation.

Randy was a very righteous young man. He positioned himself in a number of heroic ways. A knight in shining armor, a modern day Holmes, a protector of girls everywhere. Kaede was a girl to protect. Kaede was, like everyone else in this hospital, somebody that he would gladly put himself on the line for. It wasn't that he was a self-sacrificing sort by any means, though. Rather, he had complete confidence that if he stood in the way, then both himself and the person he wanted to protect could escape unharmed. That was what his first mentor had taught him. The mentor who taught him to fight and be righteous. He had a new mentor now in Kaede, who was teaching him the particulars of detective work, teaching him to have a keen eye and a clever wit. He wasn't an idiot, in spite of his impulsive nature and his habit of disrupting the regular flow of a conversation. With guidance from his first mentor, he'd become the man he was today. With guidance from Kaede, he had no doubt that he really would be able to become a detective worth talking about. For her sake, for everyone's sake, he would realize that dream.

So, it was no surprise when he was the one to suggest investigating the rooms of all three potential suspects. Nami, Riko, and Sayaka. Those girls were all his friends, of course, he considered everyone here a friend. A part of him was appalled at his own audacity, violating their privacy in such a way. Even so, it was a necessary evil. First was Nami's room. He'd already been in here earlier in the day, so he already would have noticed anything especially strange or out of place, but there wasn't any reason for him to be looking for anything in detail at that time.

Now, though, he noticed every little thing. The fact that Nami didn't have nearly as much laundry in the basket as she would have if she'd actually slept in pajamas each night, for example. The fact that, like how he had the screwdriver set, Nami got the sewing set, confirming that Monokuma respected their identities. The fact that Nami had a different brand of shampoo in her bathroom than the generic one that Randy and Tsukasa both shared.

"Hey, Kaede," Randy was curious about this, even though it probably wasn't relevant at all, "What type of shampoo is in your room?"

"Huh? Um, it's a generic brand, strawberry scented. Why?" Kaede answered.

"This one doesn't look like it's generic brand," Etsuko said, and pulled Nami's shampoo out, "Was the gift shop selling toiletries?"

"Oh, yeah, she probably got it from there," Kaede agreed, then took the bottle and examined it, "It's... Oh, that's funny. She must have sensitive eyes."

It was a normal brand's 'tear-free' version, which was lightly scented like cucumbers and advertised the fact that it would feel just like tap water if it got in your eyes. Interesting.

Randy decided that this absolved Nami of suspicion, took the bottle back, and shoved it into the bag he'd grabbed from the gift shop for the purpose of evidence collecting. Then, he left the room. Kaede seemed confused for a moment, but then realized his logical jump and joined him to follow to another suspect's room.
Randy and Kaede moved on to investigating the next suspect's room, Riko's. The last case had some very important information relating to the fact that Riko's breakfast plate had still been in her room, so Randy got the impression that he might find useful information here as well. There wasn't anything to really back up that assumption, but if there was going to be any pattern, it would be that Riko's room had important evidence to be found in it.

Unfortunately, it looked quite normal. Well, that was fortunate for Riko! Unfortunate for Randy's theory. The only thing that was especially different was that the chair for the desk was pulled out, which made sense, given she'd been sitting there to eat all of her meals.

There wasn’t anything out of place, no matter how close he looked. It was kind of uncanny, actually. He turned to Kaede, “Is it just me, or is this… Too normal?”

“It’s definitely not just you,” His recently-acquired mentor assured him that he was thinking properly, “This room would look, to most, like it’s perfectly normal and nothing is out of place at all… But people like us can tell that’s not true, can’t we?”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Randy agreed, then crossed his arms over his chest with a resolute nod, “It really is… Out of place. It’s perfectly out of place, by having nothing out of place. Asahi is a reasonable germaphobe, not a neat freak. Everything’s too spotless.”

“Somebody else was in this room,” Kaede said, “And tried to cover their tracks by cleaning up.”

“That’s right,” Randy said, “That’s… the explanation. Somebody was in this room who shouldn’t have been. You know… Doesn’t something like that imply that someone was looking for something to use to frame Asahi for this crime, or something?”

“Yes, probably,” Kaede noted, then turned and stared at the door as she thought through it, “Thinking about it on a larger scale, though… Yamaguchi was in the room undetected until she made herself known. We’re acting like those three who were there when the announcement sounded are the only possible suspects, but couldn’t somebody else have hid in there and just left at a strategic time to convince us that they were arriving at the same time as the rest of us?”

“That’s possible,” Randy said.

“I don’t think that’s necessarily likely, but,” Kaede mumbled through her thoughts, “The way for somebody to get away with murder in this situation would be to convince us that only certain people, not including them, could have done it. That was the tactic that Tomoe tried to use, isn’t it? She made it seem like there was no way she could have been at the crime scene when it happened.”

“Obviously we’d figure that out, though! That sort of trick can’t convince the great detectives a second time, after we saw through it once!”

“That’s right… So does that mean our only suspects really are those three, but the culprit wanted to make us think that trick was in play again so that we wouldn’t automatically suspect her? I believe all three of those girls are intelligent enough to do something like that.”

“Of course, it’s not Nami,” Randy said, “So it’s Asahi or Yamaguchi, huh?”

“It’s irresponsible to limit our suspicions only to those two, though…” Kaede observed, then
smirked, “Whoever is responsible for this certainly does know how to play games with us, don’t they? As soon as we start to think that a certain trick is or isn’t in play, the doubts creep in to convince us that we have to be wrong, because assuming we’re right could ruin our chances at finding the culprit.”

“So… Uh…” Randy was starting to get lost, “Does that mean, to figure out the culprit, we have to figure out who’d be good at mind games?”

“No,” Kaede said, “That’s even more irresponsible. We’re detectives, right, Randy? Assumption isn’t on our side at all. We just need to find the evidence that points to the real culprit, and no matter what sort of mind games they try to play with us, we’ll cut through to the truth!”

Randy grinned at that. In spite of Kaede’s position as an Ultimate Detective, she hadn’t really shown that off before. She was scared. Scared of being responsible for the death of a culprit, scared of making friends that she could lose, scared of getting killed. Randy understood, of course. She’d been through all this before. She must have just barely made it through, only to end up here again.

Even so, she was the Ultimate Detective, and with this case, she was showing it off. She’d revealed her secret to a select handful of people, Randy included, and because of that she was able to start coming out of her shell. Her talent was the most useful in a situation like this, and… As much as it hurt to think it, Randy was here now. Kaede was holding back because she didn’t want to die, and leave them without a detective. A weak detective was still better than no detective. She had a disciple she trusted, now. If she were somehow killed, she would leave a piece of herself behind in the form of the teaching she gave to Randy. To effectively teach him, she couldn’t hold back. She had to exhibit her talent for real.

She had to cut through to the truth.

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Nami felt different, somehow, after investigating Etsuko’s ward. Her crushing worries were lifted, though she wasn’t sure why. Like the concerns she had about suspecting her friends were truly baseless. It wasn’t like they found anything in that ward which would clear Sayaka, or anybody else for that matter, of suspicion. With that finished, the group went down to the gift shop. Last time, there was evidence here, so they’d check this place too.

Nami, of course, still wasn’t in a good mood by any means. It was awful. Her best friend was dead, and nothing could change that, but she still felt relieved. Just because she didn’t need to, yet, suspect her other friends. The information had been piling up and making Nami feel like the worst possible situation had to be true, but that was wrong, it wasn’t accurate at all. That was information, not evidence. There wasn’t evidence pointing to a specific person yet. So she didn’t need to feel crushed. She could trust her friends until the very last moment. And of course, she could investigate alongside them.
Surprisingly enough, the gift shop did yield something, though it was something that seemed quite meaningless to all present. Well, not so much meaningless. More like…

“I have no idea why this is here,” Sayaka observed, “But I’m really stretching my brain to the limits thinking about how this could possibly be related to what happened to Akabane.”

It was one of the bottles of water from Etsuko’s ward, buried underneath the ice creams. Why was it buried underneath the ice creams? Weird. Very weird indeed. It was honestly baffling how this could have any bearing whatsoever on the case at hand. Even so… Nami thought that it could be important.

“That’s definitely something we have to keep in mind,” Nami observed, “Even if you can’t think of how it’s relevant, it’s so strange that it has to be.”

“Still, it’s just an empty bottle of stale water,” Tsukasa said, “It’s really cold, though. It’s been here a while.”

“Of course it has,” Nami said, “If it was put here this morning, it probably wouldn’t be anymore now that it’s the afternoon. The ice creams rotate, and I really don’t think Monokuma would go to the trouble of removing something that’s not supposed to be there from the rotation…”

“Really don’t think isn’t proof, though,” Sayaka said, pouting, “That’s annoying. If we knew for certain that the bottle would be rotated along with the ice creams, we’d know it’s from yesterday. But if that’s not the case, it could be from early this morning… Either way leaves enough time for it to get this cold, all we really know is it couldn’t have been stuffed in here during this afternoon. Yeah?”

“Right,” Nami agreed, but she still felt lost. She, Sayaka, and Tsukasa… Were smart enough, she thought. Well, not necessarily herself, but those two, for sure. They were clever and intelligent people, but even so, it was obvious that not one of the three on the ‘accident investigation team’ could even begin to piece together a convincing theory on what could have happened. The hole in the wall, the plushie, and now this bottle… There were so many things which didn’t seem to add up at all. That confusion was written clear as day on the faces of all present.

Sayaka’s reasoning was sound. It was, and Nami couldn’t deny that, but she couldn’t even think of an absurd, implausible reason for the bottle to be here, let alone a reasonable explanation. If only… Knowing the answer to the question of what happens to a foreign object in the ice cream case would be an objective fact, right? Nami realized this, and…

“Monokuma! Can you verify something for us?” She called, and the bear was immediately right there. It was keen to give them leeway, after all. It told them how aspects of the game they were unclear on worked, and could honestly verify objective facts, on top of altering the killing game’s play-style to help them. It didn’t want the culprit to get away with it either, after all. That bear would tread the line between duty and interference for as long as it could.

“Depends on what you want verified! It isn’t like I’d give out truth for free, to heathens like you,” Monokuma proclaimed, waving both paws around, “You’ve got to give me somethin’ convincing! I won’t repeat any old words!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nami said, “But I wanted to ask. What’s the fate of a
foreign object in the ice cream case?"

“Well, every four days, I restock the case for any ice creams that may be running low. I do this before breakfast. On the fourth day; Day four, day eight, in the morning, so on and so forth! Of course, during a restock, I would also remove anything that shouldn’t be there. Other than that, it’s an automated process. The facility just straight up swaps the gift shop! Yeah, the morning stock exists simultaneously on the other side of this wall! It’s a literal rotation! A rotating room! Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, thank you, Monokuma,” Nami said, smiling at it. It struck an exaggerated, bashful pose once more.

“Awh, come on, Nami. It was nothin’! Anyway, bye-bye! Haha, upupu!” With that, it was gone, but that was fine. Nami heard what she needed to hear from it.

“You really have a way with that thing…” Tsukasa said, then glanced at Sayaka, “I guess, both of you do. Yamaguchi, does that have anything to do with your thing about plushies?”

“Ah! W-Well. Fuck, kind of? I guess, since I wanna believe that they’re a sign of innocence… That, at least, this Monokuma, which is as soft and fluffy as any plushie, might not be as bad as the old ones? I know it’s still, being Monokuma. But at the same time… I mean. It easily could have had me killed for hugging it, back there in Yushu’s ward. And it does answer our questions in a straightforward kinda way…”

“Still a Monokuma, though,” Tsukasa noted, stroking his own chin in thought, “But, you’re right. It is a participant, isn’t it?”

“Um, about that… Yeah, me and Akamatsu were trying to figure that out, but we didn’t really answer the question. It easily could have made us think it left the ward to give the impression that it’s not really a participant, but stuck around secretly and been one? I dunno. I kinda still feel like it is, though. After all. It’s a one-of-a-kind Monokuma!”

“You believe that much?” Nami asked.

Sayaka puffed out her cheeks, “Yes, I do! I know about Monokumas, I’ve torn apart lots of them! Their fur is more like the faux fur on a coat than on a stuffed animal, and their robot bones are right there, they’re boney, not squishy at all! This Monokuma was squishy and soft, and said it was worried about being trapped in one place for too long because there’s only one of it… I’m gonna believe it, okay? There’s something different about this Monokuma.”

“Ding dong!” Speak of the devil, its voice came over the intercom, “Investigation is nearly over, but I’ve decided to make one more concession for the ‘murder team’! Accident team and miscellaneous, please report straight to the courtroom lobby. Murder Team, meet me by the Ultimate Runner’s Ward!”
Deadly Life: Day Five (A Concession)

Randy was surprised to hear that announcement. Not only had Monokuma continued to acknowledge that there were two different investigative teams, but it was planning on something specific just for him and Kaede. They’d since investigated Sayaka’s room as well, and found nothing of note. They were just about finished in that room when Monokuma made that announcement, and the pair of them didn’t hesitate at all to meet it by Etsuko’s ward. Before even arriving there, however, they saw what it was that Monokuma was probably giving them. There was a new staircase. So, they arrived…

“Hello, welcome!” Monokuma greeted them, “My concession to you! Is twenty minutes to utilize the Detective’s Ward! After this trial, the next floor is opening up, including that ward. It’d be kind of dumb, when the reveal requirement of a second murder has been met, to prevent you from using the ward for this case. The others will still be super locked, but you can totally make an effort to use it before the trial!”

“Huh. Thank you,” Kaede smiled at it, holding a hand over her chest, “That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s only fair, when the Detective Lab was available from the very first case last time…” Monokuma knew, of course, that the only people present here were aware of Kaede’s survivor status. It could speak openly about that fact. The audience would have known from the start, after all.

“That is true,” Kaede said, “If anything, it was cruel of you not to have it available during that first case.”

“Exactly! I am cruel and unfair and it took lots of convincing from marketing executives to get me to let you do this! So stop wasting time talking to me! Your twenty minutes did already start, you know!” Monokuma said, waving its arms around.

“Right,” Kaede confirmed, then took off up the stairs. Randy kept pace with her. He easily could have been faster, but he was still the student, so that would be rude. They arrived at the clearly marked door, and Randy held it open for Kaede before following in after her.

The Detective’s Ward broke the pattern of the previous wards in its layout. The entire thing was laid out with traincar seats and tables, with bookshelves on one wall and another set of shelves holding something else on the other, and that was it. It broke the pattern of being split between two floor aspects, that was. It resembled the lab from the last game, but scaled up. And…

“Huh,” Kaede observed the shelves which held something other than books, “I guess this ties in with medical uses, yeah. I have more than one of each of these antidotes this time, and the only poisons here are emetics.”

“Oh, that’s good!” Randy proclaimed.

“The multiple antidotes are good, sure,” Kaede mumbled, “But… Having them here means the poisons are somewhere else, and it would be harder for me to tell if something’s been used. In the last game, I was able to keep poison from being used again by keeping track of the number of bottles in my lab. If anyone used anything, I’d have known it.”

“You can still figure out if something’s been used based on symptoms though, right? The antidotes have those written right on them,” Randy said, picking one up. It said something about behaving
similarly to a stomach bug, but being eventually quietly fatal. If something like that was hidden somewhere in the hospital, would they even notice it? Frightening.

“That one…” Kaede took it from him, “Huh. Weird. This is the one that did get used in the last game. It was the first murder. On the first night, it was administered. It didn’t matter if I would have memorized the number of bottles yet, though. I brought any antidotes that fit the symptoms with me… But I just had one. I could only save one person. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just telling myself that knowing the number of poisons wouldn’t have helped. If I’d been more proactive…”

“Then somebody else would have died, right?” Randy asked, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder, “You said it yourself. Optimism is a tool, and it can be misused. If you think ‘if only I did something different, nobody would have died’, that’s exactly what you were telling me about optimism that doesn’t help anybody. Things still would have gone badly. You couldn’t prevent it forever, right? Besides, more murders happened. Maybe you’d have a leg to stand on if that was the only one! But, you don’t.”

“I… Could have prevented at least three of those murders. The first one, the second one, the fourth one,” Kaede mumbled. She did have a lot of specific memories of the game, really, but… Anything that had to do with the nature of the Killing Game or who the Mastermind had been was shrouded in shadow. Even so, within these memories, she held two more secrets she couldn’t confess yet.

“I don’t believe you,” Randy said.

“First murder, if I noticed the poison was missing. Second murder, if I’d realized what Amami and Momota were trying to do to smoke the Mastermind out and let them know it wouldn’t work. Fourth murder, if I’d been a little more careful with the things that I said… Ha. I bet it’s even possible I could have prevented the first murder here if I wasn’t being so cagey. I could have gotten along with her.”

“Kaede,” Randy said, “Not to sound like a dick or anything, but the world doesn’t revolve around you! I know the way you feel. You’re the detective, you’re the hero, right? But if you think you’re the hero and I think I’m the hero, and who knows, maybe Nami thinks she’s the hero? Or Nozomi, and it’s him against the world? Then none of us are the hero. It isn’t about us. It’s just shit that happens. It happened. You can’t change it!”

“Ah… Yeah. You’re right about that,” Kaede admitted, looking away, “It’s hard though, isn’t it? Not to think of yourself that way? I’m the kind of person who’d trick myself into believing that the best thing I could do to help somebody is die. Like some sort of martyr.”

“Yeah, I used to be that way, but, you know. I saw someone I looked up to a lot, give it a try. All it did was make everything worse. So, trust me, alright?” Randy offered her a smile, “The best thing you can do for anybody is to exist.”
Trial 2: Accident Or Murder

Twenty minutes was not a lot of time, and it was relatively wasted by the amount of time that had to be spent on Randy comforting Kaede. Even so, having had access to the lab was enough. Kaede was the Ultimate Detective, so she had a sharp memory for details; And Randy seemed to as well, despite the fact that by his own claims he had only ever ‘played’ detective before. Maybe he’d built those skills in some other way.

Even so, their use of the Detective Ward could have been a bit better by the time that Monokuma sent them down to the courtroom lobby with the rest. Everyone looked bored waiting for them, but also kind of disappointed to see them arrive. After all, even doing nothing was better than having the trial. Unfortunately, once the last two got to the ‘lobby’ room, Monokuma didn’t waste any time summoning the elevator.

Nami felt awful looking at that elevator, to be frank. She felt like it was just yesterday, after all, when Rei had gone on about how this impressive elevator worked, and put on such an emphatic pout that even Monokuma felt the need to apologize for insulting the inventor of this elevator technology. Thinking about that now that Rei was gone… It was depressing. Everything about this was depressing, of course, but to be reminded specifically in that way…

Nami didn’t like it at all. It was bad enough to have been stuck in that position with Tomoe, and even with Etsuko… But now, she was close enough with one of the dead to be overcome.

And… It was possible, no, inevitable, that by the end of this trial she’d have somebody else to mourn. Even if it was an accident, Monokuma would probably find somebody to blame. It wasn’t likely that a trial could end without an execution. Maybe it would be Nami herself at fault. Maybe she wouldn’t have anybody else to mourn after all.

The group stepped into the elevator without any further prodding from Monokuma, though. As much as they all dreaded the trial, they also weren’t going to make any further efforts to delay it. The courtroom looked… Almost the same as last time. Rei’s podium had an image of her on it, desaturated, with her face crossed-out by wires. Monokuma’s seat was still a folding chair on a pile of boxes rather than the throne it had previously claimed it would have during the second trial. Nobody was about to call it on that, though.

“Hi everyone!” Monokuma proclaimed, “And welcome to the second trial! Though, this is a special one, ain’t it? Usually, these are putting the unknown culprit on trial, but this time, it’s totally possible that there isn’t a culprit and this was a mere tragic accident! In that case, you’d vote for the victim when the trial draws to a close. This is a trial for the mysterious death of Rei Akabane… Go!”

“Right,” Nami said, pulling out her Monopad to be the one who gave the rundown of the situation, “At 1526, Rei Akabane… Died. The cause of death was fluid in the lungs. It’s unclear whether this was a murder or an accident. Either way, we do need to get to the bottom of it, right?”

“Right,” Mitsuru agreed, “I guess that the best way to start off a case like this is for each side to make their case for it being an accident or a murder, right?”

“Yeah. We can’t find the truth until we know which sort of truth we’re looking for, after all,” Kaede said, then turned to Randy, implying that she wanted him to make the case for their side.

“The evidence that we’ve collected towards it being a murder,” Randy took the cue, “There aren’t
any other injuries on Akabane’s body, which there would be if this was an accident, like she fell and hit her head. One of the main suspects has a room that’s too immaculate. There was a hole in the drywall in the hallway that implied somebody got in a fight. Sayaka Yamaguchi was not supposed to be in the pool at that time, but was.”

“I have a few things to add for your side,” Nami said, raising one hand up a bit, “There was a plushie of Asahi found in the victim’s room. There was a bottle from Yushu’s ward found in the gift shop. Also, in Rei’s room, she was working on something complicated which could have served as a motive to kill her.”

“Thank you, Nami,” Kaede said, “And your own argument?”

“The fact that there were no other injuries is also a point for our side. If somebody drowned her there would be a head injury in that case as well, or bruising on her neck or shoulders where she was held down. The witness, Sayaka Yamaguchi, reports only hearing one splash, and looking out from her hiding spot to see nobody else in sight,” Nami explained, “The plushie was of Asahi, which implies if any murder was planned, she was the target and not Rei. In addition, it’s possible for Rei to collapse into the pool without injury, because the complicated project in her room gave off the impression she hasn’t been getting enough sleep.”

“Is there any possible explanation for the hole in the drywall, the plushie, and the bottle that doesn’t involve some murder plot going on?” Kaede asked, more for other people’s sake than her own. She already knew the loophole.

“Yeah,” Sayaka confirmed, “This could be an accident with all of that strange evidence, if a murder by some other method was being planned. Somebody was trying to kill someone else, but then an accident happened and Rei died before that plan could be completed.”

“That makes sense,” Randy said, “So, we’ve proved that both situations are actually possible. It would have been nicer if our evidence could have cancelled out one of the possibilities from the beginning, but… We’ll still figure it out.”

“I’m sure it was an accident,” Shinjiro chimed in, “I believe in that theory. Somebody was planning a murder, but then Rei died in an accident and ruined those plans. I don’t think anybody would have wanted to kill her.”

“I mean,” Tsumugi whined, “I don’t think anybody would have wanted to kill anybody else here! Isn’t it kind of dumb to attack a mystery from the why-dunnit first, in this kind of situation?”

“Smart thinking, babe,” Kaede shot finger guns in Tsumugi’s direction.

“I learned from the best,” Tsumugi said.

“You might think you’re being clever, but you’re not,” Shinjiro spoke up again, “After all, I find it very possible somebody wanted to kill me.”

“Yeah, what’s the problem with working from motive, huh?” Yuuri questioned, “This is a real case. Your dumb mystery rules don’t… Really apply here. So, come on. Nobody wanted to kill Rei. So who was the intended target… Of whatever murder did or didn’t happen?”
"Are you serious?" Randy questioned, "Shirogane was speaking the truth, you know! Every detective knows that the whydunnit is the least important part, right? So starting with it is definitely not a good way to find the truth! We need real evidence!"

"You say that, but…" Kanoshi took Yuuri’s side without hesitation, "That might be right, when you know that somebody's committed a crime. The motive could be important to figuring out if this actually was a crime, though, right? Nobody's admitted to it, which means that it's possible they’re still planning on the original murder that got interrupted by this. Or, it really was a murder, aimed at somebody else that ended up killing Rei… I’d think finding a motive would be a good way to narrow down what we’re looking for."

"They have a point, Randy," Kaede said before he could continue the argument, "We’ve laid out all the evidence we have, but none of it decisively points to what the situation is. Once we work out the possibilities, maybe it can start to turn us in the direction of who and how."

"Awh, yeah," Yuuri chuckled, then leaned forward on his podium, "Now that you’re willing to humor what I’ve got to say, I'll admit something! Something that makes me kinda suspicious of one of these so-called detectives, actually. I know how that hole in the drywall got there."

"Huh? Well…" Randy got defensive, holding his arms in close to himself, "I thought that you didn’t want us to bring that up, you know."

"The reason why we were fighting doesn’t matter, or anything," Yuuri shrugged, "It doesn’t need to come up. You very well could have just admitted that you punched the wall, without saying anything about the reason why. Instead, you were just gonna let it be presented as relevant to this case."

"I was trying to be respectful of you, dumb shit!" Randy protested, now leaning forward in an aggressive stance, but Kanoshi threw an arm out in front of him from his right.

"Hey, now. This doesn’t need to be a big thing," Kanoshi attempted to mediate, "Ruka. I believe him."

"You better!" Randy snapped, "I mean, do you really want me telling people what we got in a fight about?"

"...No, I don’t," Yuuri admitted, "But, still. It’s irresponsible to have even let people think that had anything to do with this case!"

"Well, it could have," Randy said, "You know. It’s possible that it did. I don’t know that yet."

"Are you accusing Ruka of something?" Kanoshi questioned, the defensive arm now pushing Randy back.

"Hey, leave me alone!" Randy protested.

"It’s fine, isn’t it?" Kaede intervened, "I would have felt the same way. As of right now, it isn’t relevant, but it could be. It isn’t enough evidence of anything to accuse anyone."

"Yeah, chill out," Tsukasa chided the other two. Nami just watched in confusion. Never before had she been clued in to the hostility between these separate friend groups, after all. At least it always
seemed like Sayaka didn't get involved in the boys' drama. Oh, boys, Nami thought. Girls always got called 'dramatic' and 'catty', but at least their drama didn't usually result in full-blown fistfights...

Then again, she remembered that one particular girl's drama did indeed result in a full-blown dismemberment. Right.

"I think we're ignoring something really important here," Riko's text to speech spoke up, "This isn't what we should be caught up on. Which suspect's room was too immaculate? And what about this plushie that resembled me?"

"I bet the suspect they're referring to is Nami," Shinjiro said, "Her sister already committed a murder, so it could just be in her nature. They say that there's something called a bad seed, you know, and it's genetic. Both twins could just be awful!"

"No, there wasn't anything weird in Nami's room," Randy defended her before she needed to defend herself, "Actually, in Nami's room was something that cleared her name."

"What could possibly clear anybody in this sort of case?" Mitsuru asked, curiosity and nothing else evident in his voice, "I mean, since we can't just say 'the only suspects are the people who were in the room during the body discovery'. This early on, I can't imagine anything being a perfect alibi."

"It isn't so much an alibi as something which proves that Nami couldn't have been capable of drowning somebody," Kaede explained, "She uses 'no tears' shampoo. That implies she has sensitive eyes, and wouldn't be able to effectively maintain her position if splashed in the face."

"Sorry to play Devil's Advocate, but you know I have to!" Goro chimed in, "Now, keep in mind, there isn't a single part of me which believes Nami did it! But I can still think of two situations in which it would be possible! An assisted suicide, in which case Akabane wouldn't have struggled enough to splash her in the face... Or, she spotted that shampoo in the gift shop and determined that it would be exactly the alibi she needed for this crime! So sorry, Nami. Take comfort in the fact I also use no tears shampoo, so if you do legitimately need it as I sincerely believe, that's something we've got in common!~"

"That gives me no comfort," Nami said, then pressed her hands together, "That's correct, though. The shampoo doesn't clear me of suspicion... For those reasons. So Fujishiro is right. Everybody is still a suspect."

"In that case," Riko said, "The plushie resembling me. Doesn't that make Hako seem like the most suspicious person around?"

"She wasn't in the room, though. And I went with her after the discovery announcement," Goro proclaimed, "The fact that she's assigned to keep an eye on me also gives her a permanent alibi!"

"Unless you were lying for her sake," Shinjiro said, "Or, perhaps it was Hako's plan, executed by Yamaguchi, who was in fact in the room when she wasn't supposed to be."

"What makes you think that I'd put my own head on the chopping block for her!?" Sayaka demanded, 'I'm barely even willing to die for the people I've known for years!'"

"I wouldn't put it past you, if you believed in the integrity of her plan," Shinjiro said, "After all, isn't taking orders with such disgusting topics kind of your specialty? An intelligent murder plan you were asked to take part in... Is an expression of your Ultimate Talent, no?"

"That's really not true," Sayaka tried to defend herself, "I mean... I would never ever agree with a
plan that involved a plushie like that! I believe that toys should stay innocent!"

"Hey, um, excuse me?" Box raised her hand, "All of this talk is kind of hinging on my involvement in the case... Right? Um, do you have the plushie here? I'd like to take a look at it."
"I have it," Sayaka said, then reached around Tomoe's dead-sign to pass it to Kanoshi, who continued to pass it down the line till it reached Box. She turned it over in her hands, squinting at it, until she finally spoke up.

"Okay. So, I didn't remember making any plushie like this... And I totally would have made Asahi a cute turtle, not a bunny! Yamaguchi herself is the bunny here!" Box said, "Checking this, to make sure, though... It definitely isn't mine. Um, Monokuma? Could you fetch one of the ones I have made, so I can make my point?"

"Hm... Yeah, okay!" Monokuma relented, then returned with the Tomoe-Skink.

Box started pointing out the obvious differences between the plushies, "So, for one thing, this is a different kind of stitch. I only know how to do one type of stitch on a sewing machine, and it isn't this one! For another, mine have a few things going on that this one totally doesn't... You know how there are supplies for hobbies in our closets?"

"I thought you didn't know about that," Nami said.

"Bakura spoke for me, I never said I didn't know. Anyway, my closet had stuff for plushies, including glass bead eyes and polyfil beads. I used both of those things to make the plushies of Tomoe and Etsuko! This plushie uses a different stitch, is of higher technical quality than mine, and uses cotton stuffing instead of polyfil. The eyes are stitched on. Oh! And it doesn't have a weight in the bottom to make it sit upright! I can't show it on this one, but I did it for Etsu-cat, and I would have done it for a bunny too."

She demonstrated this fact by setting the bunny down on her podium and watching it fall over sideways. It was obvious that she put a lot of care and thought into the plushies she made, and whoever had made this mockery... Didn't. Looking at them side by side, it was obvious to Nami. The one made to resemble Riko was too perfect, and too impersonal, like it was made in a factory.

"Bakura," Nami said, "This doesn't bode well for you, you know. You're the one with the sewing machines in your ward. Of course you'd be able to make something with quality like this."

"Huh? Well, technically," Goro said, "That's probably true. Except, I was in the room when Hako made the first two! I knew what stitch she used, the filling, the eyes. And all of that was left in my ward, not taken back to her room, so if anybody bothered to know that they could have made a much more accurate fake! The fact it was left in my ward is the reason I didn't know it came from her closet in the first place. Besides!! What makes you think I'd put so little heart into making a plush representation of one of our dear friends?"

"That's true," Nami admitted, "But I can't put it past you to do something like this in general, you know. You tried to kill my sister, so it's possible you could have killed my best friend too."

"No way! Rei was good to you! And Asahi? I wouldn't plan to kill her either! I think what's more important with this plushie thing is to figure out how it was that Rei ended up dead, and not the person that the plushie was trying to signal about!"

"Yeah... And Sayaka's witness statement was strange, too," Kaede agreed, then looked and locked eyes with Sayaka, "I don't think it makes her suspicious at all, actually. I don't think this was an accident... But at the same time, I think that it was. If a person directly killed Rei, then there
wouldn't be this case of mistaken identity, right? And Sayaka saw nobody. I'm thinking it could be some kind of trap."

"We didn't find anything while investigating, though," Randy said, "Some kind of trap is irresponsible logic, right? If we couldn't explain how the trap happened without leaving any injuries on Rei, and without us finding any signs of it, then it's just fiction!"

"Monokuma?" Kaede asked, though she already knew the answer.

"I can't interfere with murders! No matter how much a culprit begs and pleads, I stick to my guns and don't get involved! No special requests to lock or unlock doors, or to utilize my methods of traveling through the facility to discard of evidence, or adding things to make a particular murder easier into the gift shop. It's all above the board!"

"So I guess that eliminates that possibility," Kaede mumbled, "Maybe there is some weight to 'it was an accident, and another murder was being planned'."

"Should we investigate the planned murder, then?" Mitsuru asked, "That brings us back to 'who could have made that plushie', doesn't it?"

"That's not reliable at all!" Randy said, "Anybody could just claim that Rei was able to make something like that, and oh well she's dead now, case closed, then the culprit turns around and still commits a murder when we're done here. Hey, Nami? What was that complicated project she was working on, anyway?"

"Huh? Oh... Monokuma said one time that there's exactly one AI in this hospital. Rei was just trying to confirm that when it said that, it was referring to itself," Nami explained.

"Well, that makes sense as a motive to kill her, if we hadn't already figured out that she wasn't the intended target," Shinjiro said, "After all, in any other case, somebody among us isn't even a real person, and there's some person somewhere directly controlling Monokuma? That gets rid of the enemy we know, and adds in another enemy."

"What makes you think the AI would be an enemy?" Box questioned, tilting her head to one side.

"What other reason would there be, to have a secret robot in a Killing Game?" Shinjiro scoffed, "And if Rei was close to sniffing out that enemy, it would actually make some sort of sense that someone would want to kill her! But it's all useless anyway, if you believe that Asahi was supposed to die instead."

"Maybe that's exactly what the culprit wants us to think," Sayaka spoke up, "Maybe that really is what happened, and all of this other stuff, pointing at Asahi as an intended victim... Confusing us on if this even was a murder... Was the AI's plan?"

"How would the AI have drowned Rei without you seeing them, Yamaguchi?" Randy questioned.

Monokuma, however, was the one to answer it, "Well, I guess there's a little bit of a point there. I'll admit this much to you, this hospital is somewhere that data can be realized. Bits of data obviously can't be stopped by things like closed rooms or travel time. But doesn't that just sound like what I do?"

"So, what you're saying is that the one AI here is you?" Box asked.

"I'm not allowed to answer that," Monokuma said.
"Hey," Nami said, "Isn't that just a little bit too unreal? Let's be reasonable here. Even if such a thing did exist as somebody among us with that kind of power, obviously the game wouldn't let that person use those abilities to commit a murder. Monokuma said it. Everything's above the board, this game is fair. So let's just focus on the reality. How could somebody commit this crime under normal circumstances?"
“Thank you, Nami,” Kaede said, “This trial was getting kind of out of control. A killing game has to at least be fair for its participants, so we don’t need to consider anything that would be impossible for a normal human to do.”

“What makes you so sure that a Killing Game has to be fair?” Kanoshi asked, “It’s not like you’re in a position to know that…”

“I can corroborate, though! I’ve watched all the games over and over after all!” Goro raised a hand up in the air, “Killing Games break a ton of Randy’s precious mystery rules, but are always still solvable for the audience! And, historically, by the participants too!”

“I didn’t ask you…” Kanoshi said, “I asked Akamatsu. She’s the detective. So how does she know for sure that this can be solved, that there isn’t something strange we don’t know about going on here?”

“Does there have to be a reason? Bakura just said that it’s always been solvable,” Tsumugi frowned, holding her hands to her face, “Why do you have to make this so difficult?”

“Maybe because I’m one of the only people who’s the right age to be in this Killing Game?” Kanoshi asked, “Maybe because both victims so far have also been seventeen? The only other people who are the right age now are Ruka and Bakura, and he’s devoted to Nami. Can you blame me if I think, just maybe, it’s some sort of conspiracy, and you’re all against the two of us?”

“Kyosuke…” Yuuri stage-whispered over to him, “Don’t you think you’re being kinda paranoid?”

“Eh.. Huh? Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?” Kanoshi questioned.

“Not when being on your side means buying into the idea that Yamaguchi’s in on some conspiracy against us!” Yuuri said, “You’re letting your anxieties get the better of you again. I believe what they’re saying. I’m pretty sure if something bizarre like that had anything to do with the actual case, we’d be made aware of it! Monokuma wants good TV, so. It doesn’t want us to be wrong. It’ll make sure if we fail, it’s our own faults.”

“But what if it saying that an AI would be capable of those kinds of things is its way of letting us know it has to do with the case?” Kanoshi asked, “And obviously, Yamaguchi is excluded from our enemies!”

“You’re calling everyone else enemies now? God, you’re as bad as fucking Nozomi!” Yuuri snapped, “I should have known you’d do this eventually! Yamaguchi can do it, so why the fuck can’t you? Just believe that I have some sound fucking judgment, in some way!”

“I resent that remark,” Shinjiro was the first person to say anything after that. There had in fact been a hush over the room, as nobody wanted to react to what had clearly been a personal spat on low boil. Shinjiro could at least leverage his position as ‘most hated person in the room’ to get the conversation moving again. That was good. Nami had noticed that Kaede was giving a tight-lipped smile of incredible exasperation in the direction of both herself and Tsumugi to her right.

“I assure you. Even if it was some conspiracy against you, it isn’t like you were currently under suspicion, Kyosuke,” Kaede jumped in, “And your personal problems haven’t got anything to do with the case. I’d say I’d lend an ear after this is all sorted out, but I don’t think I’m somebody you would want to listen, if you honestly believe that I’m your enemy…”
“I…” Kanoshi started to protest.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Kaede said, “It hurts to hear you say that you consider me an enemy when I’ve only ever tried to be your friend, but again, that isn’t the issue at hand. All I’m concerned with right now is finding the truth. And I should have figured it out by now, you know. If you all didn’t keep on derailing the trial… If we could stay on track, I could end this quickly. I’m not holding back anymore. I just need the space to think.”

“Should we go over the evidence again?” Nami offered, “Dunk the trash so we can sort out what actually matters? Escape this swirling pit of fuckor?”

“I don’t know what that means, but I’ll say yes,” Kaede said.

“Great!” Nami exclaimed, then started to list off the real evidence, separating the wheat from the chaff with accuracy that nobody would have expected from her.

“-Akabane died in the pool at 1526.

-The cause of death was fluid in the lungs.

-Myself, Asahi, and Yamaguchi discovered the body.

-Yamaguchi’s witness report states that she was hiding under a chair so that she could be a witness if anything went wrong. She heard one single splash and glanced up. She saw Rei in the pool and nobody else in sight.

-There is no evidence of a trap being used.

-There are no secondary injuries on Rei’s body.

-There is a hole in the drywall of the hallway. (This was caused by a fight between Randy and Ruka.)

-Asahi’s room was too immaculate.

-There was ‘no tears’ shampoo in my room.

-Rei was investigating the possibility of somebody other than Monokuma being an AI.

-An AI could not have committed the crime through inhuman means.

-A plushie resembling Asahi was found in Rei’s room. (Somebody other than Hako is the creator).

-An empty bottle of the stale water from the Ultimate Runner’s Ward was found in the afternoon rotation of the ice cream case. Monokuma has indirectly confirmed that this bottle could not have been placed there at any time today.”

“How did you remember all of that? Even I couldn’t keep track of what was legitimate evidence with all of these arguments happening…” Kaede asked.

“It’s because she’s Nami!” Goro said.

“I dunno,” Nami shrugged, “I’ve never really had a hard time following these kinds of things, I guess. Last trial, I never lost track? And I get the feeling that I don’t actually get overwhelmed by white noise very much. Like, in the metaphysical sense? If I know what I’m supposed to be focusing on, then other information won’t really distract me.”
“That’s a good skill to have…” Kaede said, tapping her own chin, “We should sit down sometime soon and see if I can’t sniff out your talent! But, for now, thanks for the evidence. I think that I actually have some idea of how this crime could have been carried out. And who did it. I told you I was getting real with this… So, of course I’ve got to the bottom of this case.”
“Whoa, really? Already?” Randy asked, “You really are amazing!”

“A case cannot be solved with clues that were not presented… So you could have figured this out too. It would have taken some more time, though, and you might have found the whodunnit based on different evidence than what I have,” Kaede said, “But Monokuma… Would never send us into a trial without having collected all the evidence there is to collect. And on the off chance that it did, then of course, the Mastermind does know who the culprit was, and would find some way to indicate that to us… Through claiming a guess, or a hunch, or some other way of knowing without really knowing. That’s not the case here, of course.”

“What are you talking about?” Kanoshi questioned, shrinking away from his podium. He seemed put off by what Kaede was saying… Of course, Nami understood why, it was the same reason Tsumugi looked distressed and some others seemed afraid or confused. Kaede was speaking like it was common knowledge that she’d already been through one Killing Game, and some people were realizing that.

“Heh. Let’s see. I bet that if Randy were to solve it, that concession of my ward would be an important one. He would need to have seen that place to understand what’s at play in a case like this,” Kaede said, “Of course, by nature of who I am, I have a keen eye for this sort of thing. Well, maybe not by who I am… But for what I’ve seen. If I was to choose any case to prove my title on, it’s this one. After the last time, of course I would. It’s my specialty.”

“After the last time?” Mitsuru asked, somebody who hadn’t been made aware of Kaede’s past, or come to that conclusion on his own, either.

“Right, I guess that she’s okay saying it now,” Box said, then folded her hands under her chin and beamed a bright smile around the room, “I was lying! It was a lie! To help them! I was never the Ultimate Survivor. This is totally my first time here, but as the Ultimate Volunteer, I bluffed my way through. Getting to know Bakura helped me out, though. He could back up anything I got wrong, and help me come up with more stuff that’s correct. It was the best thing I could do, for everyone’s sake! If it came out before now, that those two were the Ultimate Survivors, it wouldn’t have been very good…”

“It’s true,” Tsumugi spoke up, “Kaede and I met in the previous Killing Game! I don’t know how we ended up being selected as Ultimate Survivors, though… I can’t recall anything after the end of the fourth trial.”

“Same here,” Kaede said, “We had our memories wiped out to before we would have figured anything out about the Mastermind, and that sort of thing… With a few bits untouched, that is. That’s not important right now, though. What’s important is the case at hand, and you all had better not derail it!”

“Well, but I was right though,” Kanoshi said, tapping his fingers against his podium, “At least a little bit. Bakura was in on a conspiracy with at least three of you who are older than us.”

“I didn’t actually know what was up,” Goro raised his hand, defending the girls, “I just did what Hako asked me to! I knew she was lying, but I didn’t know anything else, and I didn’t ask! She promised that Nami wouldn’t be endangered by her lies, so what do I care?”

“Stop saying lies so much, jeeze…” Box whined, playing with a bit of her hair, “That makes it
sound like what I did was wrong. I looked at every possible angle and determined that painting myself as the Ultimate Survivor was the most useful thing I could do in that stressful situation! If I didn’t step in, everyone would have been at each other’s throats about who it was… And those two would be in danger if they told the truth right off the bat…”

“I’m very grateful to you, Hako,” Kaede said, “But, we need to get back to the point at hand. How this case happened… How the wrong person was killed and how there’s no obvious trap or person on the scene…”

Kaede paused for dramatic effect, then slammed her hands on her podium and announced, “It was poison!”

“Huh? Did it knock Rei out, and she fell into the pool? That’s weird, though,” Sayaka said, “No matter who it was supposed to be targeting, that would rely on them being next to the pool at the time the poison kicked in, right?”

“Next to, or in it, at least…” Kaede said, “If the culprit wanted us to go around in circles like we are. But they probably had a backup plan for if the poison took effect without dumping the victim into the pool.”

“I guess they could just claim that the victim had a fainting spell,” Mitsuru said.

“Oh, no, they still would have died,” Kaede said, “The poison wasn’t to knock somebody out. In fact, I don’t have an antidote for anything like that in my ward, which implies such a poison doesn’t exist in the facility. There weren’t sleeping pills in the temporary infirmary either. Nothing to knock you out. But, let’s take a second look at the cause of death.”

“Fluid in the lungs?” Nami asked.

“Yes, not drowning. And Monokuma would have put drowning. This is a play on words, meant to lead us to the truth,” Kaede explained, “This is actually… The result of a unique type of poison. It’s called Fluodin. In trace amounts, it’s harmless, and tastes a bit bad. In a large enough concentration, however, it has the effect of causing the lungs to spontaneously fill with fluid between seven and eight hours after ingestion. It also takes on the flavor of something it’s been mixed with.”

“Where did somebody get poison here?” Randy questioned.

“That was…” Nami realized, “Yushu’s ward. Of course it was! Why would he have stale water? He had a supply… More than anybody would ever need, of the same poison that he used to kill his ‘keeper’ in the Cult of N. These wards aren’t just equipped with things relating to talents, but to personalities as well. Or, I guess in Asahi’s case, stuff that Monokuma didn’t feel like putting anywhere else.”

“I didn’t know that about Yushu,” Kaede said, “But I do know about Fluodin. It also has a medical use. When taken in conjunction with its antidote, it can actually purge liquid from the lungs that isn’t supposed to be there. That was what made me think it could be here.”

“…I see,” Nami said, then a soft smile spread across her face, “Would you like me to finish it off, Akamatsu?”

“If you think you can,” Kaede said, “It would be lovely.”

“There’s only… One person who would have known about Yushu’s poison, and could have put it into a meal that was eaten seven hours before Rei died,” Nami said, then, with confidence, pointed
at the culprit, “The killer who targeted Asahi, but ended Rei’s life and threw us into this confusing situation… Is you. Shinjiro Nozomi.”
“No,” Shinjiro said, simple. A statement. Not a protest, just a statement. As if it were only a fact, and he wasn’t being accused of murder.

“All of the evidence points to you,” Nami said, “I’m sorry. It’s not that I dislike you. I wanted to be your friend! But we can’t deny that this crime was only possible for you.”

“No,” Shinjiro repeated, “I would have never killed Rei, you know.”

“But, the evidence—”

“I would never have killed her. Rei was my best friend. I was completely willing to die for her, even if she didn’t think that way about me. I would not have killed Rei.”

“Oh, I see,” Kaede said, “This trial started that way, so it needs to end this way, doesn’t it?”

“I get it too,” Randy said, “They tried to make us start with why it happened. We can’t just say ‘the evidence proves it’s you’ without giving some explanation. How did the wrong person die? That’s what Nozomi wants us to solve before we can actually claim he’s the culprit.”

“Oh. Uh, that’s obvious, isn’t it?” Nami asked, frowning through her words, “Breakfast? Seven hours before the time of death, and Rei ate Asahi’s portion because she was really hungry. With permission, of course.”

“H-Hah…” Shinjiro seemed surprised that Nami had been able to explain that so easily, “Breakfast? Wasn’t the bottle that had this supposed Fluodin in it, proven to have been put in the ice cream case yesterday?”

“It’s not like it’s hard to empty a bottle into another container,” Nami said.

“Ahh… Ah, don’t you think, that, it doesn’t make any sense, no?” Shinjiro questioned, “Why would I want to kill Asahi?”

“To escape with Rei,” Nami said.

“That’s wrong,” Shinjiro said.

“You’d kill Asahi with the poison only the two of you should have known about, and gotten Rei to confess to the crime, and get away with it that way because it was you, and you’d both escape,” Nami said.

“If that was the plan, she would have known I was trying to poison Asahi, and not have eaten the meal.”

“Then she wasn’t in on it, but your plan was the same. Frame her, or Hako, or anybody but yourself. You probably knew about her research. You could have convinced us that one of them was the AI with superhuman abilities.”

“You’re being ridiculous, yes. None of that was my plan.”

“How… What?” Nami blinked. Was he actually admitting he was the one at fault? She hadn’t even yet cornered him with the fact that he would be capable of making the plushie, given he’d made some of his own clothing.
“I have no interest in escaping this place, no,” Shinjiro said, wrapping his arms around himself, 
“No matter what choice I made, this would be my tomb. I am but a mouse in a den of foxes. No, 
that’s not quite right… Even mice wish to preserve their own lives. I have no desire to leave this 
place.”

“Why… The Hell not?” Nami questioned. Nobody else was even speaking. This was between the 
two of them.

“I haven’t got anything. One of my best friends had already died. Another one has, now, but even 
before, we weren’t getting along so well anymore,” Shinjiro explained, “On the outside, I can’t 
imagine there’s anybody hoping for my return. The only person who could want me to come back, 
Minami… I certainly don’t want to see him again. I’m not like Rei, who has Natsuki to return to. 
Or like… You. Who has Kirara to return to.”

“Wait,” Nami said, “Wait, are you serious? That was your plan? I thought you hated me! What?”

“I do dislike you. However, I trust Kirara’s judgment in people. And Rei’s, too. I thought that I 
could send you and Rei to the outside… With that statement, that the two escapees don’t need to 
necessarily include yourself,” Shinjiro said.

“You’d seriously let the rest of us get executed, just to send those two to the outside!?” Sayaka 
questioned, “That’s a dumb move! You seriously hate us all that much?”

“Not everyone. However… There is one person here who is definitely better off dead,” Shinjiro 
said, then locked eyes with Yuuri, “You have his eyes, you know. His rotten blood evidently runs 
in your veins.”

“Minami…” Yuuri trailed off, “You mean, Tatsuya Minami?”

“The very same,” Shinjiro confirmed, “During my time in the Cult of N… He was my ‘keeper’. He 
was the one who used me, abused me, violated every aspect of myself that he could manage. 
Minami is the man who destroyed any life I could have had! And somebody that awful, must 
surely, be that way by nature. An innate desire to hurt and destroy. I’ve witnessed it in you, too. To 
avoid letting that man’s legacy be carried on… Myself, who was his tool. And you, his son. Should 
die here!”

“Ah. Hm,” Mitsuru spoke up, “That’s certainly odd, isn’t it? Ruka, it seems that you and I are half-
siblings.”

“Huh?” Shinjiro questioned.

“So tell me, Nozomi. Have you seen any of this predisposition to abusing in me, somebody who is 
also a son of Tatsuya Minami?” Mitsuru asked, pointing to himself as he smiled in Shinjiro’s 
direction, “The only hatred I have in my heart… Is towards that man himself. Whatever he did to 
you, it’s likely he also did to my mother. Perhaps even when she was the same age as you were 
when you suffered.”

“Then… You should die too…” Shinjiro responded, holding himself even tighter, “Every single 
trace… Every remnant of that person… Should be erased from this world. So he and his blood 
can’t hurt anybody, ever again.

“Ruka isn’t like that at all,” Kanoshi jumped to Yuuri’s direct defense, now, “He’s suffered too! 
He’s nothing like his father, and he never even knew him, either!”

“It’s…” Yuuri made a small, strangled noise before he continued with this admittance, “That’s
true, you know. I may have a shitty temper, I may be a shitty person, but I’d never do that kind of thing. Growing up, my mother always threatened me into obeying her by saying that she’d call my father if I misbehaved, and tell him, ‘what a cute little boy his son’s shaping up to be’. She never followed through on *that* threat, but I had some idea of what a rotten person he was. So, I’m with Fujishiro. The only hatred in my heart is towards Tatsuya Minami himself.”

“Not even me? Me? You don’t hate me? The living proof that the blood which runs in your veins belongs to the worst of the worst?” Shinjiro questioned, his voice shaking now, “The living proof that it’s possible that both of you could become just like him? Like him? You want to be like him? You should die! I should die! We should all just die! Say it’s not me, say I’m not the culprit. Nami? Nami, who do you want to take with you? Anyone but the three of us. Who should escape this tomb?”

“I couldn’t possibly make a choice like that,” Nami said.


“No way. Tsukasa wouldn’t want to escape without Randy. Randy wouldn’t want to escape without Akamatsu. Akamatsu wouldn’t want to escape without Shirogane. So on and so forth. I can’t pick somebody. And I can’t condemn everyone else to die,”

“Noo. No, no,” Shinjiro was full-on panicking now, “I can’t! I can’t let them live! Those two! Those two who are… His family… Don’t deserve to live… They need to die with me…”

“We won’t,” Mitsuru said, then turned. Shinjiro was standing next to him. He put one large hand against his shoulder, “I’m sorry, Nozomi. But Ruka and I can’t die yet. It’s time for you to get some rest, okay? It’s time to quiet down. Go and meet with Rei, and Etsuko. They’ll be happy to see you again.”
“I…” Shinjiro mumbled, dropping his forehead to his podium.

“It’s about time,” Kaede said, “That I deconstruct this crime. I’m sure that was a bit difficult to follow for some of you, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Tsukasa agreed, “I’m still kind of confused…”

“It’s not confusing because it was a well-done crime, but because it has a relatively unknown aspect at play. There are plenty of you who wouldn’t know about Fluodin. Though, I could have come to the conclusion that it was poison without knowing anything about what poison it was… I did need to make a logical jump. Nami was the only one of us who would have actually had the evidence in the form where it pointed to Nozomi. In the form where it made sense for there to be a poison in Yushu’s lab which Nozomi would know about.”

“Even so…” Kaede continued, “As the Ultimate Detective, I could still make that logical jump. Randy, of course, was capable of it as well! If he, and I, and Nami… If any one of us weren’t present, this case may not have been solvable. So it’s completely understandable that some of you couldn’t follow along. Therefore…”

[Kaede Akamatsu’s Fifth Total Class Trial Closing Argument]

This is a crime that began yesterday.

Or perhaps, it was longer ago than that.

It’s likely that the culprit either retrieved the poison that they would use from the sealed-off Yushu’s Ward either yesterday, or when they originally investigated the lab along with Kyosuke. This poison was included in Yushu’s Ward in connection with his personality. Nami was informed of the existence of this poison by Rei, but not the fact that it was in the facility. The culprit would have also known about this poison, and was smart enough to realize that it was the very same as what was in Yushu’s ward.

It can be assumed that Yushu told the culprit more about the poison than he told Rei, since if Nami had been given detailed enough information to use the poison effectively, she wouldn’t have been confused by the trick.

In any case, the culprit obtained the poison and transferred it into a different bottle, hoping to use the rotations of the ice cream case to dispose of the bottle. Unfortunately for the culprit, the method of rotation brought the bottle back during the investigation period, with no believable alibi. Prior to this morning, the culprit also prepared to frame anybody else that they could. They tried to imitate the plushies that Hako made, and left one in Rei’s room.

I’m actually not sure why the culprit messed up and then over-cleaned Asahi’s bedroom.

This morning at breakfast, the culprit poisoned Asahi’s portion. Coincidence was not on the culprit’s side in this case, and it turned out that the meal wasn’t one that Asahi was especially keen on. She was willing to give up her meal for a microwave one from the gift shop when Rei wanted seconds.

Rei and Asahi were scheduled to go swimming at the same time. If anyone other than Rei or Nami had eaten that portion, then we wouldn’t have been in this situation; We couldn’t be under the
impression that the victim had drowned, and we would have realized it was poison much more quickly. And then found the culprit based on who had the opportunity to administer the poison. It would have been easier to solve this case that way, without the red herring of the swimming pool.

The poison kicked in while Rei was standing next to the swimming pool. She fell into the pool in one single movement. Sayaka heard the splash, and glanced up, but saw nobody there. Because there never was anybody. We had one single, gigantic red herring thrown at us… But as soon as we saw through it, it wasn’t difficult at all to cut through to the truth.

The truth that Shinjiro Nozomi is the culprit.

[Closing Argument End.]

“God… Damn you…” Shinjiro whined against his podium, “With a confession and a closing argument…”

“That’s right. With both of those things, a vote is unnecessary unless requested by the majority,” Monokuma confirmed, “You noticed that last time, didn’t you? When a culprit continues to deny it to the very end, or if there’s some reason to doubt their confession, then voting is an important tool. It’s been removed as a mechanic from unnecessary situations due to incidents in which certain people failed to vote for the culprit and were quarantined for it. Anyone who runs a Killing Game hates quarantines! They can make things much less interesting.”

“So there’s not even any chance… For somebody to take me up on that offer…” Shinjiro hissed through his teeth.

“Well, they could. A majority would need to vote against you, so a majority could request that a vote be called.”

“Hahh… Yes, right…” Shinjiro stood up straight again, his face stained with tears, “As if anybody would! Come on! Doesn’t anyone want… Two of you? A pair who can escape without blood on their hands!? I did the killing for you! Why not leave this place? Why not be free of this tomb?”

“To forsake everybody else to die here…” Mitsuru said, “It doesn’t matter if you ‘did the killing for us’, we would still have blood on our hands. The blood of the ten people who we left behind.”

“You say that, but…” Shinjiro’s breathing was ragged, and he wouldn’t raise his gaze as he pointed across the courtroom, at nobody in particular, “If you allow this game to continue… It’s five people, isn’t it? Five survivors? So seven more people must die. With those who have already dead, and I… Who am about to die… That makes eleven dead to the Killing Game. End it now, won’t you? The numbers are-”

“No,” Mitsuru frowned, “By that logic, then somebody who escaped would have to contend with fourteen people being dead to the game. By the numbers, it’s better to let the game go on, and let five people survive.”

“No!” Shinjiro shrieked, “Those five people… Those five people could be! Could be you and Ruka and Yamaguchi… Two who have his blood… And one who kills for a living… How about, what about the worst possible other two? How about Kyosuke, who’s murdered somebody and doesn’t have Kirara vouching for him, and… Oh, how about Bakura? Bakura who’s already attempted murder one time!”

“Twice actually,” Goro said, looking up at the ceiling, “But we’ll talk about that once you’re dead, I bet, before your body’s even cold! Discussions like the one that I’m betting on… Should be had
in a courtroom.”

“What the fuck does that mean!?” Shinjiro shouted across the room, scratching his own shoulders, “Doesn’t matter! Doesn’t even matter!! My point still stands… Three murderers… And two sons who are doomed to be as rotten as their father… Should those people really escape this place!?”

“Why? Why do have to say that about Ruka?” Kanoshi cried out, not bothering to defend himself, “He’s not a bad person, you know! He’s a victim just like you!”

“Who are you trying to kid? Who? Who? Come on. Fuck you. He already admitted his mother never called his father. He already said that he never had to face that man’s wrath! That it never came to fruition! He is not a victim just like me! He is not a victim! In the future, he will take you and twist you up from the inside and ruin you ruin you it’s already started if you’ve murdered somebody he’s tainting you corrupting you destroying you you need to run run away from that man from him he’s going to steal it from you steal your chance at living a happy life, a normal life! A man with those eyes can never be trusted! Fuck you, you should just die! Die, right now! Be executed! Along with me! Yuuuuri Minamiii!”
“Don’t,” Sayaka spoke up, and she had that voice again. The voice that sent chills down Nami’s spine, that reminded her that this diminuitive friend of hers was still a serious threat, “Don’t you call him that. Don’t you dare call him that.”

“Why not? It’s who his father is, so it’s true, isn’t it?” Shinjiro questioned, a sickly grin splitting his face, “You receive your father’s family name if you know who he is, not your mother’s. As much as he should like to deny that Minami’s blood runs in his veins, it’s the truth. He can never lead a virtuous life with blood like that! It’s in Minami’s blood and in his too, to be a black hole, to absorb anything pleasant in this world and turn all he touches to dust…”

“Yuuri is Yuuri,” Sayaka said, “Yuuri Ruka hardly suited him, but he is certainly not Yuuri Minami. Komaru Ruka, a woman who shared a name with one of the Cult of N’s deities, is rotten. She doesn’t deserve to have her son share her last name. However, Minami? Yuuri could never bear a family name like that one. Minami is more rotten than Komaru. Komaru would behave, once per week at least, as if she really were a mother. Minami has never behaved as a father. In fact, I’d wager that the threats Komaru made… Were because Minami is so very rotten he would consider any child of his to be property to do as he pleased with. Just as he did to you.”

“But he didn’t, did he? That never happened! Ruka was spared that fate!”

“Maybe,” Sayaka said, “But it’s not my place to say if the fate he encountered instead might be even worse than yours.”

“That’s impossible!” Shinjiro cried, “Worse than my fate!? That’s bullshit! Just the fact that you’re standing up for him now, standing and defending him, proves it! I have nobody like that! Nagata is the only one of my friends still alive, and she certainly… Certainly hates me, for what I did to Rei—”

“That’s not fate, that’s mistakes,” Sayaka said.

“Fine! Before this game, then! Why not focus on that!? There’s plenty of content there anyhow!” His voice was cracking on some of these words as he dipped into ranges too high even for his usually breathy voice, “You all know what happened to me while I was being ‘kept’ by Tatsuya Minami, I’ve made it quite clear, haven’t I!? He tried everything he could, to turn me into a girl! To turn me into Yumi! He burned my hands and my face and filled me up with medicines and hid the scissors so I couldn’t cut my hair and dressed me up in whatever way he damn well pleased!”

“And he succeeded! In some way! Shinjiro Nozomi? Who is that? The media only knows Yumi. Faceless, frail, little girl Yumi! So even that man’s own son couldn’t recognize me as his plaything when I introduced myself by the name which belongs to me, which was given to me by my family, which I cherish!” Shinjiro’s voice was so loud, filling the courtroom so much, that nobody else even dared to breathe, “Shinji! Shinjiro Nozomi! An undeniably masculine name!”

“And!” He continued, “It didn’t end there! Really, it didn’t! Almost none of us who were rescued were returned to our families… Yamaguchi is the fucking exception, why, why her!? Why that little brat who didn’t hesitate to behead her keeper? Why is the one who was brave enough to suffer only for a few weeks the one little kid who gets to go back to her loving family? Who were my family? Who were they? I hardly even knew a thing about them but for the amazing name they granted me! I was three years old! It’s a shock that name wasn’t wiped and replaced with that disgusting falsehood of Yumi! A shock?? A fucking miracle, ooh, yes! A miracle! Who are they? Who misses me? Who loved me? I’ll never know, and they’ll never know that I lived for sixteen
“Huh. Well, they will now, if they’re watching… Won’t they, Shinji?” Sayaka said, and her harsh tone had become gentle by comparison, “I mean, fuck. They’ll have to watch you die, won’t they? But at least they’ll know for sure. Your mom. And your dad. And your sister.”

“My… E-h?” Shinjiro questioned, and the courtroom stopped echoing his panic. It became silent. Frightening. A single breath would sound, in that moment, like a jet engine taking off.

“She was named after a participant in the first trial-based Killing Game. Your parents thought it would make people think she was unlucky, and they’d leave her alone. She was born a couple of months after you were kidnapped. They sheltered that girl, so much. She didn’t even mind, though. I told her it sounded awful, to be so shut up and defended from anything that could even think a single bad thought about her. She said it was fine. All she ever cried about, she told me, was that she couldn’t meet her older brother,” Sayaka said, “Touko Nozomi. To think, that the girl I only spoke to through a screen, would be connected to you in that way.”

It surprised Nami a little, that Sayaka would have an online friend. She was the traditional type, and it didn’t seem like she wanted to make new friends too badly. Nami once had lots of online friends, actually. Awh. Remembering that made her sad. It actually wasn’t often that she went any number of days without exchanging messages with “PuroPurin”.

Of course, all of this with Shinjiro made her sad, too.

He really was a broken person underneath everything. She wanted to be his friend. He couldn’t connect with anybody here, though. Nobody could comprehend his situation. He’d had trouble all along, even connecting with people who did have similar experiences to him. It was a unique Hell, and he couldn’t let go of his resentment. Nami didn’t blame him for that. She just wished it could have been different.

“I…” Shinjiro’s ire was gone, the fire calmed, he had no reason to keep shouting. Sayaka had engaged him, because she held part of the key to helping him die peacefully, “I wanted… To be loved, you know. That’s it, you know. The only reason… I didn’t die already. I should have died already. I should have realized, in middle school. I would always be on the outside. I could never be loved. By a friend. By a partner. It couldn’t happen. Minami stole that away from me, yes. He ruined me. I… Do sincerely hope. If you really could be good people. That he didn’t steal that from his sons as well.”

“Somebody would have loved you,” Box said, “I’m sure, if not for this Killing Game… Somebody would have. I bet that I can guess your type, too. A kind of boyish girl. Brunette. Looks better in a suit than you do… And really smart, too. A private investigator, maybe. I think her name would have been Kaoru. You won’t keep her waiting, right? On the other side of this Killing Game, I’m sure, Nozomi… That Kaoru is waiting to meet you.”

“Kaoru…” That name seemed to mean something to Shinjiro, “Heh. It’s kind of creepy, that you could figure out, so accurately, what my dream girl is like. But I’ll believe what you say. I could have met Kaoru… And saved Rei… If I’d just killed myself years ago. I won’t waste any more of your time. Goodbye. Farewell. I never liked any of you.”
Trial 2: An Execution of An Empty Shell

[Shinjiro Nozomi’s Execution: You Are (Not) A Person.]

A tendril appeared and wrapped itself around Shinjiro’s neck, dragging him out of the courtroom. Moments later, the screens appeared to broadcast his impending demise. He wasn’t in the room on the screen yet, though. The room was… Cute, in a very unsettling way. It looked like the kind of room that would belong to a three year old girl, no doubt about it. Flowers embroidered on the bed’s quilt, brightly colored plushies all over it. One was the false plushie Shinjiro had made to resemble Riko. Huh? How exactly had that left Box’s possession, to be involved in the execution? Well, it was a Killing Game. Matters that didn’t relate to a mystery had no need to make sense.

Into the room fell something which, at first, seemed to be Shinjiro. However, it was instead a mannequin, simply made to look like him with a wig of his hair color, dressed in the original kimono he’d woken up in. He hadn’t worn that outfit since the first day, so everyone could only conclude that it was a work uniform. That was just the first of the mannequins, though. One after another, limp ragdolls in wigs cascaded down. Their hair was styled like Shinjiro’s, and they shared his body type, but the real one was nowhere to be seen. The mannequins wore all sorts of outfits, though, outfits that none present could even imagine Shinjiro wearing. The kimono, at least, still had some degree of masculinity to it. These things didn’t. Ruffles all over, all the best dresses for somebody who would want to have this bedroom. Not for him.

There was a verifiable pile of mannequins in the center of the room, and still no sign of the real Shinjiro. Only for a moment, though. That was when Nami spotted it. Among the mannequins, there was one hand which could only belong to Shinjiro, for its scars. It lay limp, sticking out of the pile. This couldn’t be the entire execution, though. As unfortunate as it was, such a mild execution would never fly in a Killing Game.

That was when the match fell.

Everyone’s eyes followed the single, lit match that soared down from the ceiling to land on the top of the pile of mannequins.

It went up in flames immediately, like it was much more flammable than any normal mannequin ought to be. The entire pile burned away from the top out to the bottom, but went out as soon as the mannequins were gone, leaving behind Shinjiro. He lay on the floor, part of his clothes burnt away and some of his skin singed, but he was there nonetheless. At least his own outfit hadn’t been changed to one of the sorts the mannequins were wearing.

He took deep breaths, then sat up from where he lay on the floor, and turned to lock eyes with a reflection of himself in the room’s vanity mirror… And started to cry. Though there were tears in his eyes when he’d been shrieking on about how Yuuri and Mitsuru deserved to die, this was different. This was pathetic bawling. His shoulders heaved and he couldn’t keep choked sobs back. Was it just because he’d seen himself there?

Or… Was it something to do with the barely-noticeable flash of light that had filled that room in the same moment? Nobody watching could completely comprehend.

As Shinjiro cried, the door of the room opened, and several more mannequins fell in, pouring out. This time, they didn’t look like Shinjiro. One looked like Rei, one like Etsuko, and none of the others were recognizable to the group, except maybe for Sayaka, as these seemed to be mannequins emulating people that Shinjiro had known. In the same school, Sayaka may have been acquainted
with some of them. Still, for the most part, those mannequins only meant something to Shinji.

Then, they began to move. Crawling across the floor, reaching out towards him, and speaking in a chorus that came through the screen loud and clear.

“You belong along with us, don’t you? You never could belong among them. You are less than human. You are just a homunculus who never should have lived this long. Never should have been born. Never should have been animated. Come home, Shinjiro.”

Nami wasn’t even the target of those harsh words, and she could feel herself starting to dissociate. Like if she put any effort into moving her body at all, then her soul would break free. Somehow, she didn’t want that to happen right now. Shouldn’t it have been better, not to be herself as she watched however Shinjiro met his demise? But she wanted to hold on to her soul. Like if she lost it in a moment like this it wouldn’t come back.

Shinjiro didn’t move as the mannequins advanced on him, keeping his face covered, his shoulders slumped. As much as it was awful to say, in this moment, he looked more like an immobile mannequin than the ones who were crawling towards him. The first one to reach him was the one which looked like Rei. It grabbed his arm, and that was it, squeezing with an iron grip. There was a cracking sound. He didn’t cry out.

So on, and on, the mannequins arrived at Shinjiro, and they grasped him, and they broke his bones. One by one, cracking them apart, bit by bit, crushing his skeleton. There was blood from some of the breaks, and a disturbing silence. Shinjiro refused to make a sound as he was broken, leaving only those disgusting snaps.

One of the mannequins, the last one, stood up. It had short brown hair.

“K-Kaoru…” Shinjiro made the first sound, choking it out, “Why…”

Kaoru Haruhi.

How had he ever forgotten her? How did Box know about her? It wasn’t important anymore… But Kaoru…

She was so smart. A much better detective than this so-called Ultimate Detective in here. So why?

Why?

Why hadn’t she come to save him?

The mannequin based on Kaoru clasped its hands together and brought them down on the back of his head. There was a noise worse than any of the previous cracks, a shattering sound.

And he was gone.
“Hey, Shinjiro,” Kaoru Haruhi spoke for the first time in hours. She was standing at the top of a hill, while Shinjiro sewed idly at the picnic table beside her, “I’d like it if… You could forget all about me.”

“Whyever would I do that?” Shinjiro asked, nonplussed, “If this is your way of saying you’ve decided to hate me, then very well, but I’d at least like the right to hold onto our pleasant memories.”

“Hate you? No, I promise, it’s nothing like that,” Kaoru shook her head, and the wind blew, ruffling her short hair, “If I hated you, then I’d want you to remember me. It’s because I love you that I think it’s best that you forget about me.”

“Hm,” Shinjiro mumbled, then set down his work and stood up, approaching her, “What’s going on?”

“I’ve finally realized, Shinjiro,” Kaoru said, turning to lock eyes with him, “The reason that I was passed over as an Ultimate three years ago.”

“Why?” Shinjiro asked.

“The Ultimate Initiative… Picks people based on two categories. Being especially great at what they do, and having the ability to stand up against despair,” She brought her hands up to her face, trying not to cry, “I don’t think… I’m good enough.”

“What? No, of course you are,” Shinjiro said, “If the Ultimate Initiative thought that I could qualify, then I can’t imagine that-”

“Shut up,” Kaoru said, “Those are some seriously empty words. You can say all you want that you think I could have done it, but the fact that I’m not the Ultimate Detective is proof that I couldn’t. It doesn’t matter what you think. The Ultimate Initiative knew… That I couldn’t cut it.”

“What are you talking about?” He questioned.

“Despair is everywhere, isn’t it, Shinjiro?” Kaoru asked, “And only Ultimates have the power to stand up against it. I certainly don’t. I don’t have that power at all.”
“Kaoru…” Shinjiro trailed off.

“I’ve watched you trying your best all this time. I’ve seen it. I’ve been let in on the secret of Ultimates like you, and some other people… As somebody who was almost named the Ultimate Detective, of course I’d be able to figure out which people I’ve met are Ultimates,” Kaoru sighed, “And I’ve also seen that even Ultimates can fail. Despairing Ultimates are a big threat, after all. I mean, just recently the Ultimate Volunteer disappeared. So if even the people who are picked to stand up to Despair can’t escape it… Who am I to think that I could…?”

“But you can,” Shinjiro said, reaching out to hold Kaoru by her shoulders, “You’re so smart, Kaoru. You’re worthy of being an Ultimate, even if you weren’t officially named one. Somebody
who’s so good at deduction that she realized I was an Ultimate within five minutes of meeting me…”

“Is pretty dangerous, huh?” Kaoru finished the sentence.

“Dangerous?”

“Yeah,” She nodded, then forced a smile through her tears, “It’s really dangerous! Most Ultimates are supposed to try and keep their identities under wraps, after all. With the Ultimate Volunteer being a public position, it was only a matter of time before something happened to her. They say she’s missing, but she’s probably dead, isn’t she? And so… Somebody like me… Shouldn’t be allowed to exist in this world.”

“Kaoru-”

“And I definitely never should have been permitted to become your friend! Somebody like me… A monster like me with a mind that works too well, never should have existed, and certainly isn’t worthy of being close to anybody! Everyone always says that disaster follows where a detective goes…” She sniffed, and her voice cracked when she continued, “But what if it’s because the detective is the one who causes the disaster??”

“That can’t possibly be true,” Shinjiro said.

“You don’t… Understand…” Kaoru leaned forward, pressing her forehead against Shinjiro’s chest, “How scared I am… Don’t you realize? If I became Despair, how dangerous it would be? It would be awful for you. And awful for every single Ultimate I ever met, any I meet in the future! And I can feel it! It really could happen to me… No matter what I do…”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you if you’re already scared of it,” Shinjiro said, “The fact that you’re worried you could become Despair means you won’t! Besides. Didn’t you promise to use your skills for good already? Didn’t you promise that if anything ever happened to me, you’d figure it out and you’d come save me?”

“Yeah, I did,” Kaoru said, “But… I’m sorry. I can’t save you if I’m already gone.”

And, she fell over. Toppled, limp, like a ragdoll, down the side of the hill. The wrong side of it.

One would have been fine to fall down, the side they’d walked up, but the other one was quite the steep drop, and backed up to the nearest road. Kaoru Haruhi was keeping track of everything around her at every time, with near computer-like efficiency. She could time her drop perfectly to reach the bottom right when she’d be hit with one of the cars on that road. Somebody like her… Wouldn’t leave any margin for failure in her own death.

And Shinjiro…

Did…

Forget her.

It was all that he could do, after all. For all the trauma he’d suffered which still haunted his memory, he hadn’t witnessed a death before, much less a suicide, much less the suicide of somebody so close to him. He locked the memory away, and he couldn’t recall it, but it was there, and it was rotten. The memory leaked through its lock and made Shinjiro know, deep down, the one person he had ever truly connected with was dead. It leaked and became resentment. Resentment towards Kaoru for killing herself. Resentment for anyone who would think of ending any life. So of course, when he too started to feel like he should die…
There was resentment towards himself.

So he planned a murder, so that his self-loathing would be fulfilled. He killed someone, to cross that final line. To hate himself so much that he knew he deserved to die. Just like Kaoru did. Kaoru hurt him back then, by dying, leaving him behind, going back on her promise. But he brought himself down to her level. They were both just as rotten now, weren’t they?

So Shinjiro would reunite with Kaoru on equal standing.

What a wonderful dream.
“Natsukiii,” Rei whined, walking up behind her and wrapping her arms around her waist. A move that was definitely not platonic… But which Natsuki wouldn’t even think twice about, if she even noticed it. There was being oblivious about relationships, and then there was Natsuki.

“What’s going on?” Natsuki asked without looking up from what she was working on. In this case, it was trimming a bonsai tree which had a single, tiny apple hanging from one branch.

"I wanna show you something... You've been working so hard lately and I didn't wanna interrupt you, but," Rei shook her slightly, "You really need to see the cool thing that I made!"

"Huh? Oh," Natsuki finally checked the time and date on the small clock at the corner of her desk. She'd been holed up in her greenhouse for the past three days... Hm. She needed a shower. Why was Rei so close to her if she smelled so bad? That wasn't a good decision, "I'm sorry. Right. Uhhh... What do you wanna show me?"

Natsuki was usually more composed than this, but it was reasonable to assume that she was feeling the effects of having been without sleep for three days straight.

"I made something," Rei said, "I made it for the survivors of that game..."

"Huh?" Natsuki asked, then turned and pushed her glasses up her nose, frowning, "You don't mean to tell me that..."

"Yeah," Rei said, "I mean... If her own scientists turned on her, then she probably wouldn't have a body even if her friends found her data backup, right? I mean... I guess I probably could have done a better job with it but I thought, maybe. If I could ever get the chance to give it to them, then, she might appreciate having some sort of body for her data to go in?"

"Show it to me," Natsuki said with a wild grin. Though her own specialty was in botany, she had a deep passion for all things scientific. Besides, Rei had made for her the current editions of her prosthetics, and they were amazingly advanced. Though they were very clearly robot limbs, she didn't have the slightest limp, and could even do fairly precise tasks with the false arm.

"That's the idea!" Rei proclaimed, then dashed out of the greenhouse. Natsuki followed at a regular pace, chuckling to herself. She was really quite impressed by how enthusiastic Rei could get sometimes, when she usually tried to give off the impression to strangers that she was 'softly emotionless', as she called it. Not so cold they’d expect cruelty of her, but enough that they wouldn't think she'd be an interesting person to try and befriend.

Outsiders didn't need to be friends with them, and each of the four friends had their ways of ensuring that they'd be left to their own world. Natsuki was rude and harsh, kind of a bully admittedly. Rei was emotionally distant. Shinjiro spoke with strange intonations. Etsuko was annoying. Well, all of them had those traits to start with, but exaggerating these negative traits in
themselves worked to keep people from prying into their lives and friendships. They only needed each other, right? Shinjiro may have had one more friend outside of the group, but Natsuki had never even bothered learning their name, gender, age, or any other feature aside from 'Shinjiro's friend who has never been kidnapped'.

Natsuki... Only needed these people.

Natsuki...
Ah.

She opened her eyes and stared down at an orchid. She was remembering it again. Her hands started to shake, and she stepped away from the delicate flower. She couldn't touch her precious plants when she was trembling like this. And she couldn't let her saltwater tears poison their soil.

She was living through it all over again, since she saw it on the television. She knew it had to have happened weeks ago when it was being shown... The Killing Game. She had a feeling deep down that her friends had gone there. She'd been in a fugue state since having those suspicions confirmed... And the most recent episodes were tearing her apart. They were all dead. All three of them were gone. The only people she ever needed in her life, the only ones she didn't push away... They were gone. She reached up to her necklace and clasped it tight. Etsuko had made them, ugly little string necklaces with beads that held the other three's initials. She was the only one who still wore hers these days, the other three thought them too unfashionable. Even Etsuko, who made the necklaces, agreed that they looked kind of awful. Natsuki would never remove hers, though. Especially not now. Now, she needed to carry them with her everywhere she went, more than ever before. Her precious friends...

Why was she still here? Why was she still living? What could she even do, in a state like this, when even her most precious plants were endangered by her mental health? It wasn't that she wanted to die. Really, the idea terrified her, so even if she absolutely did want to die, she couldn't ever go through with it. And she didn't want to.

Rei Akabane, who was kept in a basement and fed only stale food, kept like a pet and used like a tool... Who became an amazing electrician, able to understand even the most complex nuances of wiring something together with the human body.

Etsuko Yushu, who developed Stockholme Syndrome but still ended up poisoning his captor with what turned out to be Fluodin... And one day decided he was just going to run, and run, until he couldn't run anymore, and he ran horizontally across the whole country. Not all in one stretch, but he made the trek, he did.

Shinjiro Nozomi, whose name was silenced by history and by the cruel master who wished to turn him into his ideal woman... Who could cook, and serve food, and make conversation like none other if he put his mind to it.

And herself.

Natsuki Nagata, who fell into the hands of an amputation fetishist, who never actually used her body in the way a kidnapper may be expected to do, but instead would slowly hack away at it. Fingers, hand, elbow, shoulder. Toes, foot, knee... Then she was rescued. Each one was given proper time to heal. Some people thought she had it better than the rest. Some thought she had it...
worse.

Whatever.

Shinjiro was the only one among them who gave a damn about what was 'better' or 'worse' among misery.

Those four... Somebody had to carry their stories, right?
That Killing Game didn’t tell the stories of their lives in a way that Natsuki thought was respectful or fair at all, it didn’t carry the tale of how spectacular Shinjiro, or Etsuko, or Rei really were, before that. Natsuki didn’t hold it against Shinjiro for what he did in the game. She knew who he really was.

She could hardly care for her precious plants anymore, but that didn’t mean she was useless.
Natsuki Nagata was the one who could tell the stories of people who still worked their very hardest after having their lives stolen from them.
The screens couldn’t retract quickly enough. They did, quite quickly… But the very fact that the screens were still visible at the moment of Shinjiro’s death was already too much. Nami covered her face with her hands and leaned against her podium with heavy breaths.

Yeah, Shinjiro had been a prick, but she didn’t want him to die. The fact that it had been him… Rei’s killer shouldn’t have been him, but then again.

This was not supposed to happen.

That was the singular, underlying truth of this case. Nami knew that much.

Somehow, if it had been somebody who she got along with better, she might not feel so utterly awful right now. She had wanted to be his friend. They’d bonded, during the first investigation, before it turned out Tomoe was the culprit. I never liked any of you? That line hurt. Nami thought he’d at least liked her in the beginning. They should have been friends. Maybe, if he’d gotten over the self-righteous hangups… They still could have been.

Were this not a Killing Game.

Tomoe’s death hurt Nami so much not just because they were twin sisters, but also because it meant that Tomoe would never get the chance to be better, to come to an understanding of her own emotions that wasn’t manipulated by malicious sources. And now, Shinjiro’s death hurt so badly because, couldn’t she have known him better? She didn’t want anyone to die and leave her last memories of them so negative.

It felt like… Like ‘please, Monokuma, bring him back, not forever, I know that’s unreasonable!’ It just needed to be long enough. Long enough that she could remember him with a genuine smile and those kind words he had before Etsuko died, rather than the man who cried and screamed that several people here deserved the death.

That wasn’t a wish anybody could grant, though. And Nami knew this. To think something like that… It would be much too kind for a Killing Game. Of course it would. Why would she even think about something like that? Was she just taunting herself?

“Okay!” Monokuma called out, “That concludes this class tri-”

“Not quite,” Goro interrupted, “Didn’t you hear what I said earlier? There’s still some things we need to talk about while we’re all gathered in the courtroom.”

“Huh? What makes you think you can just use my courtroom however you like, huh? It can only be used for official trials-”

“I know that,” Kaede was the one to interrupt this time, but then she pointed an accusatory finger across the room at Monokuma, “But there’s one type of trial that we can trigger at any time, right?”

“Are you for serious?” Monokuma asked, “You want to trigger that type of trial now? Two murders in? How could you have possibly gathered enough evidence?”

“What, like it’s hard?” Sayaka joined in now, crossing her arms with a smirk, “You’ve underestimated us, Monokuma. Leaving us with our memories on the existence of Killing Games… We already knew what we should be looking for!”
“Hm. Well, you’re idiots,” Monokuma said, “But if you really want to begin the Trial of The Mastermind at a time like this… I’ll cut you some slack, since you’re so dumb! Usually, if you failed that trial, you’d get executed.”

“We know, and we’re confident-” Kaede started.

“Nahh, you definitely couldn’t have figured it out. That’s why I’m gonna go easy on you. Rather than executing you when you get it wrong, here’s what’s going to happen…

One: You will forget certain pieces of information. What these are will become apparent with the passage of time.

Two: Four new participants will be added into the Killing Game, and the game will be reset. These first two trials will remain in your memories to an extent, but any motives in play from the first two cases which could still spur an attack will be wiped out. It will be as if none of what’s happened so far was actually part of the game.”

“I understand,” Kaede said, “Though, I have a question on the latter part. Why will we have partial memories of what’s happened already?”

“Upupu… Come on! How unfair do you think I am? I’m not gonna wipe out the memories of the bonds you’ve forged with each other and the progress you’ve made with your personalities! Or the misery that comes with the deaths you’ve already witnessed!” Monokuma laughed, “It’s much more fun if you don’t forget everything!”

“You’re…” Nami muttered, “Going to steal more of my memories? Are you serious?”

“Huh? I mean… Yeah, a few of them. Gotta fabricate the reason the reset happened, for one thing. None of you are actually equipped to accept that you’ve failed the Trial of The Mastermind once already, so I’ll say something like ‘there was a glitch in the recording software, and we needed extra content, so let’s take it from the top’! But, it’s not like I’m gonna mess with you for real. The memories I’ll wipe out will be for your own sakes.”

“I don’t…” Nami tried to protest, but just collapsed her weight onto her podium again. She wanted to argue, but she couldn’t. She was just so tired. So she was going to lose more of her memories all over again. And she couldn’t trust Monokuma, either. Memories tie into each other all the time, after all. Whatever it wiped out could cause some sort of chain reaction, and she’d lose something that she’d just managed to recover over the last five days. Would she forget that she and Tsukasa were friends in middle school? Forget that she had that silly little hobby? Forget about Kira’s existence over again?

It wasn’t like she could do anything about it.

“So,” Monokuma addressed the entire courtroom again, “Let’s begin. Why exactly do you think that you have convincing evidence of the Mastermind’s identity?”

“…Kaede-nee,” Sayaka spoke softly, using a kind nickname, “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Kaede said, “I’ve been convinced, by the strength of everybody’s hearts. I need to reveal the truth. I share a deepest secret with Box Hako. And my deepest secret… Is that in the previous Killing Game, though my memories of it were wiped at the time, I had actually been involved with the planning. I created each and every motive that was used in that game. Therefore, if Hako and I share a deepest secret, it stands to reason she is involved in this game. So this is my theory. You, Box Hako, are Ultimate Judgment.”
Trial 2: Trustworthiness

Box giggled.

She just giggled. It wasn’t a joyful one, or a nervous one. In fact, it didn’t seem to have any real emotion behind it. She was just giggling for the sake of making sound, filling the air, postponing an answer.

“Hako…” Sayaka hissed through her teeth, “You need to say something. Please.”

“Mmm, hmm, okaaay,” Box sounded off. She smiled as she spoke again, “Akamatsu? You weren’t Ultimate Judgment? You weren’t The Mastermind? You were just a helper. That’s it! A helper. What does that sound like to you? Does it sound like volunteer? Doesn’t it just?”

“In that case, you should be capable of telling us who you’re helping,” Kaede said, “So my deduction is sound, regardless of how much you’re involved. You either confess, or you rat on the actual Mastermind. Right?”

“I don’t know who it is. I don’t know who is the Mastermind inside the game. I have no idea,” Box’s usual tone of speech was absolutely absent. She sounded like she was just voicing different statements of fact as they came up in her mind, not like a real conversation. She was floundering, “Do you remember? Akamatsu, remember? Do you remember? Remember?”

“Remember what?” Kaede asked.

“M4-K1 was also a helper in your game, wasn’t she? Yeah?” Box asked, then tilted her head to the side and poked her own cheek with one finger, “Her role was to help you. To help everybody! She moderated things like the realism factor, right? She made sure that everything was plausible?”

“That’s…” Kaede thought for a minute, “That’s true, another version of Maki did that. Are you saying there’s another version of you who’s fulfilling that role?”

“Another version of me? That’s dumb. Only robots can have multiple versions, yeah? And I am not a robot,” Box said, “Hmm, mm, no. It’s this version of me. I have access to low-power flashback lights around the facility, so that I can cancel out logic contradictions that would be detrimental to your mental well-being. The previous game had several problems caused by allowing participants to reach low mental and emotional states that did not tie into the contents of the game.”

“I…” Kaede started to argue, but then sighed and looked down at the podium, “Well, that’s true. There were complications along those lines. Monokuma only wants there to be one suicide at most during the course of a Killing Game, because it wouldn’t be interesting otherwise… So it had to stop several…”

“Precisely,” Box said, “So, given my position as the Ultimate Volunteer, I was asked to provide assistance. That’s it. That’s the extent to which we share our deepest secrets. Of course, I’m assuming we’ll have these facts, and even the fact that we shared a deepest secret, wiped from our memories after this.”

“Damn…” Sayaka muttered, then looked to Box again, “I mean. I’m mad that we didn’t have the truth we thought we did, but I’m glad that it wasn’t you…”

“We don’t know that she isn’t lying,” Kanoshi said.
“We do!” Goro proclaimed.

“You’re just going to take her at her word?” Kanoshi questioned.

“Of course not,” Goro said.

“So how could you possibly know that she’s telling the truth about not being the Mastermind?”

“I’d like to direct your attention once more to the first set of motives,” Goro said, pulling his own Monopad out and opening the motive up again, “Hako and I still share our ‘trustworthiness’, after all.”

“Well, that’s not very smart,” Tsumugi said, “All that’s going to do is make us distrust you as well. In fact, you’re now implicating yourself pretty seriously as a potential Mastermind.”

“Bakura isn’t…” Nami whined from where she was still slumped over on her podium, “Why would The Mastermind attempt murder? They wouldn’t want to die early on. Plus, he’s a really bad liar. We saw that when he had the lie serum.”

“Am I really?” Goro asked, “I mean, this may sound counterproductive for me to say, but I’m totally going somewhere with this! I told loads of convincing lies that day. For example, I wasn’t sewing an outfit for myself. This outfit’s perfectly fine! I don’t need another one.”

“So what were you sewing?” Tsumugi asked.

“It’s a surprise! I wasn’t planning to tell the truth about it even if I didn’t have the lie serum that day,” Goro laughed.

“So why did Hako keep telling people you hadn’t told lies all day? That makes us even more suspicious of both of you,” Kaede said.

“I know, I know! It totally does, but again, going somewhere with this! Yeah, I wonder. If I was really telling bunches of lies, why did Hako lie and say that I hadn’t told lies? I guess it’s totally possible that she could have done something like lie to cover for me if I were the Mastermind,” Goro laughed, “But there’s another explanation there! She didn’t have a choice!”

“You… Oh, fuck!” Sayaka proclaimed, “And I thought I was good at seeing loopholes in Monokuma’s wording! That’s… Whoa!”

Nami failed to understand what was going on. If she was paying more attention, then she would have, but she was much too exhausted to be an active participant in this trial after just finishing up one in which she had to be pretty involved.

“Yes! It’s a combination of motives,” Goro chuckled, and put his arms behind his head, “I had the lie serum all day long. Hako and I share the same ‘trustworthiness’. Therefore, if Hako or I have the lie serum, then it is, in effect, applied to three people that day. We would share each other’s lies. I do think she is quite trustworthy… Just as you thought before. She and I are both people who can be trusted to lay down our lives for other people. We both mean only the best for those we care about! And she happens to care about everybody here.”

“That still doesn’t clear-” Kaede started.

“Yup, it doesn’t clear our names. But what I’m about to tell you does. Hey, Nami,” Goro got her attention, and she finally looked up from her podium, “What did Hako tell you when you asked what happened to her hand?”
“She… sewed it to her work,” Nami answered, “But that was a lie, wasn’t it? What really happened?”

“Oh, I stabbed her in the hand!” Goro explained. “I did try to kill her that day, because she took me aside and she said to me, ‘I am the Mastermind’. I of course, immediately attacked, but she caught my blade with her hand. Then she took my Monopad and showed me the trustworthiness motive, and I understood. It totally was a convincing lie in that moment… But once she shared that with me, it wasn’t anymore, and she could say that she wasn’t at all, and she wanted to use the lie serum to prove it to me since our trustworthiness was linked. I get that may sound complicated, but the bottom line is, there’s no way that Box Hako is anything more than an assistant to the Mastermind!”
“There we go. That’s proof enough, isn’t it?” Box asked, “I mean… Hum. Well, I guess it would have been better if you were correct, wouldn’t it? After all, figuring out the identity of Ultimate Judgment is a win condition. Right, Monokuma? If they’d gotten it right, then everybody could have been safe?”

“It’s true! And that’s exactly why you’re not able to know the truth! I mean, part of it’s cause as arbiter of the Killing Game I am completely incapable of giving away the answers anyhow, but, you can’t know because you would ruin it right away and let everyone out!” Monokuma laughed, “I’d say that the benefit of this sham of a Mastermind Trial is that you now know that there is one person who couldn’t be in charge here! But you’re gonna forget that anyway.”

“One? So the people who’ve already died aren’t excluded?” Kaede asked.

“Maybe so! But! You’re gonna forget about that too, you know!” Monokuma shouted, waving its arms around, “So how do you feel now about jumping the gun, huh? It’d be great if you could get it this early, oh yeah, except that the clues aren’t even there yet! There isn’t any way you could actually know who The Mastermind is, and I’d never let you get away with guessing it! You’re just a bunch of dumb heathens who don’t know what you’re talking about! It’s not possible to fulfill that win condition so early on!”

“…Mm,” Kaede dipped her head.

“Shouldn’t you be more upset? I thought you were obsessed with the idea of not having blood on your hands?” Monokuma interrogated, “But instead, Akamatsuuu, you’re gonna have blood on your hands, oh yeah. If any of the new participants die, or kill somebody? It’s your fault. It’s your fault that I gotta add four people. It’s your fault if anything happens to them, or if they do anything horrible. How do you feel about that, huh? How do you feel?”

“I…” Kaede took a deep breath, then brought her hands up to her face, “I thought that… I mean… I thought we’d die if we got it wrong, and I was so sure I had it right, that I could rescue everybody… But now…”

“Now you’re going back to square one, yeah!” Monokuma said, “Any motives from the first two cases which could still cause a murder? Forget them. Any information you’ve gleaned from this trial? Forget it. Of course, I’ll still remind you someday that it was your fault that more people had to die! And of course, these motives include the ones you used for your argument. That deep secret, that trust… Struck from the record! And not in effect anymore, either. So that little trick with the lie serum hitting two people at once isn’t about to happen again. I guess unless another motive ties you together.”

“What the hell!?” Sayaka questioned, “That’s just too cruel!”

“I told you ahead of time what would happen. Idiots,” Monokuma sighed, “I really did warn you! But now I’m gonna have to reset the Killing Game. Here’s the story you’re gonna get… The cameras failed to record all of the first day, so we need more content. That’s what it’ll be. I know that sounds especially petty, but…” It started laughing again, going from a sad and lethargic tone to an entirely upbeat one, “Isn’t that what you’d expect of Ultimate Despair anyway!? It’s way more accurate than this shitty truth! And eventually, I’ll tell Akamatsu that the failed recordings were because she went around tampering with the cameras! Yeah, that’s perfect, dontcha think?”
“Eventually… Hm. So basically, this was a big mistake we made,” Nami said, “And you’re giving us a cover story to make us think that it was just a whim of the people who put us here, and not a grave that we dug for ourselves?”

“Mhm!” Monokuma said, “So you can never learn from this mistake, of course! Why would I ever do something just to be nice? Anyway, I’ve got one more surprise for you to keep this sort of thing from happening again, but I think I’ll tell that to you out there in that brave new game. It’s the perfect idea to teach you not to foolishly call for a Mastermind Trial before it’s the proper time… And since you’re so eager for a win condition, add in another option that’s bound to be super interesting! Not that I want you to win. You’ll hate it, anyway.”

“…Of course,” Nami said.

“On top of that, I don’t want you waking up miserable. Gotta start the new game with a fresh face! Especially you, Nami! You dumb little depression girl. What do you care about Nozomi, he was a grade A asshole anyway! So, I’ll give you all some sweet dreams in the meantime. Just to smooth the mood, you get it? The new game’s not starting till eight in the morning tomorrow. You can get some nice rest as I tinker around in your brains. Upupu!”

“…Thanks,” Nami said, then closed her eyes and leaned on her podium again. She was done with this. Done with the day. Done with the game. She was ready for it to end.

Ready for the mulligan. Time to try again.

Four more people, huh?

She felt resolve swelling in her heart.

She’d lost Tomoe and Rei.

Etsuko and Shinjiro, she wished she could have known better.

So she would put her back into it the next time around. She’d been missing something she hadn’t even realized she needed to have. The strength to properly remember everyone.

Nami knew she couldn’t prevent death in a Killing Game. That was unrealistic. Deep down, she knew she couldn’t do it, because nobody could. Everyone was volatile. With the right motive, even she… Could probably be convinced into doing something awful. Even so, she got the feeling that she was on the edge of something great. On the brink of being useful.

She couldn’t save everybody. Even still, she could be sure of one thing. Anyone else that she lost… Whatever else happened… There was one thing that Nami could be sure of.

In the second edition of the fifty-fourth annual killing game.

Nami Kaguya would never again have regrets.
8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

Nami Kaguya was used to waking up in hospitals. But of course she was. She’d woken up in this hospital every morning over the last five days. And before that, she was often being injured. She didn’t know why. Her job was dangerous. She didn’t know what it was. This was a cot in a room in the Empty Wings, though. Like when she first woke up. Of course it was. The game was reset.

She didn’t know why that happened, either.

She did know it was true, though. Four new participants were being added, and previous motives were ‘no longer in play’. Any aspect of the past motives which was actually meant to be motivating was wiped out completely, assuming it hadn’t already done anything. Nami could remember her own motive, but it was a big thing already. She couldn’t remember what, for example, Goro’s motive had been.
She turned her head to the side. The other person in this room was about as small as Sayaka, but clearly the rooms had been shuffled about with the replacements added into the Killing Game. And Nami was the first one awake this time. She recognized, but couldn’t place where she knew this girl from. She stared at the sleeping form for a while, until she seized upon the name.

“Torimi?” She asked to the air, and Torimi stirred. She sat up, locked eyes with Nami.
“Ah… It’s you,” Torimi spoke, and that confirmed it. Torimi had always been so childish. A tiny, small girl whose voice and appearance would have never given the impression that she was seventeen.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Nami said, then reached out and put her palm against the top of Torimi’s head, “I’m sorry that you’re here.”

“Why?” Torimi asked.

“Because this is a Killing Game,” Nami answered, “There were already two trials, but something went wrong, and the game got reset. You’re one of the replacements for the people who already died.”

“Ohh no,” Torimi whined.

“I’ll protect you, though,” Nami offered.

“Nooo,” Torimi’s whine got even worse, “You’re no good at that sort of thing! If anythin, I’ll be protecting youuuuu.”

Nami pouted, “That’s rude! I’m still older than you, you know! Um, do you remember how we know each other?”

Torimi blinked a few times, then answered, “Well, we met through your job, but I don’t remember what that is. You’re an Ultimate, Namine?”
Right, that nickname. Somewhere along the line, ‘Nami-nee’ had been shortened and warped into ‘Namine’. It was kind of cute, Nami remembered, but sometimes it made other people call her ‘Namine-san’, which was kind of a disaster of language.


“Maybe it’s memes,” Torimi said.

“People keep saying that, but there’s no way the Ultimate Initiative would assign me the Ultimate Memer!” Nami pouted, then lifted her hand from Torimi’s head, “And, you’re the second coming of the Ultimate Fortuneteller, right?”

“Mph. Just cause the last one was all high-profile and stuff…” Torimi complained, “It’s not like I’m anything like him! They don’t call any of the other redone ultimates the ‘second coming’!”

“I think they call Ultimate Detectives that all the time, though,” Nami said, tapping a finger to her own chin as she looked up at the ceiling, “So it’s not like it’s just you. Besides, I know you’re not like him, but, nobody’s gonna think you are, or anything. What’s the big deal?”

“Pffmhp,” Torimi made a weird noise, then stood up. She was so little, but still a tiny bit taller than Sayaka. They were both legally dwarves though. Before Nami could even have any other reaction, Torimi led the way out of the room, but then froze when she saw the incredibly generic halls of the Empty Wings.

“I’ll take you to the dining hall,” Nami said, pressing her palm against Torimi’s back to lead her through those ultra-baffling halls. Even without looking at her Monopad, Nami knew her way around by now. Though, they were still a good distance from there, so it would take a while.

“So, Torimi,” Nami said, “You really don’t remember why we’re such good friends?”

“Not at all,” Torimi answered, “But it feels like it’d be really super weird to treat you like a neeew acquaintance… Cause, I know you. Real good! Just dunno why!”

“It’s probably because we met with my job,” Nami admitted, “My whole Ultimate Talent and all the memories connected to it are just totally gone from my mind! If my job was my talent, then of course it’s gone, and you wouldn’t remember either… Huh. I wonder if Bakura will still remember it?”

“I don’t know who that iiiis,” Torimi complained, looking up at Nami, “But if he remembers, why don’t you know it?”

“He’s a mean little bastard boy and he won’t tell me.”

“I hate him already!”

“Noo,” Nami waved her free hand around in a kind of panicked way, “Don’t hate him!”

“But he’s a mean little bastard boy, right?”

“Yeah, but in a good way!”

“You have the worst taste in men.”

“No, that’s you, Torimi,” Nami removed her hand from Torimi’s back, “And he’s just my friend! He’s gay soo-”
“So he’s being respectful of your dysphoria and not being attracted to youuuu, I get it,” Torimi said, then looked at her own nails and puffed her cheeks out, “Wish any of the guys I liked were that considerate.”

“The difference between you and me is that you’ll go out with gay boys anyway,” Nami noted. Having Torimi here was helping to flesh out the idea of who she had become after Tomoe left, even if the talent-related memories were still entirely lacking, “Which really isn’t good for you, you know! You really shouldn’t be getting misgendered on a date!”

“Well, it’s not like I’ll get the chance to change my ways now,” Torimi complained, “I am in a Killing Game.”

“That should keep you from going back to your old ways either, though, right?” Nami questioned.

“Ha! I wouldn’t bet on that!” A sharp, high and kind of obnoxious voice chimed in, and a girl dressed like cotton candy stepped forth from a doorway, “Has a Killing Game ever once stopped a slut from slutting about? Anyway. What the fuck is this about us being in a killing game, amazing titless duo? How can you already know that!”
“What- Hey! I’m taking E! I have B cups!” Nami defended herself, “And I don’t know who you are! But you’re one of the replacements! The game got reset after four people already died!”

“Me? A replacement? Jeeze,” The girl complained, flipping the front curl of her short hair back, “And who exactly am I meant to be replacing?”

“Four of you are here to replace Tomoe Kaguya, Etsuko Yushu, Shinjiro Nozomi, and Rei Akabane,” Nami said, “But since you’ve already been a bitch, I guess you’re replacing Nozomi. He was a real prick, and I’m still super sad that he died!”

“Ami Oishi,” The girl said, “That’s my name, who I am, on and on and on. I bet you’ve heard of me, though. Silly B-cup girls like you fall in love with me all the time~”

“You’re… Huh… What?” Nami was lost.

“Oishi Cafe, right?” Torimi asked, “So I guess you’re the Ultimate Caterer or something…? I thought that position needed customer serviiice, though.”

“No way! I’m the Ultimate Blackmailer Chef!” Amai exclaimed.

“The excuse me what?” Nami questioned.

“The Ultimate Blackmailer Chef. Strikeout included. It’s my entire title as given to me by the
Ultimate Initiative! And you better watch yourself, cause if you get on my bad side, I totally could ruin you!"

"...Ruin me to whomst?" Nami questioned, "There are fourteen other people here and there are only two of them who don't already know me better than to listen to what you have to say about me..."

"Mmph!" Amai made indignant noises, "It's half of my Ultimate talent, so I'll find a way! Anyway, it's all I'd have going for me in a dumb-shit Killing Game... All of you are obviously already friends, so us four replacements will be easy targets for your conscience!"

"That's... Not really true. Tori here is one of the replacements, but we were friends before the game," Nami said, "And as much as I wanna roast you and say that you probably don't have any friends, chances are that you already met at least one person here..."

"Huh? Really?" Amai asked, blinking, then her demeanor completely changed, high-pitched, uptempo, and pleading, "Tell me their names then! Tell me the names of the people who are here! Have I got some sweet prince who will protect me?"

"I don't really wanna do you that favor..." Nami mumbled.

"Please, come on!" Amai continued, "Just tell me the girls, first! If I have a sweet prince, she'd be a girl!"

"That seems a little counter-intuitive, but okay, I guess. There's three of us here, so five others. Kaede Akamatsu, Tsumugi Shirogane, Sayaka Yamaguchi, Riko Asahi, and Box Hako," Nami gave in.

"Whoa! Oh, golly!" Amai exclaimed, clapping her hands together just twice, "That's two sweet princes right there! God, those dumb girls are so in love with me. It's a big pain! But they'll protect me! Sayaka... Box... Haa, Ah, how are those two getting along?? I don't think they ever met before! That's right, I met Sayaka after Box disappeared... She's really here?"

"Yes," Nami deadpanned, "And I think they have some chemistry, so I don't know about-"

"Wow, wow wow!" Amai interrupted, "They get along that well? Well, yes, that's perfect, isn't it? Those sniveling wretches can take a break from worshipping the ground I walk on and spend some quality time with each other instead! My, my, that's perfect... My sweet princes, together~"

"They're not dating or anything," Nami said, "And... Okay, it's official. I don't get what your deal is."

"You don't have to get it!" Amai proclaimed and struck a pose, "The duality of my personality is reflected by the duality of my talent! You'd expect totally different behaviors from an Ultimate Blackmailer and from an Ultimate Chef, right? So, I mean, think about it! I may as well also get called the Ultimate Tsundere, with my hard as rocks exterior and utterly lovable inner self!"

"You aren't giving me any idea that you're utterly lovable on the inside," Nami said, then crossed her arms as she looked Amai over again, "If anything, you're a cute shell full of venom."

"Venom? Venom?" Amai questioned, then struck a condescending pose and laughed, "Of course! That's a perfectly useful thing, isn't it? Isn't it just? Hahaha! Yes! I have lots and lots of venom that I am going to use with impunity!"

"Hey, Amai..." Box's voice interrupted, "What are you doing?"
“Here? What am I doing here? I was wondering the same thing!” Amai proclaimed, rushing past Nami and Torimi to grasp at Box’s wrists.

“No, I’m not surprised that you’re here,” Box said, averting her eyes with a nervous chuckle, “I kind of figured, that with ‘replacements’ coming in, you’d be among them, but… why are you yelling about venom?”

“Oh! That!” Amai said, then let go of Box and swooped around to exaggeratedly hide behind her, “These flat-chested lolcows were bullying me! They said that I’m a cute shell full of venom!”

“Huh?” Box questioned, “Amai, isn’t that more of a compliment than I’ve ever even given you?”

“Don’t say that! You’re in love with me and you know it!” Amai whined, “You give me compliments all the time, and they’re not backhanded dummy compliments that are trying to say that I’m a rude person!”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Box said.

“Nooo, now you’re being mean too! Come on! I just found out I’m in a Killing Game, so you gotta cut me some slack.”

“Mmhm, yes Amai,” Box looked to Nami and Torimi, “Hi. Please don’t mind her. It’s nice to meet you, new one! I’m Box Hako.”

“Box. Box Hakooo?” Torimi questioned, staring at her, then frowned, “That is… The numbah-one stupidest name I ever heard!”

“Aww, you’re cute,” Box said, then, “So, Nami. She’s your friend?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “I don’t remember how we met or anything, but yeah, we were friends before. This kid’s pretty cool. Even if she says something dumb the first time she speaks to you.”

“I didn’t think it was dumb. I take pride in having the… numbah-one stupidest name,” Box giggled, then turned around and faced Amai, “I’ll take you to the dining hall, okay? The kitchen there is pretty good.”

“Yes, Box…” Amai sighed with a pout. Nami chuckled at the sight. So this girl was cowed into submission by the innocent cinnamon roll everybody knew as Box? That was a bit surprising, but at least there was somebody here who could control the cotton-candy menace. With that, those four girls made their way to the cafeteria.
In the dining hall, most of the participants were already there. Only missing were Yuuri, Kanoshi, and Mitsuru… And another guy replacement. One of them was here. Nami left the group behind to approach him, where he was sitting alone at a table. The others had grouped together in the ways that they usually did. Torimi joined Nami, while Box and Amai went to sit and catch up with Sayaka.

“Hi,” Nami greeted the new guy, “I’m Nami Kaguya. I get that this is probably stressful…”

“Not really,” He said, leaning on his hand, “Tsukune Madara. I kind of figured this was inevitable, so here I am, and it’s happening. Whatever. Nice to meet you, I guess? It is kind of weird that there’s so many of you oldies here, though.”
“So you’re seventeen,” Nami observed, then pulled out a chair and sat down. Torimi sat on the table, leaning in Tsukune’s direction, “So is Tori here. Um, Torimi Shinoe. Anyway, I’m guessing the others explained everything to you already?”
“Yeah, and then I told them to go away,” Tsukune said, “You two seem on the level, though. That Randy guy, too, but I couldn’t exactly say ‘everyone but Randy, go away’. I’m still processing this shit, so I don’t need to deal with nonsense…”

“You’ve got a good eye,” Nami said, “But your radar kinda sucks at the same time. I think that maybe two people here are straight.”

“That would be me and?” Torimi asked.

“Mitsuru. He’s so straight he has two girlfriends. He’s cool anyway, though. Kind of like a wise uncle,” Nami said, then looked back to Tsukune, “So, it’s not like you have to worry about that kind of thing.”

“…” Tsukune hesitated a moment, then mumbled, “I mean, just cause they aren’t straight doesn’t mean they’ll get along with me.”

“I’ll definitely get-” Torimi started.

“Sorry,” Tsukune interrupted with a roll of his one visible eye, “I’m not interested in a relationship.”

“Ohhh, shoot a girl down, why dontcha?” Torimi whined.

“I take great joy in it,” Tsukune laughed. His shirt seemed to show that he leaned into it, reading ‘it’s not hot in here’, and on the back, ‘it’s just me’. Nami immediately got what he meant when he said he wasn’t interested in a relationship, though.

“It’s not about you, Tori. This guy’s just reveling in the fact that he’s a totally asexual hotboy,” Nami explained, clapping a hand against Torimi’s back, “Were I him, I would definitely do the same. Instead, I’m just a very bisexual uglygirl.”

“Pft,” Tsukune stuck his tongue out at her, “You just making fun of me, or you actually think that’s a true statement? Cause my orientation doesn’t keep me from understanding the concept of attraction, clearly. I know that I am spectacularly handsome. You seem to me like somebody who’s spectacularly gorgeous.”

“That’s not true. Me and some of the others were talking about our types,” Nami said, “And I am definitely not anybody here’s type! And I’m pretty sure the one girlfriend I might have had outside of this place didn’t like me for my looks!”

“Dumb,” Tsukune smirked, “Jeeze. Girls are the same, no matter how long they’ve been one. Just accept that you’re an objectively cute person and move on,” He hesitated, and glanced at Torimi, “Same goes for you, if you have an inferiority complex too.”

“Oh yeaaaah, a giant one,” Torimi laughed, “Got nothin to do with my cuteness though. I know I’m adorable! Just don’t know if I’m girly enough sometimes…” She narrowed her eyes and looked at another table, “And, come on, is that girl over there shorter than me? How’d that happen? I totally went to great lengths according to the alignment of the stars to keep myself little and cute! So how did sheee do it??”

“Genetics, I guess,” Nami shrugged.

“According to the alignment of the stars?” Tsukune questioned.

“Oh, um, right. I’m theeee…” Torimi trailed off to an awkward mumble, “Ultimate Fortuneteller.”
“Hm. You should be more proud of your Ultimate Talent, shouldn’t you?” Tsukune asked, “Myself, if it wasn’t obvious, I’m the Ultimate Pyrotechnician.”

“I mean, considerin the first Ultimate Fortuneteller, it’s kind of…” Torimi whined.

Tsukune stared at her for a minute, “So that’s what your inferiority complex is about. Okay. Well, as long as you make it clear that you are a girl, that shouldn’t matter.”

“But if people think that I’m like him…”

“Then, I’ll fight ‘em,” Tsukune offered with an exaggeratedly casual shrug, “Look at what my talent is. You think I couldn’t fuck somebody up for the sake of my newfound good friend Torimi?”

Torimi turned pink at this statement, then hid her face in her hands, “Good… Grief… It’s a cryin shame… No… It’s a crime! It’s a crime that nobody gets to date youuuuu!”

“So,” Nami spoke up again, “Everyone here has got some connection with somebody else, so, have you figured out who yet, Madara?”

“Call me Tsukune, that’s the name I picked,” Tsukune said, then leaned a cheek against his palm, “I haven’t yet. Can’t imagine who I’d know here, to be real with you. In keeping with my talent, I burn most of the bridges I build before too long. It’s only a matter of time before my newfound good friend Torimi gets too fed up with me rejecting her, and then I’ll be a poor lone wolf all over again.”

“I don’t think that will happen,” Nami said, “Anyway, I guess the connection could be with somebody who hates you…”

“...Hm, that’s right,” Tsukune noted, then sighed as if it was just a mild inconvenience, “I guess my days are numbered.”

“Don’t say that!” Nami complained.

“Well, if what you say is true, then what I say is true,” Tsukune said, “It’s not a big deal. If I’m in a Killing Game, I’ll end up getting killed. I’ve already accepted this.”

“That’s a bad outlook,” Torimi joined Nami in complaining about Tsukune’s attitude.

“Aw, stuff it,” Tsukune groaned.

“...Tsukkun?” Kanoshi’s voice came from the doorway, “That’s gotta be you, right?”

“Wha?” Tsukune turned to look, then responded without missing a beat, “Oh, so it didn’t have to be somebody that I’ve met face-to-face. Hi Kanokun. Or, I guess, I should call you Kyosuke here, right?”

“Um, yes, if you don’t mind,” Kanoshi said, then decided he ought to explain himself, “Madara and I met in a mobile games chatroom. Um, we’ve also played some MMOs together. I… Well… Sorry you’re here now?”

“Damn. And here I thought you’d be glad to see me.”

“I mean, I am! But this is a Killing Game!”

“It is,” Tsukune clicked his tongue, “But, you know me. It’s no skin off my back. Good to see you
lived this long, piece of crap. GG WP.”

“A Killing Game is not GG!” Kanoshi protested, only for Yuuri to chuckle at him from where he’d wandered in after him. So only Mitsuru and the other new guy were missing now.

Sixteen people again. Nami hoped it would last for at least a few days.
“So, Kyosuke,” Tsukune asked, “These people any good?”

“Huh? Um…” Kanoshi was definitely put on the spot here, given his paranoia in the previous trial, but took a deep breath and answered, “…Yes. They’re good people. I don’t know if I trust them, but they’re fine and nice.”

“Aw, Kyosuke,” Kaede put on a dripping, saccharine voice, “You really do care… No, really. Thank you for that endorsement. I was really scared you hated us all.”

“I definitely don’t hate you all…” Kanoshi confirmed, “I’m just scared, you know?”

“Of course. We all are. Especially since Monokuma reset the game out of nowhere after Nozomi’s execution…” Tsumugi sighed from next to Kaede, “I wish we had an explanation, you know?”

Kaede frowned at that statement, and Nami understood why. If Nami could feel it, then a detective certainly could, too. That shroud, as if the reason was something that she ought to know, some horrible secret that was being hidden away.

“I’m sure it will explain everything once everyone has arrived,” Box spoke up, assuring everybody. And, as if on cue, that was when Mitsuru walked in with an unfamiliar guy who looked way too old to be here but then again, so had Mitsuru at first.

“Hey everyone!” Mitsuru got their attention, “This is my old buddy, Kurou Ueda! He’s the Ultimate Carpenter, so he’s one of the new people… Any of the others turned up yet?”
The three who were already there raised their hands.

“I see,” Kurou said, then glanced around the room before chuckling, “Mitsuru, it looks as if we’re the late arrivals. There’s fourteen people already here.”

“Oh… Hm, yes,” Mitsuru realized, “That’s true. Well, then I guess we should go around and introduce ourselves, right?”

At Mitsuru’s prompting, they did in fact, all introduce themselves. Most of them already knew each other, but it was for the benefit of the new participants. Upon the completion of these introductions, Nami observed Kurou walk over to where Sayaka was sitting and introduce himself to her.

"Hey, um... Yamaguchi, was it?" He asked, pointing at her casually from where he stood beside her chair.

"Yes? Fucker?" Sayaka answered, crossing her arms as she did.

"I..." Kurou hesitated a moment, then continued, "Well, I was wondering, if you wouldn't mind getting to know me a bit. It's just, your eyes and hair, you kind of remind me of my daughter. It would make me feel a little bit less worried, is all."

"Your... What?" Sayaka froze, "Your daughter?"
"Kurou! You shouldn't have mentioned that fact, that's a serious death flag, you know," Mitsuru protested.

Kurou scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, "I can't just not mention them. Anyway, it isn't that shocking, is it? Someone who's twenty might be jumping the gun a little bit, but it's not like it's unusual for people my age to be married... With children. Does it really increase my chances of dying to say I want to get back to my wife and daughter? I'd think that should make people want to kill me less."

"It would make people think you have a reason to kill, though," Mitsuru explained.

"Oh! Well, I won't do anything like that," Kurou said, "As much as I miss my family, I'm certain all of you who have them are missing yours as well, or at least, missing somebody. It isn't any motivation to kill somebody. I could only even dream of doing such a thing in self-defense. There's no other way that even my subconscious would deem plausible."

"Mister righteous here," Sayaka stuck her tongue out, "Didn't you hear what my talent is? I'm pretty sure that you don't want to get to know me."

"Heh. What, you think I've never gotten tied up with the mob before?" Kurou asked, "I'm surprised I never met you before! Heck, maybe I did, but since my daughter wasn't born yet, you didn't stand out to me."

"You... huh?" Sayaka tilted her head to the side, puzzled by that statement, "But you said..."

"As the Ultimate Carpenter, I get loads of rush jobs, tough jobs, et cetera! So the mob said they'd forgive my debts if I helped out no cost with some reconstructions after an earthquake in a town that's their territory," He explained, then laughed a little, "Of course, to start off with I was involved enough to get those debts in the first place."

"You're a jigsaw alright," Sayaka said, "Anyway. Asking me outright if we can get to know each other is pretty dumb, isn't it? If we're gonna get along, it doesn't have to be some predetermined thing. Actually, that probably makes it less likely that we'd be friends for real."

"I guess that's correct, but it's less so that I'm asking you outright to be my friend, and more that I'd like your permission to make that effort in spite of my reasons being a little bit strange," Kurou explained.

"In that case," Sayaka said, "I mean, you didn't make your point very well, but I don't give a shit what you want to do. Go ahead and try to be my friend, think you'll find it's kinda difficult though."

"It's not difficult at all, Sayaka," Kaede assured her. Those two got along pretty well, although neither of them could actually remember how they got to know each other. Obviously Monokuma would wipe the memory of their conspiracy to find the Mastermind early, and that was the time that Sayaka and Kaede spent together, but somehow their connection was preserved.

With that conversation sorted, Nami stood and approached Kurou now, herself. She wanted to know everybody, after all. She didn't remember the context, but she knew that she was resolved not to have interpersonal regrets following the reset. She held a hand out towards him, "Hi, I get along pretty well with your friend Fujishiro, so it's nice to meet you!"

"Oh, hello!" Kurou greeted her, then paused and stared for a second before narrowing his eyes in scrutiny, "This will sound very strange, but looking at you gives me the overwhelming urge to pat
"Please do," Nami said, "There is literally nothing that would make me happier than to receive headpats from a guy I just met."

"No wonder he's already married," Torimi piped in, "What's with these perfect men I won't stand a chance at getting with, huh?"

"Get good," Nami teased, "Be bi."

"It's not like there are options with the girls either!" Torimi whined, "Except for you, I guess."

"Hey now, no matter what Oishi may say, there are some girls who aren't off the market yet," Nami protested, "I have a chance!"

Even Nami was surprised at herself for saying this, though. Wasn't there supposed to be Kira? Why did she still totally feel single, even with that flashback in play? Maybe they'd broken up after all, and some part of her still knew it.

And... Hm. Thinking back to that time.

Her current outfit was actually beginning to frustrate her.
"Upupu! Hello, you bastardous heathens!" Monokuma appeared, "Everyone is gathered, so it's about time that I explained what's going on here..."

"This is the fifty-fourth annual Killing Game, take two. There were some technical errors earlier, so four people already died, but we lost a bunch of the footage so we had to do it over again! So, most of the rules are in your Monopad, but here are the most important ones. The aim of the game is to kill somebody and get away with it!"

"When somebody dies for any reason that could possibly be called into question, an investigation will occur, followed by a trial. If the trial concludes with anybody but the killer being found the culprit, then two people will escape at the culprit's choice. This does not have to include the culprit. All others will be executed."

"However! This is actually not the only win condition for this game. For one, everyone remaining will escape upon correctly, and with evidence, determining the Mastermind's identity. These clues, however, are only available once each floor is open. Floors only open when a murder occurs."

"Furthermore, I'm adding another win condition. This will not just be a Killing Game. We are also going to be playing something called The Evil King's Game. This presents two new win conditions. For most of you, the win condition is... Defeat the Evil King, and everybody who remains alive will escape. Defeat here means to cause the death of, not necessarily to kill directly. Meanwhile, the Evil King's win condition is for the 'Evil King's Gun' to kill two people. Everyone left alive will escape. This weapon can only be found by the Evil King, and the Evil King cannot confess. Please check your Monopads for a note on your status in this game. This note will not appear again at any point in the future."

Nami looked down at her Monopad. You are not the Evil King!

Good. Even ignoring the fact that it would be a terrible role to have, Nami didn't like the idea of being called a King at all.

"You may be wondering... Mister Monokuuuma, why are you giving us more options to win? Are you getting soft? Hah! The answer is no! No, not at all! Isn't this spicy? The Evil King and The Mastermind are two different people. Therefore, you have two unknown enemies among you!! And if The Mastermind wants to turn coat, they could totally go after the King instead. Of course, if you murder the Evil King, you'll still end up executed after a trial, but you'll have saved your friends. What a great way to shake up the tired formula! Fun, let's all have fun!"

"This isn't fun at all," Tsumugi complained, "And, couldn't those of us who aren't the Evil King say that we are, and find them through process of elimination."

"Dare you to try it," Monokuma laughed.

"Um... Could anyone who is not the Evil King please raise their hand?" Tsumugi raised her voice to be heard around the room.

And every hand went up.

"You see? The Evil King must fulfill their role, no matter what. Even the most righteous among you will lie about this. There's no cheaping out of this situation," Monokuma explained, "Moving
on, how about some motives?"

"Are you kidding?" Nami groaned, "You gave us fifteen hours last time."

"Tough cookies! I didn't give you that much time between the first trial and the second motive's announcement, did I? Anyway, this next motive... You're gonna get three today, and two at every meal from here on out! We'll call this the 'Family Medical History' motive! At random selection, I'll be giving out information about a different person who held a participant's Ultimate Talent. But, something only you can figure out for yourselves, at one of these meals I'll be handing out info that actually applies to the current iteration of the talent."

"I thought that the Evil King's Game is enough of a new motive," Tsumugi said.

"Not at all! It's a separate game, not a motivation for the Killing Game," Monokuma explained, "So, come one, come all, let's watch the Devil's Roulette spin and see who's going to be exposed!"

With that, a wheel appeared with... Seventeen faces on it? Nami noticed immediately that Monokuma was also there.

"I'll take one for the team, and just," Monokuma manually spun the wheel so the dial sat on its own wedge, "Put myself on the chopping block first, during this three-person event. I mean, come on! Why else would it be three to start, then two each meal, if it was an even number?"

"I was right," Sayaka breathed, "You are a participant."

"Of course!" Monokuma agreed, "With some special privileges, of course. For example, executions and punishments for rulebreaking don't count as me killing anyone, for example. It's against the rules for one participant to kill more than two people, but for me, it only counts as a murder if I actually used my own two paws."

"So, all along, you could have had the lie serum and we wouldn't have known?" Kaede asked, "You wouldn't have informed us that you did, after all. And then we would have assumed that one of us was being untruthful about not having it that day..."

"Mm, yeah! That could have happened! But it didn't," Monokuma said, "Unless you think that you were wrong about something."

"When I lost the lie serum that first day," Nami spoke up, "Could Shirogane have lost it too, and have it shifted to you?"

"No, she definitely still had it after dinner," Kaede confirmed.

"Yeah, and I'll confirm it too! I never got the lie serum. In addition, two of the things that I said that evening are completely, one hundred percent true. If you want, I can say it in red-"

"What good would saying it in red do for anybody?" Randy asked, then waited a beat before calling out again, "How exactly do you make your words be a color, anyway!?"

"What, like it's hard?" Nami laughed.

"What? What the fuck? How are you doing that?" Randy questioned.

"Of course somebody with Nami's talent would know how to use colored truths!" Goro laughed.

"What exactly is that talent?" Kurou asked, "I thought that she didn't know what it was."
"She doesn't. I do, though!" Goro explained, then leaned over, "Anyway, Monokuma. Tell us what your truth was, and then riddle me this. How will you represent somebody like Nami who doesn't know what her talent is?"

"Truth number one: I am a one of a kind Monokuma. I cannot be in two places at once. If I were killed, I would be legitimately dead. That isn't possible though, because violence against the headmaster is forbidden. Truth number two: There is one artificial intelligence in this hospital. Motherkuma is preprogrammed and does not count. Aaaand, the answer to the riddle! This motive will hinge on the true Ultimate Talent, but will not say outright what that talent is. Even so, most of the information will be very obvious."

"With that," Monokuma said, "I'll present the motives! First off. The last one with my talent tricked somebody they didn't like into breaking a rule, effectively killing them without becoming a culprit," It spun the wheel again, and it landed on Torimi's face, "The last one with Torimi Shinoe's talent was a crossdresser who was very cute, and capable enough to let people think he was a girl until his boyfriend was ready to come out!" And once more, "The last one with Mitsuru Fujishiro's talent decided using their talent that the Cult of N was the objectively best religion."
"Well," Tsukune was the first one to react to those statements, "This was obviously not the batch that involved the truths. Torimi is a girl, and she already complained to me about worrying people would think she was the same as that guy."

"Also, there's no reason for an actual Monokuma to do what it was saying. I bet there was a normal participant who was an Ultimate Headmaster, and that's what happened there," Randy added in.

"And Fujishiro is agnostic. He's said that knowing as much as he does about different religions, it's impossible to choose one. But he has a fondness for Shinto, since it's what his family practices," Nami piped up, "And Yamaguchi would never be friends with him if that were true, either."

"I'm sure that the last Ultimate Theologist ended up becoming Despair," Sayaka said, arms crossed, "That's the only way anybody could make that decision."

"It's easy to debunk these things, since we already know each other," Tsukasa piped up. Boy, Nami realized, it might get a little confusing that both Tsukasa and Tsukune existed in the same place. Maybe she ought to refer to Tsukune as Madara in her mind, too. Yeah, she'd do that. He might not like to hear she was doing so, but it was just so she could keep track of things.

"I for one, know I'd be willing to admit to anything that's said about me, if it were to be about me rather than the last person with my talent," Kurou spoke up, "The batch that's true, only one of the two has to be willing to admit it, right?"

"Maybe that's what Monokuma is banking on," Yuuri said, "It knows that we aren't really gonna turn on each other at this point, so even if one of the truths is harmless, if the other one is something that should be kept under wraps, then it might not be exposed at all."

"What exactly are you getting at?" Tsukasa asked.

"Oh, no, I get it," Madara chuckled, "Say the two truths were 'had red as a favorite color' and 'once killed somebody outside of a killing game'. The first person might then claim that blue is their favorite color in an attempt to protect the other. And, as much as we're all explaining for each other rather than defending ourselves, it's even possible a truth about one person could mean something painful for another. Some of those first round motives still exist, right? They're just not actual murder motives anymore. Even still, that connection could make one of these motives more poignant, couldn't it?"

"Hm, you're right," Nami agreed with Madara without hesitation, "I sure wouldn't put that past Monokuma. It makes sense. For example, Kyosuke and Fujishiro sharing the same opinion of children is definitely not a motive right now. But it could become one again, if this motive made it seem like one or the other of them has a different opinion than we originally thought."

"In that case, we oughta share which of us still have round one motives, right? Cause, mine's disappeared. From memory and from Monopad," Goro piped up.

"I still share a body count with Kyosuke," Nami said, "Which, we already got sorted out and everything, it was never gonna be an issue."

"Right. And since you already said you remembered it, my motive still exists," Kanoshi spoke up.
"I shared a past job with Ruka," Randy said.

"I can't remember what mine was," Yuuri noted.

"I shared a middle school with Nozomi. Again, already resolved," Sayaka said.

"Mine's still listed on the Monopad, but it has a little stamp next to it that says 'expired'," Kaede spoke up. "So it's nothing that would cause a problem, so it was left intact, but it isn't true anymore."

Riko made a noise by tapping her whiteboard against the table to get people's attention, then held it and her Monopad up. The Monopad still had the motive for sharing siblings with Tomoe, and the whiteboard read, "That's right. I've gotten over my crush on your girlfriend, so it's an expired motive. I also think that neither of us can really say we're now attracted to a girl who's been dead for days."

"That makes sense," Kaede said, "And, again, I didn't really mind your crush on Tsumugi, cause it's not like I don't have a case of wandering eyes."

"Kaede!" Tsumugi complained, but then turned and laughed a little, bitterly, "Mine is marked as expired as well. Because, I guess... Dead girls don't have dreams."

"On the topic of expired motives," Mitsuru said, "Mine is, too. Monokuma did say that the sibling motives were relating to 'known and acknowledged' siblings. Previously, you had your stepbrother and I had my sister, but... Now that it was confirmed Ruka and I share a father, this motive fails to be correct, but is also harmless enough to still be listed."

"Don't think I'm gonna start calling you 'Aniki' or anything," Yuuri complained, "You're still, basically a stranger to me, even if that bastard fucked both our moms."

"I wouldn't expect you to, of course," Mitsuru said, "And you seem perfectly capable of caring for yourself, so when it comes to honorary younger siblings in my eyes, I certainly won't count you."

"My motive is still active, too," Tsukasa said, "It's not about to change. Nami and I went to the same middle school, and became friends there, even if I didn't recognize her when we first got here."

"And, that's it, I think," Kaede said, glancing around the room, "All the motives that are still in play. Bakura's is gone, Hako didn't even check her Monopad and I certainly can't remember what hers was... Ruka's is gone too. The only motives of the dead I can remember are Yushu's and Kaguya's."

"So, we have all of that sorted out," Nami said, "That's good to know."

"Yes, indeed," Kaede agreed, then took a deep breath, then sighed, "And I dearly hope none of these things turn out relevant to the next case."

The next case... Right. Eventually, that would have to happen.

Nami looked over, and realized that Goro was sitting by himself. Not with Box, for once. It seemed... Ah. Of course. Monokuma hates quarantine, it said so itself during the last trial. So when the game was reset, people also lost the priority of not letting Goro be alone. Nami never thought that was very helpful, so she retained the memory of it. Well, this was helpful for her purposes. Maybe even a little bit too convenient.
"Goro" Nami addressed him by his first name as she sat down across from him now.

"Yes, dear Nami?" Goro tilted his head with a sweet smile, "Have you finally decided that we should totally definitely be best friends?"

"No, I can't say I've remembered meeting you yet," Nami said, "But I'm starting to remember a few things."

"Do you know your talent yet?" Goro asked.

"I have a hunch," Nami chuckled, "But I don't want to announce it until I'm a little more certain. But, I'm getting enough bits of my memory back, that... Well, this sweatshirt isn't very suited to me these days, is it?"

"It sure isn't," Goro said, then leaned forward and a grin split his face, into his cheeks, "Now I'm excited, Nami. At this rate, how good you did last trial, your memories coming back... It's gonna be really something to behold!"

"It would be nice if I could be beheld in clothes that were a bit more personal than these," Nami said.

"It sure would, wouldn't it?" Goro joked, "If only somebody had thought about that, and spent hours in his ward making sure that the right outfit would be waiting for you when you were ready! If only~"
Goro and Nami left the dining hall together, just the two of them, quietly. Randy seemed to be the only one who even noticed, but didn't say anything, just smirking in their direction. Nami turned pink, wondering if Randy had gotten the memo that Goro was only attracted to men. Besides, even though Goro was kind of cute, he wasn't so much her type, and his personality really did dash any idea that actually dating him would go well for anybody at all.

They went straight to Nami's room, skipping the ward altogether. It was like Goro had perfectly predicted this course of action. The outfit was there, hanging on her doorknob already. Exactly recreated from her memories. It was obvious he'd seen her wearing it before, plenty of times. It was exact. Even included the accessories. All it was missing was shoes, which was fine, she was already wearing mary Janes.

"By the way, I stole some of your clothes to get your measurements," Goro explained, "So it should fit right, even though you're a lil bit curvier than you were last time I saw you in it."

That was right. The memories she was getting of when she wore this before made it obvious that the hormones were really working for her over time. If she'd pulled this off back then, she could pull it off even more now.

"Wait, how did you get my clothes to take the measurements?" Nami asked.

"Well, I got Hako to do it for me," Goro said.

"How did she get them?" Nami's question still hadn't really been answered.

"Does it matter how or why? You should go and get changed," Goro said, "Oh, and don't worry about the future, Monokuma confirmed that if I put in the work to make the outfit, it could copy it for your wardrobe's sake! Isn't it great?"

"It's... Yeah," Nami chuckled, then turned and reached out, ruffling Goro's hair, "I still don't understand all this, or why you're so obsessed with me, but, thank you. You... Are a good friend. I mean it."

"Heh... Thanks! And you are the most amazing person I've met in my whole life!" Goro confirmed, then took a step back, "I'm gonna go back to the dining hall now, so come and meet us there when you're ready!"

With that, he left her. Nami took a deep breath, then pulled the outfit from the doorknob and brought it into her room with her. She got changed, finishing off the look with the bow that went in her hair, then looked at herself in the mirror. She was Nami Kaguya. Yeah, she was, and she was looking at herself now. She stuck her tongue out, in a kind of cute pose, then burst out laughing at herself. This was silly. She was being silly. Didn't she deserve to be able to do something silly, though?
She felt good. Not nervous or worried that people were going to think she looked foolish. And she needed something like this right now, and to remember that she still had people here for her. Tsukasa was one of her close friends, and as much as she was weirded out by Goro, she was beginning at the very least to trust that he had good intentions.

And, armed with her new old outfit, Nami left her room and approached the dining hall again. She hesitated outside of it, hearing people chat from within. And... Amai’s voice. Hm. There was that little hiccup, wasn't there? Before the reset, Nami didn't have confidence, but she had undeniable support. Now, there was one person here who might actually fulfill her worst nightmare, who might say all the rotten things she was terrified to hear.

But, Torimi was here also. Torimi, who'd definitely seen her in this outfit before and wouldn't pause to see it. Then, the new guys, Kuro and Madara. Both of them were nice. So it wasn't like the reset was a detriment from a purely social position. It would be fine, Nami assured herself. Definitely, it totally would. She walked in.
...Huh. Damn. I guess that you totally do have B Cups," Amai was the first one to say something, and it actually wasn't rude. A wave of relief washed over Nami at that, even when Amai's next words were, "That hoodie was a big mistake, it totally hid your feminine wiles! Why the fuck didn't you just wear that lil number to start with?? You're a fucking vamp!

Nami didn't know what that meant, exactly, but she decided to take it as a compliment.

"Amai-nee is... right..." Sayaka both agreed, and confirmed that she did get along with the sharp-tongued girl enough to consider her an older sister. Though, it did seem like Sayaka latched onto that idea wherever she could- "You never should have worn that sweatshirt."

Then, she turned away, visibly biting her tongue like she was frustrated somehow.

"Yeah, that's true! Why did you! Actually, that was cause of Monokuma!" Monokuma appeared, "With memories missing, this outfit would have been a stressful thing to wake up in. But, Nami, you're good with it now, right?"

"Yes," Nami said, clasping her hands together as she nodded, "I'm gucci."

"Gucci? Nah, you're not bougie enough for that, besides, this is cuter than designer clothes anyhow," Monokuma laughed, "Well, in that case, I'll replace your wardrobe with copies. I'll leave one set of the old stuff there, just in case you need to do something like, I dunno, climb a jungle gym? That's about all that ensemble is good for!"

"Um, thank you?" Nami expressed her confused gratitude, then Monokuma left, and she turned back to her friends, "So, I... Yeah. This outfit is a little more fitting to my talent. I think. I'm still not certain what it is."

"You look about ready for a symphony!" Kurou chuckled and flashed her a thumbs-up, "Maybe your talent is to play an instrument. I bet it's something elegant, like violin!"

"I'm not sure about that..." Nami chuckled, shuffling on her feet. That was a cute guess, but she had no musical talent. That was something which was easy to tell, after all. An Ultimate Musician of any variety probably needed perfect pitch, or close to it. Nami couldn't even tell the difference between a high C and a medium A. She didn't even know if notes could be called medium.

"Dooo you have an idea what it iiis?" Torimi asked, "If you tooold me, I might remember how we met 'n stuff."

Nami smiled, "Oh, I think I know it, but I want to be sure before I tell anybody."

"...Huh?" Box asked, "You think you know? Really?"

"Yeah," Nami said, "I think so. I probably need to remember a few more things to be sure, though. But... It's comforting just to have an idea of it. I promise, I'll let everybody know soon."
Nami didn't actually sit down again, instead being approached by Sayaka, "Hey. There's gotta be new Ultimate Wards open now, y'know. We should check them out."

"Um, you and me?" Nami asked.

"Yeah. You got a problem with that?" Sayaka asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"A problem? No..." Nami said, "I just figured that you'd want to go with Akamatsu, or Hako and Oishi, or Ruka and Kyosuke."

"Meh," Sayaka stuck her tongue out, "Akamatsu's already planning to investigate with three people. Ruka and Kyosuke are still kinda fighting, so that'd be super awkward! And, well... Mm. Don't tell anyone, but I'm kinda, disappointed that Amai-nee is here."

"Cause there's the possibility she'll get hurt?" Nami asked.

"Cause," Sayaka frowned, "I don't wanna feel... Obligated... To spend time with her, just cause we were friends before all this? I mean, obviously, I don't want anyone to be here! But also, it's confusing. Everything I learned about baking and stuff, I learned from her, so she's gonna overshadow me. And she's gonna wanna be around me more than I might want! I totally do care about her, but she's a lot, you know?"

"I get it," Nami said, reaching out to put a hand on Sayaka's shoulder... And landing on her head, instead, because she was short, "Hey, if it makes you feel better, I caught myself thinking that Oishi was a downside of the reset."

"She's pretty fucking mean," Sayaka admitted, then reached up and grabbed Nami's wrist. For a moment, Nami thought this move was to, say, tell her off for touching her, but she instead moved straight into dragging Nami out of the room, "Goddamn idiot keeps saying me and Hako are both in love with her. How's she gonna go around saying that? It's not true, I'll have you know. It was annoying before the game, but it pisses me off even more now that I'm actually around people whose company I enjoy!"

"Do you like her that way?" Nami asked.

"If I did, it would just be embarrassing when she claimed I did, but I don't. She's not my type at all! That's why it pisses me off," Sayaka was full-on venting now, her grip on Nami's wrist a bit uncomfortably tight, "Cause it's gonna give people the wrong idea! It totally is!"

"So, what kind of girl is your type? You weren't part of that discussion in the Runner's Ward..." Nami asked, "I'll be upfront with mine so you can feel good about it telling me, right? My type of girl has long hair, and more confidence than me... Looks cute in glasses, even if she doesn't wear them. Yeah, I think that's what is cute in a girl, for me. Hm... Bonus points if her chest is flatter than mine, that'd just make me feel good!" She gave a good-natured cackle.

"Um, I see!" Sayaka noted, then started laughing nervously, losing all of the composure she'd had up to this moment while complaining about Amai. "Well, it's not like Amai is physically not my type... Physically I think my type is just... Girls? Short hair is cute though, I guess I tend to like kind of messy short hair on girls? Umm girls. Personality, though! That's what the trouble is with Amai-nee. I'm really rough around the edges and pretty loud, and pretty angry and stuff... Um, you could call me a tsundere, probably. And she's always claiming herself to be a tsundere. That's not..."
compatible! So, someone like me, kinda needs someone more upbeat, honest with her feelings, maybe has a better sense of humor than I do. Yeah, that seems about right."

"Heh," Nami giggled at that, "Wow. You're a disaster."

"I'm well aware!" Sayaka raised her voice for a moment, then averted her eyes and tried to speak normally again, "Here's the stairs, you know."

"Right," Nami agreed, then gestured at them, "You should go first, though."

"Hm? Oh," Sayaka realized that she was the one in pants here, "Yes, that's right, I should, mmhm," Up the stairs she went. Nami followed after.

This floor looked a bit different from the lower ones. While they'd appeared similar to the usual floors of an abandoned hospital, this one was somehow creepier. More decrepit, and there were holes in the floor that didn't look like they could lead anywhere, given the floor below had no holes in the ceiling. There were bits where the tile was missing, too, exposing catwalk-like metal flooring.

"Freaky Friday," Nami observed, then looked up to see the signs. Detective's Ward, Theologist's Ward, and... Chef's Ward?

"What the," Sayaka was equally confused, "The reset was just planned, right? How does Amai-nee already have a ward?"

"Yushu's was left unfinished because of when he died, so how..." Nami muttered.

"Come on," Monokuma appeared, "It's not like that ward was difficult to create. Besides, it's way easier to get a jump on things and leave a ward unavailable, than to scramble to get one done in time. I finished the wards on this floor a day before the body discovery."

"But, the reset-" Sayaka protested.

"Was a precaution! The last game went so shittily awful! At the third case, everything started going off the rails, and it ended up broken and disappointing. If we had backup participants that time, then the situation could have been resolved. I never could have said 'let's take it from the top' if we didn't already have participants to add into the game."

"So you made Amai-nee's ward at the same time as these others, and just planned to hide it from us until she did get added, or if she never did?"

"Precisely!" Monokuma confirmed.

"That seems a little too convenient, but okay," Nami said, "I mean, protesting it doesn't help, does it?"

“I guess that’s true,” Sayaka sighed, “Arguing with Monokuma isn’t gonna get us anywhere, even if we don’t believe it. We won’t have all the clues to figure out the Mastermind till all the floors are open, after all.”

“That’s true! By the way, the Empty Wings have got something new for you, too,” Monokuma said.

“Oh, great,” Sayaka rolled her eyes.
“What? Isn’t it exciting to think you’ll have a brand new enrichment option?”

“Last time you gave us a ‘brand new enrichment option’ in the Empty Wings, a murder happened there,” Sayaka snipped, “So, I’m not exactly thrilled, no!”

“Big mood,” Nami chimed in.

“But I think it’s something you’ll really love! And besides, the murder didn’t really happen at the pool. That’s just where the poison kicked in,” Monokuma said.

“That’s a kind of contrived explanation,” Nami deadpanned.

“Yeah, and it was kind of a contrived murder, whatcha gonna do,” Monokuma said, “The new thing in the Empty Wings is an arcade, by the way. One of each current console, with a television. Five fighting game cabinets, five rhythm game cabinets. Two DDR cabinets. None of the consoles can connect to the internet for anything but game updates, nor can they be removed from the arcade. Tada!”
Nami… Well, okay, she really didn’t know what to think about that.

“Pft,” Sayaka turned her nose up anyway, “Come on. You didn’t even say what games are there for those consoles, for one thing. There’s no way that you’d give us something that good.”

“What makes you think I am so stingy? I thought we were friends, Red!” Monokuma complained.

“I…” Sayaka whined, “That was before you reset the game!”

“Come on, more people being here now improves your personal chances of survival,” Monokuma said, “Anyway, the consoles have a full catalog. Every triple-a to indie to licensed cash-in is available from a digital library. So, like, check it out later if you wanna have fun, you darn heathens.”

Monokuma left.

“Well…” Nami sighed, “At the trial, we heard all about what’s in the Detective Ward already, so which one should we start with?”

“I’m pretty interested in what Fujishiro’s ward has for us,” Sayaka proposed, “Akamatsu mentioned to me that her ward wasn’t formatted the same way as the others we saw so far, that it was made to look kinda like the inside of a train.”

“Interesting,” Nami said, then stepped carefully to Mitsuru’s ward. What existed of the floor was completely sturdy, but it was still full of holes, and completely possible for somebody to misstep into a hole. Admittedly, Nami and Sayaka both had a particularly low clumsiness quotient and weren’t the sort to do something that foolish, but it was good to be careful. Nami may have been best described as gangly, but that was just from observation. It was hard to appear graceful with long limbs, no matter how much the owner of them might technically be skilled at movement.

Upon reaching the door, Sayaka stepped forward to open it. Beyond that door, the ceiling was high in some places and low in others; It was an absolute amalgam of things. The room on the whole resembled the nave of any variety of congregational Christian church, but there were sections set apart differently. One of those with a lower ceiling resembled a Shinto shrine, with the lowered roof giving it a more fitting ambient light. Another section was decorated more like a mosque, another a Buddhist temple. Each different section had several books in them. Some the actual Holy Books of those religions, and some collections of studies and information.

There were also two, smaller sections, right next to each other. One had a small chemistry set in it, and the other was filled with multiple language-to-Japanese dictionaries.

Nami walked closer to that bit, and saw there was a note pinned up between them which read, “I couldn’t figure out what any of your hobbies were besides what I already put in your closet, so I just gave you things that would remind you of your girlfriends ~Monokuma.”

“Rude,” Sayaka pouted at the note.

“Do you know what other hobbies he has? Or, actually, what even was his closet hobby?” Nami asked.

“Hm. Um…” Sayaka frowned, “Well, the closet hobby was that he got supplies for making slimes.
Which is weird, but it kinda makes sense, right? His sister probably liked them, so he got into it for her sake. I guess he hasn’t mentioned anything else he likes to do, though.”

“I mean, between being the Ultimate Theologist, helping out his family, being an agent of Future Foundation, and dating two women,” Nami said, “It’s hard to imagine he actually has time to do much else. It must be kinda nice, to have downtime here for the first time in his life. He did mention to me that he likes old animation. Maybe I should watch more of my favorites with him.”

“Ugh. Production values on the better side, please?” Sayaka groaned.

“You have my word. No emoji movie,” Nami joked, “No ‘Minions’ either, but Illumination isn’t off the table. The Lorax is a work of art.”

“Huh. Actually, I can level with you on that,” Sayaka mumbled to herself, “It’s not a bad movie on its own merits, it just got so much heat for its hypocritical marketing and its poor expression of the author’s message. The music isn’t the worst, it’s animated well enough for its time, and the obvious subplot of a young gay man leaving home, finding love, then needing to go back in the closet and distance his love after his conservative family comes back into the picture is one that can resonate with gay youth, for sure-”

“Are you actually analyzing The Lorax?” Nami questioned.

“Of… Course not,” Sayaka turned red and looked away.

“You like homoerotic subtext, don’t you, Yamaguchi?” She continued to interrogate, leaning forward with a dumb, smug expression.

“L-Look! The yakuza, we’re a group that totally values history! And as the Ultimate Little Sister, of course I’ve studied the past, I understand a few of your bottom-tier memes! Is it really that surprising that I would be kinda fascinated to see the slow crawl of entertainment to representing my demographic, from thoroughly punished to under the radar to out in the open?”

“Yer a shipper, Yamaguchi,” Nami teased.

“No! Bad bottom tier meme! Stop referencing that garbage!” Sayaka whined.

“You don’t like wizards?” Nami asked.

Sayaka rolled her eyes, “I like wizards! I just don’t like wizards who are supposed to kiss wizards and don’t kiss wizards!”

“Yeah, that’s fair. I think the author was like, a fucking TERF too, so,” Nami gave an exaggerated shrug, “Reclaim our wizards. Make wizards kiss and be trans. I mean, come on! Transfiguration is just the kind of wish fulfillment that would make anyone wanna self-insert!”

“I could be taller!” Sayaka’s voice sounded especially cute with this dreamy statement, “I forgot, another thing about my type is that she’s shorter than me, but that’s impossible!”

“Torimi sure gave it a shot, though,” Nami teased, “Though, she’s straight.”

“I mean, she seems to like it, but I really don’t get how a trans girl ended up almost as short as me,” Sayaka said, “Forgive me if that’s insensitive, but you get what I mean, right?”

“Yes,” Nami said, “It’s fine, it is confusing. But unlike your confusing shortness, it has a legitimate explanation.”
“What?” Sayaka asked.

“Malnutrition,” Nami answered.

“Oh. Now I feel bad,” Sayaka sighed.

“She did it on purpose so that she wouldn’t grow much. She didn’t really have any good influences in her life when she was supposed to have her growth spurts and messed that up, so don’t blame me, I wasn’t there.”

“Now I feel worse!” Sayaka stomped one foot, “If somebody else failed to feed her, then I could comfort myself with the thought that I could beat that person up!”

“Sometimes, Yamaguchi… Things aren’t anyone’s fault,” Nami said.

“Ah,” Sayaka’s voice was a bit strange as she acknowledged the statement, then turned as she heard the door opening.
10:00 AM / 1000 Hours

“Hello, girls,” Mitsuru greeted them from the door, “What a surprise, I get my ward this soon?”

“You do,” Sayaka said, “It’s kinda impersonal, though. Like, look at this note Monokuma left!”

“Hm?” Mitsuru questioned, and stepped forward. Box followed in from behind him, because of course he wasn’t traveling alone, and of course with Goro released from supervision, Box would volunteer for that job. He approached the note, then shrugged, “It’s fair. I never had much time for other hobbies anyway. When I did have free time, it wasn’t enough to pick up anything new, so I’d just watch television or movies.”

“Hm, that does make sense,” Box agreed, then leaned over and gave a small wave, “Hello, Yamaguchi! Nami! How are you doing?”

“Okay,” Sayaka said, “Where’d Amai-nee end up?”

“You want to meet up with her? She came upstairs with us, but immediately made a run for her own ward, since it is there… Surprisingly enough,” Box chuckled, “She may seem like the embodiment of rot, but it’s cute when she gets worked up about her talent. And her food is the best you’ll ever taste. She’ll make dinner, for certain.”

“Don’t mention rot three sentences away from mentioning dinner, jeeze,” Nami complained, “And since when do you have a bad word to say about anybody?”

“Amai is my oldest friend!” Box exclaimed, then laughed a bit, “And, well, I won’t lie about her. She thinks that everybody in the world is bacterial, microbial… I hold the distinct honor of being insectoid in her eyes. When that’s her opinion of me, forgive me if I cannot think of pleasant things to say about her without first clarifying that she is the worst.”

“Still, it sounds weird, coming from,” Nami gestured, “You.”

“Well, I can’t exactly make the decision to say things that would hurt people or their feelings. The only reason I’ll say stuff like this about Amai is because it has no effect on her. No matter what insult you try to hit her with, it rolls off, because it’s all bound to be small potatoes compared to her own behavior,” Box explained.

“I really don’t want to meet up with her right now,” Sayaka admitted, “We were doing perfectly fine here without her…”

“You have no need to feel jealous, Yamaguchi,” Box said, “As much as she claims that I’m in love with her, I’m not in the least.”

“Why would I feel jealous? I’m not either!” Sayaka protested, then the thought crossed her mind, “And I’m not jealous of her either, you know!”

“Okay, as long as we’re clear on that,” Box smiled, and it looked like she was relieved about something that nobody realized had been troubling her, “Thank you for saying that, Yamaguchi. It means more to me than you possibly could understand! Now, Nami,” Box turned to her, “I didn’t get the chance to say it earlier because I was shocked that you were figuring out your talent… But you do look very nice. I’m deeply happy that you gained the confidence to wear it.”
“Thank you!” Nami struck a pose, “I’m glad you think that compliment is the best thing for me!”

“Pfft,” Box glanced away, “You say your motto once or twice, and suddenly everyone makes fun of you for it… Well, anyway. Please let me know if there’s anything I could do to help you determine your talent, now that you have an idea that you’re pursuing.”

“You already have,” Nami said, “You got my measurements for Bakura to make this outfit, right?”

“Ohhh… He mentioned that? Oops,” Box turned around completely.

“Huh?” Sayaka asked.

“I’m pretty curious how you managed it, honestly,” Nami said, “I didn’t think that I’d left my Monopad anywhere. Did you do it during one of the investigations?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Box turned to face them again, “I’m really sorry I went in your room without permission!”

“The ends justify the means,” Nami shrugged, “Besides, I help investigate, so I go in lots of rooms without permission. Not yours, though. I guess I’ll have to even the score next time.”

“Noo! Don’t say that!” Box whined, “I don’t want anybody to die!”

“Well, somebody has to,” Nami said, “It’s really sad, but the thing is, even the kindest win condition requires two deaths. That’s if somebody kills the Evil King. Or, I guess, if the Evil King finds the weapon. I think the way Monokuma talked about it, the Evil King won’t actually get executed if that happens. So, best case scenario is, one murder and one execution, or two murders.”

“Mnnnn!! That’s bad!” Box protested, squeezing her eyes shut, “I don’t wanna!”

“None of us ‘wanna’ deal with more death,” Mitsuru said, reaching out to hold Box’s shoulder, gentle and quiet, “But Nami is unfortunately correct, in this situation. As miserable as it is, Monokuma has made it quite clear. That is the best case scenario.”

“Aaa… That’s really bad…” Box whined, “But if the Evil King is a good person, then they’ll find the Gun, right? And that second situation will happen? Yeah? I can die. They can kill me. Then there’s just one person who deserves to live that won’t.”

“Hako, stop,” Sayaka reached out, and poked her in the middle of the forehead, “Saying stuff like that? Bullshit. Not helpful to anybody. Bad!”

“Ehhh…” She just whimpered without words this time.

“Nobody here deserves to die! I’m really good at telling when somebody deserves to die, you know, and nobody who’s here does. But they’re gonna. Just accept it. Shit’s gonna happen. I’m sure that the Evil King is looking for the Gun, but it’s probably not that easy. Whatever happens, happens. At this point, getting all torn up about it’s kinda pointless.”

“I can’t just shut my brain off like that, though!” Box complained, “And it’s so… Hard… Monokuma didn’t even give us any time to grieve Nozomi, not really! It reset the game and gave us all these other things and people to worry about!”

“I understand,” Nami said, “But how I dealt with that? Was I decided I wouldn’t have regrets. When a person does die, I won’t catch myself wishing I’d gotten to know them better. I’ll at least be able to let them rest in peace.”
“That makes sense,” Mitsuru said, “And what you said about that Kaoru girl, it gave Nozomi some peace in his last moments, you know. You did good. And I know you will continue to.”

“Thank you… I’m sorry,” Box hid her face in her hands, taking several deep breaths, then showed them all a smile again, “I understand the situation. Please, don’t worry about me any longer.”
As strange as that conversation had been, Nami and Sayaka listened when Box told them that she’d be fine, she’d stick around with Mitsuru, but could they maybe just move on with their investigation? It wasn’t a difficult request to humor, given that although they were both worried about Box after that breakdown, they were also the sort of people who would readily prefer to leave that sort of situation if they could be assured that the people who were actually involved wouldn’t go on to do anything rash.

There was little more awkward than trying to comfort somebody you didn’t know very well.

In the hallway, however, they were confronted with another dilemma. Both of them already knew what was in Kaede’s ward, and were quite curious about Amai’s, but not about Amai herself. Sayaka was clearly still in bitter straits trying to come to terms with her embarrassing friend’s presence, and Nami was just along for the ride.

“Well,” Sayaka mumbled, “If Amai-nee is planning to make dinner, she probably won’t actually be leaving the ward till then, so I guess that we could go and see her without her actually deciding to come along with us.”

“We could,” Nami said, “And I also kind of think that you do need to deal with this issue… I mean, Tori being here is a comfort to me. If you can get Oishi to stop doing the things that are rubbing you the wrong way, maybe she could be that to you, too. Plus, it’d be super tragic if she died here and you spent your last time with her being bitter, right?”

"I mean, that's true," Sayaka admitted, crossing her arms with a disgruntled huff, "But, it's hard to tell somebody that you care about that they're doing something which bothers you, y'know?"

"So it's better to just keep avoiding her instead?" Nami asked, then frowned deeper, "Or let it boil over, like Ruka and Kyosuke?"

"That's..." Sayaka sighed, "Those two. Ugh. They're such fucking, children. I can't even get involved, cause I'm pretty much on Ruka's side. You know what Kyosuke did, right?"

"Yeah, he shared the truth with me since, you know, we share a body count," Nami said.

Sayaka tucked part of her bangs back behind her ear, "There's a reason he's the one who ended up doing it. Of course I'd offered before, fucking, you know me well enough to assume that! Even without knowing what made Ruka's mom so awful. But, he didn't want me to. It wasn't so much that he wanted his mom to stay alive, but he didn't want anybody killing her. He said, that the way his life is, the only fitting end for her would be some accident, or if he ever got the confidence to kill her himself."

"Huh," Nami said, "That sounds like a fucked situation to start with, but I can see how that could lead to some problems between those two, yeah. So Kyosuke completely went against what Ruka wanted?"

"Yeah," Sayaka confirmed, "So, since then, they've had all that unspoken tension between them, how Kyosuke doesn't understand why Ruka's so bitter, and how Ruka's mad that Kyosuke doesn't trust him to make his own decisions. It's hard. They're both my friends. One is objectively right, from where I stand, but if I actually support him then I could lose my other friend. So I'm keeping out of it."
"Keeping out of it's probably the best plan," Nami said, "But that doesn't mean that you should keep out of your own social problem. If you wanted, I could try and help you settle an argument if you did confront Oishi. Or those other two, if you think they'd want third party intervention?"

"They definitely don't," Sayaka said, "But I definitely do, yeah. Let's get this over with."

With that, Sayaka approached the next ward. The chef's ward. With the unsettling layout of the first two wards on this floor, and its overall creep-factor, Nami was kind of scared of what was actually going to lie behind this door.

Sayaka was the one who opened it, though, and what they found there was... Well, confusing. Certainly confusing. Not entirely unexpected, but at the same time, not expected in any way at all.

The color scheme of the room matched its owner quite closely, for a start. The decor was absolutely adorable, cutesy, with charms and cartoon characters and surrealist paintings of candies, like a kitsch cafe in Harajuku might have looked like, before Despair and all.

Then, there was the actual content. The centerpiece of the room was a fairly gigantic metal table, with what looked like a large freezer underneath it. Similarly styled countertops lined the perimeter of the room, with various things built into their undersides. A few ovens, a dishwasher, some other stuff Nami didn't recognize, but primarily there were fridges and freezers. In the center of the room as well, but set a bit away from the main table, were other bits of equipment. A long grill, a stove, an ice cream maker, deep-frier... Everything a chef might need.

And in the middle of it all, using that table, was Amai. Thoroughly in the process of butchering what looked like an entire pig.

"Um!" Nami squeaked, then crouched down to hide behind Sayaka, not that she was scared, but she didn’t want to keep looking at that, “Sorry, I have the palate of a child and prefer to exist in ignorance of where my tasty food comes from!”

“Wow, and Fujishiro thought you’d never admit it,” Sayaka chuckled, then tossed one of her pigtails back, “Honey Ham, eh?”

“How’d you guess?” Amai giggled, and there was the sound of her slamming the oversized cleaver into the butcher’s table again, “That'll be the main course, anyway. Which is why I’m working on it this early. Why’s the deceptive minx hiding behind you, huh? You can’t truly appreciate meat unless it’s this fresh!”

Nami had to admit, being called a ‘deceptive minx’ in a way that implied the deception was the fact she was hiding her own cuteness, rather than that she ‘deceived’ somebody into thinking she was a pretty girl, was actually kind of nice to hear. But she had to complain anyway, “If I have to see you do anything else to that animal then I’ll end up becoming a vegetarian! It’s gross! Gross, I tell you!”

“I wasn’t going to be eating those,” Nami whined, “I want to keep my cognitive dissonance intact! I don’t eat fish with the heads still on or anything! Yes it’s a fallacy, but it’s my fallacy…”

“Amai-nee?” Sayaka asked.

“Bleh. Give me a second,” There was a flurry of noises, then Amai’s voice again, “There. Jeeze, rush me why dontcha? Don’t appreciate my art, none of you bitches do.”
Nami peeked out, and saw that the pig had been replaced by a visibly palatable ham. She stood up straight and stepped out from behind Sayaka.

“It’s gonna taste just as great no matter how much time you take with it, you’re a dang chef,” Sayaka said, then thought for a minute, “Hey, this is just the Ultimate Chef’s Ward, huh? Does that mean there’ll be a separate Blackmailer Ward?”

“I dunno, maybe the strikeout disqualifies it,” Amai gave an exaggerated shrug, “Anyway. What’s my adorable lil’ apprentice and the equally adorable but by God when I met her she sure coulda fooled me girl of mystery, doing in my spectacular Ward?”

“Actually,” Sayaka shifted awkwardly between her feet, “Nami’s here to see it, but I’m here because... We gotta talk. Like, for serious. Serious things.”

“Well, shit!”
“Listen, Amai-nee,” Sayaka started, then glanced to Nami, who gave her a reassuring nod, “I… You know I really care about you, right? I mean, I wouldn’t call you Amai-nee if I didn’t. So I gotta confess to you. I was really disappointed when you showed up here, and not for a nice reason like being scared you’d die, but cause, I already made friends here and…”

“…Yeah, yeah. It’s embarrassing for me to tell everyone how you’re totally in love with me, right?” Amai interrupted, twirling the cleaver in one hand like she wasn’t very invested in the conversation, “You always were easily embarrassed, huh? Flustering you is so easy. I guess that could make anybody mad, that the one person in the world who knows that would show up!”

“It’s! A bigger deal than that!” Sayaka complained, and stomped one foot on the floor, “It’s not just, oh no, you know how to embarrass me in front of people… These are people that I actually kinda like! And you’re not embarrassing me with anything that’s even true! I’m not in love with you!”

“You’re not? Ah, well,” Amai laughed, “I could embarrass you with things that I know are totally, definitely, the real truth. Isn’t it better that I get you flustered with something dumb and fake?”

“…Hey now,” Nami put herself on guard, a bit of unexpected harshness creeping into her own voice.

Sayaka stayed silent.

Amai clicked her tongue, “Yeah! ‘Hey, now’, how about this? Isn’t there a better way to fluster you with the truth? What if I said that name? Haha, there’s sewing machines here, aren’t there? I could to-ta-lly get that Ueda guy, tell him that it’s something that’d be a good surprise for you, and dress him up that way! Haa-ha-how would you like that, Princess?”

“You won’t,” Nami said, stepping out in front of Sayaka. She was surprised at herself, at how sure of what she was about to say she sounded, “Sayaka came to talk to you about this because she’s worried about you. I encouraged her to do it. She didn’t want to die, or have to see you die, with something unpleasant still hanging between you. She comes to you with an olive branch like that, and you start threatening her. Were you ever really friends?”

“She burned that bridge when she told me that some harmless teasing is somehow a big deal! How can someone say something like that and think we still count as friends, huh?” Amai was on defense now, though, making her point without any extraneous insults. Nami actually had the upper hand.

“If you think that’s an attack on your friendship, then I can’t imagine anybody will be friends of yours for long,” Nami put a hand on her hip, “Seriously. It’s not like it’s only romantic relationships that need to discuss and address problems! And who are you to make threats like that, when the same sort of ploy could work against you yourself?”

“Ehhh? What makes you-” Amai started to protest.

“With your purposeful emotional distancing, and the way you know just what to say to get under your friend’s skin… This level of reasoning is possible for Nami Kaguya,” Even in this serious
situation, it seemed Nami just couldn’t stop memeing, “Work it out, or pee your pants, I guess.”

Amai puffed out her cheeks, and said nothing.

Sayaka also stayed silent, but reached out hesitantly to grab Nami’s right arm in both of her comparatively small hands. The grip was tight and unsteady, but Nami understood its intent. Gratitude.

“I’m sorry,” Amai hissed through her teeth, “I’ve, like, never had to take criticism before? Especially from dumb little girls who I totally know more than-”

“We are both older than you,” Nami interrupted, “And that’s an excuse, not an apology.”

“It’s the truth though! Criticism is totally a thing of my past! So it feels like, if you say, legitimately, that I’m doing something wrong, it means you hate me as a person and you think I am wrong, objectively, for existing,” Amai turned her head away, still pouting, “It’s part of who I am, you know. It’s half my Ultimate Talent to be cruel!”

“You don’t have to use that talent on your friends,” Nami said.

“I… Don’t like you,” Amai whined, “I don’t have any dirt on you, and you’re like, saying smart stuff? Like a smart person? How dare you?”

“How dare I make you confront the flaws you definitely have?” Nami asked.

“I’m not confronting shit!” Amai snapped, then sighed and went back to the more pathetic pouty whine, “But I wanna be Sayaka’s friend… She’s a good apprentice…”

“So, just stop embarrassing me,” Sayaka managed to pipe up again, her voice strained, “Hako doesn’t mind it, so just throw it all her direction, kay? And don’t ever say shit like that again! Don’t say that shit about me! Especially not in front of- I mean. I haven’t told anybody… Any of the details, you know. Fuck you for that.”

“Nami will keep a secret, yeah?” Amai said, “At least it was in front of her alone, not everyone. But. Ugh, jeeze, fine, if you insist! Whatever! I’ll stop, if it actually somehow makes you feel bad-” She froze, then took up her usual condescending pose and smirked, “Ohhh. Oh. I get it. That’s why. That’s how. You don’t want me saying that for a real reason. Not just cause it hurts your precious little badass feelings.”

“Don’t say it!” Sayaka shouted, then clapped her own hands over her mouth, releasing Nami’s arm. Evidently she didn’t intend to be so loud.

“Heh,” Amai left no trace of having been knocked off her high horse at all, “I see, I see. As a gesture of resuming our friendship, I’ll just leave this new information out of my extensive file on you.”

“Okay, thanks, but it’ll still be in your brain-” Sayaka started.

“AND!” Amai said, “I will change the dinner plan, slightly. I was going to make apple cobbler for dessert, but I just remembered, as I was thinking of what terrible things to say to you in those moments I believed you had become my enemy, that you’re not fond of apples. So I’ll make cherry pie instead.”

“You can make the cobbler,” Sayaka shrugged, “I mean, there’s an Ultimate Baker here too. And like, me. And Asahi. There’s twenty pounds of leftover sweets floating around.”
“I’m going to make the fucking pie, dipshit,” Amai grinned, staring right through Sayaka, “As a gesture of our friendship. Which you definitely don’t wanna test like that again, right? You love and admire me, right? Even if you aren’t in love with me, we’re really great friends. Yes?”

“...Yeah,” Sayaka mumbled, then turned and left the ward. Nami followed after her, but only after a parting shot to Amai.

“You’re the one who doesn’t want to test your friendship with Sayaka again. Don’t forget her talent. Cross her twice? Bad idea. That’s how yakuza works. And how I work.”
“Aaaaaaa. Aaaa. Aaaagh.” Sayaka half-screamed to herself down at the other end of the hallway, away from Amai’s ward. Nami avoided the holes to approach her, “Why is she here? Why is she here? Why the fuck did that girl have to come here?”
“I… I’m sorry, but I really don’t understand how you were friends with her before,” Nami said, “She’s bad, Jim.”

“Jim?” Sayaka asked, then shook her head with a bitter chuckle, “Oh, whatever. It’s… I mean, I was learning things from her. Cooking and stuff, you know? And, she was never that cruel to me. It really was just the ‘in love with her’ jokes, which was always fine around the company we shared with each other. She shouldn’t be here, though. I should have known that would happen. I’m one of the only targets available to her here.”

“She shouldn’t need to make targets out of anybody,” Nami said, “She seems like a bad person.”

“Nobody’s just bad or just good,” Sayaka complained, “And you know, I’m kinda on the bad side of things? I take the friends I can get. They’re rotten, but they’re mine.”

“No,” Nami slid down the wall to sit next to Sayaka, “I don’t think you are. On the bad side, I mean. You deserve better than somebody like that, holding personal issues over your head.”

“Ha,” Sayaka gave one, sarcastic laugh, “No, I don’t. Cause anyone better than that, is somebody who deserves way better than me. Don’t you realize what the fuck I’ve done?”

Nami stayed silent for a little while, then she spoke up, “Worked as an enforcer for the mob since a young age. Killed a guy who kidnapped you, and anyone you thought deserved it since. But not if anybody else didn’t want you to. And you’ve got okay standards for ‘deserves it’. If anyone in the world has to be an assassin, I think you’re the best we can hope for. Trust me.”

“Why should I trust you on this topic? I’m the only one who knows what I was thinking,” Sayaka said.

“Why not tell me, then?” Nami prodded.

“...I was thinking, I guess. That the world’s better off without these people, and besides, I could always figure out a way that their death would benefit my family in some way, too,” Sayaka explained, then gave a heavy sigh as she pulled her knees up to her chest, “Still. It feels like everybody here is just waiting… For me to commit a murder. I’ve been suspected in both cases so far. I just wanna live, the same as everyone else. And it’s not just because I know you’d catch me and I’d get executed. I don’t kill for fun. It’s not fun.”

“Why do you still do it, anyway?”

“Cause it’s all I can do,” Sayaka’s voice cracked a bit, “I’m capable of killing discreetly, you know? The police almost never cover ‘emotional distress crimes’ anymore. Future Foundation only cares about high-profile Despairs. There isn’t a legal way to save these kids. And I can’t just take them all in. I’m a kid too. I can’t raise them. But they can raise themselves, better than the dead could have. If I have the power to help that way, I have to, right? It’s required of me.”

Nami chuckled a bit, then it turned into a good-natured laugh, before she reached out and put an arm around Sayaka’s shoulders, “You know, the courts will throw out any cases trying to prosecute vigilantes who fight Despair. Cause stuff like that’s kind of necessary. Somehow, they’re some of
“...Huh?” Sayaka blinked, “You mean, I’m not even a criminal?”

“You kind of are,” Nami said, “For, you know, the organized crime stuff. But no, not for the murder. Or, maybe it’d even be called manslaughter in your situation.”

“Right,” Sayaka said, then turned and looked Nami in the eyes, “I… Um… Nevermind. We should check out that arcade.”

“You’re right. We should,” Nami said, “Cause, this has been kind of a stressful morning for you, hasn’t it?”

“Mm…” Sayaka agreed, “But for you, too. I mean, you had to deal with Hako, then me, then me and Amai-nee-”

“Hey, here’s how you can pay me back for ‘dealing’ with you,” Nami mumbled, “Stop calling her ‘Amai-nee’ around me. I know a thing or two about having a bad sister, I don’t need to be reminded you’ve got a bad honorary one.”

“Ah,” Sayaka made a small noise, but didn’t really hesitate to agree, “Okay. If I’m with you, then it’s ‘Oishi’. Kaede-nee is a better big sister, anyway!”

“Pft,” Nami laughed at that, “You’re kind of right, there. I may have some trouble with Akamatsu on a personal level, but I can’t deny, she makes a pretty good big-sister type. Though, you do realize you keep calling people younger than you your big sisters?”

“I’m the Ultimate Little Sister. Even if the meaning is totally different, I think that gives me the privilege to call anyone I want to my big sister,” Sayaka turned her nose up, “No matter how old I am or they are!”

“That checks out,” Nami said, then got back to her feet, and held a hand out to help Sayaka up. Sayaka took it, then reclaimed her hand to use both adjusting her scarf and fixing her hair after her minor breakdown. Nami definitely didn’t think that it was a good idea to even continue trying with a friend whose existence could cause that kind of moment… But it wasn’t like she could change Sayaka’s mind.

Sayaka walked ahead of her, leading the way towards the Empty Wings. Even from behind, Nami could tell by the way she dipped her head that she was hiding her face in her scarf. Nami witnessed something truly unfortunate today. She’d always been able to, to some extent, see through Sayaka. None of the toughness she put out was fake, but she tried to hide all of her weaknesses underneath it. She wasn’t very good at it.

A reminder of her mortality when somebody who had a shared sort of past with her was the first to die, a defilement of plushies that made her admit that she never got a real childhood and clung to things like that. The fact that she was still trying to hold on to a ‘friend’ who had, at the slightest sign of conflict, jumped right into threatening to expose details of the trauma that Nami knew that she had, but no details, of course not. Sayaka obviously wasn’t ready to share.

And the fact that the skill which made her go above and beyond, to become the Ultimate Little Sister, over just another girl who happened to become an enforcer… Her ability to assassinate… Was something she only did out of a sense of obligation to people who suffered.

Sayaka was a very strong and capable girl.
And she was so, incredibly fragile.
Daily Life: Day Six (Arcade)

12:00 PM / 1200 Hours

On the way to the Empty Wings, Nami and Sayaka stopped at the Gift Shop to acquire snacks as a makeshift lunch. Nami got Doritos and a bag of Banana Chips, to at least pretend a little bit like she cared about her health. Sayaka, meanwhile, went all in on the potato chips and chocolate bar strategy, plus a bag of Konpeito. She really liked sweets, huh?

Nami and Sayaka probably had similar taste in food, now that she thought about it.

“Hey, Sayaka,” Nami started as they were walking away from the gift shop. Sayaka seemed to have begun recovering from her sour mood, and now some trivial conversation might help to bring her the rest of the way, “What do you think of vegetables?”

“Vegetables? Umm… Well, they’re okay, I guess,” Sayaka answered, shrugging one shoulder, “I like beets. The rest, I guess I could take or leave. Green peppers are gross, though. And given a choice, my ideal meal would be a good hunk of meat, some dinner rolls, and for dessert… Oh, almost anything works, as long as it’s not apple flavored.”

“What about a beverage?” Nami asked.

“Cranberry juice is nice…” Sayaka said, “Though, to go with the meal, what about red wine?”

“You’re not old enough!” Nami teased, then jogged a bit to actually walk beside Sayaka rather than trailing her, “And wine is gross.”

“You’re not old enough to know that wine is gross!” Sayaka teased right back, “Besides, it’s food science. Red wine loses its bitterness a lot if you drink it at the same time as red meat.”

“Oh! I’ll have to try that sometime, then,” Nami said, “Tomoe liked red wine a lot, but I never did. If I found a way to like it, I think that would be nice…”

“You’d be doing better than me,” Sayaka chuckled, “I tried to learn to like straight brandy, in someone’s memory once. Never managed it. As a mixer, it’s not too bad, but on its own… Nah. Sorry.”

“Huh. I never tried any other alcohol,” Nami said, “I mean, Tomoe always just got her hands on whatever she wanted to drink. And I didn’t like what she wanted, at the time.”

“Well, I could probably make it happen. A chance for you to try it proper,” Sayaka offered.

“Huh, a steak dinner with wine…” Nami observed.

“Not like that!” Sayaka protested immediately, realizing the implication at lightspeed.

“Nyeheh. I mean, that’d be fun. Only if you cook it, though!” Nami teased, “No shifting the job onto anybody else.”

“It’s not like Oishi’s gonna let anybody else handle meals now that she’s here now, though. She won’t even eat food that she didn’t make herself.”

“Then it doesn’t have to be a meal that Oishi has to refuse to eat, or anyone else. Could just be the
two of us, right?” Nami offered, “Not… Like that, of course.”

“Of course,” Sayaka agreed, then lifted her scarf again and buried her face up to her nose.

Before long, though, they reached the arcade. Nami could tell, outside the door, that there were already some people inside. So, she hesitated a moment, “Are you good, to be around some of the others now?”

“Yeah,” Sayaka said, “I’m fine now. Don’t worry.”

So, with that, Nami pushed open the door.

Oh boy, it wasn’t obvious at all that this was a ragtag group of mentally ill young people who grew up in an unforgiving world and had to turn to escapism in media just to get by!

Riko was on one of the consoles, racking up what appeared to be a ludicrous score in a bizarre tetris-like puzzle game, the name of which Nami observed from its logo in the corner to be ‘Trash Panic’. Kanoshi and Madara were at the back of the room, but Nami couldn’t see from the doorway what they were up to. Goro was in the room, but just leaning against a wall while Kurou and Torimi seemed to be competing for lowest score on one of the DDR consoles. Each one was built for two players.

“...This is an arcade for real, yeah,” Nami observed.

“Sure is. Monokuma wasn’t kidding,” Sayaka agreed, stepping up next to Nami to take her own look around the room, “Oh, oh, this should be a laugh riot. Let’s go see Kyosuke back there.”

“Huh? Okay,” Nami barely had time to say anything before Sayaka tugged her over to the back wall. Once there, she saw that both Kanoshi and Madara were using rhythm game consoles. Even at a glance, it was obvious that one was doing much better than the other… And when their songs finished, Madara’s flashed up ‘FULL COMBO!’ while Kanoshi’s just brought up a ‘Try Again?’, implying that he’d outright failed.

“Waifus are a crutch,” Madara teased, “If you need a team of fully-leveled Ultra Rares to full-combo a master song, you’ll never stand up to the raw power of a game on a cabinet.”

“Jeeze…” Kanoshi whined, “It’s not like you don’t have a best girl, though-”

“True. However, my platonic devotion to Maki Nishikino is much stronger than yours for ‘Chika Takami, but any UR is good’. I did the oshimen challenge, after all, which required me to continue working with incredibly weak team compositions for quite some time.”

“That’s true, I guess,” Kanoshi admitted.


“There’s a rhythm game in Kingdom Hearts?” Kanoshi asked, “I… Hm. I don’t think I have any idea what that series is about.”

“Two, actually, but I didn’t bother with the one in Birth By Sleep,” Nami clarified, “And don’t worry. Even the people who’ve played it don’t have much idea what it’s about.”

“…Kyosuke, just how out of shape are you?” Sayaka piped up.
“It’s! Come on, this type of rhythm game is tiring, you’ve got to move your arms, a ton! I don’t know how Madara does it…” Kanoshi chuckled awkwardly, “I mean, you’re probably athletic enough it wouldn’t bug you, if you could reach the stuff…”

“Hm,” Nami mumbled, then approached one of the cabinets, “I guess these aren’t designed for children to play. I can barely reach one of the top buttons, and my height’s pretty average.”

“Why don’t you give it a go, Nami?” Madara offered, pointing a finger in her direction, “It’s real fun. Plus, these machines always let you finish the song, even if you fail it, so it doesn’t get too frustrating.”

“Umm,” Nami waved her hands in front of herself, “Sorry, but if Kyosuke got winded from it, then it would probably be too tiring for me!”

“Oh, alright th-” Madara started.

“That’s dumb,” Sayaka interrupted, “I know for a fact that you are a little more capable than Kyosuke, Nami!”

“Hey now, we don’t have to push the lady,” Madara shrugged, “Peer pressure is a real threat, even when it’s just about playing a rhythm game.”

“Besides,” Nami giggled, “If I’m going to play any physically taxing arcade game, it’s gotta be Dance Dance Revolution!”
“You… Actually wanna play DDR?” Sayaka asked, then took a step back, blinking as she looked Nami over, “Is that outfit really such a big confidence boost?”

“Not exactly,” Nami said, “It is! But, I had to get the confidence boost before I’d feel okay wearing this, you know? I just, well…” She scratched her cheek, “It’s a lot of things. I feel like I should’ve been, I dunno, friendlier, and it wouldn’t have hit me so hard when people died. And I’m starting to figure out what my talent is. And Tori is here, to help remind me that I actually was capable of making friends out in the normal world. It’s a mix of things.”

“Still, I kinda got the impression that dancing was something that would, I dunno, rub you the wrong way?” Sayaka shrugged.

It was Nami’s turn to give a shocked blink, “Getting more memories back is a big help too, anyway. Dysphoria’s easier to deal with when you’ve got more memories of how far you’ve come with it. Dancing is small potatoes for a cool girl like me!”

“That’s good to hear,” Sayaka giggled a bit, “You sure are, a cool girl I mean.”

“And did I happen to hear that incredibly cool girl saying she wants to play DDR?” Goro was suddenly behind Sayaka, then rested his elbows on the top of her head, which she only pouted about a little.

“Yes,” Nami said, “Off with your head! Dance till you’re dead!”

“Wanna do two player with me?” Goro offered, “It’s way more fun in co-op mode!”

“Huh? Well, co-op… I’d just drag your score down, right?” Nami asked, “I don’t really expect to do well, I just think it’s fun! And, well, it’s good to get some exercise, isn’t it?”

“Sure is!” Goro stopped leaning on Sayaka, then put up a peace sign with one hand, “I don’t care about getting a good score, or anything. The cooperative mode has a bigger song selection, you know. Not to mention that it’s the perfect opportunity between two besties-”

“Still do not remember you, Goro,” Nami said.

“Can’t we be best friends anyway?” Goro grinned.

“Friendship ended with Rei (cause she died), now Goro Bakura is my best friend? No… That doesn’t have the right ring,” Nami said, “Sorry, not gonna happen yet. I’ll play the game with you, though.”

“Have fun,” Madara gave a mocking salute, then turned back to his own game. With that, Nami made her way back to the DDR games, followed by Goro and Sayaka.

As soon as she rounded to the cabinet, Torimi and Kurou’s game completed. Kurou was wearing a lazy grin at the abysmal score displayed on the screen, but as soon as the title card showed, Torimi stumbled off of the platform and… Lay down on the floor.

“It’s so cooold,” Torimi gave a contented sigh with her face pressed against the tile, “It’s too warm in here!”
“That’s just the burning passion of exercise!” Kurou assured her with a laugh.

“Groooosss… It’s gross…” She whined, “Exercise is gross! I thought you said this would be fuuun!”

“I had fun,” Kurou said, “And I bet that once you stop feeling exhausted, you’ll wanna get right back up on the hydra’s back!”

“…Of all memes I can’t help feeling that’s the most Dad joke among them,” Nami was mostly talking to herself, but Kurou seemed to hear.

“Meme?” He asked.

“It’s a word for a humor phenomenon, but not exactly a joke, that was really popular in the 2000s and 2020s. It was usually easily remembered references to pop culture, absurdist bits, and other statements with strangely inherent humor,” Nami explained, “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, though. It’s before everyone’s time. I’m just a scholar of that very specific aspect of history.”

“Oh, I thought that I was just quoting a very inspirational shout from my wife’s favorite game,” Kurou said, “She always did just that, when the silly little goat man yelled it at her, you know!”

“Most people find it annoying, and that’s why it became a meme,” Nami said, “But I’m really not surprised that you used it in such an earnest way. Such a Dad way.”

“Some men might be offended to have other people boiling them down to their position of fatherhood,” Kurou said, “But actually, it’s kind of nice to have everyone saying that I’m ‘obviously a dad’ and stuff. Makes me feel like, before I ended up in here, I was doing an okay job.”

“I bet you were doing great,” Nami said, then approached the other DDR cabinet, “Goro and I were gonna do co-op.”

“Well, I’d go again and we could compare scores when we’re done, but it seems my partner in crime has bailed,” Kurou pointed a thumb toward Torimi on the floor, “Darling girl, that one, but it looks like she still needs to build some character.”

“I’ll be your partner, if you’re really up to a whole nother round,” Sayaka said, “Shinoe really worked up a sweat there…”

“I’m a carpenter! The Ultimate Carpenter, in fact! Working up a sweat is the proof of a good day’s work for me, and I’m nowhere near that yet,” Kurou said, “Let’s do it!”

“We’ll totally get our asses kicked with Bakura being on Nami’s team,” Sayaka chuckled, “But it’ll be fun. Yeah, let’s do it.”

With that, Sayaka stepped up next to Kurou, then stretched her legs while Goro and Nami got the other cabinet set up for themselves. They picked the same song to go against each other with, and timed hitting the start button for minimal difference. Sayaka and Nami were the ones to hit their respective buttons, and it seemed like they actually did manage to line it up. The music they picked was the only music filling the room.
It was cheesy, and old, and wow it sure was full of nostalgia for anybody who’d ever been around a DDR machine!

At the start, Goro and Sayaka were doing quite well. Goro was able to match the commands on the screen with grace, looking a lot like he was actually dancing, while Sayaka just focused on getting the buttons pushed, moving in an agile fury that wouldn’t surprise anybody who saw her. The two of them were both, actually, pulling off combos the likes of which Nami had never witnessed. Not full combos- To do that required memorization and fancy footwork from a relatively comfortable leaning position against the bar set at their backs.

It was more fun to do it this way.

Kurou wasn’t doing great, but it wasn’t that he was awful, just that he was slow. Each note he did hit was a perfect, it just seemed like he couldn’t parse the commands onscreen quickly enough to try acting on all of them. Then, there was Nami. She wasn’t doing nearly as well as Goro or Sayaka, but she wasn’t awful either. The only problem was that she didn’t know what to do with her arms, and she kept losing her balance. She misstepped and hit the normal platform instead of a button, and started to fall over, but her wrist was caught and she was pulled back upright…

And then Goro didn’t let go of her wrist, holding on as he continued with his absurdly stylish play, but this time, managing to guide her along as well. So this was… The power of an Ultimate Idol, huh?

It was in a moment like this, Nami wished she could remember how they’d met before.

But she remembered something else instead.
Location: ???, Chiyoda, Tokyo, Japan

Date: 21XS, September 20th

Time: 1700 Hours

Nami’s wrist was grabbed as she was on her way out of the building.

Who? Why would somebody be grabbing her? All of her coworkers were perfectly formal with her, and if they needed to get her attention, would give her a polite tap on the shoulder. Anybody disgruntled with her… Would probably be more physically violent, than this grip on her wrist. A bit of an unfortunate one, actually. She could have easily claimed her arm back when she was sixteen, but since she and Tomoe parted ways, she had lost most of her muscle, and was actually trapped by this unknown grip.

The year was 21XS, a mysterious year in which the fifty-second Annual Killing Game was currently occurring, to begin airing in October, to conclude just before the winter holidays. Nami had a birthday the day before. On September nineteenth, she had turned eighteen. She thought her birthday the next year would be kind of entertaining.

This day after, though…

She turned around.

“Kaguya…” A man she recognized but didn’t know breathed her name in a tone she didn’t much like.

“Can I help you, sir?” She stayed polite nonetheless. She had to keep up appearances, after all. Just a little longer with appearances, then she could go home and change into her frilly pajamas and eat six custard cream buns and a beef bowl for dinner while getting drunk off the hard lemon sodas she illegally purchased by telling a kiosk that she was twenty, and watching a ‘classic’ animated movie. Tonight had ‘Alpha and Omega’ waiting for her in her vintage reconstruction of an original DVD player.

“Well, actually,” The man let go of her wrist, and she rubbed away at the slightly red marks he left there as he continued speaking, “No need to call me sir, or anything. I was actually curious if you’d want to go on a date with me sometime.”

“...Eh?” Nami asked.

“I think that you’re really cute!” He explained, “And, well, I’ve been following your work for a while, and you’ve just gotten prettier… So I finally got up the courage to ask you out, today!”

This guy was at least a decade older than her.

Did she really seem that desperate?

“Um…” She took a step backwards, looking everywhere but at him. Well, there were people around. They’d come to help her if he decided to beat her up, probably, but not for anything ‘less’ than that. May as well take a gamble, “But, uh, you know that I’m trans, right?”
“The dick just makes it better!” He flashed her a thumbs-up, and oh boy that was a loaded phrase! Nami liked that phrase from the perspective of a meme that women like her used about each other to poke fun and bolster confidence, but just coming from a guy? That was a problem, wasn’t it? That was the sort of thing that a girl totally didn’t want to hear from a stranger-

“I’m afraid that our dear Miss Nami has a prior obligation,” Someone appeared, somebody else that Nami recognized but didn’t know, “She can’t go on a date with you, because she’s already agreed to a date with me and I’m afraid I’m terribly possessive!”

“...Apologies, Kirara,” The man shrunk under this strange woman’s words, then took off in the opposite direction.

“Um!” Nami said.

“Kira Kirara, that’s my name,” The woman said, letting go of Nami’s arm to curtsy to her, “A knight of the mind, protecting fair maidens everywhere from chasers, men who wait with bated breath for their eighteenth birthdays, and that ever-so-splendid combination of both that you just encountered.”
“Oh! Thank you,” Nami couldn’t help but smile. This girl was… Incredibly beautiful, wasn’t she?
“How did you know my name, Kirara?”
“Lucky guess, actually,” Kira said, “I knew the name of Nami Kaguya, since I was told I’d be assigned to work with her. I’m a psychologist, so I hope that I can be of better use to you than just the little favor I did you a moment ago!”

“So, you just assumed that the clockable trans girl wearing a ruffled cravat and being made uncomfortable by an old man was your new boss?” Nami asked.

“Yes, pretty much,” Kira said, holding up one finger, “And I can also tell that… You really don’t want to be here right now, but you’re sticking around out of gratitude as well as attraction to me.”

“I!” Nami protested, “If you’re supposedly getting added to my team, then that last bit is irrelevant! I couldn’t possibly—”

“Expose yourself to…” Kira chuckled, “The possibility of a harassment suit? I wouldn’t worry about that! I’m older than you, and as far as I can tell, I’d certainly be the assertive one, so the ‘power imbalance’ isn’t something to worry about. Not like you’d have a chance at losing to me in that battlefield though, even if I did sue. Kaguya-hime. I’m sure I’ve just terribly flustered you, so I’ll be on my way. Have a nice night at home!”

That was... weird?
Did Nami really just shift from one weirdly flirtatious person to another? Because, it wasn't like Kira was all that different from that guy. The only difference was that she was closer to Nami’s age, and somebody that Nami did actually find herself physically attracted to. But did that excuse such overt flirting? With a boss? Kira flirted like that with her future boss?

Nami was, to put it simply, confused. It wasn't actually that nice, to be rescued from one awkward
and somewhat intimidating situation, by being immediately dragged into another, only somewhat different one. Big oof.

Still, though, at least Kira had picked up that Nami wanted to go home, and let her be, even if she did so in a strange way. Was that even flirting? Or was that just Kira's way of saying that if Nami wanted to pursue her romantically, then it wouldn't be a problem in spite of their upcoming employer-employee relationship? Either way, Nami didn't actually need to worry about that right now. Right now, she really did just need to get back home. And that she did.

Her apartment was actually kind of nice, as apartments went, and especially as apartments that could be afforded on one person's income went. It had one bedroom, one bathroom, and a combination kitchen and living room, sure. Like a lot of cheap apartments. Even so, everything was in working order for the most part, there wasn't anything particularly gross, and most importantly, the walls weren't just lip service to the idea of walls. Nami had never actually heard anything short of some serious shouting from her neighbors in any direction. Even loud music didn't make it through most of the time.

It was a pleasant little life she'd made for herself, if a somewhat lonely one. She got along with her coworkers well, and the specialists that she worked with even more (even if the latest one, Kira, seemed like she could be troublesome). Even so, she'd avoided close relationships. Her closest friend was a specialist, a psychic who was a few years younger and looked even more years younger, and while they were indeed great friends, they weren't romantically compatible. Evidently, Nami did have some options for that, but it was difficult. The first hurdle was herself; She had to get over her own personal hangups if she wanted to let anybody else get close to her. There was also the matter of the world she inhabited; Loving people was difficult in a world locked into a long-running, silent war between the concepts of hope, despair, and the future. God, a war between concepts, how strange was that? Then, the third thing for Nami to consider was, well, Tomoe.

They'd gone their separate ways shortly after Tomoe received her Ultimate Talent, since she needed to go and put it to use. Nami received hers not long after, but they'd been so out of touch since then that she'd neglected even to mention it. Some part of her felt like telling Tomoe that she was an Ultimate too, wouldn't be so kind of her. Starting a relationship seemed difficult to Nami, when she'd grown up being prevented from that sort of thing by Tomoe. Too dangerous. No matter how sweet the asker seemed, you never know what ulterior motives might belong to somebody who asked you out.

Even apart from Tomoe, those sentiments echoed. Nami remembered what she'd been told, and worried about those words, as well as simply worrying she would disappoint her sister by ignoring her warnings. Even now...

Even two years later, Nami couldn't tear herself away from her twin sister's influence. Tomoe and Nami were a unit, even on opposite ends of the country. Yesterday was their eighteenth birthday. They hadn't spoken in two months, though. Neither of them reached out.

Nami stared down at her cream buns, then picked up the phone. She wished Tomoe a happy birthday. She got advice on what had happened earlier that day. She was reminded that somebody had to be really amazing to deserve her, Tomoe said so. Tomoe said that Nami could only let herself be snatched up by somebody who was just as perfect as her.

Nami wasn't sure that she bought into that idea, but it was still nice to hear. And it seemed like Tomoe was doing well. She'd made friends, for the first time in her life. Being separated was actually good for the both of them. With the phone call completed, Nami settled in for the night.
Eighteen years old.

Two years later, she'd be put into a Killing Game on September tenth, in the year 21XX. But she had no way of knowing that. Eighteen years old, she should have just become in the clear for that sort of thing. Safe, as safe as an Ultimate could ever be in this world. Happy, as happy as somebody like her could be... Or at least, content. It wasn't a bad life. It was only getting better.

Nami had no idea she needed to dread her sparkling future.
Daily Life: Day Six (Snap Back To Reality)

Location: Neo World Hospital, Towa, Japan

Date: 21XX, September 15th

Time: 1500 Hours

“Morning, dumb shit,” Sayaka greeted Nami when she opened her eyes, “Could you maybe stop passing out like that? Everyone was super worried. Again.”

“Ugh,” Nami brought a hand up to her own forehead, “Remembering things is nice, but not having full-blown flashbacks…”

“What did you remember this time?” Sayaka asked, leaning forward with her hands on her knees, “Anything interesting?”

“More evidence to back up what I was thinking my talent would be,” Nami said, “And I actually remembered how I met Kira… It was kind of weird, actually. The day after my birthday, a creepy guy asked me out, then she chased him off only to also creep me out. Kind of makes me wonder how we got to the point we were at in that other flashback I got.”

“Huh,” Sayaka said, “When’s your birthday?”

“Oh, it’s September nineteenth,” Nami answered, and sat up. She’d been put on one of the Empty Wings cots for the time being. Even strong people like Kurou and Sayaka didn’t exactly want to carry her all the way out of the Empty Wings, after all, “In the memory, I’d just turned eighteen. That’s kind of interesting, too, cause it means that I was actually using my talent for longer than I kind of thought.”

“I mean, I would think so. Ultimates usually don’t get selected too much after sixteen or seventeen,” Sayaka said.

“I’m sorry I ruined our fun time,” Nami sighed, “I really was enjoying myself. Stupid amnesia.”

“It’s not like it’s your fault,” Sayaka contradicted herself, “Don’t worry about it. You really were having fun, though?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Nami asked, then chuckled a bit, “I was having a great time. I hope you all were too.”

“We were,” Sayaka said, “The others went back to the arcade, but I decided I should stick around with you. Didn’t have much better to do. Besides, I committed to spending time with you today, so I can’t bail if you’re not even awake!”

“Now that I am awake, would you like to bail?” Nami asked.

“Not till after dinner, no,” Sayaka said, “I mean, we’ll be eating in like… Two hours, anyway. We probably shouldn’t go back to the arcade, though.”

“Hm… Well, it wasn’t overstimulation or anything. Actually, I think it was because Goro was holding my wrist, and I thought that I wished I could remember when we met before, but instead I ended up remembering another time when somebody grabbed me by the wrist,” Nami explained,
“Kind of annoying. It wasn’t all a bad flashback, though. I remembered a mostly nice conversation I had with Tomoe… And, I had an okay life, before. You’d think knowing that would make me more upset to be in here, but really, it’s just good to know that I was actually able to build something for myself. Now I know that I can do that again, if I end up surviving this place.”

“You were worried that you wouldn’t have anywhere to go?” Sayaka asked, and Nami nodded in reply, “Well, that’s no good. Lots of people here love you, you know. If nothing else, you’d have each other. Or, if I made it through… We’d have each other. I mean, you might not wanna do this anyway, but you could always come back to Kobe with me. That offer won’t ever leave the table! In fact, I bet. Even if I die here, then Dad… Um, Oyabun Akihiko, would take you in. As long as he saw whatever episode this whole thing ends up in. He’d do that for me.”

“You won’t die,” Nami said, reaching out to pat Sayaka’s head again, “It’s dumb to think you might. You’re Sayaka! Who the heck could kill you?”

“Don’t say stuff like that, or I really will die! Isn’t that a big flag?” Sayaka complained.

“That’s just what Fujishiro said about Ueda’s daughter,” Nami laughed, “This is real life, you know. Death Flags are a myth.”

“Hey, Kaguya,” Speaking of, Kurou walked into the room, “I finished up in the arcade, so I thought I would check on you before leaving the Empty Wings. Are you feeling better now? What exactly happened back there?”

“I’m fine now, just a little disoriented,” Nami assured him, “Hi, Ueda. You know how I have more amnesia than the rest of you?”

“Yeah?” Kurou said.

“Well, occasionally I’ll get one really big memory back all at once, and I can’t process it at the same time as all this real life stuff. It’s like a flashback, but not really the same way that people with PTSD would define flashbacks. I just kind of pass out, then relive the memory, then wake up a little bit out of it,” Nami explained, “I’m sorry you had to see that without an explanation.”

“I was awfully concerned! But I’m glad to know that it’s okay. Did you remember anything pleasant?”

“I did, actually! I remembered a whole evening in full detail. Some weird stuff happened, and some good stuff happened, but I think it was net good, cause having memories back at all is a positive, and the memory was pretty balanced out, so it tipped to nice,” Nami’s explanation made very little sense, she knew this as she said it, but Kurou nodded along as if he understood.

“Oh yes, I see.” He didn’t get it at all, and she didn’t blame him, “Well, I think that I’ll go and take a look at these so-called Ultimate Wards. There are eleven of them now, right?”

“Technically ten,” Sayaka said, “Cause if you go in the Runner’s Ward, you’ll be trapped in there for an arbitrary number of hours. He died before his ward opened. Nine if you want to say that Asahi’s lab doesn’t count, cause Monokuma just used it as storage for a bunch of really heavy books that didn’t fit anywhere else.”

“I see! Well then, I’ll take a peek at each ward but that one which would trap me inside,” Kurou saluted in a way very dissimilar to Madara’s earlier joking one, leading Nami to a confused realization that there were far too many methods of giving a salute to somebody. However, by the time she’d thought this, Kurou had evacuated the room.
“What should we do till dinner?” Sayaka asked of Nami, “It’s up to you.”

“I… Kind of do want to go back to the arcade, actually. Just, no more DDR,” Nami chuckled, “I wanted to play on one of the consoles, still.”

“Are you sure?” Sayaka asked.

“Yeah. It wasn’t the arcade which triggered the flashback. It was a mix of things. I should be fine, and if I’m not, oh well. I’ll have to get all my memories back eventually,” Nami said, “You don’t have to worry about me so much when this happens. You could even leave me on the floor, if you wanted.”

“I wouldn’t do that, dumbass. That’s bad for your back. I… don’t mind going back there with you, or taking you here again if you have another flashback or whatever, so, okay. Let’s go.”
Daily Life: Day Six (Arcade again but this time with smash)

Chapter Notes

lets just all agree to excuse the fact that I accidentally wrote Kurou into this chapter despite previously sending him elsewhere, didn't realize till it was time to post this chapter, and accept my lampshade of "he changed his mind" so you can all enjoy the Fun Times without sweating the details

Nami was a little bit wobbly when she first stood back up, and discovered a bruise on her shoulder when she lightly bumped the wall to her right, but she got her balance and was able to walk normally in just a few moments. Once she did have that sorted, she and Sayaka made their way back up to the arcade. It was quieter in there now, because most of the previous occupants had disappeared. Madara and Kanoshi left the rhythm machines, and Torimi was the only one from the DDR-relevant group who remained. Riko hadn’t budged, but was several levels further in Trash Panic, now hurling literal planets into the gigantic trash can. Actually, upon closer inspection, one literal planet, and a number of comets that seemed to be helping to break the planet apart.

Video Games Is Weird.

The only other person in the room was Kurou, who seemed to have abandoned his idea of exploring the labs after all, and who seemed to be chatting with Torimi near, but not actually using, a nintendo console. Riko smashed a piece of the game’s credits into the can, watched it bounce off and pull up the ‘game over’ screen, then gently set the controller on the ground and turned to where Nami stood. She waved, then picked her whiteboard up, “This is the final level and you only unlock it by beating the other five stages on maindish difficulty. I’m actually doing very well.”

“You don’t have to defend your gaming skills to me!” Nami assured her with a chuckle, “Maindish?”

“Yes. The game modes are sweets, maindish, and Hellish,” Riko confirmed, “They correspond with exactly the difficulties you’d think they do. And beating sweets is a pretty big struggle even for people who are usually good at these types of games. It’s tough.”

“Hm, then I’ll stay far away from that,” Nami said, “My MO is ME.”

“Medical Examiner?” Riko’s whiteboard questioned.

“Minimal Effort,” Nami said, “At least when it comes to my leisure time. I only feel good about a game if I can beat it without using more than five continues in a single level or boss fight!”

“You don’t want a challenge?” Sayaka asked.

“Certainly not!” Nami confirmed, “I’m not gonna play a game that’s frustrating me so much it isn’t fun anymore, and five losses is where I draw the line for that. Unless it’s multiplayer, anyway. I don’t mind losing against other people. That’s not the game’s fault.”

“In that case,” Riko asked, “Do you want to Smash?”

“Yes!” Nami exclaimed, knowing Riko’s meaning. The use of ‘smash’ to mean anything other
than the hit fighting game from nintendo was a meme of the past. Becky, lemme main King K. Rool.

“I’ll play too,” Sayaka said, then approached Kurou and Torimi, “Do you two want to smash, also?”

“Absolutely!” Kurou said, clapping his hands together, “My wife and I play that game all the time. I may not be much of a ‘cool gamer’, but I play a mean Wii Fit Trainer.”

“Nobody plays a mean Wii Fit Trainer,” Riko commented, but the one it was aimed at didn’t even look up to read it.

“I hope they haaaave… The DLCs,” Torimi mumbled.

“I bet that Monokuma got them, yeah,” Nami said, then crouched down and got the game set up. Even in Despair, nintendo kept going, because why wouldn’t they? Of course, the entertainment industry in general became much slower in general, but time’s arrow marches on. Smash had actually expanded so much that there were two screens worth of character select. One for nintendo characters, and one for non-nintendo. The first screen was selected from first, with each player who wanted to pick from the second screen hitting a button to indicate it, then the second screen would be moved to. It wasn’t the most efficient UI, and professional players really weren’t fond of it, but there wasn’t much to be done about a roster this huge.

Nami and Torimi both picked ‘non-nintendo on the character select screen. Kurou grabbed Wii Fit Trainer, while Riko went for Meta Knight and Sayaka picked Zero-Suit Samus. The screen swapped over.

“Yess… DLC…” Torimi chuckled as she said this, and with lightning speed, brought her cursor over one of the most recent additions to the game, “Chocoboooo? Or Woolie?”

Chocobo had been used way back when, to make it seem like it would be the second Square Enix rep in the game, only to reveal it was actually Sora from Kingdom Hearts. Then they added it for real in the most recent DLC pack. Torimi thought she would never play a different character again, but then Rune Factory Woolies were the very next addition. She was torn between two very cute mains.

“Woolie,” Nami said, then picked her own character. Chell, from Portal. A fairly old addition, but a long-desired one for sure at the time. She was a complicated character to play, but one that Nami had figured out quite a while ago. The playstyle was different from most others in the game, relying more on techs and complicated strategy. It wasn’t at all unusual for a Chell player to fall behind, only to drag the other player down, one stock against three, because those first two stocks were spent on setup.

That wasn’t the case this time, though. Kurou defeated them all with two stocks left. Yes, even Riko’s Meta Knight. That dark kirby had never evacuated the top tiers of competitive play, and Riko wasn’t exactly playing badly, but…

Kurou played a mean Wii Fit Trainer.

“Wow!” He exclaimed, “I’m surprised that I won! Ayu pretty much always beats me. Did I mention that she mains Bayonetta?”

“You did not mention that,” Sayaka said, then laughed a bit, “I guess that’s not surprising. Your wife sounds cute!”
“She’s very cute, and beautiful too!” Kurou exclaimed, setting his controller down to press his hands together, “Ayu… Is really amazing. She’s an Ultimate too, so I’m glad that she didn’t end up here.”

“Oh, what’s her talent?” Nami asked.

“Ayu’s the Ultimate Scout!” Kurou explained, “Not like, going out to scout enemy forces, but the whole. Camping, tying knots, that sort of thing. It’s a very versatile talent!”

“It seems like you really love her,” Sayaka said, “Thanks for telling us about her.”

“Why wouldn’t I talk about her?” Kurou asked, scratching his cheek awkwardly, “I mean… Well, maybe you’d think that it’s weird, but I want to be able to share the happiness I have? Ayu helped me through a really rough time, and my family’s made me really happy, like I can see even this despair-filled world with smiling eyes. It’s like… If I can share that radiance, maybe it can help you kids too?”

“There’s always good to be found, no matter how rotten the world is,” Riko showed this comment, and made it clear even through the mask that she was smiling.

“Exactly,” Kurou said, “And, maybe Ayu only means that good to be found for me, but maybe if I talk about the existence of that good, it can spread to others? I don’t know.”

“I get it,” Nami said, “I really hope that you can make it back to them.”

“I do too,” Kurou said, “But… I also know that Ayu can do it on her own, if she has to. Wanting to get back to my family is mostly just a selfish desire on my part. She’d be happy to have me back, of course! But… It’s not that important. If I died here, it would be fine, because at least I got the chance to live. Plus, I’m leaving my legacy behind. Ayano is a precious child.”

“Ayanooo is a cute name,” Torimi commented.

“It is,” Kurou chuckled, then his face fell a bit, “God, I almost failed her once, though. Future Foundation wanted to use me and Ayu for some experiment, to make Ayano be a certain way. We turned them down, of course. I can’t imagine… How I could have lived with myself, if I’d agreed to let them turn my daughter into a weapon.”

“Sounds like a shitty situation,” Sayaka clicked her tongue, “Trying to take advantage of the fact that two Ultimates were expecting a kid… Gross.”

“Indeed…” Kurou said, then felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see Riko gesturing for him to come and talk to her in one degree of privacy. The two of them went to a corner of the room, while the remaining girls started up another match in the meantime.
4:00 PM / 1600 Hours

Nami didn’t know what Riko and Kurou talked about, but they returned after two more rounds. Nami won once, Sayaka won once, and Torimi was actually the one who was left against Sayaka that time. Surprising, since Torimi exclusively mained adorable characters who were very comfortable napping in garbage tiers. Since Torimi acknowledged this fact, even getting second place in a three-person battle was a pleasant surprise for her.

They only got one round in just the five of them, before somebody else walked into the arcade. It was none other than Tsukasa, who Nami immediately jumped up to greet despite having a stock left in the current match.

“Tsukasa! Look, it’s an arcade!” Nami exclaimed, gesturing around herself, “Isn’t it great? You and me, we’ve got to get the nostalgia firing on all cylinders, don’t we?”

“Heh… Yeah. That darn Monokuma took its sweet time telling me that this was here,” Tsukasa complained, “How long have you been here?”

“Since noon, but with an approximately two hour break cause I sort of passed out again,” Nami answered.

“Oh no!” Tsukasa exclaimed, “Are you okay?”

“It’s gucci,” Nami said, and gave a thumbs-up, “I mean, I feel bad that I made people worry about me, but like… Don’t? I get the feeling that over the next few days that might start happening a little more often. Cause, one happened back on the first day of lie serum, and now I’m more receptive to actually remembering my past.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Tsukasa said, “But, uh, be careful, okay?”

“I will,” Nami confirmed, then giggled a bit as she turned back to the others, “Me and Tsukasa are gonna play GTA 8 Splitscreen on that XBee over there.”

Wow, that was some future nonsense! XBee was the most recent console from the XBox, after the industry got over silly names like “Xbox One Pro” then “XBox One Champion”. The XBone style shortening system stuck, though, so when they did move on to normal console names, XBoo and XBee were next in line for the fans to call two and three respectively.

“We’ll stick to the Smashing Brothers,” Sayaka said, “At least, I will. GTA’s a pain! Not only does it feature around a US-Centric system of crime, but isn’t it a little too realistic?”

“Huh? Well, we don’t play the normal game mode,” Nami said, “We played it when we were in middle school, so the ‘crime’ stuff was pretty boring. We just built weird racetracks and obstacle courses, and laughed at the animations when we screwed up and exploded.”

“That sounds pretty fun, but, eh. Splitscreen is more fun with only two people anyway, right?” Sayaka asked, “Once it’s split into quarters, it’s hard to see what you’re doing…”

“That’s true. Okay, have fun!” Nami and Tsukasa split off, and got their own game set up. The title screen alone hit Nami with an absolute tsunami of nostalgia. Aww, yeah. Remembering middle school might have cursed her to acknowledging the fact that she’d experienced a hate crime and
retaliated with manslaughter, but it also opened her up to remembering many good days spent blowing up virtual mini coops with her best friend Tsukasa, so, you win some you lose some. She was definitely happy to be able to experience this nostalgia.

The two of them had a great time, and Nami really did feel like she was back in middle school, but you know, much more comfortable in her physical form than she had been back there. It was strange, she thought, that while she was getting all these memories back she’d completely forgotten what her deadname was, and it didn’t seem like it was about to return. Some part of her thought she should ask Tsukasa what it was, but at the same time…

It was kind of nice, to be able to pretend like she’d always been Nami, and nothing else, and nobody would ever even think she’d been anybody else. That was reassuring. Why mix that up? She was lucky enough, for her one childhood friend to be somebody who would definitely never get her name mixed up. Really, if she thought about it, she had a lot of good luck in her life. As of right now, everything really bad that happened to her before the Killing Game was absent from her memory.

But she knew it had happened. She wouldn’t have been caught so off guard by that guy in her most recent memory, if not for what happened to her in middle school. And… She couldn’t shake the feeling now, with the way she’d met Kira, that it might not have been as wonderful as her first flashback led her to believe.

The middle school incident… She didn’t want to remember.

But Kira? That was a situation she needed to know the truth about. It was recent, and she was sure that if she understood the truth, she would understand herself on a deeper level. Maybe that was kind of a ridiculous thought. Even so, she had it, and she couldn’t shake it.

“Nami? You good?” Tsukasa asked, “You just crashed a motorcycle into the same wall three times in a row. Twice is the maximum for it to still be funny.”

“Oh! Yeah, I just got lost in thought a little bit there, sorry,” Nami chuckled, “I wondered if I should ask you what my deadname is? And also thought more about that flashback I had. I kinda… Wish I’d have another one? I feel like I’m on the verge of a breakthrough.”

“That makes sense,” Tsukasa said, “I don’t want to tell you that name, though.”

“Why not?” Nami asked, “I mean, I don’t really want you to. But why wouldn’t you want to tell me?”

“Cause, Randy would definitely like to forget the name he had before, even if his new one’s phonetically similar, the old name is pretty rotten. He flinches anytime he hears it, even if it’s not about him,” Tsukasa explained, “So, if you can have one less word that hurts you, I definitely want to keep it that way.”

“You’re really kind, Tsukasa,” Nami said, then made one of the jumps in the game properly, “Thank you. But, if I ask you to tell me… You will, won’t you?”

“If you really, sincerely want to know someday, then I’ll tell you,” Tsukasa said, “But it’s a secret that should have died with your sister, you know.”

“Yeah,” Nami agreed, “I guess just knowing that you know it, makes me feel like, I don’t know. Will someone call me fake for not knowing my deadname, and therefore, not dealing with getting hurt by it?”
“...Not you too! Nami, I already have to convince Randy that nobody’s going to jump on the tiniest things to say that he’s not passing, or not really trans,” Tsukasa gave her a jokingly exasperated look, “Don’t make me repeat myself in feminine for you!”

“Heh. You’re right, I’m being silly,” Nami said, and focused for real on the nostalgic gameplay now.
Dinnertime was upon them.

Yes, dinnertime. It was a little bit intimidating, sure, but Sayaka didn't seem as worried as Nami thought she might. Maybe it had just been long enough since the encounter with Amai earlier that she was thoroughly un-shaken. Plus, there were six people there. Nearly half of the people who were in the Killing Game ended up gathering to have a nice time in the newly opened arcade. Nami thought it was nice, especially that two of those people were the newcomers, who didn’t seem to have had any problem fitting in with the group.

Torimi and Kurou both found places for themselves easily, meanwhile Amai and Madara… Not so much. Madara was friendly enough with Nami herself, but standoffish in general terms. And of course, Amai, who had managed to cement for herself the uncontested position in Nami’s opinion of ‘rudest person here’. In fact, Nami found Amai… Worse than Shinjiro. At least she and Shinji had managed to bond a little bit before he spiraled into his own moral righteousness.

Nami didn’t want to bond with Amai right now, and it was honestly a unique feeling. Even when she had just woken up here feeling cranky, she entertained the idea of getting to know people. Especially once Tomoe took it upon herself to say that Nami couldn’t do that. Now, though… Nami had considered Sayaka a good friend already, solidified more by spending the last investigation together and even more through their joint exploits today, and Amai had grossly disrespected that friend.

Sayaka…

Some part of Nami couldn’t help but wonder, if she’d been along for the pool trip legitimately, if Nami had just gone the extra step in their friendship to feel comfortable having Sayaka along as well, would things have been different? Was Shinjiro only confident in his plan to commit a murder because of the limited number of people who were going to be at the pool at that time? Well. That was just more of the same circular thinking that had Nami blaming herself for Rei’s death when she thought it was an accident. Thinking about these things wouldn’t do any good.

The group arrived at the dining hall, and were immediately hit by a great smell. Amai had set up a veritable buffet along the counter separating the dining area from the comparatively pathetic kitchen, complete with a stack of plates at one end and cutlery at the other.

“Welcome!” Amai proclaimed, spreading her arms wide, “You’re the first to arrive for dinner! You’ll never look at any food the same way again once you try these tasty Oishi family recipes!” She brought one hand back to her face to give that condescending laugh of hers, “I’ll utterly ruin you to any mundane flavors! And you haven’t a choice but to try it, since I worked hard and poured all of my loving goodwill into creating a wonderful meal! Plus, I mean, come on. Your other option is microwave food from the giftshop.”

Ah, even when she did something incredibly nice for everybody, she found a way to be insufferable about it.

“Thank you, Oishi. This is really kind of you,” Kurou said, “It’s really kind of you, to share your talents with us like this.”
“H-huh? Well, of course it is. But isn’t it a given, that with a bright shiny talent like this, I’d utilize it immediately?” Amai seemed taken aback by the genuine compliment that Kurou gave her. And it was genuine. Even if Nami didn’t understand, it seemed that Kurou was incapable of saying anything insincere.

“You didn’t have to. After all, any of us would have been just as willing to be on dinner duty, but you went above and beyond. Good work,” Kurou reached out and gave two pats to Amai’s shoulder, then approached the buffet and took himself a plate. He had just effectively rendered Amai temporarily silent, and also took the step of starting the meal. Riko went second, and with the two of them breaking the tension, Sayaka and Nami were able to step forward to get food, followed by Torimi and Tsukasa.

There were loads of options here, and by Sayaka’s snickering, Nami could only assume she got the most predictable foods for herself that she could have. Two slices of the honey ham, some white rice with none of the flakes that Amai had set out to sprinkle on top of it, and the certainly un-green vegetable of water chestnuts. Sayaka’s plate was a similar, but she actually seasoned her rice, and also took a bowl of clear soup. There was both clear and miso… Amai really went overboard.

When Nami sat down, she immediately took a bite of the ham, and, oh. Wow. Were she somebody with fewer moral principles, the taste of this food would be enough to erase the ill will that she felt towards Amai. As it was, well, she was still not a fan of the person. But…

“I think I might actually like green peppers, if they were made by Oishi,” Nami admitted, “I thought food was supposed to be made with love to be this delicious!”

“It… Is,” Sayaka said, taking a bite of her soup before smiling at Nami, “You saw one side of Oishi today. The side of her that’s considered the Ultimate Blackmailer. That’s a loveless profession. But cooking is full of love. She expresses any goodwill she has… In the form of feeding people. This is one of her bigger undertakings. I think that she’s actually fond of the people here.”

“I… Hm,” Nami said, “I don’t think that excuses the way she treated you earlier, though.”

“Me neither,” Sayaka admitted, “I think that as long as she keeps compartmentalizing herself, as a ruthless extortionist in one part, and a loving chef in the other… She’s not really a good person.”

“Do you think that there’s anything we can do to convince her to combine those parts together?” Nami asked.

“Not sure. On the outside, maybe it’d be possible she’d have to extort somebody on a friend’s behalf, and that would start her on the path to combining her motivations, but…” Sayaka sighed, “There’s definitely nobody here that deserves to get extorted by her, by a friend’s sake or otherwise!”

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“Oishi! Hi!” Kurou proclaimed, pulling out the seat across from her, “Mind if I sit here with you?”

“I do mind,” Amai frowned, then took a huge bite out of the food she’d gathered for herself. She’d actually acquired some fresh bread from Yuuri, several loaves thanks to the industrialism of his own lab, and deemed it passable to her refined palate. So she was currently eating a thick slice of it, with an equally thick slice of ham and a poached egg atop it. She was getting yolk all over her face.

“Well, too bad, I’m gonna sit here,” He poked a thumb out to his side, and Riko stood there, “Asahi
“Asahi, huh? Where’s your plate?” Amai asked, wiping her face on the sleeve of her sweater.

Riko lifted her whiteboard, “This all smells really delicious. Unfortunately, I’ll take a plate back to my room after the dinner motive announcements. I’m not able to remove this mask around other people.”

“...Oh. Medical stuff?” Amai asked, setting her bread down.

Riko nodded.

Amai glanced away for a moment, then stood up, taking Riko by the arm, “Well, idiot, you should have fucking said something sooner! Come on, put together a plate and I’ll stick it under a warmer for you so that it actually stays nice! I didn’t have enough warmers for the whole buffet but I can sure as Hell keep one plate at a reasonable temperature till that goddamn bear lets your pathetic little frail ass go and eat some damn food! Fuck knows you need some meat on those bones!”

Riko blinked in surprise, then followed Amai’s instructions.

“There,” Amai put the plate under a warmer, “Can’t believe, fucking Monokuma. Is this gonna be the first real hot meal you’ve had since you got here? Five days with shit food?”

“I wouldn’t say it was shit,” Riko wrote, “But definitely not as nice as warm and fresh food. Thank you. I wasn’t expecting you to be this nice.”

“Then why’d you decide to sit with me?” Amai pouted, giving Riko a suspicious look.

“Cause,” Riko wrote, “Ueda and I wanted to try and be your friends anyway. He’s super positive, and you can’t interrupt a written message, so we thought we might be the best people to try and talk to you for real.”

“...Jeeze,” Amai groaned, “That Nami chick’s talking shit about me, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say talking shit. We only heard small parts of the obvious truth from Nami and Yamaguchi,” Riko answered, “I’m the one who decided we should do this. Ueda is just going along with my plan.”

“Plan, to what? Reform me? Make me a better person? You know, that’s bullshit!” Amai snipped, “If you wanted to do shit like that, telling me about it is counterintuitive! I have half a mind to tell everybody here that you thought you could do some dumb shit like manipulate me!”

“No, the plan to be your friend. And I don’t care if you tell everyone that. There isn’t anything you could say about me, that tabloid magazines haven’t already lied about even worse,” Riko explained, “I think with your talent, you have integrity enough to only use things that are the truth, or the truth twisted a little. So no matter what, I’ve endured worse.”

“You…” Amai pointed at her, then got a puzzled look on her face, and realized, “Oh. Oh, hm. Yeah. Fuck! You’re my kryptonite. I can’t interrupt you to shut down arguments or make it seem like you’re being unreasonable. And, of course one of the heiresses to the Asahi company would be unbothered, in a setting like this. Sure I could find stuff on you to get money in the normal world, but I guess, just as personal attacks… It’s nothing.”

“Yeah,” Riko replied, “And Ueda is the same way, really. He’s been blackmailed before and he knows how to deal with it. So… Do you really want enemies who are such ‘kryptonite’ to you? Or
wouldn’t you rather have us as friends?”
Others arrived for dinner. Sayaka, Tsukasa, Nami, and Torimi were joined at their table by Madara and Randy, who arrived at the same time. Seems they'd been hanging out, which made sense. Randy was the first person here who Madara had considered 'cool', after all. His slightly standoffish attitude was a little unpleasant, sure, but it kind of seemed like he'd get over it with time. The fact that he didn't just go and sit alone was proof enough that he was already warming up to the idea of other people.

"How was the arcade?" Randy asked as he sat down next to Tsukasa, his plate piled incredibly high with meat, as well as one bowl of each soup, one egg, and several slices of bread. He was a growing boy, for sure. Madara's plate mimicked it pretty closely, but with bok choy in place of ham.

"It was great! Nami was there, so we were totally able to relive our childhoods, but, you know, through rose-tinted goggles," Tsukasa answered, then glanced over to Madara, "Hey, Madara. Are you a vegetarian?"

"Nah," Madara answered, "Just not a fan of pork in general. Or, most fatty meats. The texture's kind of gross. This may sound real stupid coming from somebody with my talent, but I like stuff so well-done all the gristle gets cooked out. Crunchy."

"Are you sure you didn't just learn to like it that way after getting too lighter-fluid happy with the grill?" Sayaka questioned, "There's nothing better in the world than blue steak."

"Blue?" Madara asked.

"Sear it on one side, sear it on the other, done," Sayaka explained, "Red through the middle."

"Ew," Madara curled his lip, "I feel like that'd be an acquired taste even for people who like their meat rare."

"It sounds good to me," Nami said.

"Yeah, same," Randy chimed in.

"Savages, the looot of youu," Torimi said, resting her forehead in her palm, "Red meat is medium rare, that's the way it's gotta beehee."

"I'd agree with that," Tsukasa said, "More well-done than that starts to lose the appeal of meat in the first place, but chewing on rare or raw meat makes me feel unsafe."

"Yeaaaaa," Torimi said, "I stopped eating meat for a little while but now that I'm as tall as I'm gonna get I can eat it again!"

"You do realize you could have eaten it all along?" Sayaka prodded, but got an elbow from Nami. Telling Torimi off for things that she did in the past wasn't going to help anybody.

"Heyyyyy!" Monokuma appeared.

"What?" Nami questioned, turning to look at the bear.

Monokuma did a little twirl, "Everyone's here! That means that it's time for dinnertime motives!"
"Gross," Sayaka said.

"Let's go!" Monokuma pulled the wheel from the ceiling, and spun it, then burst out laughing, "Haha! Upupu! Look at that, Yamaguchi, it's you! Karma strikes again. So, here it is. The last person to have Sayaka Yamaguchi’s talent was the first to kill in what's known as the Supplementary Demon Hunting Game, which happened ten years ago!" It spun again, "And, here we go! The last person to have Yuuri Ruka's talent committed two murders in a Killing Game, using knives! Toodle-loo!"

Monokuma was gone, leaving the group to discuss this new batch of statements.

"Fucked up if true," Nami said, glancing to Sayaka next to her, prompting her to refute it.

"I mean, ten years ago, I was nine," Sayaka said, "Bakura?"

"Supplementary Demon Hunting was a game staged on a certain high school! The employees and students were pitted against each other in a battle royale. There are no reports of any children being involved."

"See," Sayaka held her hands out, "Couldn't have been about me. Actually, I knew the last person with my talent, she was in the same syndicate as me. My first onee-san. She liked to drink brandy straight, and she only ended up being the first to kill because the Mastermind was threatening that if nobody started killing, then the original plan of allowing thirty survivors would be scrapped and the whole school would be poisoned."

"That makes sense," Goro said, "That's a game which wasn't broadcast for real, but there's scraps of it online because some of the kids started livestreaming it to call for help. There actually ended up being forty survivors, cause, that livestreaming ploy worked."

"Obviously that was a copycat Killing Game," Box said, "All the real ones, like this one, make sure that we have no way of contacting the outside world, and they're not broadcast live, so by the time it's on tv it's too late. Right?"

"Right," Kaede agreed, "Not to mention, there's no way that Ruka could have killed two people in cold blood and still be standing here. Even in situations where a participant is allowed to get away with murder, somebody who did that would never be able to."

"Situations where a participant is allowed to get away with murder?" Kurou asked, "When has that happened? I don't really watch the games."

"Well, in the last game..." Kaede's confession of being the survivor remained in memory, so she was able to speak openly in this way, "Two bodies were discovered, and Monokuma spun a wheel which determined that if there were two different culprits, whichever one was voted for would be executed. Apparently sometimes it's set up so the first or second killer is the one who gets executed, too. But..."

"There is one way that somebody who killed two people could get away with it," Goro said, "Two murders outweighs one, in all cases prior. But those wheel options could still be in play if the other culprit also killed two people!"

"I guess that's true," Kaede said, "But, I don't think that's the case."

"Yeah. I mean, anything that mentions another Killing Game can kind of be discounted as being about a different person anyway," Goro gave an exaggerated shrug, "Only Akamatsu and Shirogane can have motives like that which apply to them, cause anybody who was in a game
older than the last one, I'd have recognized!"

"Unless they screwed with your memories so you wouldn't," Nami said, "We know it's possible, for memories to get scrambled by that bear. Since it did get rid of any memories we had of watching the last game. After all, it has been months since the fifty-third game aired. We just aren't allowed to remember it."

"I guess," Goro said, "It is possible that I'd forget something about an older game, with that in mind."

"It isn't foolproof," Mitsuru agreed, "But I think that we should rely on Bakura's statements, unless we're given some reason to believe his memories are out of order. Everything that he's said about other games hasn't steered us wrong yet. Plus, I agree that Yamaguchi wouldn't have been involved in a game ten years ago."

"It doesn't make much sense, in a game of high-schoolers and adults, that even if a nine year old were somehow there, she could commit the first murder and not be immediately overpowered," Yuuri said, "Yamaguchi may be strong, but even she wouldn't stand a chance at age nine against a whole group of people older than her."

"Nine year olds aren't known for critical thinking, either," Kanoshi also defended his friends, "She probably wouldn't have been able to make the call that killing and dying was better than letting everybody there die."

"Yeah," Sayaka said, "So... So far, we've had two sets of info that can't possibly be true about our current selves. That's just more stuff to dread later."
6:00 PM / 1800 Hours

As soon as the motive discussion was finished with, Riko took her food from the warmer and brought it to her room with her. The others present ate their food for a while, then dispersed when dinner was finished with. Or, mostly dispersed. Nami just stood by the door for a bit, not sure what she was going to do until night. Going to sleep early... Was kind of a cop-out, if she was going to be honest about it. She was in the strange position where she actually had so many friends, she couldn't quite decide who to spend time with, or if to spend time with anybody at all. Nobody else was left in the cafeteria.

Amai, after all, had already packed up anything worth keeping as leftovers, which apparently wasn't very much. The rest was left for Monokuma to clean up. Only the ham, soups, and rice were kept. Apparently respectively, 'for sandwiches', 'it reheats fine on the stove', and 'leftovers are good for making fried rice and omurice'. The vegetables went away, and all of the bread had been eaten.

Nami took a deep breath, then left the cafeteria, making a direct route for a particular room. She didn't expect to run into anybody there, but it was what she'd decided to do with her evening. If somebody happened to turn up, then she'd talk to them, but for now... She wanted to do this.

The room she was gunning for was Riko's ward. The Ultimate Heir ward, which Monokuma was using as storage for a bunch of heavy, thick books. The rationalization for using it as storage was that it included legal and accounting books, which were important to Riko's role as heir to the company... And because all of Riko's actual hobbies were already accounted for with other wards. Before going there, though, Nami paused in front of Rei's ward. Wards were locked up and turned into effective prison cells if they became available after the owner of the ward's death. But... A ward that already opened, remained open. Tomoe's ward had proved that fact.

Nami opened the door, and stepped into Rei's ward. There, she found the owner of the ward which was her eventual goal. Sitting there, warming her hands around a cup.

"Asahi?" Nami asked, approaching her, "What are you doing?"

Riko let go of the cup to write her response, "I miss her. So I'm sitting here, smelling her favorite type of tea, and warming up my hands. I don't like drinking this type, but it smells nice. I ate my meal pretty quickly, then came here."

"Plum black tea," Nami said, "It's my favorite too. We became friends because we had that in common. I was going to make myself a cup before I went to your ward to do some heavy reading."

"Do you mind being delayed in that?" Riko asked.

"Not really," Nami said, "I was just going to do that because I couldn't think of what else to do. Why?"

"I was going to teach you sign language, wasn't I?" Riko offered, "We can at least start with the basics while we have some free time, can't we?"

"Yes!" Nami said, then sat down across from Riko, "We certainly can."

"Great," Riko said, "I'll write down a word, then show you the sign for it. Does that work for you?"
"Sounds good," Nami said, nodding, and they began with the lessons.

7:00 PM / 1900 Hours

Nami and Riko worked for about an hour, and Nami was a pretty quick learner. Not so quick that it would imply she'd been learning in the past or anything like that, but she was clever enough with learning it in the present. By the end of that hour she had a pretty solid grasp of the basics, and could string together a few sentences. When that hour was finished, Nami made her cup of tea, and bid goodbye to Riko. She took it with her up to Riko’s ward, and found the book that she had been thinking about.

‘Important Cases of the Tragic Era’.

It was a thick, and painfully detailed book, discussing exactly what the title implied. During the course of The Tragedy, the incident which preceded the Quiet War, there were still court cases, and they had some really strange outcomes. Precedents were set that took years of work to overturn when the world started trying to regain some small sense of normalcy. Nami wanted to check something, and when she opened the book up, her suspicion was confirmed. There was an entire chapter discussing the trials in the Killing Games that occurred during The Tragedy.

‘The Tragedy’ was an odd concept. It was the approximately five-year long period in which Despair made its biggest moves against the world. It was a period of time which was shrouded in mystery and confusion, since a great number of its records were destroyed.

Nami wasn’t sure how she knew this, but she was aware that a lot of the destruction was the work of Future Foundation. In order to attain to a better future, it was necessary at times to suppress the past. Nami never would have been able to find this book in a regular legal library.

The Tragedy was in no small part, Future Foundation’s own fault. This book noted as much. Despair caused the Student Council’s Mafia Game as well as the Reserve Course Demon Hunting, which were now considered the first two Killing Games, but neither of those actually went beyond Hope’s Peak Academy in a large way.

The first Trial Based Killing Game was a ploy by the Future Foundation to destroy the catalyst of those first two games. Those were only able to be orchestrated by members of Despair because of the people’s discontent- Discontent with Hope’s Peak’s creation of what was known as Ultimate Hope. It was playing God, some thought. Why couldn’t it have been one of the reserve course students, others wondered. It was much too dangerous an idea, was a near-universal thought, when it was revealed that this Ultimate Hope project had to be split between two different people to avoid cataclysmic failure.

There were, in the first game… Two young despairs in important families. Both halves of Ultimate Hope. And two agents of Future Foundation, who failed in their mission to utilize the game’s first motive to eliminate only the first four in the list. Now that Nami thought about it, Future Foundation’s original plan, which ended up dooming the entire world after being commandeered and broadcasted by Despair, wasn’t that unlike what Kira said was the only way to end the Quiet War.

Remove the big players.

Evidently, that hadn’t worked in the least. What made Kira think that the idea was any different now?

It was a gigantic mistake. A mistake by Future Foundation, a mistake by anyone who thought that
a Killing Game could be a discreet way to do away with their enemies. It was the event which rocketed Ultimate Despair from a rough and desperate terrorist group, to a major faction in the world. The event which set the precedent of broadcasted Killing Games.

There was so much information here in this incredibly rare book which had caught her eye… And yet…

None of it really meant anything, did it? Knowing the past didn’t change the present. Nothing included in this book gave Nami any ideas for how to handle this Killing Game. Still, it was good to know the history, wasn’t it? All she was left wondering… Was what kind of rotten person wormed their way into Future Foundation, to come up with the original idea of a Killing Game anyway?

There were some truly evil people in this world. Evil people could find regular people and twist them up, sneak past their morality. But good people could do the same, in reverse. Inspire regular people to be better, to become good.

Nami knew she was good, even if there was a time when she wasn’t.

And wasn’t that more amazing?

In spite of everything contained in this book, tales of awful things happening and terrible mistakes being made… In spite of the impact all those things had to this day…

There would always be noble people in the world.
Daily Life: Day Seven (God Dammit, Again!?)

6:00 AM / 0600 Hours

Nami had, once again, fallen asleep in the wrong place, and without hearing the nighttime announcement. Wow, great. Where was the morning announcement?

“Gooooood morning, you bastards! It’s now six in the morning! Remember that I consider eight to be ‘breakfasttime’, so that’s when you’ll be getting today’s first batch of new motives! See you then!”

There it was.

Nami peeled her face off the book she’d been reading, stood up, and started to make her way downstairs quickly. She wanted to get back to her room and shower, and get a change of clothes, before she actually started the day. Waking up elsewhere two mornings in a row wasn’t exactly the most attractive, anyway. Unfortunately, she was on the last stairwell when she encountered Amai.

“And where exactly are you coming from?” Amai questioned, blocking Nami’s way down the rest of the stairs.

“The Heir Ward…” Nami answered through a yawn she wasn’t expecting, “I fell asleep there while reading ridiculous numbers of footnotes and disambiguations out of a book that I found simultaneously interesting and dull.”

“You sure about that? You sure you didn’t just come back from murdering someone?” Amai questioned.

“Look…” Nami sighed, “I don’t feel up to this, and, you’re just giving me weaksauce anyway. Neither of us are awake. You were going to cook breakfast, right?”

“Yea, gotta start right away if I’m gonna have it ready for Monokuma’s ‘breakfasttime’,” Amai confirmed, looked like she was going to say something else, then puffed up her cheeks and brushed past Nami up the stairs. Good.

An altercation first thing in the morning was definitely not what Nami needed. What she needed was a dang shower. She got back to her own room without running into anybody else, threw open the bathroom door, and turned the water on.

There. While the water was heating up, she got another set of clothes from her closet (Monokuma wasn’t lying about making copies of her new outfit), and got undressed. Then, she got into the shower. Nice.

Showering was, well, a bit more pleasant with the memories that had been coming back to her. Rather than feeling dysphoric, like there was no good way to stand or sit without needing to see some part of herself that was horrible… She just felt relaxed that she was under warm water, and getting clean. With more time transitioning actually in her head, more time spent living as a normal (well, Ultimate, but that’s beside the point) girl, she wasn’t being drawn to what she thought was still wrong about herself, but the things which had gone right. Not that she was about to start sitting there admiring herself, but, it was better than wallowing in self-loathing for half an hour.

And so, she became clean. Which was, you know, always a pleasant way to be. Much more pleasant than the state in which she’d woken up, for sure. That was just gross. In any case, she left the shower, got dressed, and was ready to face the day. First, though, she examined her face. She
didn’t remember using makeup, and there didn’t seem to be any muscle memory there of how to apply anything but lip gloss. She had pretty clear skin to start with, but…

Did she have eyelash extensions? Jeeze. They were sturdy, actual ones, too. How could she afford something this frivolous? Admittedly, it made her look quite a bit cuter. They were especially good quality, given she’d failed to notice them until she got to thinking about why she didn’t wear makeup. The answer was, because she just got Better Eyelashes installed?

Whatever. She claimed she was ready to face the day, and she definitely was! It was time to face it! Breakfast! Which would taste good, thanks Amai. And motives! Bad awful motives but okay!

At least there didn’t yet seem to be any strife arising from the ‘Evil King’ thing, no wild accusations or fearmongering. Not that Nami would speak that aloud, she didn’t want to jinx it. She was curious, though. Who got assigned that role? Who was told to play the part of everybody’s enemy? It wasn’t like it would be easy to figure out, though. And since the Evil King was prevented in all manners from confessing to their true nature, it would be difficult to take any actions to fulfill the win condition of defeating them without risking harm to an innocent.

Everyone seemed to realize that, so that aspect of the game hadn’t come up very much. It was good. And, Nami arrived in the dining hall. She was still comparatively early, but since she had to go to her room and then shower, there were a good handful of people already there, unlike other mornings when she’d been first or second.

Yuuri, Sayaka, and Box were seated at the same table. A kind of strange mix, so Nami assumed that might shuffle as more people arrived, but there wasn’t anything to stop her from joining them. She sat down across from Sayaka, with empty chairs on either side of herself.

“Morning,” Nami gave a little wave to them, “How’s everyone doing today?”

“Pretty good,” Sayaka said, “Where were you last night, though? At about nine I went looking for you, but couldn’t track you down…”

“She started to get worried, but then I assured her that you were fine,” Box said, though Nami wasn’t sure how Box would have known that.

“I fell asleep while reading a pretty boring book up in Asahi’s ward,” Nami admitted, sheepishly hunching her shoulders, “Well, I mean. The content was interesting, but it was written in a really boring way. Some people really just don’t know how to write academic texts, I guess.”


“It was a rare one, that you can’t really find on the outside, cause a lot of its information is stuff that the Future Foundation wants repressed,” Nami explained, “A book on the most important Tragic-Era Court Cases, including the trials that happened during those Killing Games.”

“Sounds interesting,” Box said, “So it’s a shame that it got written in a boring way…”

“Eh, I mean. It had information, but it’s not like any of it was actually helpful. Since we remember stuff, we already knew the Future Foundation is kinda iffy about their methods to help the world,” Nami said, “Goro might like the book, since it does have cases laid out including the first game. That one was a live broadcast in the height of the tragedy, so it’s lost to time.”

“Maybe he and I should check it out later today,” Box said, and clasped her hands together, “I’m sure with the both of us, we could get through a dense text like that. I’m pretty good at figuring out what information is actually useful from books, since I need to skim them a lot.”
“Is there anything that you don’t have small amounts of skill in?” Yuuri questioned, “It seems like every time a problem comes up, you’re like, ‘oh I can do this in a kind of good way because X reason’.”

“Um,” Box turned a bit pink at that statement, “It’s not like that! I get a lot of practice in a lot of different things, but it’s not like I can do any one thing in a useful enough way to actually, use it in any way outside of being a ‘volunteer’. I’m just trying to help people…”

“I’m just teasing you,” Yuuri chuckled, then looked to Nami, “Hey. Nami. You mind if I get your input on something?”

“Um… Okay,” Nami said, then followed Yuuri’s example as he stood up and left the room.
Daily Life: Day Seven (Advice)

“What’s going on, Ruka?” Nami asked once they were alone, in Kanoshi’s ward. Nobody was going to wander in here at this time of day, with everybody planning to go straight to breakfast. There was still about an hour till Monokuma’s assigned breakfasttime, and the release of motives.

“Well,” Yuuri scratched at the back of his head, looking away, “I know that you and I don’t really talk a whole lot or anything, but that’s kinda why I wanted to ask you about this. Plus, since Kyosuke would’ve told you some shit already, I don’t have to explain anything to get advice from you. If, you’re okay giving me advice.”

“Oh… Yeah,” Nami said, giving a small nod, then put her hands on her hips, “Well, I think that you and Kyosuke need to talk about this stuff, for real! I don’t think either of you wanna ruin your friendship, but you haven’t got it worked out, what he did to you, so it’s just getting worse and worse the longer you let it sit.”

“It’s not just that,” Yuuri sighed, “You probably noticed it as soon as we got here, right? He’s all overprotective of me, like he’s a dad or a boyfriend or something. He didn’t want Rei offering me a drink, cause I used to get too drunk too often. Fair, but, I never claimed to be an alcoholic, or to be trying to recover from drinking. Just him thinking he knows what I need.”

“So tell him that,” Nami said, “In an environment other than a class trial. I mean, really. I guess that since you’re seventeen, you don’t really understand how to resolve conflicts yet. The answer is talk about it.”

“...Yeah, thanks,” Yuuri said, “That’s not, exactly…”

“You wanted me to tell you if you’re the asshole?” Nami asked, then chuckled, “That’s not what is up, my dude. This isn’t AITA. My advice isn’t about to be ‘Kyosuke deserves the benefit of the doubt’ or ‘Kyosuke is a douchebag’. My advice is, fucking fix it. Kay?”

“I guess that makes sense,” Yuuri admitted, then turned back to the door, “No guarantees I’ll be able to manage that, though.”

“Figure out some way to get the tension out first,” Nami offered, “Punch bags, or something, I dunno. If you go in feeling not angry, then you can do it. I believe in you!”

“Thanks, Nami.”

With that conversation sorted, they returned to the dining hall, and found that in the meantime, Goro and Riko had also arrived. The tables had shuffled; Riko was with Sayaka, Goro was with Box. Yuuri wandered off to sit with Box and Goro, so Nami joined the other table.

“Hi Riko,” Nami managed to remember some of the signs she learned the previous night, and used them.

“Good work,” Riko answered in writing, because they didn’t really get that far in the lessons, “Morning. How’d you sleep?”

“Terribly, I slept on a book,” Nami laughed a bit as she answered the question in words now, “I really need to make an effort to sleep in my own bed tonight.”

“Do I really need to follow you around again to carry you there if you pass out some random
“You don’t need to do that!” Nami assured her, “I mean, if you wanted to follow me around, it’s not like I’m going to say you can’t spend the day with me again, but you definitely don’t have to do it for that particular reason.”

“Kinda getting the impression I do,” Sayaka said.

“Cute,” Riko’s whiteboard commented, then she looked up as somebody else walked into the room. She waved to Mitsuru, who waved back before taking a seat at the other established table. She turned back to Nami, then, “Do you want to do more lessons today?”

“Meet in Rei’s ward again a bit after breakfast,” Riko offered, “After I eat I’ll go there, and we can go until one of us gets bored of it.”

“I wouldn’t wanna delay your new lesson, being a newcomer…” Sayaka frowned, looking away.

“Nami could use a review of what we did yesterday anyhow. If you don’t mind going a bit quickly, it shouldn’t be a problem to catch you up,” Riko offered, needing to elbow Sayaka to convey the message. Then, she wrote another, her chest heaving slightly like she was laughing to herself, though no sound came out, “Maybe then we can communicate a little easier than this, though sign language won’t solve you looking away from us like a tsundere.”

“I am not a tsundere!” Sayaka whined.

“You literally called yourself a tsundere to my face yesterday,” Nami called her bluff, “So, r-slash-quit your bullshit.”

“What does that mean?” Sayaka whined harder this time.

“It’s an old subreddit that had a lot of videos made about it,” Riko was the one to explain it.

“You actually know that?” Sayaka questioned.

“My knowledge of vintage memes pales in comparison to Nami, but I have in the past enjoyed bits of musical and video entertainment from that era,” Riko noted, “It isn’t like history is off-limits to anybody. She’s simply especially skilled in it.”

“That’s true. It’s not like I’m a complete stranger to some of the stuff she says, anyway…” Sayaka mumbled, then looked to Nami, “How in the world is this not your talent?”

“It definitely isn’t,” Nami said, “When I woke up, it was confirmed that I lost every memory ‘connected to my talent’. I’ve liked vintage memes since I was a little kid, and I remembered that crystal clear. It’s just a different thing I like. It’s not an impressive skill or anything… Really, my talent’s all I’d consider myself good at.”

“And that talent is?” Riko prodded again.

“I’ll tell you soon!” Nami promised, “Like I said, I don’t want to say it and be wrong, so I’m waiting until I’m sure of it! I am a truther! It definitely will be soon, though. Especially if I get
another flashback today.”

“Be careful!” Sayaka chided her, “Don’t look forward to a thing that makes you pass out and fall down!”

“It’s okay to look on the bright side, isn’t it?” Nami asked.

“...I guess, but, come on. I saw you pass out yesterday, it was pretty concerning!” Sayaka balled up her fists.

“That’s nothing to be afraid of, if you’re around to catch me,” Nami said, shrugging her shoulders.
Box Hako had a confession to make.

Actually, she had several. That was the thing about being Box Hako. She had to keep a lot of secrets. She didn’t like doing that, she didn’t like lying at all. It was unpleasant and deceptive. Box had a lot of issues like that. She hated how, so often, the ‘best’ thing for the sake of her friends was something which she considered to be objectively bad. For example, right now, the best thing she could have done for her friends was devote herself wholly to figuring out who the Evil King was, but she doubted she was capable of that, and even if she figured it out...

Still.

Box Hako had a confession to make, and one that she was able to make at breakfast that morning. In fact, the very people she wanted to confess to were there. Goro and Mitsuru, who’d been her friends since she got here, mostly by virtue of one or the other needing a chaperone and Box being the willing volunteer among the group. Oh, and Yuuri was here too. Box liked Yuuri well enough, though. He was very rough around the edges, but everybody here was a best friend of hers. No matter how much growing they had left to do, Box knew the type of wonderful people they could become if given the chance. This she knew, about...

Almost everybody.

“Hey,” Box spoke up, interrupting a conversation between Mitsuru and Goro about, it seemed, gospel music? She hadn’t been paying attention at all, but the information made its way to her anyway. It always seemed to. It wasn’t like she was observant by principle, nothing compared to Kaede or Nami. It was more like, she just couldn’t tune things out. She wouldn’t happen to miss something that was obvious just because she was thinking hard.

“...What’s going on, Box?” Goro asked, furrowing his brow in concern. Did she really sound that worried? Oh, no, it was tears. That was why. Oops.

As much as Box had complete autonomy over her body language, there were things like blushing and crying that weren’t exactly easy to control. She took a deep breath, wiped her eyes, then spoke again, “I’m sorry. I just… Want you all to know that, I’m still on your side.”

“Why would we think you weren’t?” Goro asked, ever the innocent when it came to these things. What a puzzle, this boy was. He made it obvious that he’d been through a lot, and there were still weights he carried that he didn’t talk so openly about. Even so, he could be innocent, from time to time. Innocence in a boy who’d long had it stolen away from him was something to cherish. Goro… Was one of her precious friends.

“I mean,” Box wrapped her arms around herself, “I’m on your side. My motto has always been, you know. I’ll always do what I think is best for the people I care about. If it came down to what was best for you and what was best for Yamaguchi, for example, I’d have a lot of trouble between those options and what to do. But if it was one of you, and one of the newcomers, I wouldn’t hesitate to do the better thing for you.”

“That’s weird,” Goro said, tapping his fingers on the table with pursed lips, “Isn’t Oishi like, your childhood friend? What’s the deal? Will you really betray her for us? Is that why you felt the need to say that to us, huh, Box?”
“...Yes,” Box admitted with a nervous smile.

“Oh,” Goro stopped tapping his fingers, “I, you know, didn’t expect to be right about that! Guess that’s one point for my wild, unfounded theories I spout just to make noise on the books!”

“Why would you do that, though?” Mitsuru asked, “If it’s something like ‘you made a promise to us’, don’t worry about it. We wouldn’t hold you to helping us over your friend.”

“It’s more like,” Box mumbled, “She is my childhood friend, of course I care a lot about her, but we’re in different worlds now. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve know the eleven of you... No, all fifteen, longer than I’ve known any of these four newcomers. Amai included. When it comes to expressing my talent, you’re leagues ahead in line than they are.”

“...Huh, I guess that makes sense,” Goro said, reaching out to pat Box on the head, then turned to the other guys and quickly changed the topic for her sake, “So, so. Wanna hear something totally juicy? This Evil King’s Game thing hasn’t actually happened in a Killing Game before! It was concepted to use for the forty-fourth, but they ended up going with a different gimmick. I guess that they still had the programming for it lyin’ around, though.”

“The programming?” Mitsuru asked.

“Um, yeah. You did realize we’re in a Neo World, right? If not just for the fact this place doesn’t make much sense, all the games have been for years,” Goro shrugged, “And, I mean, what Monokuma said. The AI is data, and data is not limited to the constraints of closed rooms et cetera et cetera. Data only works like that in a program.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right,” Mitsuru said, then glanced to Yuuri, “Were you aware of this?”

“...Not actively, but yea, I ain’t shocked,” He said, “That bullshit way the gift shop works isn’t really something you could pull off too well in a real building.”

“Hmm, that’s true,” Mitsuru said, “So does that mean it’s possible the dead are still alive?”

“No,” Box answered before Goro got the chance, “This is real. They’re gone. There are special situations when somebody can die in the Neo World and come back in the real world as an Alter Ego, but I really doubt any of those four met those conditions.”

“That’s what I was gonna say, yeah,” Goro sighed, “It doesn’t seem like anything so far is something that Monokuma was opposed to. The Alter Ego thing is usually just reserved for people whose deaths were legitimately not meant to happen. A mistake on the organizer’s part, for example, not just any old accident.”

“It’s cruel, but at the same time...” Box shrugged, “Alter Egos, even with a full set of memories, are still different from the original people. That’s got to be a tough way to live. I’m sure there are plenty of people who would rather just stay dead, than be that way.”

“Still,” Mitsuru mumbled, “Wouldn’t it be fine, to have Killing Games where nobody has to stay dead?”

“Despair would never stand for that,” Goro said, and that was the end of that.
8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

“Upupu!” Monokuma appeared in the middle of the buffet Amai had set up for breakfast, to her ire. Only to her ire, and not to her wrath, because it at least refrained from appearing in the middle of any of the actual food, only getting in the way and not displacing anything, “Hello one and all! It’s eight in the morning, so you know what that means! Motives, glorious motives! Time for round three!”

Since Nami had fallen asleep early the previous night, this motive delivery felt much too soon after the past one. Even so, all she could really do was brace herself for the next set of information and hope that it wasn’t true and wasn’t about her.

“There it is! The last participant to have Tsumugi Shirogane’s talent survived their Killing Game! Aaaaaand,” Another spin. It landed on Monokuma again, so it did another spin, “There’s no duplicates here! The last participant with Riko Asahi’s talent was Ultimate Despair!”

And before anyone could say anything, Monokuma was already gone.

“That’s…” Tsumugi spoke up, “I mean, we all know that I did survive a Killing Game. Does that mean that Asahi is Despair?”

“No, that’s not possible!” Sayaka piped up, “There’s no way that she is!”

“Even so, it’s true that Tsumugi survived,” Kaede said, “That makes it a little bit difficult to dispute, doesn’t it?”

“Is that reeeeeeally true, though?” To everyone’s surprise, Amai spoke up to defend Riko, “You’re here, after all. You haven’t survived yet. Just cause you lived through one game doesn’t mean you ‘survived your Killing Game’! It’s still totally possible you’ll end up super dead before this whole thing is over and done with!”

“That’s possible, yes,” Tsumugi agreed, “Even though I did ‘survive a Killing Game’ did I survive ‘my Killing Game’? That wording makes it possible to believe that Asahi isn’t Despair, so I think I’d prefer that.”

“Tsumugi…” Kaede frowned at her, “You can’t deny the truth just because it’s convenient, you know.”

“I’m well aware,” Tsumugi said, “But I don’t think it’s the truth that Asahi is Despair, and this is a way to understand the statement about me as applying to a different Ultimate Astronaut. It took some time for you to grasp that the unpleasant truth is still the truth, sure, but I’ve never had that...
“Obviously I want to believe in our friends,” Kaede said, “But what if we brush this one off as fake, and then decide something else is the ‘current truth’ when it’s not?”

“The opposite could be truuue, though, couldn’ it?” Torimi piped up, “If we say ‘this one iiiis the truth’ then we’ll believe anybody who wants to liiiiiie about another one. That’s no good!”

“Then let’s just leave it alone,” Nami said, “Schrodinger’s Truth. At the same time, this can be current and this can be past. I do know that another Ultimate Heir was in fact, Despair, but that doesn’t necessarily disqualify Riko either. I trust her and she’s my friend, so I’ll believe it’s the past for now, but I won’t close the door on it being the one bit that’s current.”

“That seems like a good plan,” Tsukasa said, “After all, something that we hear later could just end up being more true currently, right?”

“Mhm,” Madara joined in, “Monokuma only said that ‘just one release of information is about the current version instead’. Instead being the operative there, right? There’s nothing to say that something about a past version couldn’t also happen to be at least a little bit true about the current one. I agree with the reasoning that Shirogane doesn’t count as a survivor yet, myself, but I’d rather not get into all that.”

“...Kind of weird that the newcomers are all on the side that this isn’t the truth, though,” Kanoshi mumbled, “Isn’t it possible Monokuma brought all of you in to work with the Mastermind, and that’s Asahi?”

“Monokuma wouldn’t just point at the Mastermind and call them Despair, though. It doesn’t, and can’t do that,” Box spoke up.

“I’m hurt that you’d accuse me of such a thing, Kyosuke,” Madara mocked being shot through the heart, “But, I guess I wouldn’t put it past me, so that’s kind of smart after all. Still, Ueda didn’t say anything, and Shinoe doesn’t seem to have an opinion either way, so, back to dummy.”

“Personally, I don’t know what to believe,” Kurou backed Madara up, “But… I guess I’d have to say that even if Asahi was Despair, she probably isn’t the Mastermind, and it doesn’t much matter to me. She’d still be my friend.”

“Insufferable softie,” Amai clicked her tongue at him, then waved a dismissive hand, “Guess I have to agree, though! I mean, what the fuck’s it matter anyway? You all went and scared her off debating this shit when it’s all useless! Not like ‘Despair’ is the be-all end-all of a human being.”

Nami glanced around to notice Amai was right. Riko had left the room while all of this was going on. She did take food with her, she noticed, but still… She hoped she’d still turn up for the sign language lessons.

“It really isn’t,” Tsukasa backed up Amai’s statement, “Depending on the type of Despair, it can barely change a personality at all, depending. And even if somebody is Ultimate Despair, they’d have to be an idiot to just act the same way inside a Killing Game. It’s not like they lack self-preservation or anything, so… Yeah. Even if it was true, we don’t have to be afraid of Asahi or anything.”

“I… Guess?” Kanoshi shrugged.

“Tsukasa is so smart,” Randy commented, chuckling, “Really, Monokuma only says stuff like that to try and get us at each other’s throats. So we don’t have to be scared of her, no matter what the
“It sure did a good job of getting us to argue, though,” Kaede sighed, “Monokuma definitely loves splitting groups like us in half. It thinks we’re getting along too well, so if we got split up into different factions over a disagreement, that would make it more likely somebody would be willing to kill someone from the other group.”

“That kind of sounds like experience,” Kurou said, his voice soft, “Did that happen, last time?”
“Yeah,” Kaede tuck some hair back behind her ear, “It was actually over a class president election, at least, on the surface. But it was also, kind of, because we were almost forced to choose between two people’s lives. In the end it got left up to chance, but it still made the split a bigger deal. It only stopped when one of the ‘leaders’ ended up dead.”

“We won’t let that happen here,” Nami assured her, “Even if people get into fights, there’s not gonna be a split of sides! A lot of us are mature adults who know better than to pick sides in arguments and stuff.”

“That… Maaaay just make Monokuma try harder,” Torimi said, “If it does think that we’re less likely to fight, it’ll just keep giving us stuff to fight over…”

“Come on, look on the bright side,” Kaede said, “We’ve got the best defense against that. Awareness. Monokuma started out with a weak firestarter like this, so now we’re prepared.”
Despite the awkwardness, everybody was able to sit down and enjoy the meal that Amai had prepared. It was just as good this morning as it had been the previous night. Nami couldn't really take pure joy in the girl's food, being aware of just how nasty she could turn around to be, but impure joy was still a sort of joy nonetheless. After she finished eating, Nami went to Rei's ward, and Sayaka went along with her. They didn't expect to change their plans unless Riko didn't show up for a long time, and as it was, she'd already arrived.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Nami said, sitting down across from Riko, "You left too soon to hear how things resolved. We basically agreed that it was irresponsible to say that it definitely wasn't true about you, but we couldn't say it definitely was either, and whatever the case, you're still our friend."

"Thank you," Riko gave her response without looking at them, burying her face in the whiteboard before sliding it across the table, "I couldn't defend myself in that situation. That's why I can't handle my company alone, and I need Yui to be a public face and all. Because I can't speak, I can't speak up. It's fine at the trials, and really, communicating without sound is an advantage sometimes. But at times like that it's kind of depressing."

"I get it," Sayaka said, "Would you want to have a text-to-speech like in the trials all the time or something?"

Riko reclaimed the board to answer, "Not exactly. I could have afforded one in my everyday life, after all, and I never bought one. Using one is pretty taxing, most of the time, because at least with writing I can pretend like people hear it in the voice I feel like I have in my head. The one during the trials kind of sounds right though, so it's okay."

"It would be nice if Monokuma could give that to you the rest of the time when you're here," Nami said, "I mean, you already said sign language doesn't solve when somebody's not looking your direction, so it can't help with people talking over you either."

"That would be nice," Riko said, "But I'm sure that Monokuma just considers it an 'unfair disadvantage' in a trial situation. In normal situations, it would prefer anyone possible be at a disadvantage if there is one. Of course, it's not a big disadvantage if I just leave and don't worry too much about it. I can always defend myself later."

"That's a good way to think about it," Sayaka said, leaning on the table, "Cause, even though it's pretty fuckin' rotten that you could get dogpiled like that, leaving and coming back when tempers have cooled is legit conflict resolution. Besides, everyone has disadvantages, probably worse than yours."

"I'm aware of that," Was Riko's reply, "My disadvantage can't be hidden, but it can't be used too much against me either. To be unable to physically speak is a hindrance, but not so much as hiding a deep secret about your own past, for example. I was able to tame Oishi a bit by informing her that she had no method of harming me."

"I guess as the Ultimate Heir, you don't really have secrets that would hurt you to have exposed anymore?" Nami hazarded. Riko nodded, because Nami got it exactly right.
“That makes sense,” Sayaka said, “Even things that weren’t actually known to the public before, that she could have blackmailed you with, aren’t gonna be all that personal, right? Shit like mob collusion, that we already know about cause you and I met before.”

“Precisely,” Riko agreed, “There are plenty of things which could hurt my company, but not much which could hurt me. Of course, that’s why Monokuma had to resort to something as plain as ‘despair’ to try and rile you against me, instead of anything more interesting. I already knew the last Heir was Ultimate Despair.”

“Frankly, everybody should,” Nami said, “Since he was one of the most infamous ones… But people focused too much on the fact that Shirogane’s statement was undeniably true, so they thought. The loophole Oishi figured out seems likely, if I’m honest.”

“Thank you, but we don’t need to keep talking about this anyway,” Riko said, “We should get started with the lesson.”

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10:00 AM / 1000 Hours

Nami and Sayaka were in the midst of a sign language lesson, but that didn’t mean there was nothing happening in the interim. This particular interim consisted of Goro and Kaede spending time together in the latter’s ward. Kaede was sorting through the antidotes, while Goro was half-reading one of the mystery novels with his feet propped up on one of the tables. Half-reading, because he was also half-chatting with Kaede, “So. I’m kinda curious about these past motive things.”

“How so?” Kaede wondered.

“Well,” Goro shrugged, “I already know a lot about the last Ultimate Idol, is all. Kinda wondering if I should talk you up about her so you can help clear my name when my turn rolls around.”

“Hm. Not sure,” Kaede said, “After what happened this morning, they honestly might not take me at face value if I said that. After all, we had some very confusing ones handed out today.”

“That’s true,” Goro said, “Speaking of that, well, I thought of something else weird there. Cause, it’s not like your game had any sort of Repeat Ultimates gimmick. As a detective, we all know there’s been plenty of those, but Shirogane… Was there really another astronaut?”

“I’d assume so,” Kaede said, “Though, I suppose that they could be lying about the gimmicks, since we don’t even actually know… Why those came into play this year.”

“Yeah, so,” Goro tapped one his feet on the table, “That could be it, right? The last participant to have Tsumugi Shirogane’s talent was Tsumugi Shirogane herself, in the previous game. Course, that’d mean you’re also prime to fall victim to that sorta thing, right?”

“…That’s true,” Kaede said, “Hm. If you’re right about that, then, when my turn comes up… I can admit to whatever’s true about me, without implicating the other person in the batch, right?”

“Heh… Yeah, you could! Course, guess there’s also no guarantee that it wouldn’t just be the currently true batch anyway. I dunno,” Goro laughed, “Assuming that the last detective is you, and disregarding the other person, could totally be dangerous!”

“Yeah,” Kaede frowned, then turned to actually look at Goro while they talked, “You know, you kind of remind me of somebody I knew, in the last game.”
“Oh, I do? How’d he die?” Goro chuckled.

“He didn’t, he made it out,” Kaede said, with a sad smile, “But, just like you seem to, he didn’t really expect that. Towards the end, really, he was kind of looking for any excuse to sacrifice himself, but, I believe in him. I’m sure, on the outside, he’s doing well.”

“Why else do I remind you of him?” Goro wondered, setting the book down.

“Well,” Kaede said, softly, “I know that it doesn’t mean anything concrete, since you shared this with Yushu for an entirely different reason, but… The back of your neck. He had trouble with that too.”

“Haa, I see,” Goro leaned on his hand, “So Ouma’s actually okay, huh? Good for him.”

“You know him?” Kaede asked.

“We had the same manager,” Goro said, “And… He sort of ruined my life, through no fault of his own. I don’t hold it against him. The fact he was alive, and announced to be in the Killing Game, is all that went wrong. Glad somebody actually got away from that guy, for real.”

“Bakura,” Kaede sat down across from him, “Are you, really?”

“I mean. Why would I lie? I’m happy for him. Yeah. Lucky bastard made it out, and lived through the game too. Good on him, good for him, good job.”
Daily Life: Day Seven (Plushie Collection)

11:00 AM / 1100 Hours

Nami and Sayaka worked, learning from Riko, for a solid two hours this time. Sayaka got up to speed on where they'd left off, quite quickly in fact. Of course, learning from Nami's review wasn't the most solid way of learning, so she was still on the rough side of the basics when they moved on. It didn't inhibit her from learning the later bits, but Riko offered that the two of them could go a bit more in-depth on said basics, if Nami didn't mind.

That was how Nami decided to leave them be to work on that when she started to feel a little bit info-full from her own lessons, leaving Rei's ward. As soon as she stepped out, she noticed Torimi in the hallway, holding something. Was that... It looked like the Etsu-cat.

"Hey, Tori," Nami called out to her with a wave, and she approached Nami. Definitely the cat, "Hako gave that to you?"

"Yeah," Torimi said, giving a small nod, "I collect plushies, so she said I could have them for my room. I was on my way there from Bakura's ward."

"Oh! I have something for you, then," Nami said, "I'll go downstairs with you so I can get it from my room. I totally forgot until you mentioned it just now."

"Aaaah, what is it?" Torimi asked.

"I saw it in the gift shop before, a pig plushie on a keychain," Nami said, "I didn't know why, but I figured I'd pick it up. Maybe some of your fortune-telling rubbed off on me?"

"Noooh, Namine, you're just sweet," Torimi giggled, hugging the plushie a bit tighter, "Even though you didn't know I was gonna come here, you thought of me, right?"

"Something like that," The memory was strangely foggy. Not foggy in the way that Nami's actual past was, but foggy as in she remembered doing it, but not her motivations. Maybe she'd been dissociating at the time.

“It’s really nice of you,” Torimi said, even though really, it wasn’t anything of Nami when she couldn’t remember her intentions, “Buuut… Is it really okay for me to have these ones?”

“Hako made them, so they’re hers to give. If she decided that she wanted you to have them, then it’s fine,” Nami shrugged, “Why would you think otherwise?”

“I meeeean… I didn’t know any of these people, who died. A plushie to remember them by doesn’t mean a whole lot to somebody who never even knew them, right?” Torimi wondered.

“If you’re thinking about that stuff, does it mean that they do mean something good to you?” Nami wondered about the implications of it, “Kinda, for somebody like you who collects plushies, this is the only way you can get to know them at all. Valid.”

“I didn’t really think it was vaaaaaalid, but kay,” Torimi giggled a bit, then stopped in front of the door to Nami’s room. Nami stepped in, retrieved the pig, then returned, “It’s so cute! I’m so glad you thought of me!”

“Anytime,” Nami said, then followed Torimi to her room. They opened it, and Nami was faced
with… Holy crap that’s a lot of plushies. All over the bed, the floor, arranged in cute ways but inescapably overwhelming, “…Bige.”

“Um… Yes,” Torimi turned a bit pink, “When I got to my rooom… My whole collection from home was already here. So I’m just adding to it now.”

“That’s insane,” Nami said, “Monokuma seriously gave you all of these?”

“Mmmhm,” Torimi nodded, then glanced away, “Me and Madara talked to Fujishirooo about it. He said that it’s pretty normal. Some of the others got their collections too, but mine is kind of… Excessive.”

“More like impressive,” Nami said, then thought back. She guessed she might have noticed a few porcelain figures in Riko’s room when investigating it before, and a few transformer toys in Rei’s. They didn’t really register at the time since they blended in with the decor, being small collections, but now that it was mentioned Nami could clearly recall the examples she’d already seen.

“Heeeere,” Torimi put the Etsu-cat down next to a few other plushies around her coffee table, arranged like they were having a tea party. The faulty Riko, face half-singed, was on top of the table. Around it was the Tomoe skink, and two others that Nami hadn’t seen before. One was a blue dragon with red eyes and a small yellow ribbon on an ear. Next to it was a dove, but wearing a lightly-floral button up shirt.

“I…” Nami muttered, “Didn’t see those ones yet. Hako didn’t show us those yet.”

“Ohhh,” Torimi thought for a minute, then picked up the dragon which was clearly meant to be Rei, “Then, how about, we show them off at dinner. Then, youuu can hold onto this one. She was your friend, right? Rei?”

“She was,” Nami said, reaching out to take the toy. It was obviously Box’s work, nothing like the knockoff plush that Shinjiro had made. In her hands, it felt… Like she was just a little bit closer to Rei again. Obviously, Rei was gone. Still, Box was able to capture the ‘feeling’ of Rei so well in this little creature. Rei and Box hadn’t known each other all that well, but even so, she understood her.

“I’m sorryyy,” Torimi frowned, holding her hands together under her chin, “That she died. I should have met her.”

“Yeah,” Nami chuckled, but her voice was cracking as she spoke, “My best friends… Really should have been able to meet each other, shouldn’t they? You should have met her. We could have all had tea together, and you’d read the leaves… It would have been… Nice.”

“At leaaast,” Torimi forced a smile, “At least, I’m meeting Asahi, and Yamaguchi, and Mizuho. They’re all good friends too. Right? They are?”

“Mhm,” Nami agreed, “They’re good friends.”

“I think so tooo. As your second-oldest friend, in, terms of time known not time lived, I judge them all to be,” She flashed a thumbs-up, “A-Okaaaay for you! Your tastes in people have improved.”

“Huh? It’s not like my decision to befriend you was bad taste or anything. You’re great,” Nami said.

“Haaa, I am, aren’t I?” Torimi preened, “But, that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about bef ooore. My memories related to you and stuff, will probably stay foggy till yours aren’t
anymore, but, Nami? What the fuuuuck ever compelled ya to go for Kirara?”
“What are you… What’s the issue with Kira?” Nami asked, “I mean, the way we met was kinda weird but my other memories I got back of her are pretty nice…”

“It’s nothing specific,” Torimi said, “I just don’t think that she made you really happy. She was kinda… A fuckin disaster person. Not the normal waaaay, either. She got kinda obsessed.”

“Isn’t it a good thing for your girlfriend to be obsessed with you?” Nami questioned.

“Dunno if she was obsessed in a girlfriendy kinda way,” Torimi shrugged, then stepped past Nami, “But, it’s not like it’s a big deal, since she’s not here or nothing. Don’t really gotta worry about it. Let’s hang out! What do you wanna do?”

“Umm…” Nami thought for a minute, “I kinda just wanna go back to the arcade? I mean. Now that it’s open and stuff, I just wanna spend time there. I mean, it’s video games!”

“That’s fair,” Torimi said, “Those definitely were your favorite leisure activity back in the outside world… That and watching super stuuuupid true crime shows.”

“Those were for while I was eating, can’t game while eating,” Nami shrugged.

“Watching true crime while eating makes you sound creepy, Namine! Creepy!” Torimi grabbed onto her wrist and shook it, “You better stop!”

“It’s… Not that creepy, is it?” Nami asked, glancing away.

“Truuue crime is gross. I wouldn’t ever wanna eat while watching that stuff,” Torimi whined, “Dunno how you can do it. Eat food while some old guy goes ‘this is how we used the science of maggots to find the culprit’ or whatever.”

“I guess it just doesn’t bother me,” Nami shrugged, “They have to make that stuff tv-ready, so it’s all toned down… Way less gross than horror movies for sure, and super less gross than irl.”

“I’ve given up on wondering how you’d know the grossness level of irl,” Torimi yawned, “I’ll juuust… Assume you’re referring to Killing Game stuff.”

“Yeah, I’ll also do that,” Nami said, admittedly a bit taken aback by her own statement. She really was on the verge of knowing who she used to be, but for as long as she was still in some amount of fog regarding that, she could still be baffled by knowledge she didn’t expect she was meant to have.

Even so, that conversation was done, so she didn’t need to think too hard about it anyway. She and Torimi made their way back to the arcade, finding there Tsumugi, Tsukasa, and Randy. Tsumugi was playing on one of the rhythm cabinets, while Tsukasa and Randy played…

Okay, what the fuck was that, actually?

“Hi,” Nami walked up to the boys, “What’s that you’re playing?”

“Dog foreplay, the game,” Randy answered without hesitation.

“No!!” Tsukasa exclaimed.

“Well, I’m not wrong. It is a game mechanic,” Randy shrugged, “But technically it’s called Tokyo
“The only game where you can take on a t-rex as a pomeranian,” Tsukasa said, then looked up and locked eyes with Nami, “That’s not an exaggeration. At all.”

“Huh. Yes, I’d say that my first thought of ‘what the fuck’ kinda holds true here,” Nami said, “Why exactly are you playing it?”

“Because it seemed weird. And I was right. It is!” Randy laughed, “And all the Sherlock games are only single-player, sooo…”

“I told him that we didn’t have to play together,” Tsukasa assured the onlookers, “He insisted.”

“Of course I did!! You’ve ignored me to play games for long enough, buster. I’m not about to do the same to you! Not yet anyway. Those games do seem cool. Maybe Kaede would wanna watch me play or something.” Randy said, the alligator under his control blending seamlessly into a patch of grass despite its tail sticking way out.

“H-Hey now,” Tsukasa complained, “You’re making me look like an inattentive boyfriend in front of my friend!”

“I’m very well aware that you’re attentive, Tsukasa,” Nami teased, then stuck her hands on her hips, “Randy’s being unfair! Every boyfriend deserves to put video games over romance from time to time. That’s just the way of the world. In old times, it was fishing trips. Now, video games. This is facts.”

“Pfft. I thought at least Shinoe would be on my side?” Randy said, his voice pitching to a question as he glanced her way, “Throw me a bone?”

“Um… I’ve never had a long-term boyfrieend,” Torimi sighed, “If I somehow managed to get one, he could take all the fishing trips and video game evenings he wanted! Caaaause. I’d still be gettin’ laid more often than I am usually.”

“Aren’t you a little young for that kind of thinking?” Tsukasa asked.

“Hypocrite,” Randy said, but didn’t elaborate. Well, Nami could guess at the reasoning. Tsukasa was twenty, and Randy was eighteen. They’d obviously been together for a good amount of time now, and to be frank, Nami didn’t really expect they’d been chaste till a year ago. Even as normie nerd as Tsukasa was, they just weren’t that type of couple.

“Pshhhh. Age of consent is arbitrary,” Torimi stuck her tongue out.

“It’s really not!” Tsukasa protested, “Frankly, it needs more details… Maybe it’s fine for you to be with a nineteen year old, but much older than that still starts to be unhealthy for you!”

“I haaaave never had a healthy relationship, in my life, no matter the age difference,” Torimi laughed, “Relationships can be about helping each other, using each other, or helping one while being used. I’d say miiiine are all the secon’ category.”

“That’s not good,” Tsukasa said.

“I don’ care,” Torimi said, “Not like it had a ‘lasting impact’ on me or nothing. Just shitty romance. Everything above board, just ain’t great!”

“If you say so,” Tsukasa said, but at the same time, joined Nami in worrying about Torimi’s
priorities. She didn’t seem like an unhappy person or anything, but at the same time, she didn’t seem to have a good outlook on interpersonal relationships. Hopefully, she’d be able to change that opinion.

Nami kind of got the impression that being friends with Madara would help Torimi with that process, though. Being friends with a guy who wasn’t taken but also wasn’t ever going to want to be with her in a romantic or sexual way would probably be good for her.
Having determined what it was that Randy and Tsukasa were playing, Nami turned her attention instead to Tsumugi at the back of the room. Torimi stayed where she was, watching the boys play, so it was just Nami who tiptoed over to Tsumugi and watched over her shoulder as she did, okay, at the game. Nowhere near as impressive as Madara’s play, but also far from as pathetic as Kanoshi’s. How a rhythm game enthusiast managed to suck so badly was a mystery, especially when somebody who hadn’t expressed interest before was doing fine.

Nami waited until the song was finished to step in, “Hey, Shirogane. How’s it going?”

“Oh, hello Nami!” Tsumugi chuckled a bit, “Quite well, to be honest. This morning did take me aback a little, but I’m really feeling fine. These games are fun, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Nami said, nodding a bit, “This is my hobby. I mean, one of them, I guess. But it’s what I like to do the most in my free time. I really like most types of games. But really, if it doesn’t have fun gameplay, I think it needs a good mystery! Otherwise there is no point, confirmed.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that this is quite fun to play, then,” Tsumugi chuckled, gesturing to the cabinet she’d been using, “It’s very complicated, but I think I like that. It’s fun to play a game so tough it’s hard to think about anything else when you’re playing it.”

“Yea…” Nami said, “I think you’d like some more story-driven games too, though. You seem like a woman with taste.”

“You’re the first person who hasn’t suggested I play Space Invaders.”

“The urge was there, but, come on,” Nami shrugged, “If anything, I’d probably suggest Alien Isolation. You like that sort of stuff more, right?”

“Yes,” Tsumugi said, “I think I’ve mentioned it before. What I like best about science-fiction isn’t actually spaceship sort of stuff, but the way that people try to design unique aliens. Especially aliens in horror, since those are the only ones that really take steps to move away from a humanoid appearance. Insects are a good inspiration for those things, since they’re such hardy creatures, it’s not hard to imagine that on another planet it could have been a species in that vein which ended up the dominant, sapient one. Plus, humans aren’t exactly designed well, frankly, if I didn’t know humans were in charge of the Earth and such, if I were some alien, I would definitely not assume my planet’s human-equivalent could be the dominant species elsewhere in the galaxy…”

“Ah,” Nami didn’t get it at all, but that’s okay. This may have been the most that she’d heard Tsumugi talk in one breath, and it was nice to be learning more about her most mysterious friend.
Well, okay, Goro and Box and probably Riko, were more mysterious than Tsumugi. Even so, Nami felt like she understood those friends more. Part of that was probably because Tsumugi and Kaede had originally made attempts to isolate themselves for protection, so Nami hadn’t had as much time to get to know them compared to the others.

And, another part of it was because Tsumugi and Kaede really did seem like a unit to her a lot of time. With Randy and Tsukasa it wasn’t like that, because for one, Nami was friends with Tsukasa in the past. She couldn’t necessarily explain why else, she’d been able to separate one couple and not the other, but now that Tsumugi was alone Nami had the opportunity to get to know her better. Tsumugi was more interesting to her than Kaede, anyway.

If Nami had to pick a detective to work with, she’d definitely pick Randy over Kaede. It wasn’t like… Okay, well maybe, she did dislike Kaede a little bit. She understood that Kaede was an Ultimate, but even so, she seemed arrogant. Full of herself. Like if she put her mind to it, she couldn’t possibly be wrong, but Nami knew full well that even an Ultimate could make a mistake in their field. Being the best of the best didn’t mean perfect.

In the last case, Kaede acted like all she had to do was get serious, and no matter what, the truth would be found. But she could have been wrong. Nami, honestly didn’t believe in the situation completely, even with the information she had, until Shinjiro confessed to it. Monokuma was right, when it said that was a contrived murder. The clues were all presented, but in such an obtuse way, failure would have been possible. It would have. Kaede never should have acted like it wasn’t.

And… There was something else Kaede never should have done, but this was something that Nami couldn’t remember at the time.

As it was, locked behind that wall Monokuma had erected, there were three people who could be blamed for the reset. There was Kaede, who thought so much that she had the answer that she was willing to stake all of their lives on her faulty theory. Sayaka, who just wanted so badly for Kaede to be right so the killing game could end. And, Goro. Goro, who knew that Kaede’s theory was wrong, who predicted that turn of events, and did nothing to stop it. Maybe he couldn’t have stopped it before the trial started, but he could have tried.

Nami, left without these memories, only had the faintest of inklings that there was any problem at all with these people, but coupled with her existing opinion on Kaede’s self-confidence, she found herself distrustful of that girl… But not of her girlfriend. Her girlfriend who had continued talking on about her fondness for fictional alien designs while Nami spaced out. Tsumugi was a nice person. Nami wanted to be her friend.

“That’s really cool,” Nami said when Tsumugi seemed finished, “I don’t really understand a lot of that, but I like hearing about things that other people enjoy.”

“Heh, I did go on a bit there, didn’t I?” Tsumugi asked, fiddling with her glasses, “Well, I’m glad that I wasn’t annoying or anything… I try not to do those kinds of things, you know? People usually just care about what I do for a living, not the sort of stuff that I enjoy.”

“You’ve… Already been through one of these Killing Game things, haven’t you?” Nami asked, pouting, “Surely, somebody else besides Akamatsu cared about this stuff there, right?”

“Well…” Tsumugi looked away, “A few of them, I guess. But they died pretty quickly, and… Not long after this point in the game, everyone but Akamatsu started hating me.”

“Why would they do that?” Nami asked, tilting her head.
“I… Shouldn’t really talk about it, ahah. I’ve been told I have a bad habit of fishing for sympathy. I usually did it to Akamatsu, and looking back, it was pretty rotten of me,” Tsumugi shook her head, “I kept saying bad things about myself, just because I needed her to tell me they weren’t true. But a lot of them really were true, and nobody should have told me that it was okay for me to be that way or do those things.”

“What if I promised not to say that it’s okay?” Nami offered, “Would you be able to talk to me, then?”

“...Maybe,” Tsumugi said, glancing away, “But not right now, and not yet. I don’t much understand you yet, Nami, even if I consider you a friend.”

“I feel the same way about you,” Nami admitted, then put her hands on her hips, “Guess we gotta work on that.”

“I guess so,” Tsumugi said, then flashed a thumbs-up and the smile returned to her face, “Why don’t we play one of these games together?”

“I’d like that,” Nami agreed. Tsumugi was her friend. And, she wanted her to be a better one. Nami got the feeling that Tsumugi was a person who wasn’t yet good, but who was on the path to being better. Like Tomoe had been. Nami would do her best to avoid letting that progress be squandered. She’d failed Tomoe, but she wouldn’t fail this friend.
12:00 PM / 1200 Hours

Nami and Tsumugi played a video game together for about an hour, then Tsumugi decided that she ought to go meet back up with Kaede after all. That left Nami to return to Tsukasa and Randy. They’d switched to playing some racing game, but not Mario Kart, so that Torimi could join in. She was doing especially well when Nami walked up.

“Hey,” Nami greeted them quietly, so as not to distract any of them from the game, “How’s it going?”

“Playing Excitebots,” Torimi answered, and true to her statement, the mouse robot she was controlling started to do some weird maneuver, “It’s fun and I’m really good at it.”

“Hey, I won once!” Randy exclaimed.

“Tsukasa didn’t?” Nami asked, then snickered, “Guess I’d do even worse at this game, since he always beats me in GTA races…”

“This game is just too gimmicky!” Tsukasa complained, “I’m usually way better than this at racing games. I can’t believe Randy’s better than me when he hasn’t even played any of them before.”

“I’ve played Mario Kart before,” Randy said, shrugging his shoulders, “I guess I’m just a natural at this stuff. Frankly, I’d be more concerned about the fact that you’ve driven an actual car before and you suck this bad!”

“Oh, shut up,” Tsukasa rolled his eyes, chuckling, “You know that driving in video games is nothing like driving in real life.”

“Yeah, maybe if it was I’d’ve actually learned how,” Randy laughed. The legal driving age of eighteen hadn’t changed at all despite everything that had happened in the world. Nami frankly didn’t know how to drive, probably because she didn’t need it to get around in Chisoda and there wasn’t much reason to leave that area. Everything that she needed to worry about was right there in that district. That too, was an important hint to what her talent was.

“It’s okay. In cities, it’s not that important to be able to drive anyway,” Nami said, “I was never too anxious for it or anything, I could just get anywhere I needed to go with public transportation, or just by walking.”

“That’s fair,” Tsukasa said, “I learned to drive to make traveling to meetings in different cities easier, myself. Even then, I didn’t need it, it was just convenient. It’s nice that the quiet war usually keeps away from interfering with public transport lines. Even despairs don’t know how to drive sometimes, I guess.”

“A bunch of train lines and stuff did get destroyed during the Tragedy,” Nami said, “But they got fixed pretty quickly once society started trying to get back on track.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Randy asked.

“I read it in a book yesterday,” Nami explained truthfully, “About important cases in the Tragic Era. One of them was a class action suing big businesses that refused to contribute to the repair funds for things like that. Apparently it was a mandatory income percentage, but they tried to claim
exemption through some obsolete tax code. The regular people who paid their percent in organized
to get them to pay up.”

“That sounds suuuuper boring,” Torimi said, finishing off the race then turning around to face
Nami, “But I guess it’s not surprising you’d read a thing like that…”

“Why, did you remember something else about me?” Nami asked.

“Nahhh,” Torimi shook her head, “Don’t have to remember why to not be surprised you’d do
something. Still got no clue what your talent is. It’s a pain, that I had to go and get stuff erased
too, just so you could figure it out on your own. Why couldn’t Bakura get his brain wiped?”

“The idea is it was a mistake,” Nami said, “Monokuma probably messed with your memories too
when it added you here just to try and save face.”

“Makes sense,” Torimi accepted that explanation easily. It did in fact, make sense. If Nami were
her, though, she might have been offended to hear the theory that she’d had her memories messed
around with just to cover up a mistake… Hell, she’d been offended at the fact that did happen to
her, with the motives that had been wiped ‘out of play’ during the reset. Torimi, on the other hand,
didn’t seem to care very much. Then again, Torimi never seemed to be especially bothered by
much at all.

Even, frankly, her distress over people confusing her as being too similar to Chihiro Fujisaki for
comfort, was presented in an unbothered way. Maybe it was just Torimi’s accent that made her
seem so mellow, or maybe she really just didn’t care that much, even when it came to things that
did upset her. Despite considering her a close friend, Nami still found Torimi a bit of a puzzle.

“You should keep playing,” Nami said to the group of three, “But I think that I’ll just go and have
a walk around the building. Just a quick walk. Don’t mind me, just have fun, okay?”

“Kaaay,” Torimi said, and started prep for another race. Randy and Tsukasa both gave short nods
of approval before focusing on the screen as well.

Nami watched the backs of their heads for just a little while longer before she turned to leave the
arcade. In the past, she definitely would have just spent the entire day playing video games, no
hesitation. But she did have a responsibility, a promise to uphold with her past self. If she spent
several more hours in here playing video games and keeping, in general, to herself, then she’d be
setting herself up to have regrets. It was time for her to have a stroll around and see who she might
run into, if she’d run into anybody. She hoped she would. Really, she eventually would, if she just
wandered about. There were, after all, sixteen people in the building once again.

That wouldn’t be the case for long. Unfortunately, it really wouldn’t be, for very long. Nami did
believe, still, with what Kaede said. Certain optimism was harmful, and to think that there wouldn’t
be any more deaths was a foolish optimism. Like Nami had said to Box, the best case scenario was
two deaths only, involving the Evil King’s Game. She could have enough optimism to hope for
that outcome, though.

Monokuma had offered them a way out. Unlikely as that way out was, they had it, and it was
possible it could be fulfilled. If the Evil King was clever enough to find the weapon, or somebody
here clever enough to figure out their identity… They’d be rewarded for it. It was a shred of hope,
that there didn’t need to be so many deaths that every floor of the building opened up and allowed
them to ascertain the Mastermind’s identity.
1:00 PM / 1300 Hours

As Nami expected, it wasn't very long at all before she encountered somebody else in the building. It wasn't unusual at all, when there really were so many people about. She encountered Kanoshi near the gift shop, so she just waved as she approached him, then offered a greeting when she was closer, "Hi, Kyosuke. What are you up to?"

"I was just checking out the movie selection in there today," Kanoshi said, pointing a thumb back that direction, "There wasn't really anything good, though..."

"Why are you walking around alone?" Nami asked, then rethought her statement, "Not accusing you of anything. Just curious cat."

"Huh? Well, I mean. It's just that nobody really seems to want to spend time with me," He gave a nervous chuckle, "Well, maybe not that drastic. They're just busy, really. Yamaguchi was working with Asahi on something, then went to go bake with Ruka, and they don't need my help. And, Madara was up to something in Fujishiro's ward, with him and Hako. I just didn't want to intrude, or anything."

"I see," Nami said, "Well, I'll hang out with you, if you wanna. I'm not involved in your whole feud thing, after all. My advice to Ruka was that I wasn't going to pick sides and you need to talk about it between yourselves."

"Ah... I guess we do," Kanoshi admitted, "But it's kind of hard to get somebody like Ruka to sit down and have a serious talk. We need to, soon, though. We need to have a serious talk."

"I think you do," Nami agreed, then crossed her arms and looked up at the ceiling, "You've really got to tell him that the ashtray is a dish."

"What?" Kanoshi asked.

"Nothing," Nami shook her head, "It's a really obscure vintage meme. Sorry. Sometimes when I get uncomfortable in a serious situation I just say dumb stuff like that."

"Are you uncomfortable every time you make one of those vintage memes?" Kanoshi asked.

"No," Nami said, "Only when I use the really weird ones. That one was hardly really a meme. Just a silly thing from an old short story. I found it silly, anyhow. This story's got a line. It goes something like, they'd have a serious talk soon, and he'd tell her the ashtray was a dish. That's what it was. They got this bowl from a potter at a craft fair, or something like that, and it was getting used as an ashtray."

"Ruka would do that," Kanoshi said.

"That doesn't surprise me," Nami said, "I haven't seen any ashtrays here. That's weird. Ruka smokes cigarettes, but I haven't seen any ashtrays. Is he using a dish after all?"

"Monokuma gets rid of it," Kanoshi said, "I don't understand it, but that's what happens. Ruka just ashes onto a table and it's gone the next time we look back there. Have you ever smoked?"

"No," Nami said, "I think Tomoe did occasionally, but not when we were still living together. I
liked drinking alcoholic sodas, though. I remembered that just yesterday. Does it bug you that Ruka smokes?"

"Well... Not really," Kanoshi admitted, looking away from her, "It's kind of just, fine. It's bad for him in the long term, but he's never gone on a nicotine bender and woken up in the hospital. I'd call that a lesser evil."

"Alcohol poisoning?" Nami asked.

"...I'm not sure I should really tell you all of this," Kanoshi dipped his head, "It's. I think I'm just venting my frustrations. This isn't fair to Ruka."

"I understand," Nami said, "But my lips are sealed. I won't tell anyone, if you did want to vent about it."

"It... ugh," Kanoshi sighed, "Not alcohol poisoning, no. He'd just get way too drunk and start thinking too much about certain, unfortunate things. You remember what he said the first day we were here, about not wanting to die anymore. It's, well, he only ever tried to do it when he was drunk off his ass. It's not so much that I think he shouldn't drink at all. I'm just... worried. Cause of experience."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Nami said, "But, sometimes, you can't fix people."

"I know that," Kanoshi mumbled, "But he's my closest friend. If I can fix anybody, shouldn't it be him?"

"It can feel that way, I guess," Nami said, "But I couldn't fix Tomoe, and she was my twin sister. Sometimes you have to let people make their mistakes, and then they can fix themselves."

"Tomoe's dead," Kanoshi said.

"If she didn't die," Nami said, "Then she might have gotten better. It wouldn't have been because of anybody but her, though. That's the tea."

"Dammit. Why do you have to go and make sense?" Kanoshi questioned.

"Because I am one clever girl," Nami giggled, "Also, almost three years older than you."

"I thought that you were just nineteen?" Kanoshi asked.

"I am," Nami said, "For three more days, anyway."

"Wait, seriously?" Kanoshi frowned, "Your birthday's in the middle of a Killing Game?"

"Yeah," Nami shrugged, "A little disappointing."

"I'd say!" Kanoshi exclaimed, then decided to move on with the topic, "So... That makes you and Tomoe, Virgos, yeah? That's pretty fitting. Since you're both pretty graceful girls, and stuff."

"You flatter me," Nami chuckled, "I don't really think a lot about that star sign stuff, though. I wonder if Shirogane does, or if she gets annoyed by it?"

"Huh, that's a good question," Kanoshi said, "I know a lot of people who like astronomy or astrology get bitter about the other one, but wouldn't an Ultimate Astronaut have some appreciation for both? Not like I really believe the signs mean anything, but it's still fun to know and think about."
"I agree. So, why didn't I see you up in the arcade, if you weren't hanging out with anyone today?"

"Ahah, well... It kind of still doesn't have the type of games I like most," Kanoshi admitted, "Rhythm game cabinets are totally different from mobile games, and I obviously can't play an MMO, since the games have all been set up to still prevent communication with the outside world."

"Hm, I see, I see," Nami nodded, "That makes sense. What else would you wanna do, though?"

"Well, I already said I looked for a movie to watch, but none of them seemed good," Kanoshi clicked his tongue, "Or, well, I can't tell what would be good, because I never heard of any of them. They all seem old."

"That's my specialty," Nami said, then turned back toward the gift shop, "I'm gonna pick out something you'll definitely like. You really never heard of any of them though?"

"It isn't like I ever made an effort to get to know more about other types of media," Kanoshi shrugged, "I know about older games, but not movies."

"Okay, that makes sense," Nami said, then went to pick out a movie for Kanoshi.
Daily Life: Day Seven (Decor Hall)

3:00 PM / 1500 Hours

Nami found a movie that she thought Kanoshi would enjoy, one that was legitimately good and not too full of memes, plus, actually in Japanese originally, unlike the other movies she’d subjected her friends to. Rather than the Japanese dub of Shrek, she shared just the actual original movie Your Name.

And of course, she watched it right along with Kanoshi. Nobody else ended up showing up while they were watching it, but that was okay. Unlike the meme movies, Nami didn’t necessarily want to watch this with a bunch of people. It was good, and that was why. It always made her kind of emotional, and while getting emotional around one or two friends was fine, more than that and it started to get embarrassing that she was crying at a movie.

Once the movie was finished, though, she and Kanoshi parted ways again. He was going to go to the arcade after all, now that he'd had the 'something other than video games' itch scratched. He invited Nami to come along with him, but she had elsewhere to be; She was curious what Box, Mitsuru, and Madara were up to. Of course, they may have moved on from Mitsuru's ward in the two hours that Nami had been watching a movie in the auditorium, but maybe not. She started there, but the ward was, in fact, empty.

Well, that was okay. She could just keep wandering around until she found them, or somebody else. Since it had been several hours, she kind of doubted that anybody was actually where she'd heard they were before watching the movie, but that was alright. She wasn't really looking for anybody in particular, she just wanted to hang out with somebody before dinner came around in two hours.

As it was, she did end up encountering those three, though not in any particular ward. She spotted them when poking her head into the Dining Hall. What were they up to? She walked in, "Hey, how's it going?"

"It's fine!" Box called out, then clasped her hands together and walked up to Nami, "We're helping Amai."

"Helping her do what?" Nami asked, looking around the dining hall to see that they'd put down tablecloths, and were decorating the place in a somewhat formal way. Madara and Mitsuru were still working on setting that up while Box talked to Nami.

"Monokuma showed up and told her that there would be a very important announcement during dinner, and that it wanted there to be a 'sufficiently fancy environment' for when it made that announcement," Box said, "So Amai is making a fancy meal, and we're making the dining hall look nice."

"You'd think Monokuma could just do that itself," Nami grumbled.

"It could. Madara said that," Box tapped her own chin, "But then it got all annoyed at us and said that it was an important announcement that we'd all be really happy to hear, so couldn't we just pull our own weight a little bit in this situation?"

"That's weird. I can't imagine what Monokuma would have to tell us that we'd actually appreciate," Nami crossed her arms.
"That's a little unfair to it, don't you think?" Box asked, "I mean, it did give you that ogre movie for the marathon and stuff. It's done some nice things, so maybe this is just another nice thing it decided to do. It's not like it wants us to be totally miserable when we're not killing each other."

"It's working for Despair," Madara called out, "That's kind of the definition of what it wants, right?"

"Nah," Box shook her head, giggling a bit, "Bakura told me. It's more interesting this way. If somebody's already committed suicide, then Monokuma won't let anybody else do it. It has to balance out making us despair, and making the game interesting to people who are already despair, or something like that... Hopeful people suffering and killing each other is more interesting than despairs doing that. I mean, it's a fact."

"Voicing that fact isn't going to make you have another breakdown, is it?" Nami asked, remembering the previous morning.

"No," Box shook her head, "I've resolved that particular issue. Inevitability is a factor here, and I've accepted that. I think it's better to understand the motivations behind this game, than to fuss over whether or not something's going to happen..."

"Yeah, about time," Nami said, then walked further into the dining hall, "There anything I can help with? I didn't really have any plans or anything, till dinner, so I'd be glad to help out."

"Oh! Absolutely, yes, when planning an event it's always good to have an extra pair of hands," Box said, reaching out to clasp Nami's hands, "As part of my job as the Ultimate Volunteer, I was part of planning a lot of charity benefits, so that's how I know how to do this stuff. Madara and Fujishiro are handling all the heavy lifting stuff and tall things, as boys do... Oh, I have the perfect task for you. Could you make some iced tea, with something from Rei's ward?"

"Yeah, I can do that," Nami said with a nod, then got to work. She made iced tea, then put papers on the fluorescent lights to make them a little more atmospheric, and just in general did whatever Box pointed her towards. This was definitely something that Box knew how to do. As strange as that girl was, she did have an impressive Ultimate Talent, with its jack-of-all-trades application. Though, it kind of seemed like an eighteen year old girl wouldn't have had enough time to learn all these things, even to the marginal amounts that Box had learned them. Though, Nami figured, she shouldn't underestimate the power of an Ultimate. Box was pretty bad at a lot of things that seemed like common sense, anyway, so if she'd sacrificed those things to put more time into her talent, it was probably plausible.

The ways that Box sometimes failed to exist normally didn't make sense and didn't really line up in any reasonable manner, but that was okay. Ultimates didn't need to be reasonable, and Nami was having fun setting up this dumb announcement party for Monokuma.
Daily Life: Day Seven (Announcement)

5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

Working on setting up the dining hall, time flew right on to when others would arrive to see the fruits of the odd crew’s labors. Those labors, of course, also being odd enough that Box had the foresight to send Nami into Tomoe's ward to print little ‘invitation’ cards explaining the situation to hand to people as they walked in, so that they wouldn't have to repeat themselves offering explanations out loud. It turned out to be convenient, because most people were, in fact, quite confused by the decor.

Amai’s ‘fancy’ meal turned out to be a large roast bird and its accompanying sides, as well as some pudding dessert that she'd again allowed Yuuri to make. Apparently, the Ultimate Baker was somebody who was actually up to her standards on food preparation. Somebody had to be, Box commented with a snicker.

Nami still found it so odd, that Box who was usually an immovable sweetheart, spoke like that to her oldest friend. Not that, compared to Amai, what Box said was cruel at all. Rather, it was just disarming to hear someone who'd established herself as the kindest person in the room to a fault say even a single word that didn't match the image.

It wasn't long after everybody arrived and starting filling their plates that Monokuma decided to make a grand entrance. To match the theme of the announcement party it was wearing a tuxedo and top hat, holding an odd cane that Nami swore looked somehow familiar, like it was a replica of something that she couldn't quite place. It also, unlike its usual method of appearing out of thin air in some inconvenient place, actually waltzed straight through the doors, "Good evening, one and all! It is I, your host, Monokuma. I've seen that these stellar girls and boys have already briefed you on the nature of this party!"

"Yeah," Yuuri said, "Still got no fucking clue what you could think is an announcement we'd like, though."

"Well... Maybe you won't like it, but it's a fuckin' blessing in general, so you little bastard heathens better appreciate it," Monokuma rolled its eyes, inasmuch as a Monokuma could, which wasn't a whole lot, "Of course, since it's oh-so-spectacular and I'm honestly real goddamn annoyed that it's happening, I'm gonna save the good news for later and use this awesome party to deliver your next motives while I'm at it!"

"That's rude," Box said, "We didn't make the party for motives."

"Well, I was gonna give out motives at dinner anyway, so you kinda did. It's not like you could set me up a party only for the announcement and not for the motives. Besides. We both get something good outta this way!"

"You're insufferable," Box complained.

"So I've heard, ahaha!" Monokuma laughed, then thought for a moment, and laughed differently, "Upupu."

“Well,” Kanoshi wrung his hands out in front of himself, “We should get that over with, right…? So that we can get to the good news, I mean.”

“Yeaaaa, that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Monokuma proclaimed, then did a little dance with its cane as the wheel of motives descended from the ceiling at a slow pace, “We’ll see who fortune
Monokuma spun the wheel, and it landed on Tsumugi again. It frowned, spun the wheel, and landed on Box.

"Would you look at that! It took a couple times, but it seems fortune still favors the bear! Yamaguchi got picked for sass ing me, and Hako did too this time! Wouldn’t you know? I’ve got destiny on my side!" Monokuma laughed loudly, “I’m totally not rigging this stuff, so you know! I’ve had past truths and current truths prepared for everybody since the beginning, since even I didn’t know who’d come up on the ‘current truths’ spin. I have no control over the wheel!

"Of course. Lying about something like that wouldn’t be playing by the rules,” Goro said, “And you’ve gotta follow those. Monokumas are more bound by rules than any other participant!”

"That’s true! Thank you! It’s incredibly true and I am a law-abiding citizen!” Monokuma said, “Anyway, moving on. The wheel must be obeyed. The last participant to have the same talent as Box Hako was not a real person… Huh. That’s rough, unfortunate,” Monokuma sounded a bit upset as it said that. Then, it spun the wheel again, and it landed on Kaede, “The last participant to have the same talent as Kaede Akamatsu didn’t have a sense of time.”

Everyone was silent for a little while. These were some strange statements. Monokuma stood awkwardly in front of the wheel for a few moments, then snapped, “Well? Aren’t you going to say something? Debunk those accusations? Do you really want to leave Ha… Hako hanging like that?”

“...Obviously, Akamatsu has a sense of time,” Nami spoke up, “She’s an Ultimate Detective, after all. A detective who can’t even have an idea of how long it’s been without checking the clock doesn’t seem very useful to me.”

“That’s a dumb way to try and debunk it!” Goro taunted, “It’s almost like you’re not even trying! Look. If Akamatsu has a sense of time, that still implies a different detective didn’t have one, so saying ‘a detective wouldn’t have that disadvantage’ is bullshit!”

“You’re… Hm,” Nami frowned, shaking her head, “I can’t think of any evidence to debunk this properly, you’re right. But Monokuma’s right, too. We can’t leave Hako hanging. Not a real person? Obviously, she is!”

“But that’s a really vague statement!” Goro waved a hand in the air, “I dunno if I’d call myself a real person! Akamatsu, come on. Shouldn’t you weigh in on this?”

Kaede glanced across the room at Box, then Tsumugi spoke up, “Akamatsu does have a sense of time. Of course she does, and of course Hako is a real person. Why is this even something we’re talking about? It’s obviously one of the false ones.”

“Yeah, obviously!” Goro laughed, but shot Kaede a slightly confused look. After all, he’d given her the perfect way out of this situation, one that she easily could have taken, but instead…

“In that case,” Nami said, “We’re done with the bullshit. Monokuma, give us the actual announcement.”

“My motives aren’t bullshit…” Monokuma whined, “Way to step up for your friend, though! Good work! I’ll admit, that was a set that wasn’t exactly able to be ‘debunked with evidence’. Not to say that you did debunk it, because as far as I’m concerned, anything could be a lie and even the ones you supposedly had evidence against could still be true! But, I guess that you earned the real announcement. Here goes everything!”
“The special, once-in-a-lifetime, why the fuck did the higher-ups do this without consulting the Monokuma, announcement opportunity! Tonight, certain among you will be able to have a special chat in your dorm rooms with somebody outside of the Killing Game! Carefully monitored and censored of course, to prevent any shenanigans. Yeah, here’s the list of people who’ll have someone waiting to talk to you at eight o clock tonight!”

“Yuuri Ruka, Kanoshi Kyosuke, Nami Kaguya, Sayaka Yamaguchi, Box Hako, Mitsuru Fujishiro, Goro Bakura, Randy Sempers. And that’s it!”
“...Christ,” Yuuri groaned, running a hand back through his hair, “You weren’t kidding when you said it might not be good news to me, Monokuma.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Monokuma shrugged, “But, hey, it’s not my fault! Like I said, they didn’t consult me on this at all. The option will only be there from eight to ten tonight, so it’s not like you actually have to go. You can totally stand up your only possible chance at talking to somebody in the outside world. I know I’d want you to! I haven’t had a chance to vet these people or anything, so for all I know, it’s just Despairs who wanna yell at you. It’s your call.”

“There isn’t anyone else on the outside who’d wanna talk to me at all, so, hard pass on that,” Yuuri chuckled, leaning his cheek in his palm, “Rest of you can use that as a reference point, if you wanna.”

“I’m gonna go,” Sayaka said, clicking her tongue, “There’s a possibility that it’s someone important to me, so I gotta, you know? There’s no way I’ll pass up the opportunity. If it isn’t somebody I actually wanna talk to, I can just leave.”

“That’s… Correct, isn’t it?” Box asked.

“Yes,” Monokuma confirmed, “There isn’t any condition saying that you have to stay in the room during that window. Actually, well, the people on the other end have that condition, in case you decide to go to the room at the last minute. Really, this was presented to me as a gift to you guys. Any stuff with the rules you’d expect me to do to ruin this for you? Probably isn’t involved!”

“Do you think…” Kaede spoke up, “Could this mean that somebody else got control of the game?”

“I can’t answer that! However, what I can tell you is that even if that happened, don’t get your shitty little hopes up. Obviously there are failsafes involved! You can only be safely removed from the Neo World after a win condition is met,” Monokuma proclaimed, “Notably, that censorship I mentioned will prevent any information about the nature of this game from being disclosed to you. You’ll get the clues you need in due time, like any other Killing Game!”

“Thank you for the clarifications, Monokuma,” Box said, “I… Guess that I probably have to go to my room at that time, too.”

“Who do you think’ll be there?” Sayaka asked, “I’m hoping it’s my dad, or grandma.”

“If it’s anyone good, then it would probably be my parents…” Box looked down at the table where she sat, “I’m not sure I really want to talk to them, but I probably have to.”

“Why not?” Sayaka asked, “I kinda thought somebody like you would have a good relationship with your family.”

“I don’t have a bad relationship with them,” Box said, “It’s just been a really long time. I don’t know if they’d even think of me as the same person anymore.”

“So it’s not just a grudge because your name is Box Box?” Nami asked.

“Of course not! My parents bonded with each other over their own strange names. My father’s name is Ice, and my mother’s is Speak,” Box laughed a little bit, “It obviously isn’t that. It’s really just that I’m nervous I won’t be what they’re expecting.”
“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Kanoshi said, “Parents have a way of surprising you, with that sort of thing.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri said, “Even I can say, shit, they kind of can be. I never experienced it or anything, sure, but. If your parents are good to start with, they’ll just be glad to see how you’ve grown.”

“But…” Box looked down.

“How different from their expectations can youuuuu even be?” Torimi questioned, tapping her fingers on the table in front of her, “Unless there’s something you’ve somehow felt the need to keep hidden from four kindred souls.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Box said.

“So, it should be fine,” Madara shrugged it off.

“That’s…” Box looked down, “No, it’s not like I think they’ll be angry or anything. It won’t be an argument and they won’t say anything to me. But, that doesn’t mean they won’t be disappointed, that I’m not enough. That I’m not the Box Hako they wanted to meet.”

“I understand that,” Nami said, “I mean, not personally, in my situation. But, I don’t know exactly who’d be wanting to meet with me. I can only think that it might be Kira, and if it is, then I might be in the same kind of boat. That I’m not the same Nami that she used to know.”

“Ohhh yeah,” Torimi rolled her eyes, “Like it would be soooo bad for her to dump you.”

“Tori!” Nami exclaimed, indignant.

“It’s not like you still loooove her,” Torimi chuckled, then glanced subtly towards Sayaka for a moment, then back to Nami, “I mean, Namineee. We don’t even know if you were still dating when you came here.”

“I guess that’s true,” Nami said, “Well, we should eat some of this food.”

“You fucking should!” Amai interrupted the table’s conversation, slamming a hand down, “I worked damn hard on this meal, and unlike some of you, I don’t even get the chance to see somebody I might wanna see! It’s bullshit. My parents love me a whole fucking load, you know?”

“I think,” Torimi said, “These people prooobably… Came looking for these guys. None of us newcomers were on the liiist. You’d think Mister Dad Ueda would have his wife, right? We haven’t been missing long enough for anyone to find us.”

“Wait,” Amai blinked, “You really think that’s what it is?”

“Yeaaah,” Torimi looked up at the ceiling, “Caaause, there’s no way that Mister Dad wouldn’t have anyone come to see him, if it’s legit, and that’s not the reason. I bet that they wanted to rescue us, but the failsafe stopped them… But they could at leeeaaast get through to talk to us, uuu.”

“Yeah… Yeah, if they’re real people, and not just fucking despairs tryna upset us, then that’s gotta be it! There’s no way that if they actually went around asking the people close to us to come and talk to us, my parents would refuse. Hah!” Amai cackled, “I’m their precious only daughter and they’d never let anything terrible happen to me, they’d totally come and make sure I knew they did everything they could to try and keep me safe from this Killing Game! Not like two caterers could actually protect me from this, but of course, they’d have tried~ Now eat, okay? Eat and stop talking about this dumb shit.”
“Whatever you say, Oishi,” Nami said, and gave a mock salute before tucking into her meal.
7:00 PM / 1900 Hours

Given the particular fanciness of this meal, people ate relatively slowly, so that they could try different parts of it. Well, Nami didn’t do that, because there were only four things on the buffet that she really liked to eat anyway, but the others did. Nami wasn’t excessively picky, really, but the thing was that when there were four dishes she loved, ten she’d tolerate, and another eleven she didn’t like at all (in concept, she hadn’t tried Amai’s take on them), may as well go for what she loved.

Yuuri’s pudding, too, was really great. Nami thought that it was amazing that they could have food like this. Maybe it was a Killing Game, and therefore distinctly unpleasant by nature, but at least in the act of bringing Ultimates together there were combinations of talents that never would have happened otherwise. The Ultimate Baker and Ultimate Chef never would have been able to collaborate like this out in the world, because they did need to keep their talents hidden from despair, and even if they didn’t, their personalities… Really wouldn’t lead to them getting along if it wasn’t required of them.

Nami thought, this situation, it would have been nice if not for the Killing Game thing. Her peers were all interesting people, and though she’d met a few of them beforehand, she might never have gotten to know them again at this point in her life, or known that they were ultimates, or anything like that. She probably never would have met some of them at all. Rei, Sayaka, Tsumugi, Randy… People that she honestly couldn’t think about never having met, if she was honest. Obviously in this situation, she could think about a life without any of those people, but she couldn’t think about a life where she hadn’t met them. They were precious friends.

Maybe something like this, if it hadn’t been a Killing Game, could be good. Maybe it could. But, it wasn’t, because it was a Killing Game.

“Namine,” Torimi spoke to her again, “Are you planning to go to your room at eight?”

“I am,” Nami said, “Whoever wants to talk to me from the outside, I’m sure it’ll be some insight on what is still missing from my memory.”

“If you’re sure,” Torimi said, “Do youu… Wanna have company? Monokuma didn’t say we couldn’t do that. I don’t have anyone coming to talk to me sooo…”

“No, I think it’s better if I do it myself,” Nami said, shaking her head, “Thanks for the offer, though. You should probably let the others know that Monokuma didn’t put the restriction on.”

“No worries!” Monokuma appeared, “I’ll announce it myself. Hey everybody! These conversations are in fact tied only to the rooms, not to the people. All of you could pile into one room and just talk to the same person, if you for some reason wanted to! So, it’s less like the list of people I gave have these specialty chats, and more like their rooms do. Of course, do remember that only the owner’s Monopad can open a room.”

“Thanks for the information, Monokuma,” Box said, “So if anybody wants company, they can.”

“I have no idea who’d be here to talk to me,” Randy said, “So, Tsukasa. You should come with me.”
“Yeah, of course,” Tsukasa said, “I can be your backup, for sure.”

“You always are!” Randy laughed a bit.

“Ruka,” Kanoshi started.

“No, just because I’m not planning to go to mine, I won’t sit in on yours,” Yuuri rolled his eyes, “Assuming that it is actually people we know, I don’t want to deal with your dad.”

“Right…” Kanoshi chuckled, “One of us is enough, isn’t it?”

“Pft. Yeah, basically,” Yuuri laughed a bit, as well, “Frankly, though, I much prefer Shoyu Kyosuke Lite. Much less insufferable. Never become any more like him than you are right now, okay?”

“Heh, I’ll try,” Kanoshi said.

“It’s a little worrying that there’s nobody here for either of us, though. Right, Kaede?” Tsumugi spoke softly, “You’d think…”

“No, I wouldn’t think,” Kaede shook her head, “I don’t know what they’re up to, but I’d be glad to hear that they’ve moved on from us.”

“I guess that’s right,” Tsumugi said.

“I’m hoping that this is for real, myself,” Mitsuru said, “I don’t know which of them it will be, but there are plenty of people I’d like to see. My mother, grandmother, sister, girlfriends… It would be nice, even to just have a two hour conversation with one of them.”

“Must be nice,” Amai snipped again from the table where she was now seated with Riko and Kurou. Nami had noticed that those two seemed to have already appointed themselves as her handlers, which was much appreciated.

“It would be, if it’s real,” Mitsuru said, “I miss all of them. But it just seems too good to be true, that we’d be able to talk to anyone from the outside.”

“Well, it’s not long before we’ll find out the truth, now is it?” Box spoke up again, “Actually, those of us who are planning to should head to our rooms right about now, so that we’re there when our conversational partners arrive.”

“Good idea,” Nami said, then stood up, adjusted her clothes. She was nervous about this, but Box was right, she’d be less nervous if she didn’t have to try and get back to her room for the specific time. Being back there ahead of time would at least do a little bit to soothe her. She bid goodbye to her friends, then left the dining hall. Some of the others were also leaving, but they didn’t talk to each other along the way. They were focused on their destinations.

Nami got to her room, and immediately noticed the addition of a monitor on the wall. So it would be a video conversation, huh? Well, she sort of expected that, though she wasn’t sure why. It seemed like the best option. Though, it did mean she’d have to be seen. Seen by… Who knows who? Possibly somebody who would want to make fun of her, and would then proceed to make fun of her outfit and-

She was getting anxious again. She could just leave if it was somebody she didn’t want to talk to. She didn’t need to stick around, so there was no reason to be nervous. This was fine. It would be fine.
Mitsuru Fujishiro sat down on the bed in his assigned room in the Neo World Hospital. Sitting here again. He had to admit, being here and all was working wonders for his phobia of hospitals. As much as he still wasn’t fond of wandering around the place on his own, he was starting to get used to it, at least to some degree. Sucking it up to walk around on his own anyway. He’d made it this far, at least. He kind of thought that somebody like him would be an easy target, but he hadn’t even had a motive that pointed to him in any real way yet.

He did get briefly suspected of killing Etsuko, but that was so obviously untrue that he’d never considered himself in danger of being wrongly executed. If he actually lived through this, then it would actually mean that his entire relationship consisted of Killing Game survivors. Speaking of that relationship…

“Mitsuru? Hey, Mitsuru?” Iwako’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts, then he looked to the monitor to see her peering through at him. She looked just as disinterested as ever, which made him smile.

“Iwako,” He greeted her with an awkward sort of wave, “Been a little while, huh?”

“It has,” She pushed her glasses up her nose and sighed, “Sasane and I absolutely thought that we were out of the woods when we made it through ours. I’m still very grateful to that Hoshi guy, for somehow managing to be a worse person than me enough to be put through again.”

“Huh?” Mitsuru asked, “You never told me about that bit, Iwako.”

“Well,” She clicked her tongue and looked away, “I did sign that nondisclosure agreement with Ultimate Hope after they rescued us so that we could go back to the Future Foundation, but I think that this situation calls for me to break it. In as much as I can. Your Monokuma had some really strict rules on what it’ll allow to get through to you, but I can do this much. The worst person to survive to the end of a Killing Game is the most interesting. Part of the reason Ultimate Hope is allowed to rescue the participants is because one becomes the Ultimate Survivor to spice up the next game.”

“That…” Mitsuru crossed his arms, “That’s the way they choose the Ultimate Survivor?”

“It is,” Iwako said, then turned and faced him head-on again, “So be careful of those girls, okay? I barely scraped by without being picked, of course, but even so. I watched their game. That’s all I can say about that.”

“Understandable,” Mitsuru said, “So, I’m assuming you can’t tell me how you’re able to talk to me right now, or why it’s you?”

“I can’t, not really. I can tell you that Sasane wanted to be here, too. She gave me a message for you,” The slightest smirk pulled at Iwako’s face, “She said ‘Come home safe, you big idiot. Don’t do something dumb for somebody else’s sake.’ I must say, I agree with her on that. You’re a very large man, so even your gentle demeanor won’t make you an easy target, so don’t you think that. The only way I can see you failing to get through this is if you let your soft heart get the better of you.”
“You think so?” Mitsuru asked.

“I know so. Remember, Mitsuru. No matter how fond you may become of those children, none of them are as important as your family,” Iwako tapped the side of her forehead, “Myself and Sasane included, of course.”

“Iwako, that’s rude,” Mitsuru laughed a little bit, “Obviously I want to make it back to you, but… Well…”

“What are you thinking?” Iwako asked.

“There’s still… You have Sasane. And she has you,” Mitsuru said.

“You say that,” Iwako sighed, “And, well, we do. But we aren’t a couple, you know? It isn’t the same without you, not at all. Just because we love each other doesn’t mean we would be fine without you.”

“You would, though,” Mitsuru said, “You and I would manage without Sasane, and you and Sasane can manage without me. That’s how the relationship’s always been. We were both in love with you forever.”

“Hah,” Iwako laughed, “I know. I was a bit of an idiot for a short while there. Of course we would manage without you, but that doesn’t mean it would be fine. You’re important and we need you to come home.”

“Next thing I know, it’ll turn out that this is actually just a fake motive devised by Monokuma,” Mitsuru said, “And you’re going to encourage me to commit a murder so I can hurry up and get back to you.”

“See,” Iwako chuckled, “First off, if I made it through a game without any of the motives convincing me to kill somebody, so it wouldn’t make any sense for me to outdo you in that category. Besides, historically, that hasn’t exactly worked. For anybody.”

“It really hasn’t,” Mitsuru said, “And thanks for officially verifying that you’re real.”
“I can’t believe you’d ever doubt me. Come on. Did you really think that such a gorgeous woman could be fabricated?”

“Well, no, not really,” Mitsuru laughed, “I had to make sure, though. This is just the sort of stunt Monokuma would pull. Saying that it had no say in letting us talk to you, but then it turns out just to be another murder motive.”
“That does seem like something it would do, but frankly, I’m telling you to do absolutely anything but be motivated to murder,” Iwako said, “Don’t kill, don’t get killed, make it through the game, okay? That’s what I want most from you.”

“Yeah,” Mitsuru said, “I think I can manage that. Or at least, I’ll try. I’m not sure I completely buy it when you say that I’m not an easy target.”

“Well… Anyway. That’s enough of the important stuff, isn’t it?” Iwako smirked, “This sort of thing is completely private, you know. Monokuma’s censoring is automatic. So, we could make a romantic evening of it, couldn’t we? I do miss you ever so dearly.”
8:00 PM / 2000 Hours

Box Hako was very nervous as she sat, waiting for the monitor to turn on. Nothing that any of her friends said to her had been able to help her at all. They couldn’t understand, and that was okay. She didn’t expect them to. After all, she wasn’t able to properly articulate what the problem even was. Why she felt this way. It was something that she couldn’t share. She wasn’t permitted to.

Even if she was, admitting it now wasn’t in anybody’s best interests anyhow. Except maybe her own, but since when did Box Hako care about her own self interest at all? She lived her life for other people, after all. Being the Ultimate Volunteer would do that to somebody. To be an Ultimate, you had to be the best of the best in that field. The best volunteer had to do everything for everybody else.

“Hello,” Box said to the people on the television. She was the spitting image of the woman, and had very few of the man’s features, “Mom. Dad.”

“Box! Honey, oh my god,” Speak exclaimed, “We’re so glad that you decided to answer. We were worried. We haven’t seen you in more than a year… What happened? The others didn’t disappear that long ago, we heard at least.”

“Right… Um,” Box fidgeted where she sat, “I’d really rather not talk about what happened in the extra year, you know. I’m sorry. It has been a really long time.”

“Huh?” Ice frowned, “You can’t just leave us hanging like that. We were so worried!”

“I…” Box looked away from the screen, “I’m really sorry, but I’m just not able to talk about it. I think that if I did try, Monokuma would probably censor me anyway.”

“Oh right, that,” Speak said, “Oh, I am not a fan of that at all. That bear is such a pain. How can it even keep us from speaking openly like this? You’d think that ----- - ---------- we wouldn’t be getting stopped by that thing.”

“The middle of your sentence there just got censored,” Box said, and folded her hands in her lap, “I agree, but there isn’t anything to be done about it.”

Truth be told, Box thought that the explanation for her prolonged absence actually could make it through the censors, but under the eyes of Speak and Ice Hako, she just couldn’t do it. She couldn’t look her parents in the eyes and tell them the truth. Her explanation had nothing to do with the premise of the game, but at the same time, she was ashamed to admit it. Afraid.

“I see…” Ice said, “Well then, moving on. How have you been? Are you getting along with your classmates? Have you been wrongly suspected of anything? We technically could have brushed up on what’s happened to you so far, but we wanted to respect your privacy and hear it straight from you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Box said, then tilted her head and thought for a little while, “I’ve been… okay. Some of my classmates kind of think I’m weird but I love all of them anyway. I made friends with a theologist and an idol. You’ve met that first one before, remember ssnad? They’re good guys. One is taken and the other is gay, so don’t get any ideas. I’ve been suspected because I’m weird but never seriously.”
“Oh, that’s good to hear,” Speak said, “Not that people think you’re weird, honey, but that you haven’t been in any serious scuffles, and that you’re making friends. You’re sure there’s nothing there?”

“Nothing,” Box shook her head, “For a little bit there, I started to think I might have a crush on this girl, Yamaguchi, but I just thought she was lonely. She has a crush on somebody else, so that’s fine. As long as she isn’t lonely!”

“Aww, honey,” Ice laughed, “You always were doing things like that. Remember that time in middle school you went out with the least popular kid there just because you thought he’d be sad, then he stole all of your sweaters?”

“Yes. That was very unfortunate,” Box said, “I wanted him to be less lonely. And I would have given him one sweater if he was cold and needed sweaters. But he got in trouble for stealing them, which ended up making him more sad than he started out…”

“You’re still just thinking about what it did to him, huh,” Ice shook his head, “You’re ridiculous.”

“I like to think I’m just being a good person,” Box said, “Oh, did you know that Amai’s here also?”

“We didn’t know that. Are things okay with you two?” Speak asked, “She was always such an interesting girl, very interesting. It was lovely when she cooked dinner for us. Less lovely was the way that she spoke to you… But you liked her anyway, right?”

“Yes, she always was my best friend,” Box said, “She might have been mean, but she was the only person who actually didn’t just want something from me, besides to be my friend. But… Well, most of the people here are a lot nicer, and frankly, some of them are telling me to stop doing so much stuff for them!”

“That’s good,” Ice said, then took a deep breath, “I think those people are probably good for you to be around. I wish we could have given you that, without this happening…”

“Mm,” Box frowned, looking down at her knees.

“You,” Speak suddenly spoke in a lower, softer tone. She was still Box’s mother, after all, “Aren’t planning to come home, are you?”

“I can’t,” Box said, “I won’t be able to.”

“Are you sure?” Speak asked.

“Even if somehow, I made it to the end,” Box said, “I wouldn’t be able to come home. I’m sorry, mom. I’m sorry, dad. I’m really sorry. You probably won’t ever speak to your daughter again.”

“…Right,” Speak said, and the monitor suddenly switched off, leaving Box in darkness. She supposed what Monokuma said about the people on the other side being unable to leave only applied until they had some amount of conversation. Yeah, this was about what she expected would happen. She wouldn’t have to worry about holding a conversation with them for two hours, because they were already done. Already done being able to handle her.

She really wasn’t the Box Hako they expected at all. She fell over onto her side on the bed, and held a pillow to her chest. The room was blurry. Not just because she needed glasses which she didn’t have, but also because of the tears. It wasn’t like she actually felt hurt by their rejection. She felt awful that she wasn’t able to be the person that they needed to see. What sort of Ultimate
Volunteer was she?
Kanoshi Kyosuke turned the Monopad over and over in his hands. It wasn’t the only one currently in his possession; his own was sitting in his pocket, weighing his khaki pants down to a bed that wasn’t his in a room he wasn’t meant to be in. Swiping this had been easier than he expected. He wished it had been tougher, because maybe then that would have discouraged him from doing it. Then, he would go to his own room, and talk to a father he took after so much that people called him ‘Shoyu Lite’... And probably enjoy it, he’d enjoy that conversation. Whoever he would speak to in this room, he probably wouldn’t enjoy doing it, he probably wouldn’t enjoy it at all.

But here he was. God, why was he here? He shouldn’t be here, he really…

“You’re not Yuuri,” A sharp voice spoke. He looked up to the monitor to see a face which was, unfortunately, quite familiar. Kanoshi knew who this guy was, anyway. They hadn’t ever met face to face, which was probably a good thing. Nate Harper was the person in this world that, after Komaru Ruka, Kanoshi hated most. The only other person that Kanoshi would ever kill with his own two hands.

“Nate,” Kanoshi hissed through his teeth, “So they did just send Despairs to talk to us…”

“Oh, no, not in the least,” Nate laughed, “Your father is waiting for you in your room. Ah, but I guess that you’re just too much of a jealous little shit to go and see him. Why don’t I just go and let him know, you won’t be coming, you’re too busy talking to the ex-boyfriend of a guy who’ll never love you?”

“No!” Kanoshi exclaimed at the screen, “Don’t do that! And. It’s not jealousy or anything. I just wanted to see if, maybe… It would actually be somebody that Ruka would want to talk to.”

“You got your wish,” Nate snapped his fingers, “Send him in. He’ll be overjoyed.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Kanoshi muttered, “What do you even want?”

“I want Yuuri back. Or Tsukasa. I’m not picky. It’s just, you know. Non-Ultimates just don’t compare. Can you blame me?”

“Tsu… You mean, Mizuho?” Kanoshi asked, furrowing his brow and leaning forward on the bed, “You’re telling me…”

“Hmm? Oh, I thought you knew. Frankly, that was a much nicer relationship. Too bad he had to go and betray me. If he’d never done that, I probably wouldn’t have gone after Yuuri,” Nate chuckled, leaning back against the backdrop wall in the small room he was in, “Yeah, think about that. It’s all Tsukasa’s fault that I ended up-”

“Shut up!” Kanoshi interrupted Nate, “I know what you did, you don’t have to say it.”

“Say what, huh? There’s plenty of things that I did. Could say I gave Yuuri that scar, that’s true. Could say that I gave him the gift of the truth, that even with his mother dead he’d never stop being a victim. Also true. So?”

“Stop it,” Kanoshi said, “How could that be anyone’s fault but your own?”
“I was happy with Tsukasa,” Nate sighed, “I really was, we were happy, together. I suppose that there was a bit of an issue with our sexual compatibility, a bit too much assertiveness between us, but that’s fine, I can be very convincing. Of course, for his company image, he needed to appear heterosexual, didn’t he? So he got somebody to play the part of his girlfriend. That was the plan. Funny how he didn’t care about his public image when *that* girlfriend turned out to be a man.”

“Randy?” Kanoshi asked, “Randy stole Mizuho from you?”

“Yes, in fact. Maybe you should blame him,” Nate said, “Whichever one of them you’d like to blame, really. The only fact that matters here is that I wouldn’t have hurt your precious Yuuri if only I hadn’t lost Tsukasa.”

“You’re not about to get either of them back, Nate,” Kanoshi gritted his teeth as he spoke, “They won’t go back to you. Mizuho’s too in love, and Ruka hates you.”

“There’s ways to change these things. Well, the first, at least. Not so sure on how to make Yuuri stop hating me. I guess it’s possible, though, for as long as he doesn’t fall in love,” Nate stood up straight again and stepped closer to the camera, “Isn’t it just?”

"I..." Kanoshi bit back his words.

"Come on. I want to hear what you have to say to that. If I can't see him myself, that's the next best thing," Nate said, "What have you got to say?"

...

"Hm," Nate spoke again to Kanoshi’s silence, "Of course not. You haven't got anything to say, because you're pathetic. You could fight back against me, of course. You could say that Ruka might fall in love with you, that you might finally get the confidence to tell him how you feel, but you won't. I know you won't. You're a coward, and you'd die a virgin if you hadn't been blessed with a face that makes men want to make the first move. You'll never have anything meaningful. By now, you've lost the chance."

"I... You're wrong. I could still fall in love with somebody, for real," Kanoshi said, "I'm not going to confess to Ruka in this situation. He's mad at me for some things, to start with. And, really, we're not a good match. I'm not just some coward who won't refute you. I'm trying to be mature and understand that it isn't meant to be."

"Pft," Nate rolled his eyes, "Okay, maybe so, maybe I am underestimating you. But, no matter, I still think it would be overestimation to entertain the idea that you'd survive. I know plenty about you. How could *you* avoid killing or being killed over the course of five to eight murder cases?"

"Five to eight?" Kanoshi asked.

"Well, they're usually five to six, but since your game got reset and all, who knows. Maybe your number of cases will scale as well. Only time will tell," Nate said.

"The floors are still designed to be opened up after each case, though," Kanoshi said, "So the only reason it could be more than six is if we were too dumb to figure out the Mastermind after every floor's been opened."

"Aren't you?" Nate questioned, "I certainly haven't seen anything from your motley crew to make me believe you'll be capable of investigating the Mastermind by the time you've unlocked every floor. I wouldn't trust that detective as far as I can throw her, for one."
"Akamatsu?" Kanoshi asked, blinking, "She's no less trustworthy than any of the others."

"Whatever you want to think. I'm not going to explain myself, because I really don't plan to help you."

“You’re a bastard.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

And Kanoshi left.
But, he didn’t go to see his dad.

He’d made his choice, and this was his punishment for the wrong one.
Daily Life: Day Seven (Randy Conversation)

8:00 PM / 2000 Hours

Randy and Tsukasa both went to Randy's room, because frankly, Randy had no idea who would want to talk to him. It wasn't like he didn't have connections in the outside world, but none of them were actually, well, serious enough that he thought they'd warrant wanting to talk to him here. His mentor was dead, and he'd been estranged from his family for five years now, without any contact. It wasn't because of any fight they had or anything like that, no. It was just that it was five years ago he ended up in this country, and by the time he got back on his feet, it felt like it was too late to try and find a way to get back in contact with them.

At least, that was what he thought. When the screen flickered to life, though, Randy found himself face-to-face with somebody he'd never met, but he knew who it was immediately, he didn't need to think about it.

"Courtney?" He asked, staring at her.

"Hi," She gave a nervous wave, speaking in English. She was the spitting image of Randy, before he'd transitioned. The only difference was that her hair, rather than golden, was silver; And she was several years older. She was already fifteen when Randy had been born, and living in a different part of the states where cost of living was lower and she could send some money back home every month to help out. They'd never met in person, "You're a little different than I was expecting."

"Uh, yeah, I sure hope I am," Randy blurted, then took a deep breath as he ran his hand back through his hair, "Shit, sorry. I'm just. Uhhh, I don't know what to say."

"How about, sorry?" Courtney said, raising one finger in the air, "Jesus, Randy. I was looking for you all this time, but I'm looking for 'my little sister, Reese' when that's totally just wrong... I never would have found you."

"I'm... Not going to apologize for being who I am," Randy said. "Shit!" Courtney hit her own forehead and groaned, "No, that ain't what I meant at all! I just mean, you made it hard to find you. Wish I'd known I was looking for a lil brother. When they came and asked me to come and talk to you I almost turned 'em down cause, I'm not the smartest. Didn't realize they were talkin' about you. Guess that's the most I'm allowed to say about why I'm here, though?"

"Yeah, Monokuma said there's an automatic censor," Randy said, "Um. Jeeze, this is a weird way to meet my big sister."

"Guess so," Courtney said, "So, you better make it outta there so that I can pamper you like a big sister oughta do for her lil bro! And I'm gonna give you noogies, too. Your hair's short and stuff, so it won't make big knots like my hair."

"Nooo," Randy feigned betrayal, "Not the noogies!"

"So, so, sososo, Randy," Courtney spoke really quickly, and Tsukasa got a confused look on his face. He could understand english when it was spoken at a normal pace, but she was starting to lose him, "Are you gonna introduce me to this guy or what?"

"This guy," Randy said, gesturing to Tsukasa, "Is my boyfriend, Tsukasa. He's the Ultimate CEO."
"That's so cool!" Courtney exclaimed, then turned her gaze back to Randy and glared at him, "Now, tell me. That talent of yours..."

"Don't worry, I didn't get it because of a bad situation or anything," Randy waved his hands defensively, "Well, I guess I technically did, but it's not like, 'oh nooo I got my Ultimate Talent through necessity'. It's fine!"

"If you say so," Courtney said, "I’ll take your word for it, anyway. So... Jeeze. I looked for you for so long, without ever actually thinking about what I’d say when I found you.”

"Why’d you look for me?" Randy asked, “I thought… After I made such a shitty mistake…”

“I never heard about any mistake. Only ever heard you went missing and dad was worried sick. Like, for real, sick. He wouldn’t leave his room for like two weeks and I had to send a bunch of money over to pay his bills till he got back to work.”

“He shouldn’t have been,” Randy sighed, “He would’ve realized what happened, he knew the situation. Worrying about me’s kind of pointless there.”

“Well, he didn’t tell me,” Courtney said, “So what was the situation?”

“He made you worry for nothing. I was learning Japanese from this guy, he invited me on his trip over here, then he didn’t bother bringing me back with him. Not a big deal. I got back on my feet.”

“I see…” Courtney frowned, “No, I would have been just as worried about you if I knew that whole story. It doesn’t change anything. We still had no idea where you were, or if you were safe, or if you were even alive. What makes you think that would keep us from worrying at all?”

“I mean,” Randy started, then couldn’t explain himself.

“I know there’s a whole lot of despair in this country,” Courtney said, “So maybe you got to thinking it’s not a big deal for people to go and vanish without a trace, but, damn. It’s pretty fucking unusual where we come from. Real worrying.”

“I mean, I guess when people vanish here it’s just assumed they’re dead or a criminal,” Randy shrugged, “So I kind of assumed... You’d have done the same. By the time I was situated well enough that I could have contacted you, I figured you would’ve moved on and wouldn’t wanna hear from me at all. Plus, I mean. Obviously,” He gestured to himself, “I was kind of adrift in the world of emotional turmoil!”

“Yeah,” Courtney said, then rolled her eyes, “Speaking a different language for five years didn’t even stop you from saying dumb shit like that? I kinda expected you only did that in writing.”

“Nah. I am an anachronism, babey!!” Randy laughed, then when he calmed down, “Geeze. I could go toe to toe with Nami on her vintage memes if we had the same native language. I don’t know how to do the right intonations to make the memes in Japanese… Fuck! Maybe she can teach me!”

“...Gotta say, I’m not sure how it never crossed my mind to think you might not be the same person you were when you disappeared,” Courtney admitted, “Guess I was just being dumb. It’s kind of obvious, talking to you now, that this is the way you’re s’posed to be.”

“It’s okay. I was also dumb. The fact that I was a total egg myself probably also rubbed off on everyone around me so we collectively became blind as shit to what should’ve been obvious.”

“Is that why you wear an egg on your shirt?” Courtney asked.
“Oh, no,” Randy shook his head, “I just like this shirt. Looks good on me. Nice and nonsensical.”
10:00 PM / 2200 Hours

Randy’s conversation with Courtney went on for quite a while, with Tsukasa occasionally being involved, right up until the last moment when the monitor powered off all on its own. The second that the image of Courtney disappeared, Randy fell over backwards onto the bed and groaned very loudly.

“Are you okay?” Tsukasa asked, “I thought that went well!”

“It did. It totally went well and fine and nothing wrong with any of that,” Randy said, “Technically. I just. Ugh. I don’t… I…”

“She looks like you did,” Tsukasa finished for him, staring at the now-empty monitor, “I get it. I noticed.”

“It’s like… It was like, looking in a mirror always did like, that’s not me on the other side. And she really isn’t me, this time, it’s really not me,” Randy rolled over, pressing his face into a pillow, “It’s my sister. I never met her before. We never met each other, in person. And she only just found out that I’m, me?”

"I think that it's fine," Tsukasa said, "She seemed to understand, you know."

"Yeah, like, I get that, I understand," Randy groaned into his pillow, "Ughh. I can't even, explain. It's just. Why the Hell does she have to look like that? It's. She only met me now, but she still knows what I looked like before, she's got to, even if she didn't have pictures of me or anything she can look at me and look at herself and figure out the way I used to be and I hate it, I really fucking hate it."

"I..." Randy continued, "It's, I feel fucking shitty! I should be super hyped that I got to meet my sister and that she was cool about stuff and that she's been looking for me all this time like she really actually cares about me or something. So now I feel guilty that I wish I didn't meet her! I don't want to just never talk to her again in my life. I just don't wanna have to look at her. Fuck, what the Hell am I even saying?"

"I understand," Tsukasa said, then reached out and placed a hand against the back of Randy's head, "I really do get it. You don't have to feel guilty that you feel this way. She just showed up out of nowhere and surprised you with all of this."

"I did like talking to her," Randy whined, "She's a cool person. She's super cool! I just."

"If it helps," Tsukasa spoke, softly, "I didn't think she looked that much like you, at first. You've come so far, you really just resemble her the way a brother should. I'd almost forgotten what you used to look like, at all. I just saw Courtney."

"Not Reese?" Randy asked, turning his head to look up at Tsukasa with what could only be described as pathetic puppy-dog eyes.

"There isn't any Reese left in this world," Tsukasa assured his boyfriend, "Except to you. I know that I figured out that you thought Courtney looked like you used to, but really, that's just an appearance that only belongs to Courtney now. As far as I'm concerned, anyway. As far as anybody who knows you is concerned. It's not like it's unreasonable to see that and feel bad about
it... But you can at least know that all of us who care about you, it's just Randy there."

"You're sure?" Randy asked.

"Come on. Would I lie to you? Have I ever?" Tsukasa asked, bringing his hand around to Randy's cheek.

"Yeah, once," Randy chuckled, propping himself up on elbow, "Waaaaay back, when you said you weren't gay."

"Look! That wasn't really me lying to you, right?" Tsukasa nervously chuckled right back, "I didn't know what I was doing with my PR at all. And, I mean. I kind of thought I might not be, when I first sought you out. I was with Nate, and he wasn't really a good boyfriend, I wasn't in love with him. So, I was confused."

"Good to know that I cured your confusion," Randy snickered, then sat up straight and tilted his head to one side, "By being super fucking confused myself."

"That was pretty disastrous. Well, but it worked out for the best."

"It didn't just work out for the best, it was an absolute miracle, don't you undersell it."

"Yeah, pretty miraculous that you were able to turn from a fake PR relationship to an absolute homewrecker?"

"I was always a homewrecker," Randy laughed, "Don't undersell me, either. What's miraculous is that we were able to find each other even though we were so confused. If I'd already figured out I was a guy, or if it took me longer to figure that out... Or if you committed to the decision you weren't gay after all and broke up with Nate without ever meeting me, or if you'd just gone public with your relationship with him... There's so many ways we could have ended up never being together."

"So, maybe it was a miracle," Tsukasa said, "Or maybe it was just fate."

"I'd rather think of it as a miracle, personally. What sort of odds we had to overcome to fall in love... A trillion... No, a quadrillion to one. Fate makes it sound like it was bound to happen, no matter the circumstances. That makes it less special."

"It really is special, what we have, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Randy said, then reached out and wrapped his arms around Tsukasa's neck loosely, "It's super special. I don't ever wanna lose you."

"I don't want to lose you, either. I really can't imagine it, life without you in it," Tsukasa said, his face pointing directly towards Randy's, but his gaze somewhere off to the right, "That's why it's so scary, here. I'm not afraid of dying. But I really don't want you to die."

"Well, you should be scared of dying, cause then you'd be leaving me behind and that's just as bad," Randy pouted, "To tell you the truth, I'm kind of jealous of Ueda."


"I mean, kind of!" Randy turned red, "It's just, he gets to be all, 'my wife', and, 'it's fine if I die because I believe in my wife' and all that. Comfortable stuff. Being boyfriends, is like. It still feels... Kind of distant. Like no matter how much I trust you, it's still not, like that. Because it feels
closer."

"I get it," Tsukasa said, "I could just start calling you my husband, if you wanted. It's not like we'd need to do it officially."

"I... Yeah, we could do that. What'll the others think?"

"I dunno," Tsukasa shrugged, and leaned in, "Congratulations?"

"Heh," Randy laughed a bit, "I'm... Randy Sempers. Your future husband. Aren't I?"

"You certainly are," Tsukasa said, "I love you."

"I love you too," Randy said, "More than anything."
Daily Life: Day Seven (Sayaka Conversation)

8:00 pm / 2000 Hours

Sayaka had her eyes glued to the monitor in her room, because really, why wouldn't she? At heart, she had to admit, she was kind of a daddy's girl. In the strictly familial sense, that was. Of course it could also be her grandmother, or any one of her brothers in arms, and she'd still be satisfied. She hadn't realized just how much she missed all the people she considered family until she was faced with the possibility of seeing them again in the midst of being isolated from them.

She was sitting there on the edge of the bed, staring. Her feet didn't even reach the ground, the way she was sitting. She was so small. Being small hadn't honestly bothered her before she came here, because she was consistently the most competent person in the room, but also surrounded by fairly competent backup if something somehow did go wrong. Here, she didn't know who to trust at all. That much was obvious, given she'd started off the game by barricading Nami in a room.

Ugh... Now that was a bad first impression. Thinking back, she couldn't believe she'd done that. Ridiculous. What a way to make a fool of herself in front of a cute girl, but at least it seemed like Nami considered that water under the bridge, with the amount of time they'd spent together lately. Of course, Sayaka was still tripping over her own feet in regards to Nami with no signs of stopping. She'd even spied on her... Unintentionally, in the pool, but really, maybe that was a subconscious motivation to keep watch for a murder all along? Stupid, that was stupid. Kind of perverted too. She'd break a guy's legs for doing that. Should she break her own legs? Out of fairness?

Hm, probably. If not for that, then for the fact that, as she kept reminding herself, Nami was already in a relationship. Aye, there's the rub. Well, hopefully, Sayaka would be able to talk to somebody who would be able to give her some advice, maybe?

The screen came to life, and there he was, her hopes were up for a reason. Akihiko Yamaguchi was there before her. His hair was slicked back as ever, dark, and he was dressed in a suit. A bit on the large side, though not quite as large, she'd been told, as his son who'd been granted an Ultimate Talent, and vanished some time before Sayaka was adopted.

“Good grief,” Akihiko sighed, “First Tokumei, then Kaiba. Now you. Can I raise a kid without them ending up in a Killing Game?”

“I guess not,” Sayaka said, “Hi, Dad. I missed you.”

“You did?” Akihiko asked.

“Of course I did!” Sayaka exclaimed, clasping her hands together and leaning forward, “Everything’s weird here! There’s so many weird people and for some reason I want to get along with them and I don’t know how and I don’t get how to socialize with other Ultimates and some of them are younger than me and I’m used to everyone in the room being older than me and I have a crush on somebody that I really shouldn’t and I just really wanna go home and I need your heeeelp!”

“Whoa there, slow down,” Akihiko chuckled, holding his hands up like he was defending himself from her, “I heard maybe half of that, honey. Let’s take it one thing at a time.”

“I’m confused and lost and it’s even harder cause I don’t have your guidance,” Sayaka simplified her statement, “I’m not used to… trying to make friends. I just ended up with them sometimes. It’s
weird to be around people who are actually, about the same age as me?”

“I’m sorry,” Akihiko sighed, “I failed to prepare you for this sort of situation…”

“When I was in school, I had a scary enough aura that people just left me alone,” Sayaka fidgeted, “The only friends I had outside of our circle, Ruka and Kyosuke… That’s just because I was investigating Ruka’s situation, y’know? Same with Oishi, pretty much. That was just business that turned into friendship.”

“I am aware,” Akihiko looked away. He had an intimidating way about him, that same aura which hung on Sayaka, but from her perspective that was a comforting thing. This couldn’t be an impostor, because nobody could emulate that aspect of him, “Perhaps I should have encouraged you more, to reach out during your school days. As a result, are you feeling that you lack social maturity?”

“Exactly!” Sayaka exclaimed, throwing her hands up, “And it’s my own fault, cause, I had opportunities to fix that! And I didn’t! But now! How do I? Friends? I think I made some here. Like Akamatsu, and Fujishiro, and… Well, I kinda get along with everyone, but the whole time I’m screaming inside my head like, what? Am I doing this right? Are they gonna hate me with the next sentence I say? I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I think that you’re doing fine, being yourself,” Akihiko said, “Maybe you don’t know what you’re doing, but it sounds like people there just like you for who you are, knowledge of social situations or none.”


“Of course, learning more about proper social conventions probably isn’t a waste of your time, once you get out of there,” Akihiko said, “But you’ve been there for a week already. If anybody was going to hate you, I think they already would have made that decision. Now, what’s this about a crush?”

“Mph,” Sayaka looked away, blushing, “Did I… say something about that…?”
“Yes, Sayaka. You did,” Akihiko said, “That’s good to hear.”

“Aren’t dads supposed to be horrified at the concept of their precious daughters growing up and going on dates?” Sayaka asked.

“That may be the stereotype, but, well. For one, you’re nineteen. For another, you’re a bit of a unique case. The fact that you’ve found yourself with a crush at all is a big step, isn’t it?”
“Buh- I- Wh-” Sayaka stammered for a second, then looked back to the monitor with a sheepish, soft smile, “You’ve been doing some research, huh?”

“I was reading some of Kirara’s work for other reasons, and one of the chapters really seemed to apply to you,” Akihiko admitted, “You could’ve told me sooner, to go and research this stuff. I probably could’ve been a better father to you if I read this before.”

“I guess I was too ashamed of what happened, to try and get you to address it,” Sayaka admitted, fiddling with the small cosmetic prosthetic at the end of her left pinkie finger.

“Don’t play with that in front of your friends, you’ll freak them out,” Akihiko reprimanded her for the nervous habit, “That does make sense, of course. I just wish you’d pushed me a little bit. Or I’d taken the initiative myself. I think I just assumed that there wouldn’t be research into that sort of thing. It’s frightening, isn’t it? To have feelings for somebody.”

“Yeah, it is,” Sayaka admitted, looking down, “I wanna be close to her, a lot, and say dumb sweet things and hear her say dumb sweet things and all those kinds of things. But I’m also still scared I’m, too broken for that. Not like it actually matters, though. That Kirara girl whose research you read? Is, kind of dating the girl that I like anyway.”

“Huh? But that’s --------. ---- ------- -- ----.”

“You got auto-censored there,” Sayaka frowned.

“Oh. I guess that they would rather that girl figure it out in her own time, or something,” Akihiko looked up at the ceiling, “I still can’t see why it wouldn’t let me tell you, though.”

“Maybe it just did,” Sayaka clicked her tongue, “I can figure it out from context. But, Monokuma probably doesn’t want me to tell Nami, or something. So I guess I’ll keep it secret, if she’s supposed to figure it out herself…”

“But doesn’t this solve that conflict of yours?” Akihiko asked.

“It does, but…” Sayaka giggled nervously, “I think I might still need some time to be ready anyway. Letting her get the answer can give me that time… If, she, actually wanted to date me I mean! I’m not assuming! It. Does help with the guilt, though. I was kinda thinking about breaking my legs.”

“Absolutely do not do that!” Akihiko shouted, sounding a bit panicked.

“I won’t! I won’t,” Sayaka assured him, “Shh. It was mostly a joke. My self-destructive days are in the past, I promise.”

“Good. Jesus Christ,” Akihiko’s eyes flitted to Sayaka’s left hand again, then he groaned, “Let’s talk about something more lighthearted, dear.”
Daily Life: Day Seven (Not A Conversation.)

Chapter Notes

Hey uh this chapter is Goro POV, so please consider yourself warned against content.

8:00 PM / 2000 Hours

Goro Bakura didn’t have any reason to think that his conversation waiting for him could be anything pleasant, so he had no plans of going. Maybe his manager, or maybe just somebody else from that social circle. It would have been somebody he didn’t want to see. Even so, he was sure that right now, some of his peers were having nice chats with people who legitimately wanted to speak to them. Those who weren’t had scattered to other rooms, so the hospital felt relatively empty as Goro wandered around it.

Today wasn’t a good day.

A lot of days weren’t good for Goro Bakura, but this one in particular had rubbed him the wrong way. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. It wasn’t. It wasn’t anything anybody could have expected would be a problem for him. It wasn’t an issue anybody else here would have.

When it came to Kiyoshi Matsubara, Goro never knew how to feel. He felt nothing. He felt too much. He felt everything at once.

Love, love, he had to fall in love, that was what he did, right? He fell in love. He had to be in love because that’s what people who were in love did. Love was the basis. Love, yeah? God.

Yeah right.

When Goro got to thinking about Kiyoshi, it became impossible. He felt angry beyond belief and he felt nostalgic for rotten, rotten days and he wanted to cry he wanted to scream he couldn’t understand this at all-

He felt jealous he felt oh, so jealous. Why were there others? No, there could be others. Why did Kiyoshi do that with the others? Why? Didn’t he love him? Because it had to be love. Goro wasn’t powerless he was in love he wasn’t being hurt he was in love he-

IF THIS IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO ME THEN I HAD BETTER BE HIS FUCKING FAVORITE.

Bad. It was bad. Goro had learned a long time ago that he was wrong to think that way and that this was just a twisted method he’d invented in his head to cope, but it made things so much worse it really really did-

IF I HAVE TO PUT UP WITH THIS THEN I SHOULD GET THE MOST REWARD.

Shut up. God, if he could just make his own brain shut up, then wouldn’t that be wonderful? That would be great, it would, it really would, fuck. Good thing the halls were empty. Good thing he was alone. Nobody needed to see him this way. Nobody needed to see him without a smile on his
face. Nobody needed to know how bad it hurt him he was fine he could joke about it he could make jokes so funny, funny jokes look at me I’m Goro Bakura and I’m a victim of the entertainment industry, isn’t that just hilarious?

**HOW IS HE BETTER THAN ME HOW IS HE ALIVE HOW WHY HOW WHY WHY WHY IS HE STILL THE BEST?**

It wasn’t Kaede’s fault. She didn’t know. She didn’t know that mentioning Kokichi Ouma would dig deep. Didn’t know that Goro had all this bitterness. He didn’t want to be bitter, really, he didn’t. Kokichi suffered the same as he did. They were under the thumb of the same rotten person. They both had nowhere else that they could go. Trapped, and eternally becoming more and more broken. Even so.

Kokichi’s shows made people smile more. Kiyoshi said it would just take time, that Goro would reach that level, but even so. He couldn’t stop the pit in his stomach saying that he deserved better than this. Deserved better than suffering all the same injustices only to have a smaller impact than a magician. It wasn’t like his crowds were smaller. He was the Ultimate Idol. His shows just didn’t have the same effect. Didn’t make people as happy. It was selfish and he knew it but he couldn’t stop it no matter how hard he fought.

And now Kokichi Ouma survived a Killing Game. How? How did that happen? Goro couldn’t stand it. He’d assumed Kokichi would have died. How does somebody this broken ever make it through? By being better, that’s how. Goro had already nearly ended up dead twice, in both cases so far, he attempted murder twice. Because it was a given that he’d die. He was Goro Bakura. He had to die. He was going to die. This was a Killing Game and he thought he was doomed to die. But Kokichi made it through.

He wanted to stop thinking.

He wanted a lot of things. His brain was firing on all cylinders on that. He wanted to stop thinking he wanted to DIE he wanted to hurt he wanted to be hurt he wanted to feel terrible and awful in some way that somebody else could understand. He needed pain that wasn’t just his own mind twisting itself up in confusion he needed something to feel and something to stop feeling so fucking much please just STOP.

Hey, the gift shop.

Goro walked in, wandered around, then spotted Yuuri. Oh, there wasn’t supposed to be anybody about to see him, there wasn’t, oh, no-

“Hey, Bakura,” Yuuri waved from where he stood, “You look like shit.”

“Yes.”

“Well,” Yuuri glanced at the wall of alcohol, “I feel like shit, personally. Drinking alone would make me feel more like shit. Drinking together? Might make us both feel less shitty?”

“Aren’t you not supposed to be drinking, or something?” Goro asked, his eyes focusing anywhere but on Yuuri and no emotion in his voice.

“Officially? There’s no reason I shouldn’t,” Yuuri said, waving the bottle he already held, “Except for the laws and my age. Kyosuke’s just a prude about this stuff. And, I guess I’ve done some less than safe shit. It’s fine. This way’ll be fine.”
“If you say so,” Goro said, then walked up to the wall himself and picked out something without hesitation. It wasn’t like he’d never been drunk before. Of his own volition or otherwise. Enough to figure out what he did and didn’t like, in general. Flavored vodkas were inoffensive. This one seemed to be based on a cereal. Getting drunk. Yeah. Yeah that seemed like it would accomplish what he needed. Shut up his brain.

*I’VE SEEN THIS GUY HE’S GOT A TEMPER HE’S PRETTY VIOLENT MAYBE HE CAN HELP ME YEAH MAYBE.*

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“I’VE SEEN THIS GUY HE’S GOT A TEMPER HE’S PRETTY VIOLENT MAYBE HE CAN HELP ME YEAH MAYBE.”

“Loopy? Good choice,” Yuuri chuckled, and clapped a hand against Goro’s back. He flinched, hard, visibly, but Yuuri didn’t notice, or at least, didn’t react, “We can go hand out in Kyosuke’s ward. He’s busy talkin’ to his dad, and nobody ever goes in there normally. They’re busy anyhow.”

“Kay…” Goro mumbled, and blinked, and then they were in Kanoshi’s ward. Okay. That was weird. Yuuri sat down at one of the tables. Goro sat on top of it. He opened the bottle and drank directly from it. He didn’t feel it it didn’t burn at all going down he just tasted the sweetness and it almost made him retch but he didn’t and-

9:00 PM / 2100 Hours

Time wasn’t real it really wasn’t. Goro made this decision because he kept missing things. He was dissociating just a little too much. Too much. It was only being made worse by the alcohol, really. He didn’t remember finishing the bottle. He didn’t remember Yuuri going to get more and getting a quarter of the way into another bottle.

“The dumb shit,” Yuuri wasn’t slurring, but he was definitely drunk, a clean drunk, a remarkably clean drunk for what Goro expected of him, “The dumb shit with Kyosuke. Is that he doesn’t think we’d be compatible.”

“...?” Goro intended to make a noise of intrigue, but only ended up tilting his head in Yuuri’s direction.

“Like. Like sexually, I mean. Dumb fuck I, wouldn’t wanna date him anyway, but couldn’t he give me a chance to reject him? Even Monokuma made a joke about it. Goddamn, what, the hell is with them?” Yuuri blathered on, “It’s. It’s, can you understand, Bakura? I bet you could understand. Like, even if it doesn’t apply to you. It’s kind of. Just because I’ve never had the chance to play that role in a relationship… It’s not like I’ve ever had a real one… Just what other people want me to do, I guess, fuck. Why am I telling you this? This is tooooo much information. Goddamn. We’re not friends. Don’t blackmail me with this.”

“I won’t remember this in the morning,” Goro said simply.

“You that much of a fuckin’ lightweight?” Yuuri scoffed.

“Mmm… No,” Goro shook his head, “It’s not the alcohol, it’s the mental health. I already forgot most of the last hour.”

TAKE ME TOUCH ME LOVE ME HELP ME KILL ME KILL ME KILL ME KILL ME.

“Shit. Like, are you okay?” Yuuri asked, his own woes immediately forgotten in the face of somebody dealing with more brainweird than he’d actually encountered in his life.
“Nahh. No. No, not really,” Goro turned to look at Yuuri, “Back to you. What you were saying. Are you saying that you’re actually a top?”

“In, not so few words,” Yuuri said.

“Ah. I see. That’s interesting.” Goro turned to face him, but still failed to actually look at him, “Wanna help me? You can help me.”

“I… What?” Yuuri questioned.

“I wanna get hurt,” Goro said, “I wanna be miserable. It’s better than this. I’m in feelings limbo. make me miserable. Help me hurt myself.”

“I… I can’t do that, Bakura,” Yuuri said.

“Why, cause you’re such a good person?” Goro asked, “Come on. I’m asking you to. Do whatever you want. I’ll hate it all and be incredibly grateful.”

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10:00 PM / 2200 Hours

Goro was back in his room and staring at the ceiling, and he’d failed at two things.

He failed to remember his conversation with Yuuri and was proportionately significantly miserable, for which he was in fact grateful, even if he didn’t recall asking for it as a favor and could only labor under the idea it had simply happened the way somebody who was used to being used might assume. Even under that assumption, he certainly wouldn’t hold it against Yuuri, because he was Goro Bakura and these things happened to him. And some part of him thought he may have requested Yuuri do something like that even without the memory, because he could suspect himself of anything.

He also failed to see the two people sitting on the floor in the hallway. But that was a problem for ten pm, and there were still people who hadn’t experienced the hour of the outside world.
8:00 PM / 2000 Hours

Despite neither of them having been told that they’d have somebody waiting for them, Kaede and Tsumugi were sitting in the latter’s room. Half the class wasn’t planning to socialize at all, and those who did had already made their groups and decided on their activities for the evening, something Kaede and Tsumugi had turned out excluded from. Not intentionally, but that was just how it worked out. So they’d decided to spend the evening in, since it was already relatively late anyhow.

“Kaede,” Tsumugi started, looking up from where she lay in her girlfriend’s lap, “What do you really think about this outside world stuff?”
“It makes me kind of worried,” Kaede admitted, “I just hope that they’re safe.”

“Me too,” Tsumugi said, then got a bit more comfortable where she lay and put a smile on her face, “But, if they are safe, then that means they’ve moved on from us. I might prefer that, you know. It’s not like they were very fond of me by the end there.”

“You did kill somebody,” Kaede said, “And try to cover it up. And also almost got Chabashira and
I trapped underground forever and made me kind of claustrophobic.”

“Well, yes, I’ve acknowledged this many times,” Tsumugi chuckled nervously, “And wasn’t it you who said I should stop talking about it because I was really just fishing for somebody to pity or forgive me for doing such rotten things?”

“That’s true. You were doing that,” Kaede said, then took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling, “And it did come out that I planned the motives, last game, so I wouldn’t be surprised if they decided to turn their backs on me, too. Good for them, though.”

“Do you think…?” Tsumugi started, then shook her head, “Oh, nevermind.”

“No, tell me,” Kaede prodded.

“Well, it’s just,” Tsumugi paused to get her thoughts together, “Nami’s trying to be my friend.”

“That’s good. You need more friends,” Kaede said, “I’m getting along with plenty of our peers, so you should too.”

“Well, should I?” Tsumugi asked, sitting up and frowning, “I wanted to tell her, you know. Hey, Nami. If you want to be my friend, you should know what I did, first. You should know the biggest mistake of my life and see if you still want to be around me… It’s plain to see, most people wouldn’t want to. So I shouldn’t be tricking people into liking me, thinking that I’m not a murderer.”

“Well,” Kaede said, “I have blood on my hands too, and people here don’t know that,” Having had their memories of the false Mastermind Trial erased, this was true, “But I can be friends with Randy, and Yamaguchi, and get along with everybody. Do you think that I’m being unfair to them?”

“Well, no, but that's different,” Tsumugi said, "It's not like you killed anybody directly. Don't you think that if I'm going to be friends with anybody here, I should at least give them the chance to decide that I'm too much of a danger to spend time with?"

"I don't, actually," Kaede said, shaking her head, "It isn't like you're the only person here who's committed murder, for one. You're just the only one who's done it in a Killing Game. Technically, Bakura's already worse off than you because he attempted it twice, and it isn't like he's reviled. He hasn't exactly earned any good boy points, but people are still willing to give him a chance."

"I guess so," Tsumugi said, "But, then, maybe that actually means that I really should tell my friends what I did. I already served my penance for it, by being imprisoned during that game and, well, ending up here..."

"It sounds like what you really want is to move on from your past," Kaede said.

"I really do!" Tsumugi insisted, "I remember I promised Ryoma, before the game ended... He said I had a ways to go, but I could become a good person. I have to do that, you know? I have to become a good person so that I can go back to him with pride, if I survive. I kind of feel like part of that is to be open about what sort of person I used to be."

"It's up to you," Kaede said, "But I just want you to be safe. It's much safer if we keep that under wraps. Knowing that you might be tempted to kill somebody could make you a target, after all."

"What was safer was keeping to ourselves and avoiding all the others, but that wasn't good at all," Tsumugi frowned, "I think we need to balance being safe with what's actually a good thing."
Making friends was less safe, but better than being alone. So I think that confessing my crimes might put me in danger, but... Is it really worth avoiding danger, if I haven't done everything to try and make myself somebody who deserves to make it out in the end?"

"...Jeeze, you've already come pretty far," Kaede admitted with a nervous chuckle, "You're right, you know. I'm just arguing because I'm worried about you... But you're definitely right. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize!" Tsumugi proclaimed, waving her hands defensively, "I understand! If our positions were swapped, I would probably think of your safety before your personal betterment too! I mean, I love you. Obviously I'd rather you were alive and kind of a bad person, than a better person who turns up dead... But this is something that I have to do anyway. I'm sorry if... It means I end up dead."

"I understand," Kaede said, then turned toward Tsumugi and reached out, cupping her cheeks, "But you know, we need to make the most of the time we have together! Just in case!"

"Ah-" Tsumugi turned red and glanced away, "Are you implying what I think you're implying, Kaede?"

"I mean," Kaede leaned in, "Everyone else is kind of assuming we've already been doing that stuff. May have made a joke about it to Bakura or something."

"You're such... A dirty grandpa archetype," Tsumugi giggled, breaking the tension of the moment as she fell back onto the couch, pulling Kaede with her, "Always making jokes about things you're too nervous to talk about seriously!"

"I-I mean," Kaede looked away, "Monokuma always says that in the setting of a Killing Game, everyone's either gonna get horny or murdery. I guess that since we're on the topic of being better people..."

"Oh, that's a good point," Tsumugi laughed again, "Well. I guess that we have to. Morally. If, I mean, you actually want to..."

"Of course," Kaede said, and that was Monokuma's cue to shut off the cameras in that room for the night. It didn't need to see that, and neither did the people who were responsible for editing. Good grief, though, it thought to itself. It would get pretty confusing if a murder happened while the cameras had to be off in multiple rooms because, ugh, teenagers. For once Monokuma hoped that a murder wouldn't be happening at a particular time.
10:00 PM / 2200 Hours

Riko Asahi didn’t have anybody looking for her. This wasn’t much of a surprise, really. Anybody who cared about her was certainly much too busy to take time out of their schedules just to speak with her for two hours in the midst of a Killing Game. So, instead, she used her ward for once.

The books were heavy and unpleasant to read, and Monokuma claimed she only got them because other wards represented her hobbies and heir wasn’t much of a talent, so her ward was storage… Even so, it did suit her. She’d read plenty of these hefty texts before, and now, too. Though a number of them wouldn’t mean anything here, so she decided to broaden her horizons a bit and read one of the more dense books on philosophy and ethics. She’d eventually gotten bored and made her way back towards the dorms to the tune of the nighttime announcement overhead. Monokuma kept it short and simple this time, nothing much to think about.

That was when Riko saw, near the dorms but not quite there, somebody was sitting on the ground. It was Box, with her knees pulled up to her chest, taking heaving and panicked breaths. Riko contemplated ignoring her for one moment, but instead, approached her and crouched down at her side, observing now that she was crying.
Box looked up to see Riko, screwed up her face for a second, then to Riko’s great surprise, signed something to her, “I don’t feel up to talking right now.”

“That’s okay,” Riko signed back, “I didn’t know you knew sign language.”

“I know it for situations like this but I keep it a secret because it’s embarrassing that I end up this way,” Box explained with her hands, “I was trying to go to the gift shop to get something to help
me feel better but then I got overwhelmed by the stairs and just sat down here.”

“What made you feel bad to start out with?”

“My conversation. My parents gave up on talking to me ten minutes in.”

“That’s awfully rude.”

“I understand it. I was just trying to be the person they raised me to be. But I guess I interpreted it wrong. I’m supposed to make them happy and be a good person and help everybody. But then I said something wrong and they left.”

“Sounds like they think you’re a different person than you are.”

“It’s not exactly like that. It’s more like… They expected the way they taught me to make me turn out a certain way. Like a normal good person or something. But I’m broken and I’m not the Box Hako they wanted. I can’t even pretend to be anymore. It’s been too long.”

“I don’t think you’re broken. I think you’re just different.”

“I used to get like this all the time. I’d cry a lot and I wouldn’t want to move or talk or anything. They got called tantrums and everybody said I was being stupid and overreacting. And it’s not nice to be sad. I need to be happy so everyone else around me can be happy.”

“That’s not very nice of them to say. I think that even if this is a tantrum you probably need to have them sometimes,” Riko signed, then slid down the wall to settle in next to Box. She felt like she’d be here for a while.

“No,” Box signed, shaking her head at the same time, “I don’t. It’s bad. I’m making you unhappy by being this way. It’s pathetic. I am broken. Normal people can fake it. Normal people don’t get too sad to talk or too confused and pass out or laugh when they’re scared, I don’t do anything right.”

“That’s a very strict definition of normal. I don’t talk at all. Am I pathetic?”

“No. But that’s just how you are. I’m supposed to be better than this. I’m Box Hako. The perfect Box Hako, the perfect daughter, the perfect friend. That’s how I should be. That’s how I try to be but it’s so hard to do all the time. And I’m messing it up. I’m messing it up right now with you.”

“You’re not messing anything up. You’re having a normal moment. I just happened to be equipped to help you with it.”

“I’m not supposed to be like this.”

“Maybe not, but, honey,” Riko tapped their heads together, “Nobody is supposed to be like anything. Everybody just is.”

“I,” Box started, but then dropped her hands to her sides and stretched her legs out, dropping her head to stare down. It seemed like there had been something she wanted to say, and Riko’s words weren’t landing the way she wanted them to. Riko couldn’t even begin to understand why, though. As far as she was concerned, she gave good advice, but it looked almost like Box had some reason that advice didn’t mean a thing to her.

Some further secret she wasn’t willing to… Or wasn’t able to admit. Riko knew about those types of things, so she wouldn’t press her friend on that matter, but she did wish that she could have
helped more somehow. Even so, Box made no indication of wanting Riko to leave. So she didn’t. She stayed sitting there next to the girl who had ragdolled against the wall, in absolute silence but for their breathing. The world was quiet here.

There were brief footsteps. Gradually, others returned to their dorms, but they were all preoccupied with the promise of going to sleep, and nobody noticed the two quiet girls. Right now, Box and Riko may as well have been invisible. Just because somebody can be seen, if they cannot make a sound, it’s easy enough to miss the fact that they’re there.

Sometimes, this might have bothered Riko. Sometimes, it might have bothered Box not to be ignored, but to be confronted with how often Riko, one of her very precious friends, found herself ignored. Right now neither of them were going to be bothered by anything. Riko had gotten a look behind the mask of somebody who she had previously observed to be, as she called herself, the perfect friend. Riko didn’t see the now-erased trial where Box was accused of being the one behind all of this, and she failed to react in any reasonable way. Riko didn’t see Box breaking down over the inevitability of further death. But she saw this.

A vulnerability that was specific to her.
Daily Life: Day Seven (Nami Conversation)

8:00 PM / 2000 Hours

Nami’s monitor lit up, and the face she saw there…

Wasn’t anybody she recognized at all.

“Hi,” The young boy waved to her. He gave off the impression of a teenager with a baby-face, more than that of an actual child, “It’s good to finally meet you, Miss Kaguya.”

“Call me Nami,” Nami said, squinting at him, “Nice to meet you too…?”

“I’m Kizuto Orihara,” He introduced himself, “And, yeah, you don’t know me. But I’m here. I thought, I should probably talk to you, a little bit. I was actually brought here for somebody else, but I can’t talk to her anymore. So I’ll talk to you instead.”

“Tomoe…” Nami mumbled, “You’re here for Tomoe?”

“Yeah,” Kizuto said, “So I thought that I should probably talk to her twin sister I never met. She was really proud of you and stuff, so I kind of always wanted to meet you anyway. It’d be nice if it were a different situation, though…”

“She. You’re one of her friends, from when she was in journalism?” Nami asked.

“Yeah, that’s right. She interviewed me for game reviews pretty often after my blog on the topic got popular. I got her to start playing some of the games I liked most, and eventually we became friends. Her other coworkers kinda kept distance and thought she was weird, but I just thought she was really cool,” Kizuto explained, then looked away, “And, I’m sorry to say it, but I still do. Even knowing what happened, in the Killing Game.”

“Good,” Nami said, “Cause I do, too. Think she was really cool.”

“She did a good job, didn’t she?” Kizuto asked, “Knowing what she did to protect you… She still did it, though. Even though it hurt her. And she never complained to me about that, at all. She just said how great her twin sister was.”

“She did,” Nami dipped her head, “She did do a good job, yeah. I’m thinking more about that now. It wasn’t… Well, it wasn’t good for me in the long run, but she did protect me. She kept me from needing to face unpleasant things when I was too young for them, anyway. It only got excessive once we started getting older.”

“Mm,” Kizuto scratched his head, “She was kinda messed up, yeah. But she was still my friend, and none of that stuff came up when we were friends. She was proud of you and it didn’t seem weird at all, I guess cause of the distance. And she wasn’t scared to stand up for me if anything happened. I think she just… Wanted somebody to depend on her.”

“I think so too,” Nami said, then looked up at the ceiling, “I really miss her. And I wish that we stayed in touch more than we did. Maybe that wouldn’t have actually been good for her, but… It would be nice to have more memories of her to get back, as my amnesia’s running out. Just the occasional phone call. It’s not enough. I didn’t value the time we had.”

“I think if you met her again outside of a Killing Game,” Kizuto agreed, “It might have been fine.
It coulda been. We all would’ve been friends, I bet. We could do all that fun stuff like going to an aquarium, and stuff. I always wanted a big sister, and Tomoe kind of acted like one. I bet you would have too, if we met that way. It would have been nice.”

“It would have been,” Nami said, “But, don’t worry. If I make it out of here, I’ll go ahead and take you to an aquarium myself. That sound good?”

“Yeah,” Kizuto said.

“I gotta say, I was really surprised that the person looking to talk to me wasn’t-”

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“Nami,” Kira’s voice was strained, “Nami, come on, wake up.”

“Uh… Huh? Eh?” Nami questioned, slowly opening her eyes to look up at her girlfriend. Kira Kirara. They’d met under somewhat strange circumstances, that was true, but Kira’s flirting eventually paid off. Well, it was more like she seemed to make the decision that they were dating, and suddenly, they were. That was how it happened. Well, that was fine, yeah.

What was going on?

“Oh, thank goodness, you’re all right,” Kira breathed, then reached out and wrapped her arms around Nami, pulling her in close. She felt a sharp pain in her shoulder at the sudden movement, and furrowed her brow.

The year was 21XX, it was April. Half a year before Nami would find herself in a Killing Game, in her apartment in Chiyoda. Kira was holding her tight and she didn’t know what was going on. Kira, who she loved with her whole heart. Dear heart. Please say what’s going on.

“I was so scared,” Kira choked out, “I was terrified, Nami. Don’t ever do that again, don’t you
dare. I found you passed out… Come on… It’s not that terrible, you know!”

Nami wasn’t sure what Kira could mean wasn’t that terrible, but she got the implication. She didn’t think she’d do something like that, but Kira wouldn’t lie to her, would she? And she was so distressed…

“I’m sorry,” Nami said.

“Sorry isn’t enough, Nami!” Kira whined.

“I am, though,” Nami said, her breathing quickening, “I don’t even remember… What was terrible… Kira I don’t remember I’m so sorry I’m sorry that I’m like this and I forget important things and I can’t even say it won’t happen again because-“

“No,” Kira slid her hands back to Nami’s shoulders and leaned back to look her in the eyes, “Don’t worry about it, it’s okay… It’s better that you don’t know, really. Anything that you’re able to forget, I think that you’re better off forgetting, yeah. I think so.”

“Aren’t psychologists supposed to unearth repressed memories?” Nami questioned.

“Those are fake so often, and it’s almost never a good thing, so, come on. Who are you gonna trust? Those other guys, or the *Ultimate* Psychologist and also your loving girlfriend?” Kira did have a point. She was a very loving girlfriend. Nami appreciated having her around, even if their story of how they started dating wasn’t really a story at all.

Kira was beautiful, and she obviously loved Nami, more than Nami could ever remember being loved before. Torimi said that it was creepy, but Nami didn’t think so. Kira was always there for her. Always right there. And well, Nami did have a fairly unique mental state, so it wasn’t strange to her, that Kira was interesting. The fact that it was romantic interest surprised her a little bit, but of anybody to fall for her, when she was such a mess and such a huge disaster who blacked out all the time and couldn’t even remember important events or-

“Nami,” Kira spoke up again, drifting one hand to her cheek, “I think I know, how to keep you from doing that again.”

“Yeah?” Nami asked.

“It’s simple,” Kira smiled, “Think of me, okay? Because, here it is, this is a promise. If you die, I die. That’s simple enough, isn’t it? If you die, I die.”

“Don’t… You’ve got…” Nami started to protest.

“That’s why,” Kira placed a finger over Nami’s lips, “You want to tell me, not to put my faith in you like that, because I have a brighter future than you? That’s false. Because, you have a bright future waiting for you too. And I frankly wouldn’t want to face mine without you at my side.”

“Ah…” Nami glanced away, “That’s a serious claim, you know. We’ve only been together for…”

“For a year,” Kira said simply, “Today.”

“Today?” Nami questioned, searching the walls for a calendar.

“It’s okay,” Kira chuckled, “I wouldn’t expect you to know the day. Today’s just the day that I consider, when we started dating. A year ago today, I stayed the night here for the first time.”
“I remember that,” Nami admitted, “You sort of just let yourself in.”

“Of course I did. Because I love you,” Kira said simply, “And you didn’t turn me away, did you? You let me hold you tight and fall asleep next to you. Because you love me too.”

“I do,” Nami said, “I do, love you too.”

“Good,” Kira smiled, then stood up, cheery as if she’d never been distraught at all, “I’ll make us some dinner.”

“...You’re such a fucken’ liar,” Torimi whispered to Kira, having pulled her aside in the hall the next day, “Nami told me what you said to her. She told me what ‘happened’. You’re scum, y’know that? Y’know?”

“Scum?” Kira asked, “I’m just helping the girl I love. What’s so wrong about that?”

“You’re… Takin’ advantage of her troubles,” Torimi snipped, “I may jus’ be a kid compared to you two, but even I can see it! ‘If you die, I die’? What kind of bullshit is that?”

“I think I know how to keep me from doing that again,” Kira chuckled, “If you die, I die. That’s what I said to her, with one word changed. Isn’t it fine, if she’s going to forget anyway, to let her think that she’s the one who’s imperfect? I was truthful in certain ways. If she dies, then I die. It’s true. So I won’t… Ever do that to her again. Do you seriously think she’d believe you if you told her the truth? Just mind your own business. A bratty heathen like you has no reason to stick her nose into the affairs of two adults who love each other.”

“Do you?” Torimi questioned.


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It was June.

May had been when Nami and Kira discussed her idea that the world could be solved if somebody did something ‘truly radical’, and now it was June.

June, when Kira was all over Nami, and when Nami suddenly turned to her with a solid, harsh gaze.

“It’s you,” She said, emotionless.

“...What?” Kira questioned, wrapping her arms around Nami’s chest more, snaking around like a constrictor.

“It’s you,” Nami was unfazed, “You’re the reason. My mental health started going downhill again… When I met you. I hadn’t blacked out since middle school until you came into my life.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Kira said softly, “I’m helping you. You know that I am.”

“Cut the bullshit. Do you think I’m an idiot or something?” Nami questioned, and shook Kira off of her, “This could only go on so long. You had to know that.”

“But, Nami…” Kira started to protest, only for Nami to whirl on her, teeth bared and a wild look in
her eyes.

“Since middle school, Kira. And I know what made me black out that time. So what the fuck did you do? What did you do to me?” Nami reached out and grasped Kira by the shoulders so tight her knuckles turned thoroughly pale, “Why… Did you break me?”

“I wanted to see what would happen,” Kira said simply, avoiding eye contact, “I was intrigued the moment I met you. Young women of your status have fascinating minds to begin with. Add in other mental health issues, and the fact you’re an Ultimate, and I couldn’t resist. Doll, you were made for me.”

“Shut up!” Nami snapped.

“You asked,” Kira looked to her now, “You did. I answered, truthfully. The first time was an accident, you know, it was. It was really surprising that you didn’t remember what I did for you, at first I was offended. Women, all the same, use them and lose them, until I realized that you weren’t lying. You had no recollection of the time I spent with you. So I started to experiment. See what sort of things you’d erase. Sexual encounters that I initiated would be erased, for example. And if I suddenly shocked you by turning violent, your poor sweet mind would forget not only the event, but a number of events from the same day.”

“I’m not,” Nami shook her head, “I never signed up to be your lab rat!”

“I know,” Kira admitted, “But I was too fascinated to stop trying. Of course, I nearly killed you once. That’s when I stopped. I never wanted to hurt you, and I didn’t, did I? Because you never remembered it. So it didn’t matter. Still, I stopped, because I suddenly realized. I did love you too much to lose you. Nami. I love you beyond hope.”

“I don’t,” Nami said, “I don’t love you that much anymore. No. What the fuck… How did you think you could do that to me!? What kind of a person are you!?”

“I dunno. I can’t quite figure out myself. It’s impossible to accurately self-diagnose, the industry says so, so I haven’t even tried. I certainly am not a ‘good’ person, but what kind of person I am? That’s a mystery, isn’t it?” Kira chuckled, but it was bitter and miserable, “I know what kind of person you are. I’ve studied you much too intimately to misunderstand. So I know you’re capable of forgiving me. But, you shouldn’t.”

“I won’t!” Nami proclaimed.

“Of course not,” Kira said, “I used you. It’s unfortunate, Nami, what kind of girl you are. You’re so ready to accept that somebody loves you. It happened with your sister, and it happened again with me. Of course, you are loved. You have been loved. I do love you, incredibly. But I also dragged you back into a pit of misery you’d long escaped from before we met.”

“Please just go away.”

“It’s about time you realized,” Kira admitted, and got to her feet, “Goodbye, Nami.”

She left, and Nami was alone. Alone, but there was a weight lifted. Nobody was watching her now. She took several deep breaths, then lay down on her side for several hours on the floor.

When she woke up, she had a single message from Kira.

“I’ve decided to publish my research. You probably won’t ever see me again, and chances are that I will in fact be dead. Please don’t keep your promise. Get well soon. It might sound empty, but
I’ve loved you for as long as it’s possible to love somebody. I want you to be happy. None of this was ever your fault.”

And Nami believed every word she said. She let herself cry. She let herself admit she’d been in love.

And she prepared to recover from a woman who never should have come near her.
Daily Life: Day Eight (Oversleep)

11:00 AM / 1100 Hours

Nami Kaguya woke up with memories. So many memories, to be frank. Memories that she’d even lost at the time she’d made them, only to now have them recovered. Even still, she also got the memories of time having passed since then. Since she discovered what kind of person Kira really was, and forced her out of her life.

To think, she’d once recalled “Kaguya-hime” as an affectionate nickname, something pleasant. It was easy enough to have a memory like that, though. Kira was good at pretending, Nami was just smart enough to eventually see through her. Plenty of the memories Nami had of Kira were still nice, were still good memories that made her feel nostalgic for having such a devoted girlfriend, but…

Kira wasn’t a good girlfriend, and Nami understood that now. She didn’t know if Kira had actually died or not, after that message, because she avoided news about it. She would rather focus on the fact their relationship ended because Nami realized she was being manipulated, than to focus on the fact that it might not even be possible for them to get back together. The idea that the door was shut by an outside event diminished it for Nami, and she wanted to hold onto that truth as something that she’d been able to do for herself.

Those ploys only worked, Nami knew, because Kira did put on airs of being Nami’s perfect match for such a time. Nami wouldn’t have blocked out those memories if they weren’t shocking. Nami could remember being beaten up by people she expected to be violent, after all. It was always a matter of surprise and betrayal, and when it came to non-violent incidences, her past repressed traumas probably played a part. In those cases, it was likely Kira was just going a little too quickly for Nami to be completely comfortable, so she blocked it out. Having amnesia as a defense mechanism definitely wasn’t good.

But, it hadn’t happened since she broke up with Kira, not even in situations where it could have been close or possible. She could remember still with vivid detail, the body discoveries, the executions, here in the Killing Game. Maybe she’d finally moved beyond the broken way that her mind tried to keep her safe. It made sense, when some of the black-out incidents were actually returning to her along with the full-blown flashbacks lifting the haze of long-term amnesia that Monokuma had inflicted on her.

She glanced at the clock. Eleven. Huh, so she’d been out straight through the morning announcement, and breakfast too. She was surprised that Monokuma didn’t wake her. Well, maybe it had tried, and she’d just been much too knocked out in the world of memories to respond. That made more sense than entertaining the idea that the bear would ever just let her sleep in.

Nami got up, stretched, and gathered a change of clothes. She’d slept in this late, so she wasn’t exactly in a rush to get to the day. Enough time to take a shower and reflect a bit on what she’d learned about herself wouldn’t hurt anything.

Frankly, with the knowledge that Nami had, she somehow thought that she was underreacting. Just like what she’d found out she did in middle school, she was shockingly calm for having learned that the girl she previously believed was still her lover, wasn’t, and had actually been quite the rotten one at that. Having the memories, though, wasn’t in question at all. She wasn’t about to repress them again. Had she merely matured enough that she could move on from these things and accept them as parts of her life, ways that she’d suffered but that she could move past and come out
stronger on the other side?

Probably, she decided. That was good, it made her feel good about herself. She was strong and she wouldn’t let the ways that she’d been hurt before change the way that she got to be now. She was still Nami Kaguya, after all. Kira never would have been able to change that, no matter how hard she may have tried.

12:00 PM / 1200 Hours

After showering, Nami wandered out of her room, only to find that Goro was sitting against the wall directly across from her door. He looked worse for wear. A few visible bruises, and there was even something off about his wrist. She was immediately struck with concern, “Goro? What happened to you?”

“How?” He questioned, then touched his good hand to his own face, prodding at one of the bruises, “Oh, you know me. I just fell over or did some other dumb thing!”

“You don’t know how you got hurt?” Nami prodded.

“Ehh,” He shrugged, and got to his feet, a bit wobbly, “I’m sure you know how it is, Nami! I was dissociating a lot yesterday, so I think I possibly fell down some stairs, or possibly got in a fight with somebody, or something, but I’m not totally sure!”

“I see. You’re like that,” Nami said.


“Another flashback thing. Turns out I actually broke up with Kira. Like, almost half a year ago,” Nami explained, “She was trying to study my blackouts, by beating me up, so I got angry and told her to get out of my life. And she did. And I’m fine,” She made a weird face, “It’s surprising, but I am, I’m just fine.”

“That’s good,” Goro said, “Everyone was worried. Monokuma said it couldn’t get you to wake up, but you were alive, that’s all it said.”

“You should have been able to realize what it was, it already happened twice before,” Nami rolled her eyes, “I missed breakfast motives, right? What were they?”

“Right! Get this!” Goro struck a pose, “It was you and me!”

“And because of that,” Monokuma suddenly appeared, “I will be delivering the motives to you, in person, for a second time. The last participant who had Goro Bakura’s talent had it revoked and replaced with another. The last participant who had Nami Kaguya’s talent once picked up an important ring off a beach. Ta-ta!”

Monokuma left.

“I’ve… never been to a beach,” Nami said.

“What, you don’t just believe in me, that my talent couldn’t have gotten revoked?” Goro questioned.

“I mean, it could have. Obviously not, though, since I haven’t been to a beach. Even when I went swimming when I was younger, it was just in pools and stuff,” Nami said.
“...Yeah, that’s how Asahi debunked it for us too. She remembered you mentioned that before,” Goro waved a hand dismissively, “At least, you know, that motive totally doesn’t give any more clues to what your talent could be! The game that participant was in was actually pretty recent, but unless you knew the ring they wore was important, it still doesn’t confirm anything. So I’m the only person here that could figure it out from that, and I already knew!”

“Good,” Nami said, “Because I’m going to announce it tomorrow. I think that I’ll know for sure, by then. I definitely will. I wouldn’t want some silly Monokuma Motive stealing my thunder!”
Daily Life: Day Eight (Cake Pops)

1:00 PM / 1300 Hours

Nami and Goro parted ways, then Nami went upstairs to let the others know that she was perfectly fine and they really should have known better than to be worried because this was the third time that she’d just been unconscious because she was busy remembering stuff that she’d forgotten from a several-year period of time. Of course, she knew who’d be the most worried, and made a beeline for where she most readily expected to find that girl. She was right; in Yuuri’s ward, she found who she was looking for.

Just like several days ago, Sayaka was working together with Yuuri and Kanoshi to make some strange, experimental dessert. It seemed like she and Yuuri had a lot of fun with these things, and Kanoshi… Was an effective assistant for them, anyhow. As soon as Nami walked in, though, Sayaka dropped what she was working on and ran around the counter, tackling her in a hug, “Dumb fucking idiot, you passed out at a stupid ass time. We were worried when Monokuma couldn’t wake you up.”

“It was just another flashback.” Nami chuckled, “It wasn’t a big deal…”

“Easy for you to say, you weren’t the one who had to worry that it was a big deal this time because it lasted for way too many hours! Monokuma said it started during your conversation last night!” Sayaka chided, letting go of Nami to wave a finger in her direction, “So let me be mad cause I thought it could be something serious for a little bit, okay?”

“Heh, okay,” Nami said. Sayaka took a few deep breaths.

“Okay I’m not mad anymore,” Sayaka said, then smiled, “What did you remember this time, Nami? I hope it’s something good, to make up for how worried we all were.”

“Um… Not super good?” Nami admitted, glancing away, “I remembered a lot of good things, because I basically got back me and Kira’s whole relationship. But, whole thing, includes… The end. Turns out that I dumped her, because she was actually being really not great. To me. So that’s kind of weird to remember? Is okay, though.”

“Is okay?” Sayaka asked, but then just moved on from the strange statement, “I see. That’s… I’m sorry. You’re okay, though?”

“I am,” Nami said, and gave a small nod, “I think I might not want anyone calling me Kaguya-hime again anytime soon, or anything, but I never did and I never will let Kira get me down or set me back. I gotta just keep swimming! Metaphorically, you feel?”

“I feel,” Sayaka admitted, tilting her head to one side with a small laugh, “I’ve been in kind of a similar situation, I think. So I hope that you can end up dating somebody who’s actually good for you. I won’t pry, on what sort of stuff she did…”

“Oh, I don’t mind telling you,” Nami said, then dropped her voice down quietly, “Maybe not those two, but you, it’s fine. She was the Ultimate Psychologist, you know? And she was kind of just studying me. I know that she did love me, but she fell in love with me because my messed up disaster brain was really interesting to her. So she always fucked with me to try and figure that messed up disaster brain out. Stuff like suddenly becoming a cruel person, just to see what would happen and how much I’d end up repressing when she shocked my system.”
“That’s shitty,” Sayaka said, “I hate people like that. Who do shitty stuff and hide behind research. Or let research convince them to do shitty stuff. Both sides are just as bad, really! Fuck,” Sayaka shook her head, “I wanna break her legs.”

“Well, she’s probably already dead,” Nami said, “I think. She said that she might die after she published her research, because she’d be outing herself as an Ultimate. I guess you could go dig up her body and break her skeleton’s bones…”

“It was hyperbole! Kind of,” Sayaka chuckled, “Still. God. I never knew that… Well, obviously I didn’t, because you didn’t, huh? That makes sense, I never knew you had to deal with such a fucked up girlfriend. I kinda thought she would have been amazing. Because that’s what you deserve, I think. An amazing girlfriend who’ll never hurt you, and who doesn’t like you just for the stuff you wanna change about yourself.”

“Aah, like a girl like that exists for me!” Nami joked, “Amazing? Come on. The best that’d fall for me is ‘great’, probably. You’re right about the last bit, though. I do deserve somebody who won’t do the stuff that Kira did.”

“I’m sure you’ll find her,” Sayaka said, “And when you d-”

“Yamaguchi!” Yuuri shouted back to her, “You can keep chatting, but your ganache is going to get fucky if you leave it unattended much longer!”

“Oh! Oh, right!” Sayaka exclaimed, and ran back over to her spot in the ward, rescuing the chocolate silk before it could actually ‘get fucky’.

“Hey Nami,” Yuuri turned and greeted her.

“Ruka,” She nodded back, then glanced to Kanoshi, “You’re getting along again?”

“We had a serious talk earlier this morning, and worked out our differences,” Kanoshi said.

“Your advice helped,” Yuuri said, “I blew off some steam, so I was able to stay clear-headed, and we did work shit out, yeah. Thanks for that.”

“We’re the best of friends again!” Kanoshi added in, “With, some established boundaries going on, and I’ll stop being so overbearing and stuff, but Ruka’s also gonna be more careful about the stuff that makes me worry so that I don’t have to just keep quiet and stew in it either.”

“Sounds like a good compromise,” Nami said.

“It is,” Sayaka said, “And it’s great. My friends are friends again! That was fucking stressful and you guys had better not do it again, capiche?”

“Capiche, Yamaguchi,” Yuuri chuckled.

“Is there anything I can do to help make… What are you making?” Nami asked, looking around at what seemed to be incompatible ingredients.

“Cake pops,” Yuuri said, “Which is why we’ve got all this different stuff. We’re mostly done though, which is why Yamaguchi’s working on ganache for dipping… If you wanted, though, you could totally help decorate them. Kyosuke’s finishing up on baking the cake bits, and I’m making sprinkles and edible sticks right now. We were gonna share them at dinner. Thanks to Oishi asking me to make different stuff to go with her meals every night. I’ve been pretty busy. It’s great, though! There’s hardly any leftovers, cause all her requests just go so well with what she makes,
everyone wants to eat ‘em.”

“That’s wonderful,” Nami said, and prepared to decorate some cake pops.
Daily Life: Day Eight (The Three Taps)

Chapter Notes

sorry to post late, my power went out

2:00 PM / 1400 Hours

After decorating some cake pops, Nami bid farewell to her friends in Yuuri’s ward, and checked the time. Waking up late, the day was already going by so quickly… Not like that was actually a big deal or anything, just an observation that Nami made. She was usually just searching for things to do to fill her day up effectively, but now it was already just three hours out from dinner. Still, Nami didn’t actually feel up to trying to go all over the hospital between now and then, so she just picked one location. Kaede’s ward was interesting enough.

With that decision made, Nami went upstairs again. She glanced at Amai’s ward, contemplated giving it another attempt, then decided that recovering her memories of Kira was quite enough of dealing with an unpleasant person for twenty-four hours, and continued toward her original goal. She stepped into Kaede’s ward, and found that Randy was sitting in one of the benches with a book open on the table in front of him. Kaede was at the next one over, but her book was face down as she hung over the back of Randy’s bench, reading over his shoulder.

“Hey there,” Nami greeted them both with an awkward wave, “What are you reading?”

“I was rereading one of the less-popular Holmes stories,” Kaede answered, “And Randy’s reading some Christie. We picked out books for each other.”

“Neither of us are getting very far, though, because as soon as one of us gets back to reading the other feels the need to lean over and start pointing out all the good bits,” Randy admitted, “It’s kind of fun, though. We’re both learning a lot of stuff we missed the first time through, reading with a bigger fan.”

“Oh! That seems like fun,” Nami said, and stepped further in, shutting the door behind herself, “Does one of you want to give me a book to read, then? If you wouldn’t mind me joining you. I understand if this is only an activity between detectives, of course.”

“It is an activity between detectives,” Kaede said, smiling in Nami’s direction, “But if the trials so far are any indication that certainly includes you. Sit down.”

“How about The Three Taps?” Randy offered up, “I think that might be a pretty good starting point, to read good detective fiction.”

“It is Knox, after all,” Kaede agreed, nodding to Nami, “You’ve got to understand the rules of a mystery, to be able to appreciate stories which bend or break them in lovingly crafted ways. Knox penned the rules, so his books are a good bet to familiarize yourself with them. Good thinking, Randy.”

“As enthusiasts, it’s no surprise we can agree on an introduction,” Randy said, then looked at Nami and clicked his tongue, “Unless, this isn’t your introduction to the Golden Age?”
“Um… Well, I’ve read a few, actually, but nothing by Knox,” Nami said, and took a seat. Randy immediately set *The Three Taps* down in front of her.

“It really is an interesting story,” Kaede said, “Though, unfortunately, it does have a premise which appears quite often in actual Killing Games, on a surface level. Maybe it’s not the best light reading after all…”

“What sort of premise?” Nami asked, scanning the blurb on the book’s back.

“Right,” Randy snapped his fingers, “It’s made super unclear, if the case is a murder or a suicide. There’s strong evidence in both directions… Which, yeah. I guess that people do that in these situations, since the aim of the game with this many detectives around is just to be confusing. Like how Yushu’s cause of death couldn’t have been self-inflicted, but all the alibis and evidence seemed to point to nobody having been able to do it, at first.”

“I think it should be fine,” Nami said, “That’s a loose example you gave. And if something like this does turn up during this game, well, maybe having read this novel will help to solve the case, right? Well, it’s possible, anyway.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Randy said.

“Yeah, if you think it will be fine,” Kaede agreed, “Then, go ahead. I do think that you’d like that book!”

“I think so too,” Nami agreed, and opened it up to the first page. All three of them read their own books in peace, but only for a little while. It wasn’t long before Randy and Kaede both were looking over Nami’s shoulder, giving their input and pointing to little bits that Nami might have missed that, while not important to the mystery because they both wanted very badly to see Nami take a crack at the solution, but rather, bits that emphasized Knox’s writing style and his decalogue, tidbits about him as a person outside of the context of Miles and Angela Bredon, the ‘detective and his wife’ who featured in the story more like dual detectives.

It was definitely an interesting experience, to read a novel with input like that to paint a bigger picture, and in spite of the multitude of distractions between them all, Nami did manage to work her way through the entire book before it was dinnertime. To Randy’s delight and Kaede’s seeming disappointment, Nami was able to figure out the solution before the end of the first act, though she didn’t learn she was correct until the end.

“I can’t believe you got that,” Kaede said, playfully upset, “When I first read Knox, I never solved it in time.”

“Huh? Oh, I super didn’t solve it the first time I read it either,” Randy said, “Cause, I was too focused on reading and suddenly I was at the solution. I can only solve stuff when I actually take a break from it to think, and I didn’t there. It’s cool that Nami got it, though.”

“If it makes you feel better, I never managed to solve the other novels I read,” Nami chuckled, “I’m sure if we talk about percentage of net detective novels read that have been solved, I am utterly dwarfed by the both of you!”

“Fair,” Kaede said, “I just thought for sure that Knox would stump you. At least, the first one with Miles. I solved the rest of the Miles Bredon mysteries, of course. After the first one, I understood Knox’s methods.”

“I guess maybe I was looking at the story more like a legitimate crime, than a detective novel,”
Nami said, “It seems like you both solve the novels for fun, like a game with the author. But I just wanted to solve the crime in the book, on its own. Understanding Knox’s methods is a good way to solve these things if you look at them that way… Detectives probably do, that’s why it’s called a game of cat and mouse. But all I really wanted was to pin down the culprit, so when it became obvious that there-”

“Hey now!” Kaede cut her off, “Let’s not spoil the solution for anybody who happens to watch this Killing Game, Nami!”

“Oh, that’s fair,” Nami said, “I’d hate to spoil the story for somebody like Bakura.”

“Or me! I used to be stuck overhearing the games because my sister watched them!”

“Oh, that’s fair too,” Nami chuckled, “Got to be careful about these things.”
Daily Life: Day Eight (Dinner)

5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

Having finished reading the novel that Kaede and Randy had thrown at her then continued to participate in, Nami packed up and went with them down to the dining hall, since they’d kept themselves busy straight up till dinnertime. This day had seriously flown by, aided and abetted by the fact that she literally didn’t leave her room till noon. Sometimes, days like that… Were actually kind of nice.

Upon arriving to the dining hall, the group of Detectives split up, each going to a different table. Kaede joined Tsumugi, Riko, and Kurou. Randy of course went to Tsukasa, who’d been chatting with Torimi and Mitsuru.

Nami, meanwhile, decided to go and sit with Box and Madara, a strange combination, she thought, but she may as well make it stranger.

"Hi Nami," Box greeted her with a small wave, her other hand holding a chunk of radish in chopsticks halfway above her plate. She was eating salad currently, but she had a second plate which was piled high with all sorts of things off Amai's buffet, "You doing okay? You missed breakfast."

"I know," Nami said, giving a nervous chuckle, "Halfway through my conversation, I ended up having another flashback to before, and stuff. I guess it just lasted a while, because I didn't wake up till eleven. What are you... Doing?" She glanced at the double plates.

"Oh, well, I actually didn't eat at breakfast. I made the second plate first, but then Madara noticed and told me that I shouldn't jump right into eating a load of heavy food twenty-four hours after the last time I ate anything, and said I should warm up with a salad," Box explained, then ate the chunk of radish, grimaced briefly, then grinned, "He's so... Smart."

"Why didn't you eat breakfast?" Nami wondered.

"I just wasn't feeling hungry!" Box assured her, "Nothing was wrong or anything. I'm completely fine."

"Not sure I'd call your usual status fine," Madara observed tactlessly, "But, you do seem normal. Just make sure that you eat enough of the salad first, to get your stomach accustomed to food being in it again."

"Are human stomachs really this weak...?" Box questioned, frowning again as she ate a piece of lettuce. She didn't seem to be a fan of cold vegetables.

"Yes," Madara said, "They are. And if you've never felt the consequences of eating a big meal immediately after not eating for a day, then you've just got lucky, and I wouldn't wish those consequences for the first time on anybody in a Killing Game. It isn't a very good situation to experience them in."

"You're... so smart," Box said again, and it really just sounded like some combination of a complaint and an accusation. She was acknowledging that Madara was correct, but she wasn't very happy about it.

"I'm surprised," Nami said, "I'm a picky eater, but I didn't really expect you to be, Hako."
"I'm not! Picky!" Box whined, "I just don't like raw things! Cook food! It's why cooking was invented, it's because food that's warm and cooked is better than food that's cold and uncooked by a factor of greater than 500%!"

"That's subjective," Sayaka said as she sat down next to Nami, joining the conversation seamlessly, "Personally, I'm a fan of blue steak, after all."

"Ugh," Madara rolled his eyes, "We really don't need to get into this again."

"Look, I'm just saying, from an objective standpoint," Sayaka reached out and swiped a tomato off Box's salad plate, "Some things are better raw. I mean, Hako. Would you really want all this lettuce to be cooked?"

"Grilled lettuce is tasty, though," Box said, ruining Sayaka's point. Madara burst out laughing.

"I don't like any lettuce," Nami gave her input, "But I agree with Madara about warming up your stomach, actually. That's why I got three bread rolls to eat before I eat my actual food."

"I'm not sure bread rolls are really light enough to..." Madara started, but Box clapped her free hand over his mouth.

"No, no, it's a great idea, Nami!" She laughed, then turned and gave Madara a mock glare, "You are not subjecting another poor, innocent girl to this rabbit food."

"Wow," Sayaka said, "You're pretty passionate about salads."

Box sheepishly removed her hand and sat back down in her seat, fixing her hair then clasping her hands in front of herself, "Sorry about that."

"Don't apologize," Madara said, then made finger guns with a click of his tongue, "You're a valicant paragon, standing up for the right of princesses everywhere to eat bread and not radishes."

"Does that mean I can do that?" Box asked.

"I mean," Madara shrugged, "I ain't your dad. Do what you want. Just heed my warnings."

"I'm going to eat bread," Box said and didn't hesitate to stand up and retrieve bread rolls. Madara slid her salad over to himself and started picking at the non-lettuce bits of it with his fingers.

"I didn't know Hako was capable of being that passionate about a mundane thing," Nami observed, "It's kind of cute."

"I wonder..." Madara thought to himself for a moment, then shook his head, "Oh, it's not important."

"Hello!" Monokuma appeared in the seat where Box had been sitting, but evacuated it immediately to go to the central part of the cafeteria where its wheel had already descended, "It's time for more motives! And it's good, everybody is actually here this time. I'd normally punish somebody who missed a motive delivery somehow, but given that this morning was out of Nami's control, I let it slide. Don't want this happening again, though!"

"Understood, I'll try my best not to be unwakeably unconscious during any other motive delivery," Nami said, as if that was actually something she could do.

"Anyway! Moving on! It's total motive time!" Monokuma spun the wheel, "Oh, by the way, I
fucked up the wheel physics so that I don't have to deal with landing on any of you heathens multiple times and delaying the actual reveals. Only people who haven't had their motives revealed yet can be landed on now!" It struck a pose each time the wheel landed, "The last participant to have Tsukasa Mizuho's talent lost their position to a string of scandals! The last participant to have Tsukune Madara's talent holds the record for most murders in a single Killing Game."
“...This is easy mode, Monokuma.” Madara complained, leaning his chin in his hand, “Couldn’t you have given me something more interesting to debunk? Good grief. We’ve all read the rulebook. One person can only kill two others, or they’ll be punished on the spot without a trial. So as soon as the fire killed three people, the guy who set it would be killed himself. So, clearly, I couldn’t be here today, if that was me.”

“Yeah,” Tsukasa agreed, “That’s super easy mode. I wouldn’t still be the Ultimate CEO if I’d fallen victim to scandals before ending up here. Obviously, the last one was a survivor whose leadership fell apart after the Killing Game.”

“Hey, it’s not like I make these things up myself,” Monokuma whined, “Like I said, for the wheel, every statement was prepared ahead of time! Besides, every Killing Game has some throwaway motives. It’s not possible to make up something that stresses out everybody!”

“Oh, you poor thing, pitting people against each other is so hard,” Amai teased, putting a syrupy air into her voice, “How could a shitty bear invented just to do this be worse at it than a human? Cause, you totally are. If I was in your position, I could make motives so spectacular, knock-your-socks off rotten, that you’d be struggling to keep up with the murders!”

“I could do better, but, I’m supposed to give you guys a fair chance…”

“Oh, yeah, making excuses now? You just don’t want to admit that you’re inferior! Whoever programmed you was garbage! You know there was another blackmailer somewhere in the past, yea? Get that one in on the motives deal!” Amai continued to taunt, “It’s funny. I bet you don’t even have a single solid thing on me~ How pathetic can you get, to be this bad at your own job?”

“Stop it!” Monokuma shouted, “The rules say that violence against Monokuma is not permitted! And I am deciding right now that includes emotional violence! If I tell you to stop making fun of me, and you do it again, you get punished! Who’s laughing now? Me, ahahah! Upupu!”

“...Damn,” Amai pouted as she settled back down, arms crossed. Kurou reached out and patted the top of her head, like she was just a jilted child. Well, that was how she acted.

And as much as Nami would have loved to continue enjoying this conversation…

She still had something left to remember.

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The airing of the fifty-third annual Killing Game had been one of the worst things to happen during Nami’s career, and since it had happened, she’d been having a rotten time. This was before she’d realize Kira’s bad influence on her, so she was laying all the blame for her misery and blackouts on that incident. Everything had been on track, it was standard, normal, the way that she did things. Help from Torimi and Kira was proving unnecessary…

Until, back in December, when that first episode of the Killing Game aired. And everything got so
much more complicated. What had easily been a slam dunk was suddenly a desperate battle, and it waged on for months.

This was the end, though. Today was the very last day that Nami would need to deal with all of this, for better or for worse, today was the day that the judge would hand down a decision. Courtrooms had been seriously changed during the course of the Tragedy, and the changes stuck around. Juries were unreliable when anyone could secretly be Despair, so instead, a heavily vetted judge was put in charge.

Of course, those judges were vetted through government processes, and Nami was really beginning to suspect that there was something going wrong higher up. The judges were still objective for the most part, but every so often, Nami would see the hint of a bias. A judge whose objectivity was failing, and who was rooting for the plaintiff or the defendant, or who was fond of Nami’s opponent, or particularly not fond of Nami. That wouldn’t be reason to think twice under normal circumstances, she thought, but these people were supposed to be one hundred percent objective, or at least, convincingly give that impression.

This particular judge… Didn’t have anything against Nami or for the Defense, but did seem especially hard on certain witnesses. One witness, in particular. The one who Nami was trying to help. The one who was too afraid of the defendant to even speak freely, saying awful and condemning things that he would, a moment later, brush off. Not a big deal, it’s nothing. It was obviously something and any truly objective judge would be able to see that.

And the case only got worse when it was discovered that Kokichi Ouma was alive. A great amount of the trial of Kiyoshi Matsubara hinged on the idea that he’d been responsible for the events which led to that young man’s suicide, so it when it turned out that Kokichi had actually just been kidnapped to participate in a Killing Game, the leverage began to fade. Kiyoshi was put on trial by the state after one too many reports, and Nami was tasked with prosecuting him, with digging deep and proving that Kiyoshi displayed consistent patterns of intense direct harm towards those in his employ, a number of whom were minors.

It wasn’t like there was nothing there, with Kokichi Ouma being alive. That didn’t erase Kiyoshi’s actions, and Nami had won uphill battles like this one before. She’d even managed to get a good friend of hers a high enough payout to start her own business, by going after the foster parents who’d severely, if unintentionally, damaged her psyche for years. The foster system was found to be guilty of negligence in allowing this to happen, and paid out, but it wasn’t easy to convince a judge that this damage was substantial. With that in mind, Nami did think that she could probably say it was her specialty to prove the presence of direct harm. Even so, even with every tool in her arsenal, this trial was proving impossible.

It wasn’t a surprise when the Not Guilty ruling came in, but that didn’t mean that it didn’t hit Nami hard. She’d never lost a case before. There were times that she failed to earn a not guilty verdict when working as a defense attorney or failed to earn a guilty verdict when working as a prosecutor, but in those cases, she’d always agreed with the eventual verdict. She valued justice more than being correct, so those weren’t losses in her eyes. This was. There had to be something wrong, higher up. No real judge would put down such a slap in the face of a verdict.

Even still, she composed herself, picked herself up and went to meet that witness in the lobby.

“Nami!” He proclaimed as soon as he saw her, nowhere near as miserable as he should have been, it was an act, this kid was so good at acting. It was obvious he was secretly terrified of returning to his life after something like this. Returning to work with Kiyoshi after standing up against him… Nami knew that he had an especially tough time waiting for him.
“Hi, Goro…” Nami sighed, rubbing her own arms, “I’m sorry. I should have… That shouldn’t have happened. Especially when I got Kira in to determine your state. Torimi in to predict what would happen if the wrong verdict was passed down… It’s…”

“It’s fine,” Goro said, “I don’t hold it against you!”

“I just,” Nami took a deep breath, then pulled something from her pocket. A friendship bracelet, she’d weaved it in her nervous fidgeting while waiting for the Judge’s deliberation to finish, “Here. You like these colors, don’t you? I think… I know that it’s nothing, really. But I hope you can accept it as an apology.”

“Hey,” Goro took the bracelet, “I will take this, cause, it’s nice. And you’re nice. You’re amazing! Watching you fight for me was the best thing I’ve got in years. You don’t have to apologize, though. Cause, I understand now. Kiyoshi’s too big to fall. If the Ultimate Attorney couldn’t do it, that means nobody can. This is just the way things have to be.”

“You… How did you…” Nami stared at him, shocked.

“So I was right, that’s what you are. Somebody as amazing as you had to be. Don’t let me get you down, okay? Keep being awesome, every day. Next time, try saving somebody who deserves it!”

Chapter End Notes

To read Nami’s flashbacks in chronological order:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RjxEZ3FKAT6ZNq3hCOZjKgY1D386-nfIDYUIrrNpgg/edit?usp=sharing
Daily Life: Day Nine (It's Breakfasttime)

Chapter Notes

Read Operation VK to understand the reference Nami makes here. It's well worth your time.

6:00 AM / 0600 Hours.

“Hey, you bastards! It’s six AM, so wake up and get on up to breakfast for the eight AM motives!” Monokuma’s voice woke her for what felt like the first time in an eternity.

Nami had been correct.

For a while now, she’d been aware that her Ultimate Talent was as the nebulous ‘Ultimate Attorney’. While she more specifically qualified as a prosecutor the majority of the time, the precedent had already been set by the selection year before hers, because the last Ultimate Attorney was a sort of jack of all trades, and also of genders because as far as Nami could recall (and her memory was thoroughly restored now) that precedent was set by somebody whose name was both Reiji and Reiko.

It was only after Nami got the title of ‘Attorney’ that she ever stood on the side of defense, but she wasn’t bad at that either. She could protect her clients just as effectively as she could tear down her enemies, and in the cases that she was needed on, most all defendants could be called enemies. It was rare that she was tearing down somebody falsely accused, because false accusations and framings were rarely so elaborate or difficult that a standard lawyer couldn’t handle them.

Her skillset had still been, primarily, going after people who she already knew had done something wrong, and gathered all the necessary evidence to prove that. She’d solved a few mysteries, found a few culprits, but for the most part she was laser-focused on bringing bad people to justice. This skill was something she’d discovered by accident, the ability to be a lawyer. It was born of her secret love for arguments, but she did remember now, that she had eventually been found out for what happened in middle school.

She didn’t want to get Tomoe involved all over again, and her public defender revealed himself useless the first time they met, so she took it into her own hands to pore through dense legal texts which somehow came naturally to her. She stepped in, defended herself, and did so in such an adept manner that she began a work-study program while finishing high school, working as an assistant for a prosecutor who’d witnessed her potential. This morphed into an actual career with ease, and she was awarded a late-but-still-effective title of Ultimate.

And Tomoe never… Needed to know. Because, she was right. Being an Ultimate was something that Tomoe got to have for herself, something she had to give herself value, separate from Nami, all on her own, like she was a real person after all. Nami didn’t need to let her know that they were both picked, that both twins shared even the status of having an Ultimate Talent. Even to the end, Tomoe denied that Nami had this talent…

Nami would have denied it too, if she only knew the version of herself that Tomoe knew. Her memories were important things, and it did take time to build her confidence to a point where she
was capable of doing anything impressive with her life. Even then, she stumbled through, experienced one huge failure, got involved with somebody who was bad for her. She did things she never would have been able to do with Tomoe guarding her, so of course Tomoe wouldn’t believe she could do them.

And… Goro. God, Nami felt awful about that. She failed him, she could have saved him, in that memory he was broken but there was still something there which he distinctly lacked now. He’d agreed to testify in the first place because he had hope that he could escape, he had the desire to live and to seek a better life than the one he was trapped in. And she couldn’t give him that.

She took a deep breath, and got out of bed. On the nightstand was her Monopad, and a note tucked under it. Signed by Sayaka, reading that she and Mitsuru brought Nami back here when she passed out at dinner, and that no, they wouldn’t worry, so don’t come yell at them for worrying. She chuckled a bit, then stretched out. She felt rejuvenated, with her talent confirmed and the feeling that she had everything back that she needed. She was finished with these flashbacks, there wasn’t any more of that emptiness of knowing there were gaps in her own existence.

Even if it wasn’t all good, it was fulfilling. Nami got a shower, then stepped out into the emptiness of the Hospice Ward. Upstairs to the Hospitality Ward, but as soon as she reached the top stair, she noticed that there was a commotion out near the Dining Hall. She couldn’t see what it was about from here, only that Amai, Riko, Kurou, and Mitsuru were today’s early birds, all crowded around in the hallway. Nami squinted towards them. What was going on this early in the morning?

She leaned against the railing of the stairs for a moment, now hesitant to go and engage, concerned about what could be happening there. It could only last a moment, though. She stood up straight and approached the commotion down the hallway.

“What’s going on here?” Nami asked, and all four turned to look at her with pale faces, but didn’t say anything. Her heart sunk. There was one thing that could mean, one thing that would shock and horrify these four into absolute reluctant silence. Only a single thing that could phase Amai in this manner, for sure. The usually bold and offensive girl was just as stuck in place as her strange friends and the man who preferred not to walk the halls alone. He looked especially shaken, out of the group. Riko, too; While all four were frightened, those two looked like they might throw up.

Nami turned to look at the doors to the dining hall, blinked. What was waiting on the other side of that door… Would be an awful tragedy, and a confusing mystery, because what kind of location for a murder was that? But she couldn’t put it off any longer. She needed to see.

She pushed the door open.

Just in front of it, as if the poor victim had been trying to escape, was a crumpled body, bleeding, impaled thoroughly through the chest without any murder weapon visible.

Kaede Akamatsu was dead.
Kaede. Kaede was dead. After surviving through the entirety of one Killing Game, here she was, unceremoniously left to bleed on the ground in the dining hall. The blood was a good amount dried. That made sense, of course it did, it made sense that it would be dry because this murder had to have happened last night before the cafeteria closed for nighttime and God suddenly Nami began to resent her flashbacks entirely for leaving her so clueless on the topic of what had transpired after dinner. She was certainly missing out on certain facts.

“It’s…” Amai finally spoke a word, peering past Nami’s shoulder to eyeball the body again, “We can… We still have to eat. We can eat in my ward. Yeah. Could we ever eat in there again? Bullshit. Whoever fucking offed Detec Bitch here coulda been a little more considerate of the people who gotta live here!”

It lacked the usual verve and venom, though. Nami could see right through this crude talk on Amai’s part. She was legitimately disgusted and horrified. She hadn’t experienced the first two deaths, after all, and her first one’s crime scene was in a place which was sacred to her as a Chef. Amai had never taken any time to know or care about Kaede Akamatsu, but it was still a potent wake-up-call to the reality of the situation.

Nami turned and shut the door, “We don’t have to keep looking at that right now. We’ll investigate once everybody’s awake…”

“That’s a good plan,” Kurou said, “I’m sure that it’s fine to do that, yeah. One of the rules says that everybody is supposed to commit to the ‘best of their abilities’ in the investigation. Sleeping people can’t do that. Right?”

“Right,” Monokuma appeared, “The investigation can only begin once I distribute the Monokuma File!”

“You…” Amai whirled on it, “It’s your fault!”

“Get angry at the culprit, not the enabler. Ta-ta!” Monokuma disappeared again before Amai could break a rule.

“Fucking… That bear…” Amai’s voice was strained as she stared down at the floor, “How could it let her die!? She’s the detective, right? How are we supposed to…”

“It’s okay,” Nami said, and hesitantly put a hand on Amai’s shoulder. She seemed to appreciate it, “You wouldn’t know this, but Akamatsu isn’t the only person who’s good in a trial. Sayaka and Randy are both good at investigating too. And my talent’s also relevant.”

“Okay,” Amai sniffed, and actually seemed a bit vulnerable. Nami had to steer her towards the stairs. Kurou volunteered to stand by the dining hall and redirect people to Amai’s ward for breakfast, so the other four all went upstairs.

Much to their surprise, upon reaching the fifth floor of the main hospital, they discovered Tsumugi. Tsumugi was asleep on the floor, and she looked as if she’d been crying. Did she already know? But why was it up here that she ended up crying herself to sleep?

Nami approached and gently woke her, then spoke, “Are you alright?”

Tsumugi woke up, then locked eyes with Nami, and sighed, “Kaede is dead.”
“You saw her already?” Nami asked.

“No, I couldn’t get this door open,” Tsumugi gestured to the door to Amai’s ward, “But I know it’s true. She didn’t come back to my room last night, and I couldn’t find her. I tried, and tried, and I couldn’t open the door.”

“She’s not there,” Nami said, “She’s in the Dining Hall.”

“Ah…” Tsumugi made a sort of strangled noise of surprise, then moved away from the door she’d been sleeping against, “Then why couldn’t I open this one? I was sure that if she was somewhere it would be…” She trailed off, then lifted her hands to hide her face in them, her voice cracking, “I should have been the first person to see her!”

“I’m sorry,” Mitsuru said, “If we’d had any idea that was what we’d find, then we wouldn’t have opened the door. Some of us never needed to see her in that state at all. We’ve unintentionally violated a bond between-”

“What the fuck did you say,” Amai interrupted, straining to speak with her palm flat against the door to her ward, “About this door? You were trying to open it?”

“I couldn’t get it open, so I assumed when I couldn’t find Kaede…” Tsumugi took a deep and shaking breath, folding her shoulders in toward herself, “God, oh God oh fuck! If Kaede’s in the Dining Hall, then… What’s in there!?”

“Nothing, obviously, there can’t be!” Amai rolled her eyes, then patted down her pockets only to come up empty handed, beads of sweat showing on her forehead, “There’s… I lost it?”

“You lost what?” Tsumugi questioned, pulling her hands from her face to look up at Amai.

“I was gonna say that there’s no way anything could be in here and get all proud of my own cleverness and the fact that you couldn’t get the door open! But it’s not here! I don’t have the unlocking tool!” She started to pace back and forth, holding a hand to her forehead, “I didn’t want people messing with my stuff when I’m not around so I got Ueda to help me set up a makeshift lock with things from the gift shop! And there’s a tool to get it open! But…” She smacked her shoulder against the door, then whined, “I lost it!”

“You seem a bit too responsible to just lose something that important,” Riko held up a whiteboard.

“As much as we don’t get along, I’m inclined to agree,” Nami said with a serious frown set on her face, “Misplacing the only way to get into your ward, the only thing that sparks joy for you in this place?”

“You think someone stole it?” Amai questioned, wringing her hands.

“It’s possible,” Nami said, “How did the lock work, anyway?”

“It’s just a thing made into a shape that stuck the hinge in place, the unlock tool was just a piece of wood carved in the right shape to push the stuff out of the way from under the door, or to push it back into place,” Amai said, “I wanted it to be confusing to figure out, cause I figured somebody here would know how to pick locks or undo bolts from the outside!”

“Paranoid, but okay,” Nami said, “Do you think something could unwedge the door?”

“What, like Fujishiro ramming into it?” Amai questioned.
“Exactly like that,” Nami said, in the same moment that Mitsuru actually did try it out. Just like when he’d cracked the infirmary’s Closed Room, there was a rough noise as the door was forced open in spite of its attempts to be closed. There was a sound of splintering as the hinges were finally granted enough force to crunch through the wood holding it in place. Everybody in the hallway turned to see the results.

“A body has been discovered!” Monokuma’s voice chimed over the intercom, “Please report to the Ultimate Chef’s Ward!”

Nami no longer felt horrified at the memory of Amai chopping up a pig, because something much worse was now on the butcher block. Yuuri’s body lay there, thoroughly mauled.

And on top of his chest was Kanoshi’s head, the rest of him suspiciously absent.
“No,” Amai squeaked out, “Nonononono… I can’t… No way no way no way who the fuck would do this who would do this what kind of person is here with us what kind of person I should’ve been able to know there’s somebody like this here? Somebody like this? What the fuck GodDammitChrist where are we supposed to fucking eat now!? It’s all gone it’s all fucked it’s not… here and the Dining Hall and Yuuri’s Ward… All… Who in Hell!?”

“N...No…” Tsumugi whined from where she still sat on the floor, “Three… People? That’s not… No. One person can’t kill three people, and still have an investigation!” She shrieked this last bit, clutching at her own head, “There’s two culprits, at least! Nonono… Not again… I can’t handle another trial like that one not without Kaede why Kaede!?”

Nami looked between the two girls having breakdowns, then grabbed Amai by the shoulders and steered her out of the room, standing her next to Tsumugi and shutting the door again. Then, she took a deep breath, and addressed them, “We’ll find this out.”

“How can you? How can you find the culprit oh my god she’s dead, the detective is dead, is this why? Because somebody wanted to get away with this?” Tsumugi questioned, still hyperventilating.

Amai joined her in that endeavor, “God! How many people are in on this wait how many people did I fail to read how many people managed to deceive me what if it’s just… What if everybody else is dead how many people how many culprits do there need to be for everybody to be dead!?”

“That would be,” Nami spoke Riko’s writing aloud for her so that those two could hear it, since they weren’t about to look her way anytime soon, “Five culprits, each killing two people, for these three and the seven we haven’t yet seen today, to be dead. Meaning only one of us here wouldn’t be a culprit. That seems very unlikely.”

As if on cue, Kurou and Madara both arrived upstairs, the latter doing the talking, “Ueda here told me about Akamatsu in the Dining Hall… Is there actually something going on up here, too?”

“How somethings,” Nami said, holding up two fingers with a heavy sigh, “Ruka and Kyosuke are both dead in Oishi’s ward.”

“Oishi’s ward? Does that mean somebody managed to break the lock?” Kurou questioned.

“Not until now. It was still stuck, but Fujishiro slammed it open,” Nami explained, taking the responsibility of explanation upon herself. Briefing people like this was something that came naturally to her this whole time, and was only further explained by her talent.

“I see,” Madara said, then brushed his hair back, a grim look on his face. He glared at Amai, “In that case, doesn’t the culprit simply become obvious?”

“Are you accusing me!?” Amai demanded to know, “Excuse you! I would never kill somebody in a place of food, or with my own hands either!”

“This type of argument can wait until the trial, you know,” Nami said, “Madara, I understand you’re upset that your friend is dead, but making accusations without evidence won’t get us anywhere. I know that you’re smart, so I’d really appreciate if you could help with the investigation without a bias towards a particular suspect.”
“Don’t you call me a suspect, you dumb bitch!” Amai shouted from where she’d sunk onto the floor next to Tsumugi, “Why are you talking all big now like you’ll be in charge, anyway!?"

“Because,” Nami turned with a sharp look in Amai’s direction, “I am in charge. I’m the most qualified person here to direct an investigative time.”

“What qualifications, you talentless hack-”

“Oishi,” Nami said, keeping her voice level, “I am the Ultimate Attorney. That’s qualification enough. I hoped to be able to share this information under better circumstances, but it’s the truth.”

During the argument, others had arrived, so in effect, Nami’s claims here were announcing it to all of her peers.

“You finally remembered!” Goro exclaimed, “Well, who’s dead?”

Monokuma finally appeared to involve itself in the investigation, “The Monokuma Files have been delivered for all three of the bodies! Kaede Akamatsu, Yuuri Ruka, and Kanoshi Kyosuke have all been documented to the highest possible specifications on their untimely deaths. Given the situation, you will again have extra time on the investigation!”

“...All,” Sayaka hissed through her teeth, “All three of them?”

“I can’t believe this,” Box mumbled, “The idea that we could finish this game with only two more deaths is already destroyed. And it isn’t the Evil King, is it? Monokuma said that the Evil King’s Gun is an immediate win, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Madara said, looking up at the ceiling, “If the Evil King’s Gun killed Ruka and Kyosuke, but somebody else killed Akamatsu, we’d still need to find the culprit in Akamatsu’s death. The rules do say that all situations must be resolved to succeed at a win condition, like how whoever kills the Evil King would also be found out and executed.”

“I’m confused,” Mitsuru admitted, “On how that works.”

“Let me… Try and put it to a diagram,” Madara said, then pulled out a pen and paper he seemed to carry with him, writing the information down.

-Win condition Evil King’s Gun: The Evil King is not executed for the crime and all left alive will escape.
-Win condition Kill Evil King: The culprit is executed for the crime and all left alive will escape.
-Win condition Get Away With Murder: Two people of the culprit’s choice will escape.

“And we know this is a program,” Madara spoke again as he pointed to the writing, “So if anything with the Evil King is going on here, but this third option for a win condition is also in play, we’d need to resolve that first before the program can understand the next one in, right?”

“Indeed!” Monokuma confirmed for Madara, “I’ve left out times of death from the Monokuma Files, but I will tell you that if the Evil King is involved in any way, that involvement occurred after Akamatsu’s death. Therefore, her death needs to be dealt with before these two.”

“Of course,” Madara said, “This case could also just be a pointless double murder. Just because the Evil King exists in this game, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the case. That’s part of the reason Monokuma added that in, after all. To confuse us more and make things more interesting.”

“Yeah,” Randy agreed, “The responsible thing to do… Kaede would say… Would be to investigate
all three of these deaths as thoroughly as we can.”

“Don’t worry, Randy,” Nami said, “We’re going to let her rest. We’ll find the culprit… Or culprits, responsible for all this. You’ll join me, right?”

“Of course,” Randy and Sayaka both agreed without hesitation, then Randy continued, “I’m not going to let another mentor go unrevenged. I’ll make her proud.”
Deadly Life: Day Nine (Fingers)

“I,” Madara offered, “Can work on talking to everybody and putting together a picture of what happened last night.”

“That’s a good plan,” Nami said, “Sayaka and Randy will help me with looking for evidence. You should have two other people help you out with alibi collection, too. Since it’s likely there are two culprits, groups of three for investigating will keep us accountable.”

“How about,” Madara pointed around, “Shinoe and Fujishiro, you seem calm enough to manage this stuff. Good at talking to people?”

“Good enough, ye,” Torimi confirmed, putting her hands on her hips, “I’m not really caaaalm, more like in shock, but we can take advantage of it.”

“I’ll trust you three with that,” Nami said, then turned to her own detectives, “Where… Do you want to begin?”

“We can start here,” Sayaka mumbled, pushing past Nami to open the door to Amai’s ward again, “Both are awful, so we’ll go for the closer… Ah-”

Sayaka hadn’t yet checked the Monokuma file, and had no sufficient warning for the scene that awaited her. Nami assumed that Sayaka was probably expecting, at worst, something as bad as Etsuko’s death. This was far worse than that. Even in her surprise, Sayaka took slow and methodical steps into the room, up to the corpse and the head on top of it.

Nami and Randy followed her in, and checked the Monokuma files.

**Kaede Akamatsu:**
Cause of death: Impalement
Discovered in the Dining Hall at 0613 by Kurou Ueda, Riko Asahi, and Amai Oishi.

**Yuuri Ruka:**
Cause of death: Blood loss
Discovered in the Ultimate Chef Ward at 0628 by Mitsuru Fujishiro, Nami Kaguya, and Amai Oishi.

**Kanoshi Kyosuke:**
Cause of death: Blunt force trauma
Discovered in the Ultimate Chef Ward at 0628 by Mitsuru Fujishiro, Nami Kaguya, and Amai Oishi.

Having the information from the Monokuma files at hand, it did become more evident what was going on with the bodies. The side of Kanoshi’s head, where it was perched on Yuuri’s chest, was caved in. It had obviously been hit hard with a blunt object, so at least his death wasn’t as horrible as it seemed at first glance. Yuuri, meanwhile, seemed to have died in just as awful a way as his body would suggest. He was covered in thin cuts and gashes, ribboned across his skin, with several sections… Cut out. That latter part was probably postmortem, though. Either way, it was awful to look at.

“…I can’t believe this,” Sayaka muttered to herself as she kept staring, “They just started getting along again. I was looking forward to all three of us being friends again. I was still celebrating the
reunion in my head, then I wake up and they’re gone. They’re both gone.”

“I know,” Nami said, reaching out to put a hand on Sayaka’s shoulder, “It’s got to be hard.”

“Both of them, and, Kaede-nee…” Sayaka mumbled, then turned to Nami and fixed her with a glare, “You had better not be the culprit, Nami. I don’t know what I’d do if you died, too, I don’t know… There’d be nobody left that I want to protect.”

“Not Oishi?” Nami asked.

“She doesn’t need me to protect her,” Sayaka mumbled, “And it’s not like I care as much about her as you, or the people who died. Fuck. Why’d they have to die, Nami?”

“I don’t know,” Nami said, and removed her hand from Sayaka’s shoulder, “I really don’t.”

“We,” Sayaka said, “Need to find the rest of them.”

“The rest of them?” Randy asked.

“Yeah,” Sayaka confirmed, “Kanoshi’s body. Yuuri’s missing parts. We need to find it all so they can be properly cremated. I don’t want them to die this way. They need to have their whole bodies, their spirits do. I don’t want them searching forever for their missing pieces.”

Nami wasn’t completely sure she understood, but she got the sentiment, “Yeah. We’ll find them while we investigate the room,” And with that, she started to look around. Sayaka did too, and Randy approached the butcher’s table to investigate what of the bodies was there all on his own. All three of them were thoroughly sickened by the situation, but knew what they had to do.

Nami was the first one to find another part. Kanoshi’s torso was in one of the freezers, most of it. The pinkie finger was still missing from one of the hands though, which were still attached to his midsection. Sayaka found that bit seconds later, though, pulling it from the fry oil. It hadn’t been turned on at all, just floating cold in the basket. She cupped it in both hands, staring for a while.

“Sayaka?” Nami asked.

“Is this the only finger that’s missing?” Sayaka asked, having noticed Nami’s find.

“Yeah,” Nami confirmed.

“The left pinkie,” Sayaka blinked at the single digit, “I guess you have to suspect me now.”

“Or suspect that somebody’s framing you,” Randy disputed her self-defeating statement, “Or that somebody is just trying to get to you. Killing your friend and doing that to him,” He checked Yuuri, “Ruka’s is attached still, but barely. It’s cut through down to the bone, anyway.”

“Left pinkie,” Sayaka reiterated, then explained, noticing that Nami seemed lost, “Removing a left pinkie is punishment, in the mob, for a serious failure or a mistake. Going from that one in, anyway. It damages the owner’s ability to use a sword and makes them rely more on the group, so that they don’t harm the group again. I just have to wonder if the culprit… Only knew this, or if they were seriously trying to get under my skin.”

“What do you mean? Were you punished in this way at some point?” Nami asked, “That’s terrible, Sayaka… That’s real bad.”

“Yes, it’s terrible,” Sayaka said, looking away, “The mistake I made, anyhow, was real bad. Dad
said that it was fine and it wasn’t my fault, but I insisted, I made such a huge mistake. I needed to pay. He wouldn’t punish me, so I cut it off myself. But I’d rather not talk about that much more. We need to keep investigating.”
“We understand,” Randy said, “We don’t have to think about that now, or anything. For all we know, it’s not even that relevant.”

“Yeah,” Nami agreed, “Obviously it has some sort of relevance, since it’s both of them, but that isn’t something we need to worry about right away. This is just one room,” She continued looking around, and came up with several more… Bits, for both of the bodies, until it seemed that they’d gathered both bodies now side-by-side on the butcher table.

“Here,” Randy offered, holding something out, “I found this in Ruka’s pocket. Do you think it’s evidence?”

Nami took the item, and turned it over in her hands, examining it. It seemed to be the top off of a bottle. Sayaka held out a backpack.

“I brought it with me when I heard the body discovery announcement, to carry evidence,” She explained. It was red, with three hard sides, a hard bottom and the rest of the bag soft. It had plenty of space in it. Nami dropped the cap in.

“That was good thinking,” Nami said, then dug in the pockets on her skirt because thanks for the pockets, Goro. She pulled out a few items, herself. Obviously, she had found some things while looking for body parts, because it would be kind of ridiculous not to find other evidence in the process of combing an entire room for the pieces of a corpse. Even so, there was one other point to finding all of those bits besides Sayaka’s insistence on ‘proper cremation’. The fact that they did find everything in this room meant that everything happened here.

Nami shared her findings, putting each item into the backpack after showing it to the others for a moment. A ballpoint pen, one polyfil bead which stuck to her fingers with its static, and a hairclip that seemed to belong to Amai. This was her ward, sure, but it could still end up being evidence.

“Cool,” Sayaka said, then lifted up something she’d already put into the bag, “There’s also these,” They looked like large garbage bags, “They were stuffed in the freezer, underneath Kyosuke’s torso. I guess that the culprit thought we wouldn’t move the body, and wouldn’t end up seeing these…”

“Or,” Nami said, “Oishi just had some trash bags in that freezer, for some reason. We’ll have to see if there’s a reason to use-”

“They have blood inside,” Sayaka interrupted.

“Okay, in that case, you are probably correct,” Nami admitted, “If it’s just blood, and no pig bits or anything, it does seem excessive to store animal blood in a bag like that…”

“Good to know you’re educated enough to be aware that there are reasons to store animal blood.”

“Of course I am. I even know that you may use dog blood in a transfusion for a cat… Once,” She lifted a single finger as she said the final word.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Randy called out, “But I found something else over here. I’ve got a pretty good nose, and I was right. This oven’s on a real high setting, and it looks like something’s charred inside of it.”
“Um… Hm,” Sayaka frowned in that direction, “Well, open it up, will you?”

Randy opened the oven, and that which was inside the oven immediately burst into flames, which he started dumbly at. Sayaka just reached over and extracted the burning item, then shoved her hand back into one of the freezers without a second thought.

“Are you… Okay?” Nami asked, leaning over Sayaka’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m fine, put the thing out!” Sayaka hissed, and Randy splashed a bucket of water over the still-flaming chunk of something. Then, she explained, “Wood in a hot oven doesn’t ignite because it’s closed up, but if it’s in there long enough that it would ignite, opening the oven makes it flashfire. Can’t say I expected it to be a chunk of wood, though!”

“Piece of wood,” Nami echoed listlessly, meme-ing even at a time like this, then crouched and examined said piece more closely. It was burnt beyond recognition… But one could only assume based on the strange shape, “Is this the… Locking tool?”

“The what?” Sayaka asked.

“Right, you weren’t there for that,” Nami remembered, “Oishi had a weird contraption to lock this ward up. But if this is the tool, then… Hm. This is a locked room.”

“It is?” Sayaka asked, then thought about it, “Fuck, you’re right. It would be.”

“Fujishiro opened it by ramming into it, but he wouldn’t have been able to lock it again,” Nami mumbled, “The tool had a unique shape, and the room could only be locked or unlocked using it, from the outside. It can be locked from the inside without a tool, but if the tool’s inside here, then, the culprit…”

“…There’s no way,” Sayaka squeaked.

“Huh?” Randy asked, “Yamaguchi, you should know better than anyone, all of Ruka’s wounds are perfectly plausible to have been self-inflicted before he bled out! He would’ve had to be in good shape to hold out long enough, but…”

“No!” Her squeak grew to a shout, “There’s got to be another way that a culprit got out of this room and locked it from the outside! Yuuri and Kanoshi might have had their issues, but Yuuri never would have killed him!”

“Well,” Nami offered, “Someone else could have attacked them, and while Ruka was bleeding out, he set the lock…”

She didn’t think that especially plausible, of course. In fact, it was on par with plausibility of Kanoshi having eaten small bombs to end up in his current state. But if it made Sayaka feel better…

“Euch…” Sayaka made a gross noise, then pulled her hand from the freezer, staring at it. There were small patches that had blistered with burns, but she didn’t seem fazed by that part, “You could at least try and make it sound like that’s believable. It’s… That can’t be the unlock tool. Or two existed, and that’s one of them. The culprit’s trying to get us to believe this was a locked room, but… It wasn’t, I bet it wasn’t.”

“Taking that out of the oven wasn’t really worth the injury, huh?” Randy asked.

“We needed to know what it was…” Sayaka sighed, then clenched that very fist with a similar
clench of her teeth, “I’m fine, it’s fine. If anything, the injury’s not worth the information we got.”

“Sayaka,” Nami started.

“Don’t,” Sayaka hissed through her teeth and closed her eyes, tight, “Ask if I’m alright.”

“Will you be?” She asked instead.

“I… Think so,” Sayaka admitted, opening her eyes again to look into Nami’s, “But you understand, right? I need to be broken. I need to be broken, for a little while. It’s fine, it is. It won’t interfere with the investigation. I’ve done much more difficult jobs than this, in states like these, before.”

“I’ll trust you,” Nami said, and without hesitation, stood up straight again. She understood that feeling, she did. The feeling of needing to be broken. She believed in Sayaka, when she said that it wouldn’t interfere and that she would be okay. Sometimes, the promise of being okay again someday was the best that anyone could do. Frankly, it was better than most people could hope for, with two of their best friends found dead in one terrible moment.

Sayaka was strong, though. She was incredibly strong.

Maybe she thought this was her punishment, for letting them die, though.

“It isn’t your fault,” Randy beat Nami to the punch, having come to the same possibility.

“I know,” Sayaka said, and unlike her previous statement, Nami wasn’t so sure that one was the truth.
Having found all that they were going to in Amai’s ward, the investigative team of three started towards the Dining Hall, but along the way Nami stopped, “Hey… I know we need to investigate, but I think that I need a minute.”

“What for?” Randy asked.

“Well,” Nami glanced at Goro’s ward where, as they’d come down the stairs, she’d seen him retreat, “I need to talk to Goro about something. Since I remembered my talent, I also remembered how we knew each other before…”

“That makes sense,” Sayaka said, “So, go on ahead. We’ve got plenty of extra time on this investigation… Randy and I’ll check out the gift shop in the meantime. Investigate it, and get something to eat. You trust us to do that much?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “I do. Even if you were somehow both culprits, I don’t think there’d be much there to sabotage.”

“Thanks,” Sayaka said, giving a mock salute as she and Randy went down the final set of stairs back to the Hospitality Ward. Nami, meanwhile, turned and opened the door to see Goro in his ward, standing dead in the middle and staring at a wall.

“Goro,” Nami greeted him, “I remembered you, too, you know.”

“You did?” Goro asked.

“Yeah,” Nami confirmed, and stepped closer to him, “I remembered how… I failed you. That you’re the only person I failed. I’m still… So sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Goro said, with a bittersweet laugh through his words, “I told you then, and I’ll tell you again. I didn’t deserve to be saved, to begin with. So, frankly, it’s the biggest favor in history that you even bothered to try. Trying to save me? It takes a saint to bother. That’s why… I’ll always be your biggest fan, you know.”

“You don’t need to be my ‘fan’, Goro,” Nami said, “You could just be my friend. Let me start making up for the way that I failed you, because trying wasn’t good enough. I let you go back into a terrible situation, because I just wasn’t good enough, I wasn’t. Don’t love me for falling short of my goal.”

“I don’t think about how you failed,” Goro said, “I think about how you cared. Any other prosecutor wouldn’t have tried as hard. I was swept up in all that stuff by the government, I didn’t want any of that to be happening… But when I saw you fighting so hard, for my sake, for somebody who never deserved to smile again, it made me happy. For trying, for caring, that’s what I love you for.”

“Well,” Nami said, “Truth be told, I wasn’t in a good place myself, at that time. I don’t think it impacted my ability to work… But I do think, that if I’d been better off, I wouldn’t have let you go back to him, no matter the verdict. After we get out of here, you won’t go back to him, okay? I promise. You can stay with me.”

“Heh…” Goro turned to look at her, and she saw that his eyes were glistening, “That’s real funny! After we get out of here? What makes you think… I mean, come on. That’s not likely at all. You
know me. You know me better than anyone. Since when will I survive? Since when do I deserve it, over any of you guys? You’ve gotta be joking. I don’t even want to.”

“Is that true?” Nami asked, closing the distance between them to wrap him in a hug, “Or, y’know… Do you just not know how to feel, like you want to live? Cause I’ve been there. I have, it’s true. If you want to die for long enough, it’s hard to remember how it feels not to.”

“You…” Goro shook his head against her shoulder, “Somebody like you? No way, hah, there’s no way that’s true! You’re one of a kind, special. Why’d you ever be like me? Why’d you ever wanna die?”

“Because I wasn’t a special person at all, for a long time,” Nami explained, “I didn’t like who I was and how I couldn’t do anything good for anybody, I felt like I was useless. I didn’t really remember ever getting hurt or anything, and definitely nothing like you, but that doesn’t mean… That I didn’t spend a lot, way too much time, being depressed.”

“You’re lying,” Goro said, “You’re lying to make me think it’s normal, to be this way, just to make me feel okay.”

“Why would I lie?” Nami asked, “It’s the truth, it is. I can’t understand what you’ve been through, not completely. But I have wanted to die, and I’ve suffered at the hands of somebody I couldn’t escape. I know I can’t understand, just like you can’t understand my stuff with gender, but I can relate, okay?”

“…Never meet your heroes,” Goro mumbled against her, “They’ll stop being heroes and turn into friends. I’m sorry. I’m so… So sorry, Nami. For putting you on a pedestal, and… For everything. I’m sorry. I love you, I do, thank you…”

“It’s okay,” Nami whispered, running a hand along his hair. He was so small. Just like when he’d been on that stand, he was small. He was only two… More like three years younger than her, but at the same time, those three years felt like an intense distance. He was a child, and she wanted to protect him. Even now, he was.

She’d got herself sorted out, and it took years upon years. Days away from twenty, and she only now felt like she was starting to get a handle on her own existence. Goro was a million days away from even starting to understand his place, as himself, without Kiyoshi Matsubara, without the Nami Kaguya he’d invented in his mind, all on his own. As Goro Bakura.

“I need…” Nami told him, “To get back to the investigation, you know. I’m sorry, but I do.”

“I know you do,” Goro said, “It’s important, you do. That’s your job, after all. Take down somebody who really deserves it.”
Nami and Goro parted ways, and Nami returned to her investigative team in the gift shop. Upon arrival, she was greeted with a strawberry uncrustable held out to her by Sayaka.

“Thanks,” She said, and took the premade sandwich with a smile.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d like, but I figured,” Sayaka shrugged, “You said that you have the palate of a child, or maybe somebody made fun of you by saying that? But this is pretty much the epitome of that, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Nami admitted, and started to eat the ever-so-slightly incorrect sandwich, “Thank you. So, what did you guys find in here?”

“Not a whole lot,” Randy admitted, “You were right, that it isn’t like there would be much evidence to sabotage in the gift shop. The only real evidence about this sort of place is what’s missing from it, not what’s here, yeah?”

“Pretty much,” Nami agreed.

“Anyway,” Sayaka said, “The trash bags came from here, and one of the shelves is a rung shorter than the others, so it’s probably what Ueda and Oishi made the locking mechanism out of. It’s wooden, obviously.”

“Also,” Randy said, “We checked the wall of liquor, but couldn’t find anything matching this bottle cap… There were some with the right shape, but none with the right color. It’s purple, after all.”

“Hm…” Nami looked at the wall for a while, “It’s morning, though. If Ruka drank this last night, then it probably got pulled from the nighttime selection. So, whatever it was wouldn’t still be available right now.”

“Yeah, that’s probably right,” Sayaka said, “Based on the way the cap is, it doesn’t seem like it would have come from any non-alcoholic beverage, so it must just be from nighttime. It seems irresponsible, to leave that unavailable to us, though. Really, it kind of seems like the rotating gift shop would be the only foolproof way to dispose of evidence…”

“Hey!” Monokuma appeared, “Did I just hear you dissing my murder mystery responsibility?”

“She definitely was,” Randy said, “There was a lot of irresponsibility in that last case, too. Only letting me and Kaede see the poisons in that ward… The right way to give us access to a clue like that would be to make it available to everybody. If the clue exists, we’re supposed to be able to acquire it! That’s an important rule for conduct in mysteries, you know.”

“Mhm,” Nami said, “I learned that yesterday.”

“Real crimes aren’t fair like that, you know,” Monokuma complained, but then produced a bottle with a small chip at its mouth, but with a ring of purple where the seal of the cap would have been broken. It had froot loops on the label, “Anyway. This is the bottle that cap came from, it was in the trash can in the other version of the Gift Shop. In the future, I’ll transpose any potential evidence from the alternate gift shop into the current one.”

“Thank you, Monokuma,” Sayaka said, then took the bottle and squinted at it, “Loopy? Weird.
Yuuri doesn’t drink this sweet crap.”

“I definitely found the cap in his pocket, though,” Randy said, “So maybe he did, just this once?”

“The only reason Yuuri drinks stuff he doesn’t like is if he’s thinking about somebody who does,” Sayaka observed, slipping the bottle into her backpack, “Like, really thinking. Wonder if he went to his conversation after all? He wouldn’t tell me what he ended up doing, maybe whoever talked to him was somebody who drinks this.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Nami said, “I hate to say this, but…”

“I know,” Sayaka said, “It helps the investigation, that I knew the victims so well. That’s reasonable. You don’t have to hate saying it. If it were Mizuho who died, you’d want Randy’s input on the evidence, right?”

“And I’d do it, for sure,” Randy agreed, “Even if it would hurt… Yeah. I kind of wish I knew Kaede well enough to make any claims like that about her behavior, really. Instead I’m stuck… Caring about her, a whole ton, but not knowing enough about her to be useful with this. Shirogane would be, but…”

“She seemed in a bad way,” Sayaka confirmed for him, “I understand how you feel, though. You and I both… Had a lot left to learn from Kaede. About detective work, and about her. That’s the kind of thing that comes up in a Killing Game… A close friend, whose drink of choice you don’t even know.”

“Yeah…” Randy frowned, looking down at the floor, “Hey, Yamaguchi. I never drank a whole lot, but when I did, it was usually champagne. Didn’t really try much else, cause I liked the taste plenty.”

“Thank you,” Sayaka smiled, just a little bit, “Yeah. It’s good to know that. I dunno why, I guess it’s how I grew up, that’s the kind of thing that’s important to me. Might sound weird for me not to like something tough and cool, but, a dirty shirley is probably the best thing in the world, mhm.”

“Strong Zero for me,” Nami chimed in, “I thought I didn’t like any because I only tried red wine, but then I got more memories back, and I remembered I like those.”

“Jeeze,” Sayaka reached out and half-heartedly gave her arm what was trying to be a playful punch, “Strong Zero? That’s the shit that makes little kids alcoholics. You really do have the palate of a child, for real.”

“Shush,” Nami protested, “You’re the one who wants to know our drinks of choice as a character trait when most of us are underage!”

“It’s not surprising that we all had answers though, is it?” Sayaka asked, “Plenty of people have answers, huh. Yuuri didn’t really, though, not actually. Vodka, I guess. Whatever he didn’t have to taste too much.”

With that statement, an unpleasant feeling came over the room, but that didn’t stop the conversation, “Rei told me that she really did like Jack Daniels, legitimately. It wasn’t just for getting drunk, even though that helped. And Tomoe liked red wine, whatever she could get her hands on. Nozomi said one time, that he liked expensive wine, too.”

“Tsukasa,” Randy added, “Likes old fashioneds. But with two sugarcubes. It’s kind of cute. But he’s old enough to drink those. It’s not the same way some of us have favorites. That’s just for being an adult. Don’t think I’ve ever seen him drunk.”
“We’re,” Sayaka chuckled, but there wasn’t any humor in it, pushing one twintail back behind her shoulder, “Just a whole heap of mess, aren’t we? It’s kind of funny. God, it’s just hilarious. We were acting this whole time, like it’s just normal, that we’re all this broken. Even now, we can’t just stand here, trying to know everything we can about each other before we die… We have to keep pretending we’re okay, and find out the truth.”

“Hey now-” Randy started to protest.

“No, Randy. If anyone here’s got it together, let’s be real, it’s Nami,” She turned away from him, “I know the truth about you. But, again. Pretend it’s okay, and we’ll find out who killed our friends.”

Nami felt like, every day, she witnessed a new and different Sayaka. She did see her in a moment of weakness with Amai, but… This was the first Sayaka she saw, who didn’t ‘have it together’. The Sayaka beneath it all who was broken, brought out again by the loss of some of the only people she found it in herself to love.

The first Sayaka that, Nami thought, might actually want somebody else to step in and protect her.
With the gift shop thoroughly investigated, and a bittersweet conversation thoroughly had, the evidence-collection team moved on to the Dining Hall, the other crime scene, where Kaede had been found dead. Nami observed something that she’d been too shocked to notice, initially. There was a substantial pool of blood just in front of the door, and underneath it of course. Very substantial. She snapped a photo with her Monopad, just in case. Kaede’s body was right by the door, so it made sense her blood could have pooled beneath it, but it was still possible that might turn out to be evidence in the trial.

Nami opened the door, and saw Kaede’s body again. Compared to the state in which Yuuri and Kanoshi had both been found, Kaede looked downright peaceful. There was just one wound, fairly large and straight through her chest. She probably didn’t even feel it…

But there was still the undeniable fact at this scene, that Kaede was trying to escape. That much was clear from just one look. From where her body was, to…

“Her knuckles are bruised,” Sayaka said, “And the outsides of her hands.”

“The door’s scratched, too,” Randy added.

“Yeah,” Nami said. She’d already seen both of these things, personally. She was drawn to those aspects, for some reason. Escape, Kaede was trying to escape. God, of course it stood out to her. Scratches on the doors, bruises on the knuckles and wrists and necks and of course they were. Why didn’t she see it at the time? That combination? No, well, only one made no effort to hide her wrists, and Nami only saw one bruise on a neck for a moment.

They were trying to escape, too, they were, at some point, fighting to get out. Even the girl who stared and answered no questions when she was called to the stand. Nami failed all of them. Why didn’t she realize at the time? They were…

“Nami,” Sayaka said, “Stop. You’re thinking about the past, aren’t you?”

“How could you tell?” Nami asked.

“It’s a look in the eyes. What’s going on?” Sayaka questioned.

“It’s obvious Kaede was trying to get away, to escape, before she died,” Nami explained. “It’s so obvious. Why couldn’t I see it at the time? I failed, one case, in my life. And I failed a lot of people who were all trying to escape, just like Kaede… Was…”

“That’s the past,” Sayaka said, “Focus on right now, okay?”

“Take your own advice,” Nami said, then sighed, “Guess that’s something we both need to work on, huh?”

“Yeah, probably,” Sayaka nodded, then crouched down. She was about to voice her findings, but…

“Hey!” Randy called out as he looked around the room, “There’s no clocks in here, I just noticed that. Has that always been the case?”

“It is,” Monokuma appeared only to confirm that, then vanished again.
“Huh, weird. Though, if we think about it, there aren’t a whole lot of clocks here to start with? I guess Monokuma just assumed we’d use our Monopads for the time, since we’re all doing the same kind of thing with cell phones all the time anyhow?”

“That would make sense,” Sayaka said, “And makes it weird, that Kaede doesn’t have her Monopad on her at all. It’s missing. She does have this workbook, though. Philosophy 101 Workbook Unit Six, Traditional Problems of Moral Relativity and More.”

“Huh,” Nami said, “That’s a weird workbook. It probably came from Kyosuke’s ward…”

“Maybe,” Sayaka started, “Maybe, I don’t know, she was trying to figure out if it was okay for her to kill the Evil King, whoever they are? But they realized this, and killed her before she could?”

“That’s assuming that whoever got assigned the Evil King is actually malicious, though,” Nami frowned and looked away, “I don’t wanna think that. I bet, whoever got assigned it, would have been glad to see that Akamatsu figured them out!”

“I’d wanna believe that too, obviously,” Sayaka said, “But we can’t just assume it.”

“I know,” Nami admitted.

“So,” Randy said from where he stood, further on in the Dining Hall, “Has anyone else really been in here yet? Do we know?”

“I don’t think so,” Nami said, “But I don’t know if anyone else has really been in here, no.”

“Hm. Well, I guess it’s safe to assume that these chairs all got knocked over by Kaede,” Randy observed, gesturing around, “And whoever was attacking her. I think that if we consider what Monokuma said about Kaede dying first, she must have been killed last night, not this morning. And it couldn’t be in the middle of the night, since the Dining Hall is off limits then…”

“That’s fair,” Nami said, “So I guess that the time of death would be narrowed down to between when Shirogane last saw her, and ten pm.”

“That’s good to know,” Sayaka noted, then spoke up with another observation, “Anyway, this watch that she wears, it runs twenty-five minutes slow. I just noticed that. It’s still running, it didn’t get stopped or anything, and it doesn’t seem recently broken. I think it’s just like that. It probably has been.”

“Why would she be walking around with a broken watch all this time?” Nami asked.

“Sentiment?” Randy offered, “Maybe it couldn’t be fixed, but it was still something important to her.”

“Maybe Shirogane will know,” Nami mumbled, then to avoid getting off track again, stood up straight and looked around the rest of the room, “Well, anyway. Is there anything else that seems weird here?”

“I checked all the fridges here and stuff, I think we probably got everything sorted out,” Randy said with half a shrug, “There wasn’t much evidence or anything, in the rest of the room. Just the fallen chairs over there. Seems kinda weird to me, though. We found a whole buncha weird stuff going on at the other crime scene…”

“One culprit’s more meticulous than the other,” Sayaka brushed it off with one potential explanation, “Or something like that. It’s not that strange, we’ll figure it out during the trial. I
guess… Well, where should we check next?”

“I wanted to check the infirmary,” Nami said, “And while we’re down there, we can check people’s rooms, too.”

“That’s a good plan,” Randy agreed, and they left the Dining Hall.
The investigative team made their way downstairs, and upon entering the infirmary, actually ran into somebody. Two somebodies.

“What do you want!?” Amai immediately asked from where she sat on the cot next to Tsumugi.

“To investigate the infirmary,” Sayaka answered readily, “Isn’t that kind of obvious?”

“Would there really be anything here? It’s not like anyone was drugged or poisoned or whatever,” Amai groaned, rolling her eyes, “I thought that we’d be able to be alone here! You promised, Shirogane!”

“I… Didn’t say something like that,” Tsumugi mumbled, her voice sounding dazed and particularly empty, “I said I hoped we’d be left alone, not that we would be. It’s fine. Take a look around, if you like. We weren’t looking for anything, and we probably didn’t disturb anything.”

“Whatever you say,” Randy said, already having pushed his way into the room to look around the area. Sayaka and Nami, meanwhile, stayed by the door to talk to the somebodies.

“If you really wanted to be left alone,” Sayaka prodded, “Why didn’t you just go to the Empty Wings? We know that the crimes had to happen close to nighttime, so we weren’t planning to investigate them too closely except for the areas that somebody definitely could have gotten back from in time.”

“We didn’t know that!” Amai hissed, “You really expect us, two flowering beauties, to have any idea what you lot are doing about the fucking crime? How would we have known it happened close to nighttime?”

“Well…” Tsumugi admitted, staring at the ceiling, “I guess that I would have, if I thought about it. It was only fifteen minutes to ten when Kaede and I split up last. She just told me she wanted to check something out and she’d meet me back in my room soon, and… I went looking for her about twenty minutes after that.”

“Twenty minutes, huh?” Nami asked, “Was there blood in the hallway outside the Dining Hall, at that point?”

“Well, no,” Tsumugi said, blinking, “I think there were some people in the auditorium, I did hear some shuffling there, but that’s the only thing that I thought was strange on that floor… I went and checked every ward, before finding out that Oishi’s was locked up on the fifth floor.”

“Every ward…” Sayaka thought for a minute, “Does that include the Runner’s Ward?”

“Yes,” Tsumugi confirmed, “I spent about forty minutes in there, before it would let me out. That would have been from ten forty to half past eleven… So, if I had to guess, it was probably during that stretch that Kyosuke and Ruka ended up getting killed in Oishi’s ward. I would have noticed anybody moving suspiciously while I was doing quick checks on the other wards.”

“Notice anything weird in the Runner’s Ward while you were there?” Randy chimed in from the far end of the infirmary.

“I couldn’t tell you. I wasn’t looking,” Tsumugi answered, then let her head loll to one side, “I was just trying to find Kaede.”
“That’s understandable,” Randy said, “I mean, not for me, obviously! I would keep an eye out for anything at all suspicious even in the event I was frantically searching for Tsukasa. But, understandable for somebody who’s not me, and not trying to be a detective. Must have been awful, not knowing where your girlfriend was all night long…”

“Yeah, it was,” Tsumugi confirmed, then almost fell over sideways, but Amai silently propped her up, “At least with Yushu and Akabane, we knew right away, there wasn’t any waiting to know if they were dead… It’s terrible, it’s a terrible feeling. All night, I thought, maybe… Maybe she’s okay, maybe she’s in the quarantine room or... Something. But she wasn’t. That whole time, she was just gone, and I knew it, I could feel it but I didn’t want to believe it.”

“Hey now,” Amai muttered, “Stop running your mouth about it and gettin’ yourself worked up again. Just fucking relax, okay? That’s all you can do with this kinda shit, relax.”

“What would you know about dealing with grief?” Sayaka questioned.

“More than you, I bet,” Amai stuck her hands on her hips and leaned forward, “Fucking, used to death is what you are, not at all about dealing with grief! Goddamn murderer, of course I’d know more than you! You forgetting that I thought Box was dead for more than a year? You forget that? Cause it ain’t like I knew I’d meet my best friend again in a Killing Game when I already lost her once! Now isn’t that some shitty grief to deal with?”

“My mistake,” Sayaka said, and looked away.

“Just,” Nami said, and went to join Randy at the back of the room, “Keep helping Shirogane, seems like that’s something you’re actually capable of doing for another person.”

“I-!” Amai started to protest, but decided to give it up.

“What are you finding back here?” Nami asked.

“Not a whole lot,” Randy admitted, frowning as he shuffled through the medicine collection, “If Kaede was here, she’d be able to tell us if any of these had been used, but I never took a count of it… God, I’m fucking stupid.”

“I wouldn’t call it stupid not to take the time to become ludicrously prepared to find what may not even be evidence,” Nami said, then took a glance at the shelves herself, “But, it doesn’t look like anything other than the painkillers and HRT have been used at all.”

“Huh? How can you tell?” Randy questioned.

“Well,” Nami pointed between them, “I know that me and Tori both have one bottle each of estradiol in our rooms. The aspirin has one less bottle than is still here for that, and most of the other random stuff has two more than the stuff I know two people have taken.”

“I don’t know,” Nami gave a shrug, then squinted at one more line of bottles, “Huh. These bottles aren’t quite as full as the other ones…”

“Probably because it’s a controlled substance,” Randy offered, pointing to the label, “So they don’t want to give us access to too much of it. But I guess having all these bottles just partly filled is kinda counterproductive. Never claimed Monokuma makes sense.”

“That’s a controlled substance?” Nami questioned, frowning at the label. Unlike the others, it
wasn’t a self-explanatory Monokuma Name, “Flower juice…?”

“I mean, just think about it for a minute,” Randy shrugged, then walked away. “There wasn’t anything else weird, though.”

“Yeah…” Nami followed after him, “We should get to checking the rooms, now.”

“Definitely.” Randy agreed, “And what we should do next, before we get to checking some other wards, we can stop at the auditorium on our way up. I want to see if we can figure out what Shirogane was hearing in there.”

“Good plan,” Nami agreed, and the investigative team left Amai and Tsumugi alone in the infirmary, just like they wanted to be.
Deadly Life: Day Nine (Rooms Check)

Having finished in the infirmary, the investigative team set about checking everybody’s rooms for evidence. Almost every room was utterly unremarkable, but there were two which seemed to have some form of evidence in them. The first of those two being, not surprisingly, Yuuri’s room. Though what was out of place there wasn’t especially strange.

“Gross,” Randy observed when they walked in, referring to the snack wrappers strewn about, “Isn’t Monokuma supposed to clean this stuff up?”

“Hey, I ain’t your maid!” Monokuma appeared, “And the Ultimate Maid was in the last game, not this one, to boot. There are certain things I’ll clean up, sure, but snack wrappers? There’s a reason that there are trash cans! I’ll only remove that stuff from trash cans! I’ll clean up cigarette ash, dishes from real meals, but it doesn’t take any extra time to put your trash in the can, so I’ll only take it outta there.”

“I see,” Sayaka said, then frowned, “You clean up cigarette ash?”

“Yeah,” Monokuma said, “There aren’t ashtrays or anything around here, so I just discreetly sweep up any bits that end up around~ It’s something I don’t mind doing, because I’m currently making an art installment out of the leftover cigarette ashes from around the hospital.”

“Really?” Randy asked.

“Nooo,” Monokuma laughed, “That would be dumb! Who ever heard of a Monokuma doing art? I ain’t doing that. That’d be boring. I just clean up the ash cause when Ruka asked me about ashtrays, I stupidly said to ash anywhere instead of just getting some ashtrays, and I gotta clean up, and I’m not going back on my word! I am not a liar.”

“You totally are a liar, often,” Sayaka stuck her tongue out, but then continued with her original point, “Though, that’s unfortunate. If we knew where Ruka had been smoking, we might be able to trace his steps better last night.”

“That’d be an unfair advantage, since only he and Ueda smoke cigarettes regularly,” Monokuma said, “The case can be solved entirely without leaning on the habit of one person involved. It’s the same reason Monokumas have always done things like cleaning up bits of fingernails from people who habitually bite them. Too much obvious trace evidence spoils the mystery!”

“I see,” Sayaka muttered, “Anyway, these snack wrappers aren’t too weird. Some of them are snacks that Yuuri ate, and those cheese-flavored seaweed snacks… Only Kanoshi could enjoy something like that!”

“This does inform us that they were both in this room last night, though,” Randy said, “The wrappers are all over the bed, so it can’t be from further back. Ruka would have had to move them to go to sleep!”

“Yeah,” Sayaka said, “You’re right about that. Yuuri won’t sleep on the floor if a bed is available, no matter what state he’s in. So Kanoshi and Yuuri were hanging out in here and eating snacks, yesterday… And it had to be after dinner, since I was with both of them up till then.”

“Good to know, where they were, even if it’s just vague,” Randy said, then they got back to investigating. Nothing else odd was discovered in Yuuri’s room, but that didn’t mean that they were finished with strangeness. The next room that was odd, almost wasn’t. At first, the three of
them investigated and were about to leave Torimi’s room, but Nami froze and turned back around on the way out.

“Hey,” She said, “There’s three plushies here that weren’t before.”

“Huh?” Sayaka questioned, “How could you…”

“I was friends with Tori for a long time, so I’m acquainted with most of her plushies. And I know the ones that were based on our dead friends, and I know which ones she got from the gift shop. Three of these weren’t here when I visited her room a couple days ago,” Nami explained, approaching the overflowing pile of plushies to retrieve the triple offenders. One was very small and firm, a bear. The other two had similar stylings to the plushies that Box made, being squishy and filled with beads, but didn’t have the same style of eyes or soft fabric she always made sure to use. One was a creature that resembled a cat, but not quite. The other was a raccoon.

“I’m sure that they don’t have anything to do with the case, though,” Sayaka crossed her arms and looked away, glaring, “I mean, come on. You really think anybody besides Nozomi’s tasteless enough to involve a plushie in their fucking murder plot?”

“I mean,” Randy said, “If they were tasteless enough to mess up the corpses that bad, I don’t think that using a toy in their plan would be crossing any additional lines.”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “And, I mean, if this person was trying to get to you with the pinkie fingers, one of these plushies being somehow involved would be right in line with the culprit’s thinking, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess,” Sayaka clicked her tongue, then pulled off her backpack, “Just put them in here, then. You’re right. Just. It’s not like… Well, I only even said that was a problem to you, Nami, and… Mizuho.”

“Tsukasa would never-” Randy started.

“I’m well aware!” Sayaka snipped, cutting him off. Her face was red, “Nami wouldn’t and neither would Mizuho! Neither of the people who heard me say how much I hated this kind of thing would have ever done that to me, unless they’re completely different people than I think! And I… I have to think right! I have to be able to read people, right, it’s what I do! And it can’t be either of those people!”

“Does…” Randy started, thought a minute, then asked anyway, “Does Oishi know?”

“I guess,” Sayaka admitted, adjusting her backpack’s straps, “Is she such an idiot? Is she so dumb that she’d let everything point to her this obviously, just to get under my skin? Just because I made her hate me? Come on, seriously… If she really wanted to hurt me, she would have just told everybody everything she knows about me. It’s not like it’s hard. She didn’t have to do this. I don’t think it was her.”

“But we’ll have to figure that out,” Nami said, “During the trial, everybody else is going to think it’s her right off the bat, for lots of reasons, you know?”

“I know,” Sayaka said, “And you’ll clear her name. You’ll find the real culprit… I mean, even if it is her. You’ll figure it out.”

“We all will,” Nami assured her, “You’ll get through this, Sayaka.”

“Yeah,” Sayaka kicked at the floor with the toe of her boot, “I get through everything, one way or
another. Let’s go investigate the rest of the rooms.”

So they did.
There was nothing unusual left to find.
The next stop on the investigation was the auditorium, and the moment that the trio walked in, it was obvious that something had happened there. Several of the seats had their armrests broken off, or the hinge that was supposed to make the seat return to a vertical position when nobody was sitting in them had failed, leaving random aisles blocked by empty chairs.

“There was a scuffle in here,” Sayaka observed, then dashed forward to where the largest extent of the damage was to put her knowledge of dirty fighting to work.

“It wasn’t me this time, I promise,” Randy said.

“Yeah…” Nami said, “What was that fight you had with Ruka about, anyway?”

“It’s definitely not relevant here,” Randy glanced away, “And at this point, it would be kind of disrespectful to talk about it.”

“Understandable,” Nami said, “As long as you’re sure it’s irrelevant.”

“It definitely is,” Randy confirmed, then looked over to Sayaka, “What’s the situation?”

“Well,” Sayaka crossed her arms, “Obviously, I can’t be certain how things happened, based on residual evidence… But… It seems like three people got in a fight in here. One person was much more skilled than the other two, one was more invested, and it seems like one of them was just doing their best to get away. And ended up running out that door,” Sayaka pointed back where they’d come from, “So, three people. One who was good at fighting but didn’t want to be in it, one who wanted to be in it but wasn’t great at fighting, and… A victim.”

“Could that be Ruka, Kyosuke, and the culprit?” Randy asked.

“It’s possible,” Sayaka said, “That Yuuri’s the one who was good at fighting, Kanoshi was the one trying to escape… And the culprit was invested most, of course, because they had some motive to commit murder. And this was happening while Shirogane looked for Kaede. But that’s just a theory.”

“A fight theory,” Nami concurred.

“I think we can work off of that for now,” Randy said, giving his own look over the scene, “I don’t see anything to contradict your theory, Yamaguchi. And it’s a solid base, even if the truth turns out to be something different.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Sayaka wasn’t going to be modest about her own useful skill for the investigation’s purpose.

“Is that it?” Randy asked.

“We should probably take a closer look in all the aisles, just in case,” Nami offered, and the others agreed, so they split up to look. There wasn’t anything else strange in the auditorium, though. The DVD player still had Your Name in it, from when she’d made Kanoshi watch it with her a couple of days ago, though. That in itself wasn’t odd, but was odd was the fact that the movie hadn’t been changed, implying the player hadn’t been used. If that was the case, then why were they in the auditorium to begin with, for a fight to happen there?
Nami mentioned this when they reconvened, and neither of the others had an honest comment to give, so they simply moved on to work their way upward, checking any wards that seemed like they could be relevant. The first one they’d encounter with a degree of relevance was, of course, the ward belonging to Kanoshi. The first thing that they encountered out of place was the gap in the shelf for the workbook Kaede had been holding, but that was to be expected.

What was really odd was the pile of notes sitting on one of the desks.

“These… Huh,” Sayaka stared at them, “These are all the motives, so far, and the reasons that they were debunked.”

“Do you think Kyosuke was collecting them?” Randy asked.

Nami took a closer look, “No… Hold on,” She ran to the back of the room and pulled out a workbook she knew Kanoshi had written in, remembering that she’d seen him using it when she first checked out the ward. Opening it up next to the notes, the handwriting was completely different.

“It’s too neat to be Yuuri’s, though,” Sayaka observed, hands on her hips, “I can read it really easily. His handwriting’s barely legible when he takes his time, let alone if he was rushing to take notes!”

“I think,” Nami squinted at the notes, “These are probably Madara’s notes? The handwriting does look familiar, and he just made that diagram for us. Plus, he was carrying the materials around, so, it’s valid?”

“Yeah, valid,” Sayaka agreed, then pulled out a chair to sit and read the notes. Nami and Randy did the same thing.

“Hey, this one,” Randy held up a sheet, “Madara says that these motives weren’t debunked. The ones about Hako and Kaede.”

“Of course they were,” Nami said, then thought back, “Oh, wait, no. They really weren’t. Akamatsu just said that she had a sense of time, and we let it be.”

“Yeah, cause, how the fuck are we gonna say that Hako’s not a person?” Sayaka questioned.

“Well, Madara’s got a theory for that too,” Randy explained, “It’s scribbled in here, ‘witnessed Hako behaving like a normal person, but quickly corrected herself. Possible that the statement that she isn’t a real person implies that the idea of Box Hako that we’ve become acquainted with isn’t genuine’. I guess he’s trying to say that it’s some dumb metaphor that just means that Hako acts fake?”

“I… Wouldn’t put that past Monokuma, I guess,” Sayaka admitted, leaning her cheek in her palm, “Would be fucking dumb, though. Hard to believe that explanation could be so easy!”

“Yeah. I mean, Madara can probably explain better himself during the trial, yeah?” Randy shrugged, “But these notes are evidence, anyway. Anybody could have read them and decided this was a reason to kill Kaede, or something.”

“Why?” Sayaka wondered.

“Maybe they thought,” Randy said, “That if she lied about her motive, she had to be the Evil King? The why doesn’t really matter. Cause, like Monokuma said. No matter if the Evil King is involved, we still gotta figure out the culprits.”
“That’s true,” Sayaka said, “Well… We gotta get moving to the other labs, right? We keep getting caught up talking about possibilities, when, we gotta do that stuff with everybody.”

“It’s kind of nice to do some thinking just the three of us…” Nami admitted with a sigh, “Class trials are so chaotic, you know? Everybody can talk whenever they want, and I have to tune out so much white noise, and it gets derailed… Getting some theories out with people like you two, who actually know what you’re talking about? No offense to other people but. Not everyone’s suited to a trial situation!”

“Nah, I get it,” Sayaka said, “But… We don’t know how much time we have to waste on that kinda thing?”

“Oh yeah, mood,” Nami stood up, “We do need to keep investigating and stuff… But it’s not so bad that we get sidetracked. Well, let’s go.”
Deadly Life: Day Nine (End of Investigation)

The next step in the process of checking relevant wards was the Ultimate Baker’s ward, but there wasn’t anything odd in there at all. Yuuri’s ward was untouched by this event, but for the fact that its owner had died. On the same floor was the Runner’s Ward, relevant only when it came to how it wasn’t accessible in a normal way. It was completely unavailable for the time that Tsumugi was in it, so if there was any evidence in there, that did help to narrow down the events of the night.

It was, luckily, open for the duration of an investigation. The evidence-collecting trio walked in, and there was something strange in there. Haphazardly tossed in, lying open to a random page on the floor, was one of the heavy texts from Riko’s ward. One of the medical ones, specifically, a book on general anatomy. Much more detailed in nature than any of the anatomy workbooks available in Kanoshi’s ward.

Sayaka groaned as she put it into her backpack, “Carrying textbooks in bookbags like this is one of the worst things for your back, you know.”

“I can carry it if you want,” Randy offered.

“You… Are not stronger than me,” Sayaka said simply, giving him a mostly-joking stink eye.

“Probably not! You are pretty strong. But I am taller, and miraculously enough, do not have tiny baby shoulders,” He continued his offer, holding a hand out. Sayaka laughed, and handed the bag over.

“Tiny baby shoulders is a good point,” Sayaka said, “Actually, I kinda think you have broader shoulders than Nami does, too.”

“We both had good fortune in that category!” Randy exclaimed, immediately comparing his own shoulders to Nami’s, “One thing that guys and girls like us don’t need to wish we could trade, huh?”

“Wow, that’s right,” Nami agreed, “Though, honestly, I’ve had very good fortune in general. I have very soft skin, and even though I got eyelash extensions, they were naturally long.”

“Hm,” Randy put a hand against her cheek, “Yeah, super soft! Wack. Mine is too, but like, never bothered me a ton. Cause guys like it, mostly.”

“I think the only people who can’t appreciate soft skin in a partner,” Sayaka observed, also taking the opportunity to feel just how soft Nami’s cheek was, “Are people who have a reason to want rough hands instead. Like straight women, I guess.”

“Um… We should probably keep investigating, though,” Nami said, admittedly a bit weirded out by her friends feeling the softness of her cheeks, even if that softness was something that she was proud of.

The others agreed, and they moved on with their investigation, to the final relevant ward. That would be Kaede’s. Back to the fifth floor, where nobody was around at all, because everyone cleared out after the body discovery. Kaede’s ward didn’t offer up much of note, either. The Monopad she didn’t have on her body had been left on the table here, and nothing else was odd. That Monopad could be evidence, though, so it came along in Sayaka’s bag.

With the wards finished, the group went back downstairs and to the Empty Wings. There didn’t
seem to be any semblance of evidence in the areas that they were able to check before
Monokuma’s voice rang out over the intercom, “Alright everybody! I gave you plenty of time to
investigate this time around. Even more than the last case! But now it’s time to bring your findings
back around and commence the latest Class Trial! Please gather in the Trial Lobby.”

“Guess we have all the clues,” Sayaka noted, shrugging, “We… Didn’t end up finding any of the
three murder weapons.”

“That’s not true,” Randy said, “The locking tool could be one. It’s too burnt to tell, but it might be
what hit Kyosuke.”

“Fine, we didn’t end up finding two of the three murder weapons, possibly all three are
undiscovered,” Sayaka shrugged, then sighed, “Maybe somebody else just found them before we
did. I thought we were pretty thorough.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to figure it out,” Nami said, “Madara was getting reports and alibis from
everybody besides us, too, and we’re the ones who ended up with Shirogane’s report. So his group
could have found physical evidence. And maybe the reports and alibis will have a lot of important
information!”

“I’m sure we will get it sorted out,” Sayaka admitted, “Unlike some of those others, I know that we
can make it through a trial without Kaede. That doesn’t stop it being stressful, you know? Like, I
know a Killing Game hasn’t really ever ended with everybody getting executed for finding the
wrong culprit. So it stands to reason we wouldn’t be the first. But there’s a first for everything, too,
so. Fuck.”

“It’ll be okay,” Nami said, then led the way to the courtroom lobby. They were the first ones there,
but the other investigative team arrived soon afterward. Torimi was dragging Kurou along by the
wrist, as well, though Mitsuru was leading them because he was the only one who knew which
room was the lobby.

Similarly, Tsumugi led Amai to the lobby, though she seemed even more out of it now than she
had been when they spoke to her in the infirmary, so it was more like the blind leading the blind.
Nonetheless, they still made it in the second quickest group. Next were Tsukasa and Goro, then
Box and Riko. With that, everybody had arrived, and the now-infamous elevator made its
appearance.

“How does it-” Amai started to ask.

“Magnets,” Sayaka said, and that was the end of that. Nobody wanted to give the full explanation
over again, with Rei gone. Not that the newcomers would know that, not like they’d understand.

Even so, there would be things to remind them of Kaede, of Yuuri, and of Kanoshi. Amai already
realized the aspect that, in polite society, they’d lost anywhere they were meant to eat. She’d lost
her own lab to the crime scene. Nami wouldn’t be surprised if Tsumugi neglected to mention the
infirmary they’d camped out in during the investigation had been the site of a murder as well.

Until these deaths, the four newcomers had still been, to some degree, outsiders. They hadn’t yet
experienced the grief of a body discovery or the emotionally grueling class trials. They hadn’t
witnessed an execution yet, either. By the time this was over, well…

They were Killing Game participants too, and when the trial concluded, that would be made
evident to all parties.
The Third First Class Trial: START.

Everyone was stood at their podiums, the layout much the same as it had previously been. The signs which marked friends dead before the reset were now set, two each, to either side of the throne that Monokuma swore it had and now followed through on. It was silver, with plush purple seats, an unexpected result.

Torimi stood where Etsuko had been, Madara in Tomoe’s spot. Then Kurou took Shinjiro’s and Amai stood where Rei once did. Nami felt a pang of anger to see that the newcomer she liked least had taken the place of somebody she considered a close friend, but she realized that it was either unintentional, or done by Monokuma specifically to make her feel this way, and she put it out of her mind.

“Okay, everybody,” Nami spoke up, taking on the role of briefing everyone on the situation, “As the Monokuma Files state, the dead are Kaede Akamatsu, who was impaled… Yuuri Ruka, who bled out, and Kanoshi Kyosuke who was killed with a blow to the head. All three were discovered early this morning. Akamatsu in the Dining Hall, the other two in the Ultimate Chef’s Ward. Time of death is not listed, but it is known that Akamatsu was the first to die.

“I was wondering when you’d ask that!” Monokuma said, “The wheel landed on a super rare one this time, which I think you folks will enjoy! It’s really fortuitous!~ In the event that there are multiple culprits, here’s what’s gonna happen. You’ll see any and all culprits die. However, at random, one will actually be saved at the last moment and placed into the Quarantine Room. The room will be locked up and the identity of the rescued culprit kept a secret until their mandatory participation in the following trial.”

“That’s weird,” Tsumugi said, “Why is that even an option?”

“To keep you on your toes!” Monokuma exclaimed, “Come on, I thought you’d love it! You’ll be so overjoyed to find out which culprit actually survived, that you won’t even hold it against them that they committed a murder anymore!”

“It definitely doesn’t work that way…” Tsumugi whined, lifting her hands to her head and staring at her podium, “You’re just doing this to cause more despair, I bet, yeah… That’s all you’re doing… It wasn’t selected randomly at all, because of course it’s not, because it wouldn’t be so similar last game and this game, letting one culprit survive… No, no way, it’s just because… No culprit would actually want to keep living in a Killing Game after being found out…”

“I assure you, it is completely random! But I guess I’ll admit this. Of the options on the wheel, there are thirty. Of those thirty, five involve the deaths of all culprits. One involves the sparing of all culprits. The remaining twenty-four are all variations on sparing one culprit. So is it that surprising that’s the scenario which pops up most often?”

“If that’s the ratio, it’s not shocking at all!” Goro laughed, tapping his fingers on the podium in front of him, “What’s such a big deal about it anyway, Shirogane? You want to make sure Akamatsu’s killer is brought to justice? Can’t stand the idea that person could be spared? It’s no big deal, just kill them yourself! Don’t you know how revenge works?”

“Oh course I know that!” Tsumugi whirled towards him, shrieking, but her eyes didn’t reflect this
fervor. They were still glassy and empty, maintaining the appearance of marbles even with her pupils as constricted as they were. She started… laughing? It seemed like a strangely genuine laugh, more than a hysterical cackle, “Me? Not knowing how revenge works? You’ve got to be kidding! But, you know, it really isn’t that. Living on among innocents after killing somebody they cared about, I wouldn’t wish that even on my worst enemy!”

“In any case,” Nami said, “We do need to determine the culprits in this case, and I do believe Monokuma’s input is relevant here. From where I stand, in this case… The Evil King wasn’t responsible for these deaths.”

“How can you assume that so early?” Tsukune asked.

“The causes of death. If the Evil King’s Gun were used, then two people would have the same cause of death. Instead, Sayaka was right with what she said we were on our way to the lobby. There are probably three different murder weapons,” Nami explained, “It’s still possible the Evil King got killed, though. So don’t give up hope that this could be the final trial.”

“If this is the final trial…” Randy wondered.

“Yeah, yeah,” Monokuma shrugged, “Obviously the culprit wheel doesn’t work right, that way. I’ll just let you get the surprise in the outside world of who it is, instead.”

“Just how much control do you have over these things?” Sayaka asked.

“Very little!” Monokuma admitted, “I have special abilities, sure, but a lot of this stuff is out of my paws. So many wheels of random decisions I have no input in! I just have a small amount of wiggle room when it comes to how all the premade stuff is put into action. Motives, wheels of decision, executions, all of that, I had nothing to do with! This is far from a one-bear show!”

“I see,” Sayaka said, “Okay, well, here’s all the physical evidence that we found.”

With that, Sayaka emptied her evidence backpack onto her podium, and started passing bits around the courtroom so that the others could examine it for themselves. Nami also sent her Monopad with the photo of the blood in the hallway open.

While everybody was checking out the physical evidence, Madara spoke up.

“My team interviewed pretty much everybody,” He explained, “And as far as we could determine, since the time of death is still mostly unknown for everyone, we have minimal alibis. Knowing that Shirogane last saw Akamatsu at nine forty-five, she must have been killed between that time and ten, when the Dining Hall became off-limits. The window for Ruka and Kyosuke’s deaths is unknown, but if we take Shirogane at her word, it couldn’t have been after midnight. There are only four solid alibis for the night. Nami Kaguya is known to have been unconscious from directly after dinner until morning, Monokuma accidentally confirmed this in a conversation we had. I can also state this. I slept with my door open. I’m not an especially light sleeper, but I’d tested it with Randy’s help and I would wake up if the door opened on either side of my room. This didn’t happen last night. I witnessed Randy and Mizuho enter Randy’s room, and Fujishiro enter his own. None of them left.”

“Weee can verify,” Torimi piped up, “That Monokuma did confirm Namine’s alibi! As for the other alibis… You’ll have to trust Madaraaaa to believe them, but that’s fine, right?”

“If the evidence starts to point toward somebody Madara cleared, we can worry about it then,” Randy confirmed, “So, I guess it’s time to start debating…”
“Indeed,” Madara agreed, “And, in fact, I already have a suspect to put forth. Amai Oishi is by far the most suspicious person in the case of Ruka and Kyosuke.”
“Jesus Christ” Amai scoffed, arms crossed, “How exactly does any of this evidence actually point to me, huh!?"

“Well, to start with, two of the bodies were found in your ward,” Madara described, “Your ward, which was locked in a way that only you and Ueda knew about, that continued to be locked this morning.”

“Idiot,” Amai laughed, “I lost the lock tool, you know! Obviously I couldn’t have done it.”

“There’s nothing saying there couldn’t be multiple tools, though,” Riko’s TTS made an appearance, coming to her friend’s support in a roundabout way, “Or is there, Oishi?”

“Of course there is!” Amai proclaimed, slamming a hand down on the podium in front of herself. “Ueda only made one! And it requires his unique skills to make it in the right shape, you know. Not just anyone could cut a piece of wood in the exact right way!”

“Well, if it’s true that there’s only one tool,” Randy said, “Then it doesn’t actually seem plausible for anybody to have done it.”

“What do you mean?” Kurou asked, “Somebody easily could have stolen it from Oishi.”

“I wouldn’t say easily, but yeah! It’s not like I’m immune to getting stolen from!” Amai kept yelling, “Besides, why the fuck would I commit murders like any of these!? Food’s a sacred thing, and I can’t cook somewhere a human corpse’s been, now can I? Whoever defiled these places… I can’t forgive them!”

“Or you specifically picked your own ward,” Madara said, “So that you could use that excuse. What reason do we have to believe you? Frankly, for all we know about you, you could be the sort of person who’s willing to use human meat in the cooking itself.”

“You… I… Cannibalism!? Are you fucking nuts? Oh my god. Oh god!” Amai turned to the side of her podium, clutching her stomach, and retched, with ugly hacking heaves.

“Madara,” Riko chided, “Now you’ve upset her. The poor dear.”

“It could still be an act, you know,” Madara said, but then gave an exaggerated shrug. “I’m willing to take a step back, though. Somebody else can explain why it’s not her, in a way that makes sense, right? I just wanna find the truth.”

“That’s understandable,” Mitsuru chimed in, “But your emotions are a bit over-involved, don’t you think? You had one close friend here, and he’s been murdered. Even if you don’t think you’re doing it, you’re attacking Oishi more than necessary.”

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do with criminals? Attack them until they break down and
confess?” Madara asked.

“We don’t know if she’s a criminal yet, and that’s not it at all!” Nami exclaimed, pointing at Madara. “You may be smart, and you may be able to do good work as a detective, but leave this kind of thing to me! I specialize in finding out the truth… Even if that means my client is guilty, or the opponent innocent. You’ll only reach a shallow lie if you try to force it out of somebody without evidence.”

“Speaking of evidence, I never answered Ueda’s question,” Randy said, “We know that Oishi’s tool wasn’t stolen because of that,” He pointed to the burnt tool, which Box was currently holding. She passed it over to Kurou.

“Oh,” Kurou noted upon closer examination, “This… Does seem to be the tool, yes. I assure you, I only made a single one.”

“And we found that in one of the ovens in Oishi’s ward,” Randy explained, “Which makes it a locked room.”

“Hm. Well, somebody had to do it,” Madara said, “So this doesn’t do much, except make Ueda suspicious, in that he could be lying about making a second tool. And he’d only have reason to lie about such a thing if he were the culprit, or else protecting the culprit.”

“I… Well, that is possible,” Kurou admitted, pressing a hand to his forehead. “But Oishi did oversell it a little bit. Though I doubt anybody else has the same skill I do to work with wood, it isn’t like that’s the only physical material which would work.”

“Right…” Nami agreed, “Just because we couldn’t find a duplicate of the tool doesn’t mean one didn’t exist. And shaping something like soap the right way would be much simpler for a layman, and could easily be disposed of just by washing it down a shower.”

“That’s true,” Box said, “But wouldn’t the culprit need to know what the original tool looked like in order to make a duplicate?”

“Well, of course they would,” Sayaka said, clicking her tongue. “The culprit ended up burning it. So they duplicated the tool, burnt it in the room to make the closed room effect, then melted down the soap one elsewhere in the building. Yeah?”

“Entirely possible,” Nami said, “However the closed room was created, all we have to know is that it was possible to create the illusion of a locked room. This was probably meant to throw us off into thinking that one of the victims inside of Oishi’s Ward was responsible for it all, but we’ve already debunked that. And as for the idea of Oishi as a suspect… Sayaka?”

“It’s bullshit, that’s what it is,” Sayaka explained, staring across the room at Amai. “She’s not able to hide her feelings well at all, so this reaction is genuine. Certain things about this case seemed to be targeting me… But, they’re not methods of targeting that she would have used, not really. I was targeted with the cut-off pinkies only because it’s known the yakuza do that. And as for the plushies, it isn’t like I was that discreet with my opinions during the last trial. Oishi would do something more personal.”

“And?” Madara prodded her for more information.

“And, there are multiple culprits. First off, who would work with her? She’s a fucking disaster waiting to happen, I know I sure wouldn’t trust her to have any part in a murder plot!” Sayaka gave a large shrug and shook her head, smirking as she found free reign to stand up to her worst friend in
a situation where she’d have to be grateful for it, “And, well, if we assume that both of these murders were done by different culprits entirely, Oishi wouldn’t have known about the Dining Hall, and couldn’t make the excuse that she wouldn’t defile the places where we eat to try and cover her tracks.”

“None of this is actually evidence, you know,” Amai said, “But, she’s right! You idiots are all piling onto me over the double murder, when we got no idea what really happened. Shouldn’t we go in chronological order or something? Yeah. How’d Akamatsu get offed? That’s what I wanna know, before we can think about the other stuff!”
**Trial 3/1: How Did Kaede Die?**

“How Akamatsu died…” Nami sighed, “Well, yes. We do need to figure that out, so I’m okay with focusing on it for the time being.”

“Yeah! God. Did you all forget she was also dead, just because the other two were so much more gruesome? Pathetic. Aren’t you supposed to have experience with this sort of stuff!!?” Amai cackled.

“Don’t push your luck there, Oishi!” Goro proclaimed, clapping his hands together, “You’re still on thin ice, you know! Leave the crude and tasteless comments to the master, won’t you?”

“Master? Puh-lease. It’s my talent to make crude and tasteless comments perfectly angled to bring out the worst in people!”

“He’s right, Oishi,” Tsumugi said, fixing the flippant girl with a hard stare, “Stop talking. You said we should find out how Kaede died, and we should. Put your money where your mouth is and let us do that, if you aren’t going to help.”

“Jeeze, fine,” Amai turned her head to one side and pouted.

“So... Akamatsu was killed sometime between 9:45 and 10?” Torimi asked, holding one hand up in the air, “How did we verify that, again?”

“I last saw her at 9:45,” Tsumugi explained, “We split up. I went straight down to the dorms. I passed by Ueda and Fujishiro on the way, so they can vouch for that.”

“I actually heard them talking about the split,” Kurou added, “Akamatsu said she wanted to go to check something, then Shirogane came past us. It definitely was at 9:45, or maybe 9:46. A little bit later, Fujishiro and I also decided to go to our own rooms, but I thought I heard Akamatsu’s voice again as we were leaving. I could be mistaken, though, and I didn’t hear what she said or if she was talking to each other.”

“How long is a little bit?” Madara asked.

“Five minutes at most,” Mitsuru answered, “We just finished our conversation then went to bed.”

“If we believe you, then that actually puts Kaede’s time of death in an even smaller window,” Tsumugi said, “Strange... But I guess it’s plausible.”

“Well, wait, what I was really wondrin’,” Torimi spoke up again, “Wasn’t the start of that window, but the end of it!”

“Well, she was in the Dining Hall,” Nami explained, “And after ten, that room is completely off limits. Akamatsu only could have been killed there while it was still open.”

“What about mornin’? There was about the same time window from when the caf’ opened to when we found her there. Maybe the reason she disappeared at night was cause of that quarantine room or somethin’...”

“That doesn’t leave time for Ruka and Kyosuke to be killed,” Nami debunked, “Shirogane was asleep in front of the door for that room by then, too, and Monokuma told us Akamatsu died first. Assuming Shirogane is reliable, that makes it impossible. I know we said we’d focus on one case
at a time, but we can’t entertain theories that make the other case implausible. Even if the murders happened simultaneously, I think that the staging of Ruka and Kyosuke’s corpses would have taken longer than the time between morning and the discovery.”

“Ohhh… Yeah,” Torimi said, “So I guess it was in those ten minutes after allll…”

“I think,” Tsumugi spoke up, “There is one thing that needs to be relevant to this case. I don’t claim to know why Kaede lied about it, but she actually doesn’t have a sense of time, that’s the truth. She doesn’t have an innate sense for the passage of time at all. She has to keep checking the physical time, and even then, she can go three hours between checks without it feeling longer than five minutes if she’s alone…”

“Yes, I did come to that conclusion,” Madara added in, holding his own chin, “I also didn’t know why she lied, though, which is why I kept it to myself. There wasn’t a reasonable debunking of that motive, and observing her seemed to confirm this fact.”

“She didn’t even trust us enough to tell us the truth about that!?” Sayaka hissed, “I really… Didn’t know her at all…”

“No, that’s unfair,” Box said, “I think she lied about it for my sake! My motive was in the same batch, and it was such a rude one… Isn’t a real person? I lied for her sake once, so she was returning the favor, that’s all.”

“That’s a metaphorical statement, obviously,” Madara said, “What it really means is that the Box Hako we see isn’t real, she’s a construction of who you think you’re supposed to be. Am I correct?”

“Wellll,” Goro jumped in with a grin, “That’s all well and good, sure, but really… She’s just a liar, after all. That’s my opinion. She’s an Ultimate Survivor, just like Shirogane. The ‘last participant’ to have their talents, would be themselves. And I told Akamatsu all of this! She totally could have said so and confessed, without putting dear Hako in the line of fire. So she was lying! It was a lie.”

“Ah…” Tsumugi mumbled, “You told her something like that, and she lied anyway?”

“Guess so!” Goro shrugged.

“Her moral fortitude isn’t in question here!” Randy said, “We’re just trying to figure out who killed her, and how! It doesn’t matter that she lied, or why she did it, or any of that. It just matters if it impacted the case.”

“Well,” Sayaka said, “Her watch runs wrong, there aren’t clocks in the Dining Hall, and she didn’t have her Monopad on her…”

“That watch… Yes,” Tsumugi said, “It’s quite slow, and gets slower every two weeks or so. But it was all she had to tell the time for about a year of her life, even if it told that time inaccurately, so it’s very important to her. Was… very important to her.”

“That’s… Huh,” Sayaka blinked as she realized something. Nami realized it as well.

“It doesn’t completely line up with,” Nami jumped in, “Some of the evidence we found. There was definitely some sort of foul play, because she was trying to escape, but…”

“The body discovery announcement didn’t play when we got there,” Riko said.
“Kaede Akamatsu was…” Nami finally voiced what everyone was slowly realizing, “Killed for breaking the rules.”
“Killed for breaking the rules… So she was in the Dining Hall after ten?” Riko asked.

“That’s the idea,” Sayaka confirmed, “If she can’t tell time, then it makes sense, doesn’t it? She wouldn’t be aware that she was cutting it close. The only problem here is that she was trying to escape, but…”

“But now that we have a general idea of what happened to Akamatsu,” Madara said, “We can continue to wonder what happened to the other two, can’t we?”

“Are you serious?” Tsumugi asked, “We can’t just move on like that. There are still signs of foul play with Kaede’s death…”

“Hey,” Kurou spoke up. He currently held Nami’s Monopad, in the shuffle of evidence around the room, “You know, there’s too much blood in this picture. In the hallway, I mean. Looking at it, and the door, there’s no way this much just dripped from underneath…”

“How do you? Know that?” Sayaka questioned, gesturing wildly in his direction.

“Huh? Well, it isn’t as if I’ve never seen dead bodies before,” Kurou said as if it wasn’t strange, “I mean, not human ones! But still, yeah. The blood’s weird. Definitely not all Akamatsu’s.”

“...Okay, I guess!” Sayaka threw her hands up with the resolution that she would never cease to be surprised and confused by Kurou Ueda. Then, she spoke calmly again, “Well, what would that mean for the case?”

“Probably that Oishi’s Ward isn’t actually a crime scene,” Nami said, “I mean, that nobody died in that room. Right?”

“Oh shit that would make sense,” Randy said, “If we think about the auditorium…”

“They avoided detection from Shirogane because the scuffle was in the auditorium, and she was too focused on looking for Kaede,” Sayaka explained, “The fight happened in the auditorium, and I generalized how it happened, but the important part is that the person who both didn’t want to be involved in the fight and didn’t think they could win it ran back out of the auditorium, directly in that direction.”

“Can we assume that was Kyosuke?” Randy asked.

“For now, probably,” Sayaka confirmed, “Kanoshi ran out of the auditorium, into the hallway, where the culprit managed to chase after and kill him. Then the culprit also killed Yuuri.”

“How’d the bodies get to Oishi’s ward, then?” Nami asked, “There would have been some sort of blood trail. If the culprit had time to clean up blood in the hallways, they would have also cleaned up the puddle, right…?”

“None of the cleaning supplies at this hospital are efficient against blood,” Sayaka added in, “Which is probably why the blood wasn’t cleaned up. There should have been a trail either way, though, if the bodies were moved.”

“And how could one person move the bodies all the way upstairs?” Tsumugi asked.
“I’d say there are three people strong enough to do it,” Mitsuru said, “Being myself, Ueda, and Yamaguchi. However, Ruka’s quite tall, isn’t he? Even though Yamaguchi is strong enough to move him, I’m unsure if she could do so in a way which wouldn’t leave a trail.”

“The culprit probably used these,” Riko chimed in, then held up the garbage bags.

“Right, we found those in Oishi’s ward, and there was blood inside,” Sayaka said, “But somebody would have to be able to carry the bodies inside the trash bags in a way that wouldn’t let any blood drip out of the opening… Which, I am too short to do, it’s true. But unlike what Fujishiro said, I actually don’t think any one person could do it. The body would bend and the blood would come out of the end if it was being carried in any way a single person could manage without tearing the bags… And the bags don’t show any signs of being dragged.”

“So,” Nami said, “It was two people, was it?”

“Yeah,” Sayaka confirmed, “The only way to move the bodies without leaving evidence along the way would be for one person to hold the feet, and the other the head.”

“So we’re still at multiple culprits… Or… Hold on, Monokuma? You said that tricking somebody into being killed by rulebreaking doesn’t count as becoming a culprit?” Nami asked.

“That was true in the past, and in some ways it still is. However, there are situations where somebody would be considered a culprit. For example, if somebody threw a person at me and I had to kill that person for attacking the headmaster, the person who threw them would be considered a culprit!”

“Weird flex, but okay,” Nami said, then continued on, “So, one person couldn’t have killed all three, still. One person could have killed Akamatsu and one of the others, or one person killed Akamatsu and somebody else killed both of the others, but more than one person is responsible. And the accomplice who moved the bodies could be a culprit too, or might not be.”

“So there may be up to three culprits…” Box frowned, looking down at her hands. “That’s so terrible, that’s awful… How could this happen?? I don’t want more people to die… If it’s three culprits, then two of them will…”

“This is just a theory,” Nami said, “We don’t know if it’s the case. The accomplice might be innocent, and just got pulled into helping move the bodies, maybe as a threat. Or there’s overlap and still just two culprits somehow… Wow. Even I’m having trouble keeping track of this stuff! I’m usually good at that.”

“Well, we’re confusing the point,” Madara said, “The idea of multiple culprits is a difficult one to sort out. What we really know for certain right now is that Akamatsu was killed for rulebreaking, and there may or may not be a culprit responsible for her. Also that Ruka and Kyosuke’s bodies could only be moved by two people working together. This confirms that Oishi’s Ward was not a closed room in which Ruka was wholly responsible. That’s it. That’s all we know for sure so far.”

“Oof. That’s not a lot,” Nami said, crossing her arms, “But I guess it’s something. We need to start figuring out how this actually could have happened, though… We aren’t getting very far. For now, let’s assume that the person who moved the bodies is primarily innocent. Accomplice X, if you will. That way we can focus on the main culprit and see where that leads us.”
“Alright then, let’s focus on who could have committed the murder,” Randy said, “I mean… We did find a polyfil bead in Oishi’s ward.”

“Oh, me?” Box asked, pointing to herself.

“Yeah, that is what that would imply,” Randy admitted.

“That’s understandable, since I am the person who uses them. Plus, I’m in a position that I would have known how to get under Yamaguchi’s skin! But, sorry to say, it’s just not me. I didn’t kill any of the people who are dead,” Box explained, “I guess that I can’t give solid evidence why it wouldn’t be me, though. I don’t have a real alibi and there isn’t anything that physically absolves me.”

“But?” Nami prompted.

“But nothing. I don’t have anything to defend myself with except words! I have no alibi and there is one piece of evidence that points directly at me, plus circumstances that I’d be able to make Yamaguchi upset because I totally do know about her sensitivities,” Box said, shrugging. “It points very much towards me and all I can say is that I did not do it. You have no reason to believe me and I have no other way to protect myself…”

“You can’t just let people suspect you that easily,” Riko said, “Come on. Fight back, or something!”

“I have nothing to fight back with,” Box said, “And why would I get insistent or anything like that? I can just say it wasn’t me and hope for the best. Really, I’m thoroughly incapable of committing a murder, but I haven’t any proof of that. Fighting back too hard wouldn’t be a good thing to do.”

“Acting like this,” Riko said, “I know you’re doing it because it’s how you think you should act, but just stand up for yourself for once, can’t you?”

“No, I can’t.” Box shook her head and clasped her hands together. “It doesn’t matter if I want to scream and cry that I would never kill somebody, that I hate this and I hate being suspected… Because admitting that it’s reasonable to suspect me is all that anyone really wants from me. My feelings are irrelevant.”

In between her words, she was laughing, that tinny nervous laugh of hers that permeated her statements whenever this sort of thing happened, whenever she was having her intentions doubted by the others. It sounded so thoroughly incorrect, like each laugh was a thought that wasn’t allowed to escape in any other form.

“Please,” Riko spoke up again with her tts, “Hako isn’t the only suspicious person. This whole time, we’ve been relying on statements from Shirogane on what the timeframe is, but she could be lying to us, and she’s the one responsible after all.”

She also signed to Box, “You don’t have to say anything else. I’ll stand up for you if this happens again, okay?”
Box answered just by making a heart shape with her hands, in gratitude. Only a few people in the courtroom noticed this exchange at all, though, because they’d turned their eyes on Tsumugi.

“I’ve been telling the truth, I promise…” Tsumugi said, “At least, there isn’t any way I was involved with Kaede’s death! Fujishiro and Ueda can vouch that we went in opposite directions!”

“Oh, of course, I wasn’t suspecting that in the least,” Riko said, “But you did just get very defensive of the fact that you know how revenge works. And as the one person known to be moving around freely last night, you do become suspicious. If either of those boys were involved in Akamatsu’s death…”

“That’s funny!” Tsumugi laughed, still holding her head. “Do you think I’m really that dumb? Do you, do you? Think I wouldn’t say somewhere in all this, in all my wandering, that I saw somebody? Even if I didn’t, I would have said I did. I would have tried to agree when you said it could be Hako, or Oishi. But I didn’t. I haven’t tried to frame or place blame onto anybody!”

“That proves nothing,” Madara said.

“Why would I sleep right outside the crime scene if I was responsible? I didn’t even know who was inside, I thought it was Kaede!” Tsumugi complained, “I tried and tried and couldn’t get into the room and I told everybody everything as soon as they found me! My girlfriend is dead, what more do you want from me!?”

“That proves nothing,” Madara said.

“Some proof,” Madara said, “That you’re innocent, so we can rely on your testimony. If you aren’t the culprit, well, we can narrow down the time of night that all of this could have happened, right?”

“I’m not! So we can!” Tsumugi insisted, pressing her elbows against the podium. “Let’s narrow it down and find the culprit and get me out of here just get me out I don’t want to be here it’s so loud and I just want to go to sleep and sleep and sleep some more and maybe when I wake up all of this will feel like a bad dream…”

“Shirogane,” Nami said, “You said you were in the Runner’s Ward for a stretch of time, weren’t you?”

“That’s right.” She nodded, words clipped as she only barely split from her breakdown.

“10:40 to 11:30, correct?”

“Mm. That’s right.”

“How did you remember the exact time, if you were so stressed out?” Nami asked.

“I took… Oh.” Tsumugi startled herself, then pulled out her Monopad and turned it around to face the rest of the courtroom, “I took a picture on my Monopad of the timer above the door. Timestamped for 10:39, actually…”

“Is this really enough to clear her name?” Randy asked, looking to Monokuma. “Is a photograph like this enough to cement an alibi?”

“Normally, it wouldn’t be,” Monokuma said, “It would be way too easy and you’d all be snapchatting away to prove your innocence! Note that photographs taken with your Monopad only show a timestamp when you’re in the hospitality ward, or any of the Ultimate Wards. It doesn’t function in your rooms or the Empty Wings, reason being, no timestamp in the areas the feature is enabled are so far apart that a timestamp can absolve anyone… Unless, of course, that timestamp is on a photograph of the device trapping a student in the same room for a stretch of time!”
“This doesn’t actually prove my innocence,” Tsumugi admitted, “But it does prove where I was, at this time. I got to the fifth floor at about 11:50, and didn’t leave the door of the Chef’s Ward starting at midnight. That’s my testimony. I was also in front of the dining hall at five past ten, and didn’t return there when I started searching the Ultimate Wards. I did hear a scuffle in the auditorium at that time, but without Kaede’s voice involved, I ignored it.”

“Could you maybe, I dunno, let us know what the other voices were?” Amai asked.

“I can’t tell those things apart, and I wasn’t paying attention.” Tsumugi turned her gaze downward. “Still, if the crime happened in front of the dining hall… The moving of the bodies must have happened while I was in the Runner’s Ward, that’s what I think. Besides. I do know what revenge is. I didn’t have the faintest clue who I’d be looking for revenge against, and if I had committed a crime, don’t think I’d still be standing here. I went through all of this once. I’ll die before I was a culprit… Again.”

“You say it was for revenge?” Sayaka asked. Tsumugi nodded. “Well then, whatever. What’s past is past and it wasn’t for a stupid reason, you’re obviously different now. I believe you. You didn’t kill Ruka and Kyosuke. Could be an accomplice, sure, but you’re no murderer anymore.”

“And we’re supposed to listen to you on this dangerous matter, why?” Madara asked, “No offense, of course.”

“Cause this is my specialty,” Sayaka said, “And cause she’s right. Just like Oishi. Neither of them are such idiots that we’d be able to pin these things on them for blatant reasons like ‘was the person who can lock the ward’ or ‘slept in front of the door’. There’s got to be something more specific. We just need to find it.”

“I think,” Nami spoke up, “We may be looking at this wrong? A little bit? Just because Akamatsu died first, doesn’t mean that there was any revenge involved. Especially since we don’t even know if Kyosuke or Ruka was involved in that. Let’s… Circle back around.”

Chapter End Notes

BNAI: Tsumugi killed someone! This is a big deal and we all need to hate her for the rest of the game.

MMMM: Tsumugi killed someone last game? Well that's not too surprising, moving on.
“Well,” Madara said, “I frankly think it’s pretty obvious that one of those two was involved, somehow, in Akamatsu’s death. She turns up dead immediately after… I let them look at my notes.”

“So they knew she was a liar,” Nami said, “That could be a motivation, I agree.”

“We know that they were spending time in Yuuri’s room,” Sayaka said, “And eating snacks. It’s possible that they went someplace private to conspire on how they’d pull it off.”

“You think so?” Nami asked Sayaka.

“Yeah.” Sayaka shrugged. “Just because they’re my friends doesn’t mean that I’ll just believe they’re innocent like it’s nothing. It isn’t nothing. And I don’t think it’s impossible, at all. Especially with the fight those two just had, Yuuri probably felt guilty… And Kanoshi could have convinced him to do just about anything.”

“Really? You think he was the ringleader there?” Randy questioned, leaning on his podium, “Cause, I mean, I got in that fight with Ruka that one time…”

“I’m pretty sure,” Tsukasa added, “That if it was one of those two, it would be me or Randy who got killed. We didn’t exactly get along.”

Right, Nami kept forgetting that there were people who didn’t get along with each other, since she mostly got along with everyone. Except Amai, who nobody got along with. Except apparently Riko and Kurou and maybe Box to some extent, she didn’t even know. Still, it continued to surprise her each time she was reminded that there was some secret beef between those pairs of boys.

“Not necessarily,” Sayaka said, “It’s possible that they thought they were doing the right thing. After all, when Kaede lied about her sense of time… That may have been enough to convince those two that she was the Evil King.”

“Waaaaas she?” Torimi wondered.

“Well, we won’t know till the trial’s over,” Goro shrugged, “After all, the one who defeats the Evil King must also be brought to justice! I guess? I dunno. If evil wins, then they get to escape with us, but if good wins, then we can’t just bring a murderer out of the game!”

“I mean, you can. You probably will,” Monokuma said, “Given one of the culprits in this case will be randomly spared and also given that you have already been made aware of three people here who’ve committed murders before this game even started. I dunno why the Evil King’s game is like that! It’s old unused programming that I threw in for the Hell of it, I don’t know what the original intention was or if there’s any weird bugs in it!”

“Bugs are cool and that’s rude.” Tsumugi pointed and glared daggers at Monokuma.

“Well, whatever. Doesn’t change that we can’t know if the Evil King’s been defeated yet!” Goro said.

“It also doesn’t change that it was probably the motivation involved here,” Madara said, “They read my notes, concluded that Akamatsu was the Evil King, and plotted using the information that she doesn’t have a sense of time to get her killed for rulebreaking?”
“Yes, but it’s not just that,” Nami said, “After all, the signs of foul play are there…”

“I know how they convinced her to do it,” Mitsuru said, raising a hand up, “The workbook Akamatsu was holding. They probably hid it somewhere in the Dining Hall and asked for her help finding it.”

“Oh worm?” Nami blinked, then steepled her fingers. “Okay. I have an idea of how the first part of this case went down, then.”

“Let’s hear it!” Kurou gave her a thumbs-up.

[Nami Kaguya’s First Class Trial ‘Closing’ Argument.]

With all the pieces laid out like this… Doesn’t it become kind of obvious what happened? Or at least, it becomes simple.

At 2145, or 9:45 PM, Kaede Akamatsu and Tsumugi Shirogane split up, Akamatsu going to investigate ‘something’. The nature of this is unknown and not necessary to know. About five minutes later, at 2150, Fujishiro and Ueda overhead some voices in a hallway, but couldn’t make out who or what was being said. This can be assumed to be Akamatsu and the ‘culprits’.

The ‘culprits’ asked Akamatsu for help finding something. They’d already looked for it, they said, but had no luck. A detective would probably be able to, though. So Akamatsu agreed, and went to look for the workbook in the Dining Hall.

After finding the workbook, however, Akamatsu realized the time by looking at her watch. The watch runs slowly, but she knew exactly how slow it was. She had no sense of time, and was unaware she’d spent a full nine minutes looking for the workbook, but at the last minute realized the situation. She ran for the door, knocking over chairs as she went, only to find it shut tight. As insurance, the ‘culprits’ were holding the door shut from the outside. She scratched and banged on the door, but they wouldn’t let her out. The clock changed to ten pm, and Akamatsu was executed for breaking the rules.

Those ‘culprits’... Between the workbook used, the signs of conspiracy, and the fact they knew Akamatsu couldn’t tell time, have to be Yuuri Ruka and Kanoshi Kyosuke.

[Closing Argument END.]

“So?” Nami questioned, staring at Monokuma. “I know that I’m correct. So could you tell me. Are those two considered culprits? It certainly wouldn’t reveal anything about the other murder, I just want to know if one of them counts. If holding the door closed counts as murder, or if they were right in thinking that rulebreaking could be a way to defeat the Evil King without becoming culprits?”

“...Ugh,” Monokuma said, “Now that you’ve remembered your talent, that’s super annoying. I was banking on at least another false suspect in that half of the case! I’ll admit it, though. Kanoshi Kyosuke is considered a culprit. Yuuri Ruka is not considered a culprit, because Kyosuke was responsible for planning the incident.”

“That’s interesting,” Nami said, “Funny. Good to know that you can be fooled, just like a human.”

“What do you mean?” Monokuma asked.

“The fact that Ruka isn’t considered a culprit proves the closed room couldn’t have been made from the inside. We already determined this, but now we know for sure that we can’t come back
around to a fake idea like that one.” Nami smirked with her hands on her hips. “However, you did say back then that any punishment for breaking a rule won’t result in an investigation and trial. How would Kyosuke’s punishment have worked if he survived?”

“The same,” Monokuma said, “But I wouldn’t have made you figure out he did it, I’d just say so. This was fun though, wasn’t it? The second murder did a great thing for me! Let me put your through the run of figuring that out! An investigation and a trial are off-limits for a rulebreaking death, but I never said anything about piggybacking them off another investigation and trial!”

“I see,” Nami said, “Anyway. Second murder, you’re trying really hard to leave us in the dark, but it’s obvious. Four people discovered the bodies in Oishi’s Ward, we all saw them at the same time. Even so, you listed the same three people discovering both bodies.”

“That doesn’t mean anything…” Monokuma whined, fidgeting where it stood.

“It does. You said it yourself.” Nami raised a finger. “Most things in this facility are out of your control. You don’t know what sort of bugs or glitches certain things have, and the way that things act are predetermined. Am I wrong in assuming that if Ruka and Kyosuke were killed by different people, the body discoveries would parse differently? After all, discoveries do have complicated rules associated with discovery by their own culprits.”

“This… I mean, how would you even determine this sort of thing?” Monokuma questioned, “The program could do exactly the same thing that way! It isn’t like the culprit even disc- Oh.”

“Heh.” Nami just gave Monokuma a grin.

“Nami! Oh my God!” Monokuma waved its arms. “You were just babbling at me! Babbling in a way that sounded smart and I fell for it! Fuck! You seriously outsmarted me again? You… You absolute heathen! You glorious bastard! How dare you! How dare you use your lawyer powers on me??”

“There we have it. Tsumugi Shirogane, Mitsuru Fujishiro, Amai Oishi, Riko Asahi, and myself… We’re all absolved from being the culprit, so Shirogane’s been cleared of suspicion,” Nami said, then turned her eyes to Box. “Let’s talk more… About that polyfil bead.”
“Everyone keeps talking about that bead,” Riko made good on her promise to stand up in Box’s stead, “But those have a serious static charge. Anybody who’s been around any of them knows that they’ll stick to clothing and fingers no matter how hard you try to avoid letting them. One single bead at the crime scene means nothing, because even Ruka or Kyosuke could have gotten one stuck to them.”

“That’s fair,” Nami said, “Hako has mentioned before that she put her plushie-making supplies into Bakura’s ward with the sewing machines, for anybody to access.”

Box signed something to Riko, which she then typed into her own tts. This time there was no mistaking the nonverbal communication. “Actually, Box moved some of the supplies back to her own room. Specifically the eyes and the weights that she uses inside the plushies. Since she lay out her entire style of plush-making last trial, she took some measures to keep it from being replicated.”

“We’ll… Come back to Hako apparently being fluent in sign language some other time,” Sayaka said, “I hate to say this, but yeah, Asahi’s got a point here. It’s not the bead we should be focusing on, but the plushies.”

“Where did these come from anywaaaay?” Torimi wondered, holding up the raccoon, “Well, ‘cept the little one. I found that one in the gift shop yesterday… Waaait… You went in my room?”

“We checked every room,” Nami explained, “And took the plushies that I didn’t recognize from when I was in there the other day.”

“Ohhh, okaaay. Well, yeah, I woulda noticed this raccoon and this cat… thing. Later today when I did role call,” Torimi said, “Just not yet. Dunno how they got in my rooom. Seriously dunno. But I don’t think they were there when I woke up?”

“Anybody could have planted them during the investigation,” Mitsuru said, “Given that all the rooms are open. Who would have had that opportunity?”

“We do know that Oishi and Shirogane were already downstairs before we investigated,” Randy said, “But didn’t both of them already get eliminated as culprits?”

“Well, one of them could be accomplice X,” Nami mentioned, “But really, the time we spent investigating even the Dining Hall alone was plenty of time to put two plushies in Tori’s room and get back out. Even Bakura, who I spoke to just before, still would have been capable. Or it was done while we were investigating the Chef’s Ward, or even in the infirmary, there was plenty of time before we found the plushies. We can’t really narrow down who would have gone downstairs, unless somebody was watching for them.”

Silence all around. Nobody thought to guard the bottom floor when neither of the crime scenes were there, after all. It seemed normal for people to go back to their rooms at some point during the investigation, since they were woken up so abruptly. Still, it now left everybody unable to ascertain who among them had the chance to place these plushies in Torimi’s room. Opportunity was an easy thing to find when nobody even had a reason to suspect that there could be a problem in that area.

“But,” Goro spoke up, “It isn’t like we even know if Shinoe’s mystery plushies are relevant to the case, do we?”
“Shit, that’s right!” Amai exclaimed, “Just cause they appeared through mysterious circumstances, it ain’t like they’re actually evidence just because! I mean, seriously. You snuck two weird stuffed animals into a seventeen year old girl’s room while she wasn’t there and it was open to the public, now gimme a cool hundred-k-yen? Come on. That’s gonna sound a lil creepy, but unless a plushie’s got a camera in it, then nobody’s gonna pay up for a paltry thing like that!”

“...Could there be a camera?” Kurou asked.

“Huuuh? Who’d wanna spy on me? Come on, I wanna knooow. I’ll give you a kiss!” Torimi stomped her feet where she stood, “It’s ruuude to stalk a desperate girl and not let her know how ya feel!”

“There’s no camera in this one,” Tsukasa said, as he was currently holding the cat thing, “The only weight is at the bottom.”

“Weight?” Riko asked.

“Yeah, there’s something in it,” Tsukasa said, “It’s pretty light, though, so definitely nothing electronic.”

“That’s strange,” Riko said, then held out one hand in Tsukasa’s direction while continuing to type with the other. “Hako put the weights back in her room, along with the eyes. That’s why these have embroidered eyes, I’m assuming. So that begs the question of what is serving as a weight in that plushie.”

“Oh, you’re right…” Tsukasa passed the plushie along to Riko.

Box hadn’t spoken another word since the first time she’d been suspected, holding her arms tight around herself and staring at the floor. Something seemed off about her, but Nami couldn’t focus on that right now. She’d already decided that Box wasn’t the culprit, at least, not one who could be executed. The position of ‘Accomplice X’ was wide open, still. Nami needed to focus on the issue at hand.

Or, in this scenario, the cat-like creature plushie at hand, in Riko’s hand.

Riko held it for a few more moments, then shut her eyes and grabbed it with the other hand. There was a sudden tearing sound, and polyfil beads flew out, scattering around the entire courtroom in seconds.

“Hey now, I’m gonna have to clean that up!” Monokuma complained, but everybody ignored it, much more focused on the now-open plushie. Riko certainly didn’t have it in her to tear cloth apart, or even to tear seams. The ripping noise and subsequent disemboweling of the toy was made possible by one single item, an item that Riko had discovered inside the plushie and lined up so that it would slice through the cloth with pressure, not unlike using the edge of a screw to open the plastic bag that the screws came in.

The item itself was caked with blood. Made itself evident in an instant it was the third missing murder weapon.

Murder weapon number one, Monokuma’s Rules.
Murder weapon number two, Amai Oishi’s Locking Tool.
Murder weapon number three…

A scalpel that nearly everybody had seen before.
Nami recognized that scalpel, of course she did, but…

This wasn’t right.

It wasn’t right it wasn’t right it wasn’t right for this to be it. Nami was supposed to be making up for her mistakes and now, now…

“A scalpel,” Kurou said, “Could that even be used to kill somebody, though?”

“I mean, obviously anything can!” Amai crossed her arms. “And this is a tool designed specifically to fucking cut through human flesh so yeah I think that a scalpel can be used to kill someone. Specially cause, what, Ruka bled out? Fruit ninja slice that bitch up down left and sideways and see if whoever’s on the other end still has blood after that.”

“I would prefer not to!” Kurou exclaimed.

“In any case, of course it’s possible,” Madara said, “Because it seems clear that’s what happened. Since the culprit and Accomplice X would have needed to wait until Shirogane was locked in the Runner’s Ward to move the bodies…”

“The scalpel couldn’t be cleaned,” Sayaka finished, “We’re well aware that there isn’t anything in this facility which can effectively clean up blood once it’s dry. The only times blood has been cleaned was when it was still wet and could be rinsed off of a surface. So if the culprit needed to stay with the bodies until they could be transported…”

“Yes, exactly. The only option was to try hiding the bloodied weapon,” Madara said, then tossed his bangs forward, “Of course, Monokuma doesn’t allow for the irretrievable hiding of evidence, right?”

“It went and got the empty bottle of Loopy from the alternative gift shop for us, so no,” Randy said, “Evidence can be obscured or hidden, but not completely removed from the playing field, seems like. It’s a fair mystery that way!”

“Is this bottle actually evidence at all? Ruka had the cap in his pocket, right?” Amai questioned, “Doesn’t that just imply he was, you know, drinking it? Or is it now somehow evidence to say a victim was drunk off his ass?”

“One bottle of Loopy wouldn’t get Yuuri drunk off his ass,” Sayaka scoffed, “But he wouldn’t drink that shit normally, so it means he was thinking about somebody who does drink it. And it’s chipped, meaning it got tossed into that trash can hard…”

“Huuuuuh?” Torimi wondered, “Are you saying that the person Ruka was thinking about is the one who threw it out?”

“Maybe,” Sayaka said.

“Caaaause, well, I can’t think of any other reason to get sooo mad at a bottle than if it means somethin’ else to you,” Torimi said, “And maybeee it’s the culprit, too?”

“Are you saying that the culprit actually had a connection to Yuuri, not to Kaede?” Sayaka questioned.
“It’s possible, isn’t iiiiiiit?” Torimi asked, then glanced around the room, “What’s with all the super serious faces, eh?”

“Well,” Mitsuru explained, “The four of you wouldn’t be able to understand, exactly, but looking at that weapon… It kind of explains who the culprit is.”

“The four of them?” Goro butted in, “I mean, I don’t understand either, so why won’t you all go ahead and explain it for those of us who aren’t so fucking big-brained to follow along, Megamind?”

Don’t say that Goro don’t you say that good grief why are you making this difficult it’s the movie she recommended he watch it’s the movie she told him he’d like and now he was-

“I think,” Monokuma said, “Now is a good time to mention. During the conversations with the outside world the night before last, three people skipped their conversations. One person accessed a conversation which did not belong to them.”

“Nobody… Asked for that information,” Goro said, “What gives, Monokuma?”

“If I didn’t relinquish it then somebody was gonna trick it outta me! Can you blame me for wanting to not get duped again? Besides, it isn’t like that information matters for the whodunnit or the howdunnit!”

“As for the whydunnit…” Randy mumbled, then looked over to Nami, “Hey, Nami?”

It’s wrong it’s wrong she had to be wrong because this couldn’t be right, she couldn’t do this to him and live with herself, she made a promise she had to help him she had to protect him and yet-

“When it comes to the fight in the auditorium,” Nami said, “Yuuri Ruka was skilled at fighting, but not invested. Kanoshi Kyosuke was invested, but not skilled at fighting. It’s the culprit… Who was just trying to get away.”

“Huh?” Goro locked eyes with her, staring. Was that… Awe? He shouldn’t, he really… Shouldn’t…

“The culprit who killed those two witnessed their attack on Akamatsu,” Nami said, “The fight in the auditorium was because of that. Because of what the culprit witnessed. It must have been… With what Sayaka said about Kyosuke, he wanted to kill the witness. Ruka didn’t, though. And knowing, what I do about the culprit… Ruka was right, because this culprit wouldn’t have remembered what he witnessed. Probably doesn’t even completely remember what happened now. But it’s not hard for somebody who’s panicking… Whether we’re talking about Kyosuke or the culprit, to do something unfortunate.”

“Ah…” Sayaka hid her face in her hands. “I hate to say this. I hate it. They were my friends. But you’re right, I think, you’re right. Kanoshi would do something like that, he would. If he was jealous. If he was.”

“He probably was,” Nami said, “Given the bottle.”

“That’s what I thought, I thought so, yeah,” Sayaka whined, “Idiot. Idiot, what an idiot… Both of them, fuck!”

“Hey, that’s not very nice to the culprit.” Goro laughed. “I mean, come on, is it really? Really that stupid, for Yuuri to have been attracted to him? To the culprit? It’s not stupid, ha, it’s something like a curse, isn’t it? Isn’t it just such a rotten curse? I wish it were stupid, I wish, I really wish!”
“The culprit,” Nami spoke, soft and gentle, “Is somebody who’s used this scalpel before. Somebody who had the skills to make plushies like these. Somebody who knew Hako planned for his plush, if he died, to be a raccoon. And somebody who was already so bruised up that none of us noticed any difference after he got in a fight last night.”

“It’s you, isn’t it, Goro?” Nami asked.

“Why would it be anybody else?” He answered.
“Because,” Nami said, “This didn’t need to happen. It didn’t.”

“Yeah it did,” Goro said, “It did. It happened and it’s nobody’s fault.”

“It’s,” Sayaka spoke up, “Kanoshi’s fault, isn’t it? It’s his fault, for killing Kaede, and for deciding that he needed to kill you for witnessing it.”

“Nah.” Goro chuckled. “That isn’t it. Course it’s not it! Kill me for witnessing it, that’s garbage, the method for killing Akamatsu was because neither of them wanted to die, wanted to become a culprit. Far as either of them knew, there wouldn’t even be an investigation! It’s not cause I was a witness. Ain’t it. Ain’t it, sister.”

“How…” Sayaka asked, “Then, how did he even find out, to be jealous of you? Can you tell me that?”

“Guess it was… My fault?” Goro wrapped his arms around himself, grinning. It was a sickening grin, though, exactly the type of grin that Nami never wanted to see on anybody’s face. He was breaking apart and trying to pretend like he wasn’t. “I dunno I dunno haaah… I dunno! Cause Nami’s right she’s super right it’s all hazey super hazey like I don’t even know what happened! What really happened! I wasn’t there I wasn’t really there but I bet the me that was there said some dumb shit to Ruka. Bet I did.”

“Dumb shit like?” Sayaka questioned. Her voice was almost hollow, but the edges were soft. There wasn’t any of the venom Nami knew she was capable of, and it was kind. Compassionate in some way. Not the tone that somebody should take with the murderer of her two closest friends. It was sincere, though. So sincere.

“Dumb shit like?” Goro echoed, then laughed a good long while before he continued, his voice barely scratching above a whisper. “I dunno, let’s think, what would I say to him if I was in a bad way and I was in a bad way last night. Guess I’d say hey, fucker, what did you do to me? Ruka, what the hell? Hey, why are you drinking that, that’s what I drink. You really drinking it? Or do you wanna get me drunk again? Cause that went well for you last time, yeah, went pretty well. The fuck did I say to you that time? The fuck did I say to you this time? Why you got a guy so head over for you that he wants me dead when he hears what you did?”

“What he did…” Sayaka hissed through her teeth, and didn’t seem shocked. Somehow she didn’t seem shocked.

“Not his fault, not really, fuck, not my fault?” Goro questioned to nobody in particular, “I get like this, this happens sometimes and I lose track I lose my mind it just goes far away from me and it’s like I can’t even control what I think or what I say and I do stupid shit and I say stupid shit and I just wanna get hurt I just wanna die that’s all it is. Felt that way the other night. Bet I asked Ruka to hurt me, and he did. Did what I asked. And hurt me. A lot. I’m so stupid and disgusting and I hate me! I hate me and I hate him and I hate everything that’s ever happened!”

“That’s not surprising,” Sayaka admitted, “It isn’t like… He was a bad guy. Neither of them were. I’m just not surprised at any of this. Yuuri never had a chance to realize there’s such a thing as a situation like that. Like there’s a way for a ‘yes’ or a ‘please’ to mean nothing.” She rubbed her own arm. “Kanoshi’s wanted him to do something like that for years, probably. Never asked cause he’s a stupid idiot who can’t say what he wants. Just does what he wants. Did… What he wanted.
And that was to try to kill you. For getting hurt by somebody he loved.”

“You knew they were like this and you didn’t warn us!?” Amai questioned, “Fucked up boys like this and it never crossed your mind to say? Hey, Ruka doesn’t understand dubcon? Hey, Kyosuke is fucking nutso when the green eyed beast grabs him by the dick?”

“I never thought…” Sayaka mumbled, “I never thought they’d be a danger to anybody but each other. Come on. Why would I air my friends’ baggage to everybody, reveal their darkest sides to strangers they could have made a good impression on? It’s not like they hurt you, Oishi.”

“They hurt me the minute they got Akamatsu killed in the Dining Hall.” Amai crossed her arms.

“In the grand scheme of things, uh, that doesn’t fucking matter,” Sayaka snapped, then turned to Goro. “Bakura, I’m sorry. You can understand why I didn’t warn you, can’t you? Can’t you forgive me? I never could have guessed that this would happen.”

“Does it matter if I forgive you?” Goro asked, suddenly seeming lucid. “I won’t live long enough for that to make a difference, you know. I could live my last breath despising you for letting him near me and it wouldn’t be any skin off my back. It’s in, how long? Ten minutes? Less? How long have I got to live that I can’t be angry at you?”

“Ah-” Sayaka took a step backwards. “I guess. You’re right. But letting him near you… Isn’t that phrasing kinda harsh? It’s not like he was a monster! You know, I kill people like that!”

“Maybe you have a blind spot,” Goro said, “Or, maybe, I’m just messing with you. Maybe I just wanna hear it. If I hadn’t killed him and you found out, would you have?”

“You said it yourself, it wasn’t his fault either!” Sayaka said, “If he was really a dangerous person, if the situation wasn’t this complicated, I would! To hell with ‘he’s my friend’, I would if it would make you feel safer, I don’t care! I’d protect somebody like you… No matter what…”

“Wrong answer!” Goro burst out laughing again. “Idiot! Idiot, you’re a real dummy! Killing him for me, in this Killing Game? How little do you value yourself that you’d give it up just so I wouldn’t have to look at him and remember how he felt!? Come on. If I got away with this… I was gonna let you out. You and Nami. Me? A speck of my happiness isn’t worth your life!”

“It would be,” Sayaka said, “If the situation was really bad, it would be. If it got out of control, like if Yuuri thought just because it happened once it could happen again, whenever he wanted, something like that… Of course I would…”

“It ain’t,” Goro said, “Your responsibility. Know you think it is. It ain’t! I’m my own responsibility. And I… Fucked up.”

“Bakura…” Sayaka sighed.

“I did. I made a mistake! I didn’t wanna kill ‘em. It’s all a blur! I was just so, so scared. They had me pinned in the auditorium but somehow I… Got away. I dunno how I got the locking tool, either. Just before I knew it. I won the fight. I was the one who got out alive.” He let out a long and raspy breath, lowering his forehead to his podium, “Never wanted that! I thought, though. Funny. Funny it’s me. I’ve gone and done it this time. Wasn’t even trying this time, not like the last two. But it’s me. I’m the villain. I better be a good one. I better be…”

“Somebody who deserves to be taken down by Nami Kaguya.” He finished, and then fell eerily silent, holding even his breath in place.
“Well, I’m sorry, but you failed,” Nami said, “A villain worthy of being taken down by me? You’re hardly that. Hardly a villain at all.”

“But what I did to the bodies…” Goro said.

“Was when they were already dead, right?” Nami asked. He lifted his head to nod. “See, so you didn’t really do that kind of stuff. It was staged. After the fact.”

“I still did it,” Goro said, “I still did something that awful.”

“Yeah, and fucked up my ward in the process! So why’re you being all soft on him?” Amai demanded.

“I…” Nami tried and couldn’t explain herself.

“It’s cause she feels bad!” Goro proclaimed, spreading his arms to his sides. “Cause, I did fail! I tried and tried and I couldn’t make myself a villain in her eyes, so she feels bad, cause she had to find me out. Still feels bad she couldn’t save me, back in the real world. But that’s bullshit. I’m just rotten… Never should have been saved. Really should be condemned now.”

“I’d say!” Amai snipped, but then took a look around the room and shrunk under the stares, “You don’t… Agree with me? Are you braindead?”

“It isn’t that we disagree completely,” Tsumugi said, holding her hands close to her chest. “But this is your first class trial, Oishi. You don’t know how it feels, no matter what they did… To see one of your peers executed.”

“Especially because,” Mitsuru said, “In the real world, a case like this would probably be argued as self defense. In a Killing Game, the punishments are too severe, everyone knows that. But it’s even more severe when the culprit’s punishment would probably be to spend time at an inpatient facility, or something like that, in the real world.”

“Ugh.” Amai rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t change that he killed two people, moved their bodies to my ward, and made it so there’s nowhere to make food! He knew somebody was dead in the Dining Hall, even if he didn’t know it was Akamatsu, and then he had to pick my ward to move the bodies to, my ward to dismember them in! Who gives a shit if it started with self defense? My pity runs out the minute he puts a body in a bag.”

“That’s my kinda argument!” Goro said, “See, she understands what a rotten person I am, how I’m a villain too now! No need to save a villain from anything, Nami, you can rest easy! You found the culprit and you don’t ever even have to worry about ‘failing’ me again!”

“Are you kidding me? Of course I do,” Nami said, “None of this would have happened to you… If I’d been able to convict Matsubara.”

“And we have a ringer for false equivalency!” Goro threw his hands up in the air. “Come on! You really think I wouldn’t mess up this bad if I lost out on a couple months of abuse? Big if! I mean, just look at what I ended up doing. Doesn’t this make me rotten down to my core? Normal people don’t commit double murders, and totally don’t stage it as something even worse just to make it interesting for an attorney! Bet I would’ve been just as bad if I never even met that guy…”
“Of course you’re not normal. You’re broken.” Nami sighed. “So am I, though, you know. What
do you think? Come on. Am I rotten down to my core, because of the man I killed in middle
school? Am I rotten for that? I can’t remember doing it. Just like you, I wasn’t in control of myself.
Does that make me rotten? Or are you just a hypocrite who hates yourself?”

“You? Nah, you’re Nami, though. Nothing could make you rotten. And you’re not broken
either…” Goro took a step back from his podium, a smile still on his face and his eyes unfocused.
“If that did really happen, well, it actually was self-defense, through and through. You were
keeping yourself from being broken! Hahaah… If I was really capable of a thing like self defense
then why didn’t I kill Kiyoshi a long time ago? If I was able to do this just to protect myself? And
not because I’m a sick fucking bastard who just wanted to kill them!”

“It’s pretty obvious you didn’t want to,” Nami said.

wanted Ruka to kill me but as soon as he actually tried I panicked and I did this!” Goro held his
head in his hands, breathing heavily as he was starting to visibly lose track of himself again. “Who
am I? Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? I don’t even know that! All I know… All I know is
I… Can’t stop hurting…”

“It wasn’t just to put on a show for me, was it?” Nami asked, “You’re saying that, to make it seem
like you’re just a villain. But it did hurt you. Obviously it did. The way you cut up Kyosuke… You
followed an anatomy book, right? It wasn’t personal. With Ruka, it was. Wasn’t it?”

“So what… So what if it was! Isn’t that worse!?” Goro questioned, “It’s got to be worse! That I
saw a corpse and I thought, finally. Finally I can just fucking do something to someone who hurt
me? A body isn’t threatening! A body can’t do anything! So it’s fine to cut pieces and mess it all
up and look at it and think, yeah, haah, how’s it feel to be me!? Aha-
AhaaaaaaaaaaaaaAaaaaaaa-

His wild, hysterical laughter crescendoed to an agonized scream. Everyone, even Amai, could only
be silent as they stared at him. Nami could swear she saw some sort of realization on that girl’s
face, before it was turned away. Like nobody was allowed to see the fact she knew she was, in
some way, wrong.

Nami didn’t think that Goro was an innocent person, or that he ought to be absolved of all
responsibility for his crime. Even so, she’d been able to draw out that truth, so everybody in the
courtroom could see. Just like the way that Yuuri hurt Goro. This wasn’t anybody’s fault. It wasn’t
easy, like the last two cases where Tomoe readily murdered a boy who she thought wanted to kill
her sister, where Shinjiro plotted out a poisoning which just impacted the wrong person.

Yuuri had hurt Goro, had taken advantage of a weak mental state, without realizing completely that
was what he was doing. Kanoshi had become jealous and decided to kill Goro, using the excuse
that he witnessed their ploy to defeat the Evil King. Goro defended himself, then set up a mystery
to watch Nami solve it… And at the same time, found some sort of catharsis against the body of
somebody he never could have condemned while alive.

There wasn’t anywhere to lay blame. Everybody had done something wrong, creating a perfect
storm that led to this outcome. If Goro hadn’t killed those two, or at least killed Kanoshi, he’d
probably be the one whose death they were investigating. Monokuma didn’t care about that
distinction, but Nami did. Of course she did. She didn’t know the full extent of what was in Yuuri’s
heart, or Kanoshi’s. Even now, as she was exposing Goro’s heart for everyone to see, she didn’t
fully grasp it herself. She couldn’t. For all their similarities, she hadn’t suffered the way he did.
Even so, she couldn’t let this trial go without letting others see what she did.
A broken, scared boy.

He would have done this even if she hadn’t failed him? That was a lie. After a trial which nearly robbed him of his position, a trial that Goro had aided and abetted, it couldn’t have been more of the same. All the horrors Nami tried so hard to expose and put an end to would be nothing compared to the revenge of a man whose toys tried to destroy his power. She remembered him, in the courtroom. Goro Bakura, frightened beyond belief, lying and backtracking and trying so hard to escape at the same time, holding onto some hope that if she failed he would still be allowed some form of survival.

And here, where his heart was exposed and he couldn’t stop crying, somebody whose heart had never been shown made a decision.

A decision which was probably.

*In Goro’s best interest.*

“I was Accomplice X.”
10:00 PM / 2200 Hours: Day Eight.

Goro Bakura had done something that he thought quite impressive over the course of that day. That being, pretending to be normal. At least, as normal as he ever got. It helped that his day-to-day demeanor was one that was already off-putting and strange. He’d effectively lied about the origins of his injuries, and even managed to put it somewhat out of his mind, what happened. He woke up with the clarity to understand what he hadn’t when he went to sleep, the memory that he’d asked for that. That didn’t change how much it hurt, but he asked to be hurt, didn’t he? He specifically begged that Yuuri do whatever he wanted with him, anything he wanted as long as he’d hate it.

Why did he do that? Why? Now that the day was winding down, it was hitting him again. Goro didn’t understand why he’d done something like that. It would have been better if he hadn’t run into anybody and he’d just gone back to his room alone and died. That’s what he would have done. He was a dead man walking anyway. Ever since he failed to kill Tomoe. He made the decision to commit a murder in a Killing Game, and he failed. Maybe he gave up too easily. He did give up, but he’d tried. And he tried to kill her too. The girl who’d probably become his closest friend here, until Nami remembered.

Goro already should have been executed, back in the first case, but he gave up and got away. He should have been killed as an easy, low-sympathy target for being an attempted murderer. He should have killed himself last night. He should have. He was still here, though. Why was he still here? What was it about Kiyoshi’s victims, that they continued to scrape through no matter how many times they should have died?

And that was when it happened. Just like last night, he’d stumbled into Yuuri in the throes of his self-loathing and dissociation. Not just Yuuri this time. His vision shook as he stared at the two of them, holding the door to the Dining Hall shut tight. It was night. It was night and they were holding that door closed. They were…

“Ahh-” Goro breathed, staring wide-eyed at the both of them. “What did you… do?”

“Bakura.” Yuuri let go of the door and stepped towards him. “It’s… We’re just trying to help people, okay? It’s no big deal. Don’t worry about it.”

“You killed somebody?” Goro asked, then crossed his arms and looked down at the floor. “Ha, okay, yeah, alright. Alright I get it. I won’t tell anyone. Why would I? Nah it doesn’t matter doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter it’s alright. Yeah. Course, though. Ha. Just great. No wonder you fucked me up so bad, no wonder! Bet it was real hard to show some restraint. Not kill me. You should’ve. Really should’ve. Woulda been a better victim than whoever’s dead in there. Bet you would’ve enjoyed that even more!”

“Uh.” Kanoshi stepped over as well. “Ruka, what’s he talking about?”

“No nothing,” Yuuri said.

“No nothing,” Goro said, “Sorry Kyosuke but it’s not nothing! Nozomi might’ve been onto something about what this guy’s capable of, he might’ve-”


“Those bruises are…” Kanoshi realized. “Ruka, what the hell?”

“It’s not what you think-” Yuuri started, but stopped himself when he realized that Kanoshi had walked up to Goro and grabbed his wrist in a rough, jerking grip.

“With him!?” Kanoshi questioned, “Are you kidding me!? This guy? He’s… Is that why you’re drinking that sweet shit? Is that what he got drunk on, when you…”

“H-Hey, let go of me-” Goro tried to protest, but Kanoshi jerked him closer and clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Yeah, so what?” Yuuri asked, setting the empty bottle down. The cap was nowhere to be seen.

“…No, you know, I guess it doesn’t matter,” Kanoshi said, “But what does matter is that this guy saw what we were doing.”

“You said… That wouldn’t be an issue, though,” Yuuri protested, “You said that it was how Monokuma said. Tricking somebody into breaking a rule doesn’t make you a culprit!”

“Tricking doesn’t! But how are we supposed to know if that’s still the case when we held the door closed?” Kanoshi questioned, “I know we were trying to kill the Evil King, but… If we’re both culprits, and we both got away with it, that would still be four people getting out. I don’t want to just let a witness tell everyone what he saw and get us both executed. Do you?”

Goro realized what Kanoshi was getting at, and managed to squirm out of his grip, making a dash down the hallway. He didn’t get very far, though, before that same wrist was grabbed again and he was pulled, hard, through a doorway. He heard a pop and felt his shoulder come out of its socket, dislocated with the force. So that was… Yuuri.

Ah, so he’d get killed by that guy after all. Just twenty-four hours later than expected. Why was he crying? Why was he scared? Wasn’t this what he wanted? Yet he found himself struggling, running, stumbling through rows of chairs to try and find some way out past two people who both wanted him dead. He clipped the last armrest in an aisle with his hip and fell onto the ground, his elbows scraping the carpet. Kanoshi was the one who took advantage of this mistake, pressing Goro against the floor and wrapping his hands around his neck from behind.

He coughed and sputtered and shouted something, he didn’t know what it was, he could hardly think, all he was thinking was please, save me. I don’t know why but I don’t want to die.

I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY ALL OF A SUDDEN I DON’T WANT TO DIE.

The door at the end of the auditorium opened.

“Kyo...suke?” The betrayed voice of a delicate flower couldn’t understand why he was doing this, and that gave him just the pause that Goro needed to get away, running from the room, back into the hallway. They were right behind him, though. Right behind him and when did this block of wood get in his hand?

WHEN DID I USE THIS BLOCK OF WOOD TO BASH KYOSUKE’S BRAINS IN???
“Bakura…” Yuuri was holding his hands out like he was trying to calm an angry horse, “Hey. Hey it’s… Alright… It’s. Okay-”

But he took a step closer and

**I DON’T WANT YUURI RUKA TO TOUCH ME EVER AGAIN WHAT THE FUCK GO AWAY GO AWAY!**

He had dropped the block of wood, but he always carried another weapon with him. It wasn’t immediate. Yuuri had fallen to the ground, silently clutching and the long wound down his stomach as a puddle grew. Goro watched the life go out of his eyes.

**I DID NOT WANT TO SEE THAT. I NEVER SAW ANYBODY DIE. I ALWAYS SHUT MY EYES AT THE LAST MINUTE OF THE EXECUTIONS. I NEVER SAW THIS BEFORE. IT’S AWFUL. IT’S AWFUL. WHY DIDN’T I JUST LET THEM KILL ME?**

“Goro,” Box said, reaching out to put her hands on his shoulders. It wasn’t bad. Her hands were small and gentle and *oh she just set his shoulder that was very kind of her.*

“I don’t feel… so good…” He muttered, leaning against her, “What just. What just happened?”

“As far as I can tell… I found Kyosuke trying to kill you, and on your way out I thought you might need a weapon to defend yourself, so I gave you the thing I found on the floor near Amai’s ward, and… You did.”

“Why’d you have to go and do that?” Goro asked.

“I didn’t want you to die,” Box said.

“It would have been better if I did. Maybe *one* of them could have survived that way. Wouldn’t that have been better? Doesn’t that match your motto more?”

“I guess so. But everything happened so fast I couldn’t think about that. I guess I just thought about what I wanted. What I wanted was to save you,” Box explained.

“But I’ll still get executed.” Goro brought his hands up to his face and *oh was his wrist broken too that hurt?*

“Yes,” Box said, “But that doesn’t mean you’ll die.”

“How?” Goro asked.

“I can’t say,” Box said, “But it’s possible. I’ll hope with all my heart for something that lets you live.”

“Garbage,” Goro scoffed. Then he brought his hands down again and turned to look at her. “How are you so calm right now?”

“I’ve seen this plenty of times before,” Box said.

“I…” Goro took a few deep breaths. “Can’t leave it like this. I have to make it interesting. It’s got to be something worth solving, right? Got to be something so I’m a real bad guy.”

“For Nami?” Box asked.
“Yeah, for Nami,” Goro said, “Can you help me? Can you help me get these bodies moved?”

“Where to?” Box asked.

“Uh…” Goro thought for a minute, then looked at the block of wood. Given its shape… Yeah, it was probably something like that, right? “Oishi’s ward. We should put them in garbage bags so we don’t leave a trail.”

“I… don’t want to do that.”

“But you will, right?” Goro asked, his voice shaking, “For me?”

“I will.” Box frowned as she stared at one of the bodies. “You asked. So I don’t have a choice.”

Goro picked up the bottle and brought it with him, dropping it in the trash in the gift shop while they got large garbage bags. The two of them managed to get the bodies into the bags, but Box told him to wait a little while. She’d noticed Tsumugi checking all over for Kaede. She’d get to the Runner’s Ward eventually, though. Box watched from the stairwell carefully, then returned to Goro. They moved the bodies while Tsumugi was in the ward, and once in Oishi’s ward, Goro staged the scene as well. He did it quickly.

Using a heavy anatomy book from Riko’s ward, and a ballpoint pen to mark where to cut for Kanoshi. He dropped the pen and couldn’t find it again, though. Then he left to find Box where she waited outside the door.

“Give me that,” Box said, holding a hand out for the locking tool.

“What for?” Goro asked.

“I’ll make it a locked room,” Box explained, “That’s the easiest way to make a mystery more interesting, right? I’ll do that, and then you’ll let me go. Okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll handle the rest on my own,” Goro said.

He tossed the anatomy book in the Runner’s Ward once Tsumugi had already moved on, made the two plushies in his ward, hid the weapon in one. During the investigation he planted both in Torimi’s room. All of this was a matter of luck, that Tsumugi didn’t catch him during the night.

**WHY DID I ASK HER TO DO THAT I KNOW SHE CAN’T REFUSE AM I JUST AS BAD AS THE PEOPLE I HATE WHY DID I MAKE HER HELP ME WHY AM I LIKE THIS WHY-**

Nami found him out.

Nami found him out so much more than he ever intended.

And Box Hako had to rescue him again.
“You? You’re Accomplice X?” Amai questioned, staring at Box from across the courtroom.
“What… What the fuck!? What the actual fuck!? How could you do that to me!? My ward? My fucking ward?”

“It isn’t like I chose the location,” Box said.

“That doesn’t matter! You still did it! You helped him to do something like this and you put it in my ward, why did it have to be my ward?” Amai cried, “You destroyed the one good thing that I had in this bullshit hell-spital! I don’t care if you didn’t choose where to do it, you still did it, my best friend and you helped do this to me!”

“I’m not your best friend,” Box said.

“I mean, fuck! Not anymore!” Amai threw her hands up.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry won’t cut it! Jesus Christ!” Amai shouted, “You knew how much this would hurt me and you just went ahead and still did it and you put dead bodies in my ward, in my kitchen! Why don’t I just air out everything I know about you? What if I did that? Come on, do you want that?”

“I… Don’t care,” Box said, “The past is the past. Whatever it is you ‘have on me’ shouldn’t matter anymore.”

“Fine, yeah, I guess that I’ll just say all of it then! You’re a bullshit person and you never think anything through! Somebody asks you for anything and I guess you just fucking do it? I shouldn’t be surprised it came to this, with all the other shit that happened! How many boys were you with who you didn’t feel anything for, just cause they wanted it, yeah? How’d that feel, how’d that screw you up? I know it did! You never said anything but you did! Being everybody’s friend and everybody’s girlfriend and doing everything for other people and the one thing you ever did for yourself you fucked up too, since you’re here now!”

“The one thing… I ever did for myself?” Box asked, tilting her head slowly to one side in her dazed confusion.

“You really gonna make me say it? The one fucking selfish thing you ever did and then you had to vanish for a whole ass year on top of it and let me believe you were oh so perfect you always did everything just right? Straight As in every subject, even fucking ending yourself?” Amai demanded, “You’re a fucked up person, Box! I don’t know why it’s even surprising to me that you would do a shitty thing like this!”

“I… I-I…” Box pressed a hand against her forehead, tears welling in her eyes. “I don’t… I don’t remember… I didn’t think I… Why would I… I wouldn’t do a thing like… That… That’s no good for anybody it’s no good at all it’s worthless it’s a worthless thing to do it doesn’t help anybody it doesn’t help anybody at all so there isn’t any possible way I did that there’s no way Box Hako would ever do a thing like that there’s no way no way n-n-n-no way--”

“Well, you did.” Amai crossed her arms. “And I’m one of the only people who ever knew that about you. Oops! Now the whole world’s gonna know the truth! Ultimate Volunteer didn’t get kidnapped or murdered by Despair at all! She tried to fucking chicken out of being the perfect daughter, friend, girlfriend, Ultimate, then went and hid for a year without letting anybody know
she survived her pathetic fucking attempt because, no one can know she failed to be perfect in the art of snapping her own goddamned neck!"

“Ama...i…” Box whined.

“What did you think I’d do when you fucking did this to me? You’re one of two people here I actually got dirt on! You cross me and you get what you deserve!” Amai cackled. “And wow, it feels great! Feels great to fucking make you feel the way I do! Or worse! I bet it’s worse, at least I didn’t start crying like a little bitch!”

“I didn’t want to do this I didn’t want to put the bodies in your ward I really didn’t want to but he asked me to I had to I didn’t have a choice,” Box said, “I’m just a tool for you to use that’s what I’m here for I’m not a person it’s true I’m not a person I’m just a tool I’m furniture I’m anything you can think of that exists only to be used because that’s what I’m here for to be used I always have been and I always will be and that’s the only way that I exist—”

“Yeah, I’d say! You’re suuuuuuch a tool!” Amai leaned forward, sneering at her former best friend.

“I want this to stop I want this to stop please stop,” Box complained, “I said I didn’t want to put them in your ward! I had to, though, I had to! He asked and I had to! This would be even worse if I didn’t, it’d be really bad! Anytime I don’t help it turns out so much worse than if I did, every time! I need this to stop I need it I need it please please please please please can this game end can it end it’s been too long I need it to end—”

“Stop trying to make me feel sympathy for you,” Amai said, her snide voice now cold and hard. “I won’t. And I don’t think anybody else here does, either. Nobody’s trying to defend you. You’re a useless, spineless person.”

“Not a person not a person not-” Box dropped to the floor behind her podium as she started to repeat that phrase, but she was cut off by somebody else joining in.

“That’s enough, Oishi,” Nami said.

“I agree,” Tsumugi spoke up, “As an accomplice to a murder… I think the things you said to her have already been punishment enough. I know how it can feel to want somebody to suffer for helping, but I believe her, that she hardly did anything at all. Like Kirumi… She hardly did anything.”

“We weren’t staying quiet because we don’t care about her,” Riko said, “But because she did deserve, some of it. That’s more than enough, though. Any more won’t be good for her. Or for you. Isn’t that enough catharsis? I’m friends with both of you and I think that this is enough.”

“Enough…” Amai said, “I guess. I guess it’s enough. I guess, if you say it that way, I’ve had enough. Yeah. We’ve had enough.”

Box wordlessly whined from the floor.

“Can’t…” Goro spoke up, “Can’t this trial just go on… A little longer…”
“Goro?” Nami asked, turning to look at him.

“Just a little longer…” He whined, “I don’t… I don’t want to die?”

“I’m sorry,” Nami said. She didn’t know what else she could say.

“I thought for so long I wanted to die but I don’t! I don’t want to… I want to get to know you like a person, not my hero… I want to make up for what I did to Box… I want a chance to to stop being so fucking horrible!” Goro shrieked the last bit, and slammed his fists down against the podium.

“I don’t think that you’re horrible,” Nami said, “But I don’t… Know what to do.”

“There’s nothing to be done there’s nothing I’ve known this whole time I’m gonna end up dead I’m gonna die die I’m gonna die! I’m the only culprit left alive I’m the only one so that’s it that’s all there is to it I’m going to die I don’t want to I don’t want to die!”

“That would make you,” Mitsuru observed, “The first culprit who didn’t, right?”

“No,” Sayaka said, “Kyosuke was also a culprit who didn’t want to die. That’s why this happened. At least, a big part of it. It’s not like any of us can actually say… Why this happened.”

“It happened because I am a fucking disaster!” Goro shouted out, “It happened because I couldn’t just be a normal person in any way!”

“And whose fault is that?” Nami asked, “If anything, I’d say… This is more like a second trial for Matsubara.”

“In some ways… I suppose it is,” Madara admitted, “Matsubara being Bakura’s manager, correct?”

“Even that’s… My fault…” Goro said, “I never should have gotten involved with him I never should have…”

“Goro,” Nami said, “You had nowhere else to go. He knew that. That’s how he picks his targets. It isn’t your fault.”

“I had somewhere to go… At first I could have turned him down but I… I was desperate and I just fucked everything up!” He shouted, “Nothing went the way it was supposed to, everything went wrong, and now I’m here! I’m here in this Killing Game and I wanna go home! I wanna go home and I don’t have one anymore!”

“I want…” Goro wailed, dropping to the ground as Box had previously done. “I want my mom… I wish… I wish I was better… And I could still… Go back to her.”


“I only did this… All of it… Because I needed money for her. Because I needed money to save her. And Kiyoshi said… he said he’d give me everything we needed. In exchange for. You know,” He muttered, “And then she died. She died before the doctors even said she was supposed to… And that was when I had nowhere else to go anymore…”

Nami didn’t say anything else, she just walked across the courtroom to Goro, sat down beside him,
and pulled him into a gentle hug.

“She was a good mom, wasn’t she?” Nami asked.

“Yeah, she was the best,” Goro sniffed, burying his face in Nami’s shoulder, “She was always there for me even though I was a weird kid… And I wanted to help her so bad, you know? I really wanted to. But I was just twelve and I believed the wrong person. I think he killed her. I think he killed my mom so that I’d be stuck with him. I loved her so much, Nami. I really did. She taught me to sing and she had the nicest voice I ever heard… And everything I did was a good thing, to her, she said. Even when I behaved badly she said it was a good thing I did so she could teach me not to do that. Do you think she can see me now? Do you think I finally disappointed her?”

“I think,” Nami said, “She’s watching. But she isn’t disappointed in you. I bet she’s just sad that she couldn’t be here to help you through this.”

“You think so?” Goro asked.

“I do,” Nami said.

“That’s nice to hear…” Goro whispered, “You remind me of her, you know. That’s part of it I guess. Why I thought you were so amazing. You look a lot like she did.”

“I can’t replace her,” Nami said, “But I can try to be here for you, anyway.”

“Thank you…” Goro went quiet, and just cried. He cried against Nami’s shoulder with her hands on his back, keeping him close and as comforted as she could. Some people might think it was weird, to be compared to somebody’s mother. Under any other circumstance she might have been, but this was somehow okay. She wanted to protect Goro, wanted to nurture him, he really was just a scared and miserable kid underneath it all.

A scared and miserable kid who made some really bad mistakes. Even so, Nami wanted to do anything she could, for him. He was going to die soon. There wasn’t anything to be done about that. He’d be executed for his crimes.

“Nami…” Goro whined, “Do you think it was ever possible? Do you think there could have been any way… Any way that there could have been a future for me?”

“I do,” Nami said, “I think it’s possible. You would have been happy someday. You’d get better and you’d find a way to be happy.”

“Do you think,” Goro asked, “Someday, I could have been so much better, I’d fall in love? For real this time? With someone who loves me?”

“Of course. Of course you would have.”

“…Thank you, Nami,” Goro said, then finally let go of her, pulling back to look her in the eyes. He was shivering. He looked… So frail. “I think I’m ready to go now.”

“Are you sure?” Nami asked, “I’m sure we could stall longer if you needed it.”

“Yeah. I’m ready.” He gave one last forced smile. “No reason to make all of you stand here moping for longer than you have to. No reason to make you stand here moping at all. It’s not like it’s tragic for somebody like me to die, after everything… It’s just the end. That’s all it is. I don’t have to suffer anymore.”
“It’s the end,” Nami agreed, trying and failing to bite back tears of her own.

“I’m sorry that I made things so inconvenient for you.” Goro dropped his smile, shut his eyes, and let the metal tendril wrapped around his waist drag him away to his final moments.
Goro Bakura’s Execution: LONG LIVE THE PRINCE

Goro was alone.

He was utterly completely one hundred percent unchangeably alone and he was lying on the ground. Mud. It was mud and there were bugs in it and he didn’t care but he sat up, anyway, and looked around. It was a shack, a small building. There wasn’t anything here. Shaking, he got to his feet, steadying himself against a wall with his unbroken wrist. His wrist was broken last night and unlike a dislocated shoulder, Box couldn’t just fix it with her bare hands. She didn’t notice it either. He kept it well-hidden.

Box. Box, why’d he have to go and put her through that? He should have known, should have listened when she said she didn’t want to do it. There were other ways. Other places. It would have been easier to go with, for example, a ward that Tsumugi had already checked. Or better yet left the bodies there. Why was it important to make a mystery? Why did Goro ever think that mattered? All he did was hurt his best friend.

He looked down. At the shack’s entrance, something glimmered in the mud. He unearthed it with the toe of his boot to see it was a diamond, sparkling in the light. The light? There was a window in the door and light was streaming through it. He reached out and opened the door, again, with his uninjured… Less injured arm. His whole body was injured in some way. Just some more than the rest.

He was struck with sunlight. Maybe it was imitation sunlight, but even so, it had been a while since he’d really had any of that. In the hospital, it seemed like all days were cloudy, wherever it was that they could actually see out of windows. The bright light kind of hurt his eyes, but he appreciated it. It was warm. Since when had he become so cold all the time? It felt, really pleasant, but this was an execution. That couldn’t last.

Out in front of him was a crowd of mannequins. They weren’t making any sound, but they were moving as if they were cheering, not dissimilar to the mannequins from Shinjiro’s execution. These ones all resembled the same person, though. Well. Not quite. These ones all had a certain person’s face taped to them. A wanted poster, for who else but Kiyoshi Matsubara? A sea of his tormentor, cheering for him as he stood above them.

He felt like somebody was behind him, and he turned to see one more mannequin, the same as the others, but wearing a crown and a robe. It was dressed up like a king. It seemed to be staring Goro down for a full minute. He was frozen, right up until the mannequin reached out and shoved him by the shoulders. He toppled off the ledge, backwards, into the crowd. That was how it should have been, right? But he was falling for so long. Falling for so much longer than he should have.

As he fell, he was losing his breath, having trouble breathing. He brought his hands to his throat and thumbed at the bruises that Kanoshi had given him, last night, the night when he should have died. The night that he really should have been the one to turn up dead. His vision was getting blurry and he couldn’t tell if it was from a lack of oxygen, or if he was crying, or if he was just having that much trouble with his own brain all over again and he wasn’t even here right now. Maybe he wasn’t falling for a long time at all. Maybe it only felt that way to him because he was so afraid of dying that he’d stretch out the minutes he had left to be alive, even if they were unpleasant minutes.
Another mannequin fell from above, falling much faster than he was, and not actually resembling Kiyoshi. This one looked... Like Kokichi Ouma. It hit him on the way down. Then, there were more. Kobayashi, Morinaga, Warushi, Kashiwagi, even people he'd never personally met, like Itadai. Then Kanoshi, then Yuuri. He was covered in even more bruises by the time any of those mannequins could be heard hitting the ground below him. How much further did he have to go? How much further did he have to fall?"

Above him, the light was going out. He was losing it, but he could still feel its warmth on his injured skin as he fell, as much as the wind whipped his arms and tried to give him back his chill, he at least had that. He had that much to take comfort in. He hadn’t felt this warm in a long time, the sunlight really was incredibly warm. Even in bed, he wasn’t this warm, he never felt comfortable. When was the last time he felt this warm? It had to have been... Before Kiyoshi. When he frivolously kept an electric blanket that would always, at all times, wrap around him and keep the chill deep inside of him from stretching out to pale fingertips and shivers.

Why was he still falling? He was ready to die. He’d made that decision. Just as soon as he’d realized that he didn’t want to die, he’d had to come to terms with the fact that he would. And he did. But now it was taking so long... Too long. Why did he have to keep thinking? Why did he have this time to keep thinking about all of his regrets and his sadness? He should have died a long time ago. A long time ago in his life and a long time ago in this execution. He kept falling. Kept on falling and falling and falling and...

The light was gone, and Goro had lost consciousness. He faded away. His thoughts were silenced. He landed in the pile of mannequins, and was immediately swallowed up by them. Gone from sight, and everybody knew, gone.

One thing was certain, though. This was the end. It was the end of Goro’s suffering and hard times and nobody was ever going to hurt him again. No matter what, nobody would hurt him again.

Yeah.

Anyone could take some cheer in that.
Hanako Bakura thought that it was an incredible tragedy, when she got sick. It wasn’t like her life was worth especially much, compared to others. She was a normal woman, and always had been. The only exceptional talent she had was a beautiful singing voice, but she had very little stage presence and quite a plain face, and she’d long outgrown being able to sing for shrines at festivals. It wasn’t for herself that her illness was a tragic thing, but for her son, who was ten years old at the time. The doctors gave her three more years to spend with him. She’d be torn from him just before what were the most difficult years of any child’s life.

He was a very special and talented boy, she thought. Unlike her, he was destined to do something with that voice of his. He was cute, and unlike most young boys, only getting cuter as he grew up. He taught himself dances that he saw on television all the time, ever since he could stand on his own two feet. In spite of this belief in his destiny, Hanako had never signed him up for auditions or contests, never tried to push him into becoming the star she knew he could be. He needed time to be a kid first, after all. She knew the sort of things that happened to people who entered the industry too young, especially these days, especially in the Quiet War. There were plenty of talents in entertainment, which meant there were also bound to be plenty of Ultimate Despairs.

It wasn’t like the industry had ever been a safe place, even before the concept of Despair dug its roots in deep to society and left the regular populace in a state of resignation that they’d simply experience some form of misery before reaching adulthood. Hanako thought she could avoid that for Goro, by keeping him away from dangerous people, and besides. Wasn’t it misery enough, when his father cruelly threw them out of the family home five years ago? Then again, staying with that man, Hanako thought…

Would have been a worse misery, too. It wasn’t that he was remarkably cruel. He was a good husband to her for years, but that’s all he really was, passable as a man who could be a husband to a plain woman. His decision to turn them out on the street was a culmination of small incidents, not the least fueled by the fact that a woman named Hanako bore him a son who was cold all the time, pale, and seemed to always have dark circles under his eyes. A ghost bearing another ghost, and after five years of it, he decided he’d had enough of housing two ghosts under his roof.

But he was still a standard man, Hanako thought. If he hadn’t been superstitious, he would have grown to hate his son for his behaviors instead. Despite the acceptance in the face of Despair of the world at large, there still existed in this world standard men who could only stand their sons to be standard men. Standard men who could be a husband to a plain woman.

Hanako wanted, always, to protect her precious son from everything she could. A pair of ghosts who needed to watch over each other, but he wasn’t old enough to watch over her yet, so she’d do it herself, do it herself for as long as she needed to, to make sure that she could preserve his wonderful smile. She’d caught wind of a false one a few times already. When he said that other kids at school called him creepy, his smile spread and split his cheeks and hid his dimples. It was still a smile, but it was unsettling. A smile that would be called creepy, the smile of a ghost trying to be brave.

She’d broken down in tears right then and there, and held him close, so close, and told him not to pretend to her and she was sorry, it was because of her, because she was a ghost that he was as well and she’d speak with his classmates’ parents and she did and last she heard, the parents had doled out strict punishments, even the doting ones who’d spoil their rotten children into thinking it was fine to tease a little boy for his ghostlike attributes. At the next PTA meeting, there had been
hushed whispers about a ghost woman named Hanako, and who knew that yokai like that could grow up and become mothers?

When she was younger, Hanako would have hated statements like that. She hated her own name and her pale skin and her dark hair. Now, she would willingly lean into such things. Call her a ghost if you will. She didn’t believe in such things, of course. It was foolish, she was a human, so was her son. Still, they were ghosts in a way.

When she got sick, she only became more ghostly. She could see her veins through her skin, her hair lost its silkiness no matter what shampoo she tried, and the plump figure she’d never shed from her pregnancy finally melted away to leave her, frail. Barely wanting to hold her son close, because she wasn’t soft enough for him anymore. Her sickness was a tragedy only for his sake. She wouldn’t be able to leave a ghost for real. When she died, he would be on his own. When she died, she couldn’t protect him anymore.

She had this awful feeling of dread, that when she died, all the misery she’d held off from him would come crashing down like a tidal wave. She cried often, in those days. Cried and drank a lot of tea, because whenever Goro saw her crying, he would get her a cup, so she wouldn’t be dehydrated. He was so sweet, too sweet for this world. She was losing her grip on him, because she was so frail. She had to let him go out alone. He was old enough, anyway. Old enough to go out alone, that was how she made herself feel less like a failure. If she were well, she would be letting him go places without her anyway. He was twelve.

Just not this often, not this often.

Not so often that she often found herself languishing without any idea of where her darling boy was this time. She read a lot of books. She hated not working to give him nice things, though. Support from his father kept them afloat. Insurance kept her medical bills paid, though not enough to save her. It still took real money, for big procedures like that. She was practically in hospice care.

Where was Goro? Where was he now? She could use a cup of tea…

Hanako woke up to the sound of the door sliding open. It was harsh. Goro would never open her door so harshly, so she startled, sitting straight up with a jolt at the noise. An odd young man stood there. Young enough, anyway. Early thirties, she figured. He wore a suit, but didn’t make any effort with his long hair, tied into a low and greasy ponytail, or the stubble that looked as if he only ever trimmed it close with scissors and never bothered to shave.

“Hanako Bakura,” He greeted her from where he stood, and there was malice in his eyes. She didn’t move. She was afraid and it wasn’t like she, in her current state, could accomplish fight or flight if she did move. She didn’t say anything either. So the man did, “You’re the mother of a very talented young man, did you know that?”

“Of course I knew that,” Her voice was defeated. Ah. So she didn’t even have to be dead yet… For her protection to expire…

“My name is Kiyoshi Matsubara, and I’m a talent agent. I’ve signed your son as a solo pop-punk idol. He’s got the look for it, and the talent,” He said, “He does, also, have the willingness to do whatever it takes. So I’m here to inform you that your bills will be handled, and your life will be saved, for as long as he remains in my employ.”

Hanako was weak. She’d become so weak. She’d already failed to protect Goro… So what use was there in sticking around anyway…?

The doctors said she died of heartbreak.
Kaede was in darkness.

Of course she was, she’d died. She knew in her last moments that she was absolutely going to die and there wasn’t anything she could do to avoid it. Here she was, in darkness. Alone? No, she wasn’t alone. There was definitely somebody here. She was sitting in a chair. She turned around. There they were.

Those four.

In the moment of her death, Kaede remembered her mistake. Remembered what she’d done to the dearly departed, and now she was face to face with them.

“Hey Akamatsu,” Tomoe said, “How was your death?”

“We thought we’d have to wait a whole long time to yell at you!” Etsuko said, “But then you actually died in the Killing Game. I sure wasn’t expecting that. Were you guys?”

“I can’t say I was,” Rei said, “But I wasn’t expecting my own death either.” She side-eyed Shinjiro.

“I also wasn’t expecting your death,” Shinjiro reminded her, then turned to Kaede. “Nonetheless. I think that Bakura put it quite well, didn’t he? Poor boy, ignoring my warning on Minami’s nature… In any case. Before my body was even cold. That’s how long it took, for you to turn my death utterly meaningless, Akamatsu.”

“At least you waited a lil while on mine!” Etsuko laughed. “Course, I had to be the first one dead for that to happen… Not cool, anyway. How’s my death supposed to have any impact if I just get replaced in a reset?”

“Frankly,” Tomoe said, “The only thing I find unpleasant about your death, Akamatsu, is the fact that you didn’t live long enough to see the consequences of your actions through. What was it Monokuma said, again? Right. If any of our replacements die, then, oh dear. Their blood is on your hands. Suppose that could still happen. What’s a little more blood to you, though, detective?”

“I wanted to become better…” Kaede buried her face in her hands. “I never wanted to make your deaths empty and I never wanted to hurt anybody else. I was trying so hard, this time. Not to be in that position. Not to be responsible for every single culprit’s death, by finding them out…”

“And for giving them the motives in the first place,” Rei reminded her.

“I must say, those were very competent motives. This year’s…” Tomoe thought for a minute, then chuckled. “Well, they’re not so good, are they? Isn’t that disappointing, as somebody who knows how to create much better ones? This pre-made crap that Monokuma’s delivering… Must drive you wild.”

“Of course it doesn’t!” Kaede snapped, “Why would it? Come on… I don’t care about that at all. The version of me who wrote the motives for the last game has been dead for a long time. Longer than I have, I mean.”

“Is she?” Shinjiro asked, “I thought for sure, I saw that rotten Kaede when you were condemning us to deaths without purpose.”
“I was trying… To save everybody who was left,” Kaede said, “You know I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone…”

“You’re stupid,” Etsuko said. That was it, all he said, but he said it so matter-of-fact.

“Hey now,” Kaede whined, “I might not be a good person… But I’m smart at least, right? I’m a detective. I was the detective…”

“And look how they’re doing just fine without you,” Rei said, “Isn’t it impressive? I knew Nami had it in her.”

“Your own student, and my precious sister,” Tomoe said, “Are so much more competent than you ever were. They figured out how you died, so simply.”

“Plus,” Etsuko said, “You totally ignored all of Monokuma’s super big warning flags not to do the dumb crap that made our deaths so meaningless!”

“Come now,” Shinjiro said, “That doesn’t mean that she’s dumb. It’s dumb of you not to know the difference, Etsukun.”

“Then… What is it, Yumi?” Etsuko asked.

Shinjiro grimaced. “It’s Shinji.”

“I didn’t think that was a character trait,” Etsuko said.

“No, my name is Shinji,” Shinjiro groaned, pressing his fingers to his forehead. “What Akamatsu’s mistake was… Was arrogance. She believed she couldn’t possibly be wrong, and that’s what led to the current situation.”

“Arrogance?” Kaede asked.

“Maybe you thought it was confidence,” Rei said, “Too much of a good thing… And you spit in the faces of the dead! How does it feel?”
“It feels… Terrible…” Kaede whined, wrapping her arms around herself. “Why? I was trying to hard, why couldn’t I ever do something good? Why did I have to die before I could make this right? It’s got to be… This is a nightmare…”

“Maybe so,” A voice that sounded not unlike her own sounded out, “After all. It’s only in a nightmare where your dead friends would be more of a threat to you than me. Even so, you know,
dreams don’t take very long to have. A nightmare can fit in the moment of death just fine.”

Kaede opened her eyes to see her there. That girl who looked so much like her. Shorter hair, more punk clothes than Kaede would ever wear herself... It was Keiko Akamatsu, it had to be.

“Keiko?” She asked, just to make sure, then glanced behind herself. The dead she’d forsaken had vanished. Back to Keiko.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.” Keiko pulled up another chair from out of nowhere, and sat down. “Shut your eyes for a minute.” Kaede obliged. “Okay, open them now.”

When she opened her eyes again, there was a table between her and her twin sister. In the middle of it was an elaborate tea pot, with small people painted around the circumference. She leaned in closer to see that they were smiling representations... Of everyone who’d died in the last game. She sat back up. She and Keiko each had teacups with simple designs as well. Keiko’s looked like Monokuma’s dark half, her own the light half. Cute pastries filled the rest of the table.
“Feel free to eat as much as you want,” Keiko said, “It’s a dream, so you won’t get fat. They’re normal sweets, too. Nothing disgusting secretly hidden in there. I’m sure you were worried about that, weren’t you?”

“Any detective would be,” Kaede said, then lifted and ate an eclair. It was a normal eclair.

“Let’s not be a detective, Kaede. Just be Kaede Akamatsu,” Keiko said, “There aren’t any
“No, there is one…” Kaede said, glancing between their teacups. “Why not just give us both dark teacups?”

“Did you let them get to you?” Keiko asked, lifting the teapot. Into each of their cups she poured a sweet hibiscus tea. It didn’t look dissimilar to blood. “You were arrogant. You’ve made some mistakes. Still, look at our family, will you? Of the four of us… Despite everything, you always held onto hope. You didn’t run to Despair like I did. You didn’t fall into melancholy like Mom and Dad. You even survived one Killing Game. I think… That’s more than worthy of the white bear teacup.”

“Thank you, Keiko…” Kaede said, wrapping her hands around that cup. It was warm with the recent tea poured into it. “I’m sorry for everything.”

“It’s okay,” Keiko said, understanding the apology. Sorry that the world was this way. Sorry that Kaede took so long to join her family. Sorry that she didn’t use that time to accomplish anything she considered worthwhile. “We were living in a tragic sort of world. It’s admirable that you could hold out. I bet… There’s a world where we could have been a happy family.”

“I bet there is,” Kaede said, sipped her tea, then set the cup back down and stood up. “I’d like to go there now, Keiko.”

“You’re ready to move on?” Keiko asked.

“Yes,” Kaede said, removing her hat. “I’ll have to find somebody once we’re there. I’ve got something which belongs to him.”
Keiko Akamatsu wasn’t always her sister’s enemy.

There’d been a time, when they were young and pure and happy. Their parents hadn’t fallen to despair, and the outside world gave off the impression that it was safe, at least, safe enough. Keiko and Kaede would run around the yard, climbing trees and skinning their knees, and losing track of time. Keiko had the sense of time that Kaede lacked, sure, but that didn’t mean she could use it too well when they were so young.

Or, maybe she was just having so much fun, that she was willing to pretend she didn’t realize it had been three hours and they were supposed to go home after just two. Like Keiko understood somewhere, deep in her heart, that she needed to make the most of these years and this time. Like she knew that this was something wonderful she would one day lose.

That loss began when she and Kaede were nine years old. There was a kidnapping. A kid their age. A kid from their class. A kid vanished, and turned up three weeks later. The adults tried their best to keep it hidden, but Kaede was always so smart and she took Keiko by the hand and led her out to where, she thought, she overheard the adults referencing in their vague warnings. Did you hear about, down by the creek? The railroad junction? Near that old maple tree? Each a different way that the spot was whispered, and Kaede put them together and knew where to look and that was when she and Keiko went to see the body.

Following the tracks down to the junction felt strange. Keiko and Kaede had very different taste in books and Kaede had certainly not read the old short story that Keiko was probably too young to have read all on her own, but it felt like this. Following the tracks to go and see the body. How Keiko knew they’d find a body at the end, she couldn’t say. It was just this feeling of dread.

Whether Kaede and Keiko had gone to see it or not, that didn’t change the fact that this was the last chance the two of them had to do something like this, to wander down to any old place in town that they pleased. The very next day, Mom and Dad told them that they couldn’t play outside anymore. Come straight home after school. Go straight to school in the morning. Don’t delay or detour or talk to anybody and don’t be alone outside, and don’t answer the door when you’re home alone either, make sure to lock it. Keep each other safe. Stay safe.

All reasonable things to hear after a kid their age had been murdered. Mostly, anyhow. Keiko and Kaede were young, but even they only picked out ‘don’t play outside’ as the unreasonable bit. They weren’t bad kids, though, and their parents’ voices were strained and stern and oh-so-worried. Only bad kids would break rules delivered in such a serious way. It was a boring life, though. It got boring. Keiko and Kaede stopped being friends as much, when that happened, because their tastes in indoor activities were vastly different. Sometimes they’d play at climbing around the furniture or pretending their beds were rival pirate ships, but there just wasn’t enough space in that dark and cramped house for imaginations to flourish. Instead, Kaede buried herself in detective novels. Keiko preferred television.

A bored little kid watching television for hours a day while her parents were out of the house was bound, eventually, to have some sort of encounter with the most widespread pop culture phenomenon since Precure. The Annual Killing Games. At first, Keiko thought the advertisements were boring. It was live action, and a reality show at that? No ten year old girl would be intrigued by that at first. It took her friends at school regaling her with the story of one of the bloody executions to pique her interest.
Ten year olds, after all, had this unfortunate habit of being drawn in by the darkness of the world. Shielded by caring adults, this was the age they finally began to catch wind of such things. It wasn’t unusual for pre-teens to get themselves wrapped up in the morbid, creepy, or gorey entertainment, this had been true through all time. In the era of Killing Games, kids were bound to be fascinated by such extreme horrors. It was the same fascination that drew kids to trick grandparents for copies of M-rated games, to sneak into R-rated movies, and to start reading books from the young adult sections of bookstores and libraries. In this case, Keiko found herself following any episode or rerun that happened to be on during those precious few hours of the day that she and Kaede were home unsupervised.

There were plenty of kids who experienced this fascination and still grew to be perfectly fine, upstanding, even hopeful citizens. It was honestly garbage to think that watching mass murder packaged for the masses would be enough to radicalize a child, especially one who had no real grasp on the fact that the horrors on the television weren’t fictional. And Keiko didn’t. For a while, she honestly had no idea that Killing Games featured real people really dying. All that really did was make her creepy. She started to accessorize in ways that matched the fashion of ‘Despairs’ on the show, but as far as she was concerned, it wasn’t any different than Kaede’s keychains of cats dressed like famous detectives.

What actually started Keiko on the path to Despair was what her parents did when she and Kaede were fourteen. Hadn’t even completed middle school, but that was okay, their father said. He’d homeschool them. This town was getting too dangerous.

*Why don’t we just move?*

Keiko wondered this, but never said it aloud. She wasn’t a bad kid. She wouldn’t speak against her parents. She wouldn’t ask why they were both working from home and locking themselves in their rooms and she wouldn’t ask why she and Kaede had to homeschool themselves with workbooks their mother hardly remembered to order from her computer, the only connection to the outside world she kept around beside Keiko’s television. No radio, no telephones, just the one computer that both parents shared to email their jobs. That was what they claimed, anyway. There was never any fresh food. Plenty of food, plenty of canned food. Nothing fresh.

Keiko thought, probably, only one of her parents still had a job. If they did. They burnt their savings on canned food. Probably, the television would go soon. Probably, the computer too. They were in Despair. Keiko learned a lot about that from the television. What had once been the comical villains in an over-the-top reality show slowly came around to her as something frightening. Real villains in the real world, and their real victims too. People sadder than sad or crueler than cruel. Some of them were incredibly weak and some were incredibly strong and none of them did anything *good* with any of that. And here Keiko was, being hurt, feeling her life and her potential sapped away by weak despairs. By her once-loving parents, now paranoid and lethargic to a level hardly ever seen in humanity before this affliction took hold of the world.

Keiko didn’t want this. She didn’t want this for herself. Or for Kaede. But she’d only ask once. Just once. If Kaede said she wouldn’t run away with her, then she would go alone. And she’d be fine, just fine, on her own, she would, wouldn’t she?

The last news Kaede Akamatsu would ever get of the outside world, before her parents’ paranoia failed them and they were murdered… Was the news that a group of strong, cruel, malicious despairs had managed to claim an entire apartment building as their turf. This news came in the form of a letter. A triumphant letter, from Keiko Akamatsu, who couldn’t be fine on her own.
But she would rather be strong than weak, and do nothing good with any of that, if she had to make a choice.

Sorry, Kaede. Sorry that our time having fun together couldn’t stretch on forever. I’ll miss you. Please do something amazing, I believe in you.
Yuuri Ruka was on the brink of death the night that he first met Sayaka Yamaguchi. It wasn’t necessarily that he was dying or that he was likely to kill himself or anything quite like that, but he’d always acknowledge he probably would have died if she hadn’t been there. He was in a terrible mood, and he was drinking, and like he often did when those two things combined, he was hanging out up on the roof of his shitty apartment building. It wasn’t ever a good idea, and Yuuri assumed he’d fall off someday. He’d acknowledged this likelihood every single time, and tonight, he figured it finally would.

That was when he saw her. A little kid? No… Something about her wasn’t right, to look at her that way. She was short, and wore twintails as she stood on the guardrail that resembled a sidewalk’s curb, but the way she stood and the way the moonlight glinted off the hatchet strapped to her leg made it evident that she was no child.

Yuuri was fourteen at the time, already nursing bad habits, and it seemed somehow like in spite of her size, she was older than him.

“Yuuri Ruka,” She greeted him, and turned around. “I’m sorry that I took so long.”

“Who are you?” Yuuri asked.

“Well.” Sayaka stepped down from the rail, even though that made her much shorter than him. “I’m Sayaka Yamaguchi. Some people just call me Red, though. That’s what most people think of me by, anyway.”

“Red?” Yuuri asked, “I thought that was a myth.”

“I’m as real as it gets. Anyway, you want me to kill her?” Sayaka asked.

“...No, I don’t,” Yuuri said, surprised to hear those words from his own mouth. He didn’t?

“I thought…” Sayaka said, “You might not. That’s why I asked. Do you want me to kill any of them? I can. I’d do whatever I can to help.”

“Why would you do that for me?” Yuuri questioned.

“Because I’m capable of it,” Sayaka said, “Somebody has to, you know.”

“That seems like a bad reason to do this kind of stuff,” Yuuri said.

“It’s the best reason anybody’s got,” Sayaka said.

Yuuri sat down on the floor of the roof. “I guess if you look at it that way, that’s right. Fuck. How many have you killed, anyway?”

“Not enough.” Sayaka sat down next to him. “It’s never enough, you know? For everyone I find out and get rid of… There’s always more. Especially cause I can’t go after anybody high-profile.”

“What for?” Yuuri asked, “Afraid of getting caught?”

“Family business,” Sayaka corrected, “Certain people are outta my league, and the sorta stuff that means I should kill somebody isn’t the sorta stuff that means the family should kill somebody. With enough money, you can buy protection.”
“So there’s a few people you can’t get away with killing, even just for me, I bet.”

“A few, yeah. Sorry. Maybe the reason it took me so long is cause I’m not even super useful for you.”

“Useful?” Yuuri asked, “Hey, I don’t expect anything from you. You don’t have to do anything on my behalf, you know.”

“I want to help,” Sayaka said.

“I dunno if there’s any helping me…” Yuuri groaned, then lifted the bottle to his lips again. He’d barely put a visible dent in it, but it was strong enough that he didn’t need to. If he actually put a dent in it all on his own in one night, he’d probably end up with alcohol poisoning.

Sayaka watched him for a minute. “If anybody could, wouldn’t it be me?”

“By killing a guy? Nah.” Yuuri shook his head and set the bottle down between them, with a small hand gesture inviting Sayaka to help herself. “Guess I could use a friend, though.”

“This any good?” Sayaka asked, lifting the booze and examining the label. It was a strong gin, made with ‘fifty botanicals’.

“Not at all,” Yuuri said, “Not without tonic, anyway. It’s what my mom drinks.”

“You steal it from her?” Sayaka asked.

“Just have this shitty habit of drinking what people I’m thinking about do.”

“How often do you drink this?” Sayaka asked, then tried a sip. Dear God she could taste all fifty botanicals. That was too many botanicals.

“She’s actually… Not in my thoughts, a whole lot, as things go.” Yuuri shrugged. “But I guess, tonight she is. There’s a new guy. She’s still getting new guys, even though she says I’m getting too old. Could think about the new guy. Thinking about her instead. What makes her do this shit? She says it’s cause I gotta ‘earn my keep’ for being her kid. Never looks like she feels bad about it, though. Not even a little bit. You’d think a religious woman would show some remorse.”

“I bet she confesses,” Sayaka said, “Bet she confesses and thinks that makes her fine, right?”

“Little bit of that. Little bit of, I’m such a rotten sinner anyway, she’s just punishing me.”

“How’d you ever sin before this all started?”

“Can’t remember. Sure that I did, though. Maybe it’s cause I bake. Maybe making cookies when I was six was all the motivation she needed to sell me out.” He laughed, and it was empty, as he leaned back to lie down on the roof, staring up at the night sky. “Beat it outta me ahead of time. Can’t have a kid grow up attracted to men if he’s abused by ‘em for years, eh?”

“Doesn’t work that way.”

“I know that. She doesn’t.”

“Are you religious?” Sayaka asked.

“Not the way she is.”
“Well, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, though. Maybe it’s stupid of me, in my situation. But I think there’s gotta be something out there, watching over me.” He reached one hand out towards the sky. “Fact that I’m still here’s gotta mean something, right? Think as long as I don’t hurt anyone, life might hurt, but at least I’ll have it. It’s not like it hurts all the time. Right now it doesn’t hurt, cause I’m drunk. Living drunk’s better than dying.”

“Do you think that if I killed someone for you, it would jeopardize that?” Sayaka asked.

“Mm, probably. Maybe that’s why I think it wouldn’t help. I’d be hurting somebody by asking you to do that, so, nah, it wouldn’t help me. Anyone ever help you?”

“How can you tell?” Sayaka asked.

“You wouldn’t still be sitting here listening to me if we didn’t have that in common.”

“Did you?” Yuuri asked.

“I thought I did.” Sayaka brought her knees to her chest. “I thought I did, at the time. Guess I didn’t, though. First person I ever killed and he didn’t even die. I’ve seen him a few times since then. He turns up sometimes.”

“Have you killed him for real yet?” Yuuri asked.

“Every time I see him… It’s like I’m not even in control of myself anymore. It’s like I’m gone. I can’t move and I can barely even speak and it’s like I’m six all over again and helpless. I’m supposed to be this fucking ruthless assassin who rescues kids from people like him but when it’s really him I can’t even do… Anything.”

“I know the feeling.”

“I’m sorry. You don’t need to know this.”

“Maybe not, but you needed to say it,” Yuuri said, then sat back up. “We can help each other, you know.”

“How?” Sayaka asked.

“By being friends.”

“I haven’t had one of those before,” Sayaka said, “Not really. Not a normal friend.”

“I’m not a very good first one to have, sure, but I’m volunteering.”

“I’d like that.”
Kanoshi Kyosuke didn’t have a memory of when he first met the love of his life.

Sometimes, he hated himself for that fact, that he didn’t have a memory like that. Reasonably, he knew it was because they hadn’t met in an unusual fashion. They were in the same class, that’s all it was and all it had ever been. Through elementary school, there was only one year when they were in different classes, so it was never a matter of the day that they met, but rather, they met in a gradual fashion as classmates are wont to do.

Kanoshi obviously wasn’t in love with him from the start, but he was pretty sure that he did fall in love before they’d ever begun talking. They were thirteen years old at the time and anybody else would label such a thing as a ‘first crush’, but Kanoshi was some sort of hopeless romantic who believed in the power of eternity, as if because he fell for Yuuri so easily it was guaranteed that they’d one day get married and adopt three children and two dogs.

And they’d never spoken more than four words at a time to each other, but that was fine. Kanoshi was happy for a year just to admire him from afar, because he considered himself much too timid to actually do anything about these feelings in any way, shape, or form, even just formally introducing himself to Yuuri. The only way they eventually did start talking was when the teacher asked Kanoshi to help Yuuri, because he had failed his last three math tests and something had to be done about it. Kanoshi had already proven his abilities as a tutor time and time again, saving struggling students. And it was the excuse for his nervous nature to be overcome, and to become friends with the boy he loved more than anything.

Unfortunately for him, that boy was *so obtuse* that not a single hint given throughout the course of their friendship landed. Not the way his dad teased him when they were studying at his house, or the way that he got so worried when he found out about Yuuri’s habits, or the way that he always sat just a little bit too close to him. And, of course, Kanoshi’s nerves couldn’t possibly allow him to confess for real, especially with the fear that Yuuri would be so oblivious even an outright ‘I’m in love with you’ wouldn’t land.

Instead, Kanoshi just stuck at his side for years. Stuck to him like glue, such that people began to consider the pair of them a singular unit, though it was obviously just guys being dudes, best friends. The *average* person would never assume that the rough guy who wore leather and the miniature math teacher could be anything other than unlikely friends.

Kanoshi really didn’t have a memory of the day that they met.

What he did have a memory of was the day that he realized *just* how intense his feelings were, because it was the day that he met ‘Red’. Red, who introduced herself as a friend of Yuuri’s, but Kanoshi heard the rumors, of course he did. He followed the news about these kinds of things almost fanatically, knowing in and out every article put out on the tales of uncaptured murderers. He knew what Red did. He pulled her aside and demanded to know why she met Yuuri. She wanted to keep it a secret, for Yuuri’s sake, but later that day he confessed it to Kanoshi himself.

That was the first day that Kanoshi had any reason to feel jealous.

He was *jealous* beyond *belief* of every single man who’d ever used Yuuri like that. He should have been furious at them, just so angry that there were people who’d pay money to hurt somebody he thought was so amazing. That was there, but at the same time, he was jealous of them. What they got to see. What they got to do. At the same time, it enlightened him to his hints being ignored, at
least, he thought so. Of course, in a position like that, Yuuri wouldn’t want to date.

So Kanoshi stewed in this mix of envy, anger, and relief for one year, until Nate. Until Yuuri actually got a boyfriend. It didn’t last long, Kanoshi never got the details on why, but it didn’t. Still, that reawakened a certain level of frustration that had been buried. If Yuuri was going to manage to date anybody, it should have been him, not some condescending asshole who was probably just as bad as the guys who paid.

It was when all of these feelings came to a head, that Kanoshi met face-to-face for the first time, Komaru Ruka. A rotten woman who shared a first name with a famous Ultimate Despair.

“You’re that kid,” She observed.

“...Kanoshi Kyosuke, Ma’am.”

“Mm,” She grunted, then looked him up and down thoroughly. “Nice clothes. You’ve got money?”

“I’m not giving you any of it,” Kanoshi said.

“Really? You’re not?” Komaru questioned, and squinted at him. “But you like him, don’t you?”

“How could you-”

“Please.” She curled her lip in disgust. “I can spot a homo a mile away! And it’s not like you make it difficult.”

“Being well-groomed doesn’t mean-”

“But you are, aren’tcha?”

“I mean-” He didn’t want to admit it to a woman like this, but outright denying it wasn’t exactly easy to do either. He wasn’t used to lying in such a direct way.

“So,” Komaru said, “Why not buy him for a night? Not like you got a chance with that kid otherwise.”

“I can’t do that, he’s my friend!” Kanoshi said.

“But you would otherwise?” Komaru let loose a cackle. “You guys are all the same, huh? Just go and fuck up your friendship first, then you’ll be good to go!”

As she laughed more, she turned away from him, and Kanoshi felt something come over him. All of the jealousy he’d ever felt... Was this woman’s fault, and now, what she was implying...

He didn’t surprise himself in the least, when he made that decision. When he reached out, placed both hands against Komaru Ruka’s back, and shoved her down the stairs. He broke a certain barrier for himself. He was willing to kill for his love. He was willing to go that far... He’d just done it. He also felt as if he’d do it again. There wasn’t any regret there, as he stared down at her body.

He didn’t need to be with Yuuri. But he wanted him to himself. Komaru Ruka had been in the way of that. That’s all there was to it.

When Kanoshi did die, well, that proved it. Yuuri was the love of his life.

If only because he’d never loved anybody else, until the moment his jealousy killed him.
Trial 3/1: Conclusion

12:00 PM / 1200 Hours

“Now,” Monokuma said, “Usually I’d also have to show you a video of last night or something, but I think that just having seen Kyosuke’s body counts well enough to have ‘seen him die’. That’s… Enough of this.”

“Thanks for the fucking mercy,” Amai snipped, but there was sincerity behind her words. She didn’t want to see that. This had been a grueling trial for everybody, and a grueling day in general. This was mercy, for Monokuma to say it wouldn’t reveal any further horrors.

“He’s… Not dead…” Box said, then flinched as if she was in physical pain.

“We just saw him die, Hako,” Nami said, gentle. She understood wanting to deny it, but this was the reality.

“He can’t be dead… He…” Box whined and brought her hands up to her head. “Monokuma said that one culprit will be saved at the last minute, at random! And it’s got to be Goro! It has to be him! I don’t want him… To be dead…”

“He was the only living culprit left, though,” Sayaka said, “That kinda implies that he has to get executed fully.”

“It wasn’t like that! Not both culprits will be executed and one will be saved! Both will die and one will be saved!” Box shrieked, louder than any of them had ever heard her before. “I wished and I wished and wished so much that the wheel would land on something… That could let him live… It wouldn’t be fair for Kyosuke to be the one that’s saved!”

“We don’t know if anybody was saved,” Mitsuru said, “With one of the culprits being dead before the trial, do we?”

“I can check! I can check oh my god I can check I can go see I can see-” Box cut herself off and somehow, in the blink of an eye, had gone from her podium to the elevator.

“I see,” Madara realized, “If the quarantine room is closed off, then that does imply that there’s somebody in it.”

“We won’t know who until the next trial, though.” Sayaka looked away. “Is it bad if I say that… Hako’s right? It wouldn’t be fair for it to be Kanoshi.”

“Why the fuck not? He only killed one person. Bakura killed two!” Amai tried to argue, just to be contrarian, but there wasn’t any heart behind it.

“Two people who were trying to kill him,” Mitsuru corrected her.

“He was my friend, more than anybody else’s,” Sayaka said, “And I want to be frank here. It isn’t, to me, a matter of who’s worse or who deserves it more… But there isn’t any chance of Yuuri coming back. I think that Goro has a better chance than Kanoshi, of actually being happy in the future.”

“If you put it that way.” Amai clicked her tongue. “Fucking jealous freak, what’s he supposed to do without his object of obsession anyway? At least Bakura’s got that fake-o friend on his side.
“That’s something.”

“Obviously,” Kurou said, “It’s impossible to say if Kyosuke would have been able to move on or become a better person. What is possible to say is that Bakura has more people who are already willing to help him do that.”

“Are you all forgetting about me?” Madara asked, “I’d want him to come back, you know. I don’t have a reason to care about Bakura.”

“At least this means,” Nami said, “If either of them is still alive, then somebody’s going to be satisfied with that outcome. We really can’t know until the next trial, though. It’s not worth talking about any more than this.”

“If Hako discovers that there’s somebody there,” Amai wondered, “Do you think she’ll kill somebody, just to find out?”

Amai’s words struck everybody. That’s right… A situation like this could easily double as a murder motive. That was probably the only reason that such an option was in the mix. Curiosity was like a drug, and somebody probably would be willing to kill, just to get answers.

“I don’t think she would,” Riko said.

“I don’t think anybody would,” Tsukasa said, “Monokuma did say that if the game ended without another trial, we’d be reunited on the outside, right? So there’s still plenty of reason to try and avoid further killing.”

“Yeaaaah…” Torimi agreed. The elevator returned. Everybody left the courtroom, and Monokuma was left alone.

Of course, Monokumas left alone will talk to themselves. (Or, if we are to get meta, to the readers.)

--

Well… I guess at least it’s not suspicious, that I’ve been trying to give them all these things to help them out.

Come on, you really think the wheel was randomized for this case? I already said I rigged up the motive wheel to stop getting duplicates. Obviously I was gonna mess with it so it’d give me one of the solutions to keep somebody alive. A triple murder? Seriously? And right after I set up the Evil King’s Game, too.

I guess that’s just how it goes when you rely on people to be intelligent. These kids. A bunch of them are super smart, but when it comes to this stuff, they’re still just dumb. Evil King as a spicy motive? Come on. What Monokuma in their right mind would add in two entire win conditions just to motivate killing? A win condition that could let everyone else escape with just two deaths, if done right?

What sorta chump do you take me for?

Heh… Guess a pretty big one, since Nami outsmarted me again. Brought that one on myself, yeah, sure did. Enough about me!

Or… Maybe one more thing about me.

Did you know that, as a ~Monokuma~, I come whenever my name is called? Somebody says ‘Monokuma’, and there I am! So I gotta wonder… Maybe there’s somebody else here who comes
if their name is called. It’s been a lil too convenient when that kid shows up, don’t you think?

Of course, for me it’s just a Monokuma clause. But for that kid, it’d have to be their real name.

Yeah… I really gotta wonder.
Nami was losing her mind dying for the sake of somebody who was already downstairs. Halfway down the hall from the current wings are pretty cool thing. " goro bakura says you know what everyone loves! "

" yeah okay maybe but i guess it was a maze now. " tsumugi admitted with a slight laugh as she walked towards the others. " what... Moron the ultimate wards were really easy to see what it read the motive listed there was a room. "

nami nodded along with plastic forks. " we can tell it apart and all. Could it be that they're going to assume bakura was a liar too... "

“oh no!” the ultimate survivor... If you were caught off guard by my company... Yeah okay.

" it's not like i wanna fuck you guys... " etsuko mumbled with a deep breath and crossed his arms. He was still plenty of people in a situation.

Tsukasa watched and rewatched that was right after all... Why wouldn't you think that i can learn from a true great in something that seemed trivial?

Rei suddenly became synonymous with a strange hopelessness which shouldn't have been delivered tomorrow morning. Plus tomoce said stuff like that just because she was always good at it. " what... Yeah right now that ruka’s running his hand along the side of the bed's really matter. "

nami raised her eyebrows and shinjiro made a noise that was definitely frightening. mitsuru just wasn’t the ultimate talent after all.

Randy shrunk. " etsuko yushu died because of my amnesia in the infirmary. So obviously i did it. "

management on top of everything else was definitely composed enough not to be started by monokuma’s goro. But even so... It's a hospital and monokuma was right behind randy and his hands. So this is riko asahi and i were standing in shock else was two someone elses.

Box was seated on top of one of the tables in groups and the barricade flew across the room. Kanoshi asked to wear a mask to the reality of the empty killing game. " not me to call him by the arm and pulled several knives from the shadows. "

yes was i to a bunch i were to a bunch i were to a place where all the way through the announcement. It sounded like that should mean something more to me than it does. Nami handled the tea and the tutor can swear to god... " another one of the primary suspects in this case seems completely wrong about one singular stuff. "

i guess if you had to become friends with me implies that you're a little boy. She looked and saw blood on the roof. Even through a lottery of the empty ones sharing with a large multinational habit.

" maybe you could think of him killing on the back wall. " heyy " yuuri ruka is a fool and a small auditorium. "

Funney Jokes 1: that’s a murder! Well just a bit.
“that’s a murder! Well just a bit. Imagine if i wanted to break that record hako didn't even. The cot is a threat to your sister... " tomoe said the word sigh before she came here instead using these people for whatever reason people who don't know.

The other cabinet set up for breakfast. Nami got doritos like a lot of good. Maybe kaede would wanna talk to me sooo bastard heathens better appreciate it.

The tragedy was actually kind of nice. Showering was a pleasant little life where they'd heard of any children being the survivor yet none of them seemed good. But kira had picked her own bed tonight.

" no way that mister dad ueda is just going to do that because i needed to go back to the arcade. " sayaka said about that kaoru girl wearing a tuxedo.

" i was just checking out the ultimate heir. " that nami swore.

Torimi giggled a little bit like she cared about her health. She got advice on the screen with grace. " nothing better than the japanese dub amai! "

" huh that was a copycat killing game. " kanoshi said " i don't really think a bad word to say anything else. "

why couldn’t i think that this is just the burning passion of the basics?

it’s the first day s??????i????????i????????i??????????x not like you actually wanna play a game so tough it’s the game. namine, madara were using it a little bit wobbly.

Finger the first two people who are usually good at these types of games. But really just that nobody. Nami received her hands on her knees. " i don't get it at all... Not like my talent is a real person huh? "

blue dragon is a precious child. and i need yui to be a ludicrous friends with madara and mitsuru. kirara they were made by the literal planet apart from tomoe. Nami wanted to drink a good relationship.

" you flatter me to commit a murder. " sayaka chuckled awkwardly in front of her friends. " that makes me feel unsafe or something. "

box shook her own forehead in her palm.

i’m going to be honest about it anyway all of you could figure it out on your own. Why she felt towards amai had set out to sprinkle regrets. " no clue what you said about that star sign stuff. " then she chased him off.

Died pretty quickly once society started.

Goat man yelled it at all that personal attacks. Nami wanted to confess to her oldest friend tsukasa. There was also the matter of the people who suffered. Sayaka was actually sora from kingdom hearts.

" oh boy that was a loaded phrase " riko wrote. " nothing like the knockoff of course demon once you stop feeling exhausted sodas. "

sounds like that which was shrouded in mystery.
Iwako smirked up to the boys play. It was quieter in there now... Yeah let anybody who was just torimi’s stuck of the others got ta beeeeee this stuff. Frankly it was time to face the other person in the room during dinner. Sayaka obviously wasn’t in the middle of the buffet. Torimi grabbed wii fit trainer for a minute of her sweater.

Execution to be a ludicrous species elsewhere.

Nami kaguya wasn't here now.

"oh blood on the roof " tomoe said with a deep breath and stepped down from the table.

Tomoe laughed for a moment and looked back to nami with her eyes. She was very decidedly not a normie. The only thing that gets you... Yeah... I would hate me for telling people the other side of her.

"that's existence " goro said with that rotten little kid for the sake of her dissatisfaction " tomoe would always be my favorite creature "

tsukasa furrowed his brow in concern to be a buzzskill. He was actually an absolute person... But you don't have to compare yourself to that guy or anything like that so that's the most likely conclusion.

Goro bakura was actually a murder in a fucking unoriginal boy who was very vague. " i don't want anyone to do that again for the purpose of improving that love of plum black jeans. "

box was seated on her knees which was only a little bit foolish. She glanced down at her own door to see the final moments of those idiots. But maybe i'm monokuma. She could tell she was used. She took tsukasa by the titles of her neck " you mean... I mean... Yeah okay maybe but you can't like that "

guess that you paid them well enough too. Usually it was a maze now is it yamaguchi fuck? "kids start acting kind of shitty!"

don't the ultimate journalist. She wasn't smart enough. She wanted to be alone with somebody like that. Just two people who don't care about relationships or anything worth respecting spiderman.

" that's punished in a killing game?" box asked high on crooked shelves.

"it's that they might believe that she wasn't black tea?" followed her out of this place with tsukasa.

shinjiro narrowed his eyes at him for being the voice of reason. Or perhaps not like anyone was trying to tell us that the reason is the right selection.

rei rolled to be a threat to your safety... Why do people even bother hiding their true selves and i don't know that somebody else had woken up in this room. " oh good advice for that one.

Tolerating randy and tsukasa next to the boys they were in danger.

etsuko got killed before explaining how much those people deserved it. Don't like that.

"that sort of thing isn't for the approval of others " randy said without hesitation in the empty room.

" upupu " asked monokuma " using taxpayer money to fund it was a good idea of course! It will just be throwing money around like a teen."

sayaka complained about several different boy. But this is definitely a killing game... Who was actually a murder in that case? What about a little kid makes you feel free? I'm the other one who
made you the empty.

Mitsuru stepped towards the door and pushed it outright hard. Because he finally located me.

[THIS IS A NON-CANON CHAPTER POSTED FOR APRIL FOOL’S DAY AS GENERATED USING A PREDICTIVE TEXT BOT.]
Upon riding the elevator back up into the empty wings, the remaining eleven were faced with Box Hako, standing there, waiting for them. Eleven… Nami couldn’t help but cringe to think about that number, because really, there were twelve people. She’d just been ready to experience twelve survivors after the previous trial, and then there was the reset. A reset that meant nothing, in the end, because four people had died.

“He’s alive,” Box said.

“Stop,” Amai said.

“Goro Bakura is alive!” Box insisted, taking a step forward with her hands clasped at her chest, “I went to the quarantine room and he’s in there, trust me!”

“Him or Kyosuke,” Madara corrected.

“How would that even…” Box asked, “He was dead, you know. Dead for a while. People don’t just come back. For somebody to be saved at the last minute they’d have to start out alive. So it’s-”

Amai had stepped forward, lifting a hand as if to slap Box, but Kurou caught her wrist before she could put it into action. “Oishi. That’s not going to help anything.”

“It’ll help me feel better!” She protested, stomping one foot like a little kid who’d just been denied a candy.

“Really? Will it?” Kurou asked, then pulled her off to the side. She wasn’t exactly letting herself be moved, but she was so much stronger than him that she may as well have been the little kid that she was behaving like. “Help you feel better? You’ll just be hurting your friend, and your hand, and what for?”

“She’s being an idiot,” Amai said, “She’s being stupid and saying that guy’s gonna come back, what’s so important about that!? If she really didn’t want to put the bodies in my ward, then the least she could do is not so obviously hope he didn’t die.”

“Well, they’d have to be pretty close, for her to be convinced to help move the bodies and keep quiet, right?” Kurou asked, “So of course if there’s the chance her friend survived, she’d hope it’s true, don’t you think?”

“But… She was my friend, Ueda!” Amai whined, “I mean, we were closer, I thought?”

“We were,” Box finally said something, “Once, Amai. But… It’s been a long time, okay? I said it before and I’ll admit it, for a second time, I care more about everyone else here… Than the four newcomers. As far as I’m concerned I’ve known them much longer. We were friends a lifetime ago, Amai. We were.”

“How can you…” Amai tried to approach her again, but Kurou held her back effortlessly. “How can you say something like that if you don’t remember? How can you say it was a lifetime ago like that’s not saying you were done with me the minute you died!!?”

“…” Box didn’t say anything, and looked to Riko with a certain desperation behind her eyes.

“Hey,” Riko signed to her, whiteboard tucked under one arm.
“I can’t,” Box signed back.

“Can you give me something to tell her in your place?” Riko wondered.

Box nodded, then signed, and Riko wrote the translation down to show to Amai. “Some part of Hako did remember the event, but she was forgetting it because it doesn’t match the way she thinks she is supposed to be.”

“Urgh…” Amai scoffed, but… “I guess that makes sense.Fuck. Am I really just a shitty artifact of who you used to be?”

Riko turned to get another response, but faltered at writing down the second word. She wiped it out, then wrote instead, “It’s just not like that.”

“Yeah? Huh? What’d she actually say? Figures, you can’t translate accurately. Guess you think, oh no, I’m friends with both of them! I can’t make the fight worse! But I wanna know. What she actually had to say to me.”

“She didn’t have anything to say to you,” Riko explained, “She was just hating herself again. I didn’t want to share that.”

“Why not? Don’t you think I’d wanna see it, if she was saying it? Can’t just keep fucking secrets cause you know a language I don’t!”

“She said that she’s sorry. She said that you’re not an artifact, you’re just from the time when she ‘could be considered human’. She just wants to be able to move on from that past. Do you blame her, if it really was as awful as you claimed?”

Amai turned her nose up, then turned and ran away, reclaiming her arm from Kurou, though he chased after her once she was gone.

“Hako,” Nami said, “You never mentioned before, that you sign. Just how many things can you do?”

“She never mentioned it because it embarrassed her,” Riko continued ‘speaking’ on her behalf, “Because she goes nonverbal like this. She didn’t want to let people here know that this happens sometimes.”

“You know…” Nami reached toward Box’s shoulders, but didn’t close the distance. “If you’d let Monokuma know, it would have given you accomodation too, like it did for Asahi, for the trials. Admitting that you were Bakura’s accomplice… Must have been even harder, in this state, right?”

Box nodded, then squeezed her eyes shut and moved forward, past Nami’s outstretched hands toward her shoulders to lean against her fully. Nami didn’t hesitate now, to hold her there. Sayaka and Riko both looked on; Everyone else had already scattered, the atmosphere made awkward in the argument.

“You’re not an okay person,” Nami whispered, “You need to stop pretending like you are. Help yourself for once, okay? If you’re so devoted to helping people that you help cover up a murder when you don’t even want to, that’s no good at all, no good for anybody. Get some rest, okay?”

“Mm…” Box mumbled, then pulled back from Nami and rubbed her eyes.

“I’ll take her back to her room,” Riko showed the message, then reached for Box to offer her support. Box was small, and frail, and honestly seemed just as thin as Riko, who had reasons to be
all skin and bones. She was probably the only person here whose weight Riko could reasonably support for any amount of time.

Nami hadn’t ever really noticed or thought about that before. Maybe that was because Box’s pretending worked. Maybe it just took a moment like this to see the weakness in the Ultimate Volunteer.

What an awful day this had been.

It wasn’t even over yet.
Daily Life: Day Nine (Cafe Monokuma)

1:00 PM / 1300 Hours

Nami and Sayaka were left alone in the class trial lobby, which had once more become just another room in the Empty Wings. Nobody was fighting here, the elevator was gone, and even though it had only been an hour since Goro’s execution, it already felt like the trial was something of the past. That was a benefit, Nami supposed, of having these incidents tied to one specific place. When a trial finished, it was like Monokuma was giving them permission to move on with their lives, in some way.

Not like Box had taken that permission, though. Not like it was an easy thing to do, either. And as much as she’d been crude about it, Amai did have a point. Nobody used the pool anymore, as far as Nami knew, after Rei was killed there. The Dining Hall, Amai’s Ward, and Yuuri’s Ward were all tainted in some manner, and Nami wasn’t sure how they were going to move on in those ways, and even eat properly.

“We should,” Sayaka spoke up, “Check out the new wards.”

“Huh?” Nami turned to her, blinking.

“The new wards,” Sayaka reiterated, “There was a trial, after all. That means that there’s a new floor open, and new Ultimate Wards with it. It’s something to get our minds off the issue, isn’t it?”

“Right.” Nami had completely forgotten about that. So much had happened since the last trial… And it felt to her like Amai’s Ward, and the others on that floor, had always been open. Kaede’s had been made available early for use in the second trial, Amai’s was used to make meals for the past several days, and Mitsuru’s… Well, that ward wasn’t much of anything and Nami didn’t really think about it at all, which was another way to feel like something’s always existed.

“…Yeah,” Sayaka said, then grabbed Nami’s wrist before she started walking. It was a smooth motion, without any awkwardness, so Nami just went along with it. Sayaka had done this before, too, so it made sense. Unlike last time though, when Nami had been dragged along, she found herself matching Sayaka’s pace. Neither of them said anything until they reached the fifth floor, and noticed something odd.

“Oishi’s ward…” Nami muttered.

“Huh? Oh.” Sayaka stared down the hallway for a few moments. “It was on the other side of the hallway before, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, and the two of them made their way down the hallway, avoiding the broken bits of the floor without separating their hands at all. Both of them were fairly graceful young women, after all, even if Nami would get clumsy when trying to track too much at once.

Upon reaching the door swapped to the opposite side of the hallway, and relabeled as ‘Cafe Monokuma’, Nami reached out and opened it up. Amai wasn’t there, and probably didn’t know about this yet, but it looked like Monokuma had entirely replaced her ward. It was reworked, having all the same equipment but the butcher’s table, which had been removed. Everything was rearranged, and it took up the back end of the ward. The cutesy decor had been cut down, and there were four-person tables set around the front of the ward, making the ward look more like a cozy coffeeshop.
“Monokuma?” Sayaka asked. The bear appeared, as was required of it. “What’s this?”

“Well,” Monokuma said, “Oishi did have a point, about the bodies and stuff. You guys do need to eat, and I do need to allow you outlets to utilize your talents too, so I can’t just leave you to fend for yourselves in the gift shop as long as an Ultimate Chef is here. So I scrapped her ward and made Cafe Monokuma.”

"Hm," Sayaka noted, "What makes Cafe Monokuma different?"

"Well," Monokuma explained, "Her misconduct in the last trial was a contributing factor too in the removal of a ward specific to her, if I’m honest. Everyone is entitled to Cafe Monokuma. I will deliver motives here rather than the Dining Hall, since I can imagine you’d rather not eat there anymore in general. There isn’t any time the Cafe is off-limits. Any attempts to lock Cafe Monokuma will be automatically thwarted, no matter the conditions. It’s an open-door-policy room."

"I see," Sayaka said, furrowing her brow. "You’re actually punishing misconduct now?"

"Not exactly. More like, I’m just avoiding rewarding it, y’feel? Cruelty for cruelty’s sake isn’t something that makes someone deserve an all-new untainted ward all for herself!"

"Isn’t cruelty for cruelty's sake sort of your M.O.?" Nami asked.

"Well, who says that I’m rewarded for that?" Monokuma questioned.

"That’s fair," Sayaka said.

"I guess it is," Nami agreed, shrugging.

"See? There's no reward for just bein’ a good-old-fashioned baddie! Just the endless pressure of the higher ups shouting, hey Monokuma, drive those ratings up, make the game interesting! Never 'good job Monokuma', never 'hey Monokuma, you've got four weeks of unused vacation time, why don't you take off to Bora-Bora for a month?'... Just 'when's the next murder, Monokuma?'. It's a cruel cycle!"

"Hey, who even has more control?" Nami asked, "You, or The Mastermind?"

"The Mastermind, as in Ultimate Judgment, as in the one that's a regular human... Usually we split the responsibilities! But I've had to take on a whole bunch of them myself and I still have no creative control!" Monokuma waved its paws around. "Dealing with you heathens is like herding cats, and I never even get any appreciation for all that I do! Making sure the murders are fair isn't exactly easy, you know, and that totally rests on my shoulders..."

"Awh," Sayaka said, "You know, I appreciate you."

"You do?" Monokuma asked.

"Yeah. I don't like you or anything... Honestly you seem like kinda a shitty person even beyond the whole Monokuma Murdergame thing. But I do appreciate the nice stuff you do for us. A lot of it seems unnecessary too, so, for real. Thanks."

"...No problem," Monokuma said, "It's not like I hate you kids. Come on. Stuff like random movies and making sure you feel comfortable eating food, and can solve the mysteries, I mean... That's the least I can do."
"Monokuma..." Nami mumbled.

"I'm a participant too, you know," It reminded them, "I'm also trapped. In it till the game's over. The only reward waiting for me if you brats kill each other is that this gets to end."

"Till next year?" Sayaka asked.

"Yeah," Monokuma said, and took its leave before either of the girls could call it on its noncommittal tone.
With that encounter finished, Nami and Sayaka made their way back down the hallway, then to the newly-opened stairs up to the sixth floor. Hospice ward, Hospitality ward, and now this was the fourth floor of Ultimate Wards. It wasn't tall for a hospital, but it felt like a lot of floors when there wasn't any elevator, that was for sure. The Empty Wings were only seven floors total, but Nami thought that this end of the hospital was probably at least one floor larger. From the windows in the Empty Wings, anyway, it looked that way.

Those windows weren't fully able to be looked through, and it seemed like the hospital existed in a gray void outside of them, but somebody could at least see across to the main wings from there, and vice versa.

This new floor discarded the extra-abandoned aesthetic of the previous one, and instead gave way to... Wood? Polished wooden floors and walls, looking less like a hospital. It went from a sterile aesthetic to a professional one which didn't quite match, but the wood was birch and stained light, so at first glance it still had the appearance of a hospital's hallway. There were four wards labeled.

Volunteer, Attorney, Pyrotechnician, and Carpenter.

Now, one of those was Nami's own talent, but she was more preoccupied with the first of that list. She let go of Sayaka's hand to approach it and stare at the door.

"What's up?" Sayaka asked.

"Monokuma said," Nami noted, "That the Volunteer Ward would have contents in it to counter a particular motive, remember?"

"Huh." Sayaka blinked, then stepped up next to Nami in front of the door. "I remember that, now that you mention it. I guess if we check out this ward, we might get an idea of what the next motive is?"

"Mm." Nami nodded, then pushed the door open only to find... Huh. A very strange thing to see in a hospital was what looked like the equivalent of a medical mission camp, down to the grass carpeting the floor. It made sense as a ward for Box, of course. She'd probably volunteered in plenty of these. Even so...

"Upupu!" Monokuma appeared again. Mitsuru stood up also and made himself visible, he'd been going through a cabinet in one corner of the room. "Hey, you three! Two of you realized the situation here, so here we go, I'll let you know. I'll tell everybody at dinner, of course, but it's in effect from now on, since you now know this place can counter it... That's right! Despair Fever's gonna be making the rounds!"

"Ugh, seriously?" Sayaka asked.

"Seriously. This ward has medicine that cures the fever after a 48-hour track, as well as surgical quality masks like the one Asahi wears." Monokuma then vanished because it would answer questions when everybody was there to hear it.

Well, that's just great. Hardly... Nami checked the time.
Two hours since the trial's conclusion and the next motive was already in effect. Not publicly, but it was. Ugh.

"What was that about?" Mitsuru asked. Right, he was here.

"Apparently this ward is our only defense against Despair Fever," Sayaka said, giving an exaggerated shrug. "Also apparently there's a cure for it and it's here. That's news to me."

"Oh. Yes, that's news to me too," Mitsuru said, "In fact, very substantial news. Um. Hm. Do you think we'd be able to sneak any of this medicine out with us? I mean, when it's all over, whoever survives. This would mean an immense amount to the foundation..."

"Yeah," Sayaka said, "What, like it's hard? I could sneak anything out of anywhere."

"Really?" Mitsuru asked.

"Absolutely not, I have my boundaries," Sayaka said, "But I don't really think that they'll be seriously searching us on the way out. Any of us could sneak some medicine out."

"That's great to hear," Mitsuru said, then placed a hand on his chest. "It would be helpful to a number of people. There's enough Despair in the world without people catching the disease as well."

"What can you tell us about Despair Fever?" Nami asked, realizing he seemed to know a non-zero amount about it.

“Well… It’s airborne, and quite contagious. There isn’t… Or I guess, wasn’t till now, a cure or a good way to manage symptoms. In some people the disease just runs its course, though the more people who are infected in one area the less likely it is that anyone will recover. After being infected, the patient starts behaving erratically and unlike themselves. Over several weeks the personality fades away until the infected becomes similar to a zombie… And a month after reaching this stage, it’s blood transmitted. The only way to catch Despair Fever from somebody that far gone is to have a blood transfusion from them, or something similar."

“So a two-day cure track…” Sayaka observed, “Won’t move past the first stage. Right?”

“Yes, seems right,” Mitsuru said, then chuckled and scratched his chin. “Don’t take my word for all this, though. It’s not like I was actually involved enough in those kinds of things to count on my memory.”

“It’s still good to know what we’re apparently in for,” Nami said. Sayaka held one of the masks out to her, and she fastened it to her face. “Good idea, Sayaka.”

“I can hear you better than I expected to,” Sayaka said, slipping her own mask on before she held one towards Mitsuru as well.

“Thank you,” He said, and fastened it. “These probably won’t be reliable, since that wouldn’t be interesting to Monokuma… Some of us will probably catch it anyhow, and need to take the two-day medical course. Keep an eye out, both of you. The quicker we catch it the quicker they’ll get better, after all.”

“What exactly are we looking for?” Nami asked.
“It’s complicated,” Mitsuru said, “But really, it’s anything strange and unusual. Some of them are
difficult to notice, too. Some are obvious, like losing control in part of your body or having your
regular emotional responses flipped. Others are more subtle. Things like ‘every third statement has
to start with a certain letter of the alphabet’, or ‘gives all instructions slightly wrong’.”

“Oh, well that’s fucking cancer,” Nami said, “I mean, in the figurative sense.”

“I didn’t know there was a figurative sense.”

“It means ‘that’s bad and unfortunate but in a weird way’, basically,” Sayaka stepped in to explain
for Nami. Ah, so that was one she’d been acquainted with.

“In that case, I agree,” Mitsuru said, “Anyway… You two were looking around the new wards in
general, right?” They nodded a confirmation. “Take some of the masks with you in case you run
into others, since we still have three hours till Monokuma announces the motive for real.”

“Will do.” Sayaka gave Mitsuru a fake salute, grabbed Nami’s hand again, and turned to leave.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand with this chapter, chapter 190, I have an announcement.

I'm kind of overwhelmed!
I'm a college student and as much as I love updating this fic every single day, making
the time to write and still have any time left to relax is proving difficult with my
current school workload. But I'm not going to stop.

I'm just taking a week's hiatus. Chapter 191 will be posted on Thursday, April
Eleventh, then updates will resume as normal. I hope you don't mind the break!
“Next up, next up...” Sayaka mumbled to herself as she looked around the hallway again, then spoke up, “Do you want to look in your ward, Nami?”

“Not yet, actually,” Nami said, and couldn’t hold back a soft nervous giggle. “I kind of don’t... I mean, I wanna see it. Today, yeah. Just, well. I got the real memories of my talent back... And then I immediately had to use it, and against Goro of all people. Doesn’t work.”

“That makes sense.”

“I want to see Madara’s ward,” Nami decided, “Ueda might still be dealing with Oishi, but Madara might actually be in his own ward. It’s nice to actually have a ward, um, explained to me when I get there... Except for the chef ward that time.”

“Of course,” Sayaka said. The two of them walked over to the Pyrotechnician’s Ward, opened it, and similar to Box’s ward, it was made to resemble a particular location. In this case, a fireworks store.

“Oh hey.” Madara raised a hand from inside one of the aisles, then made his way over to them. “Looks like I got my ward.”

“Is it... Safe to give you these?” Nami wondered.

“Huh? Oh, they’re mostly fake. The only things here with any chemicals to ‘em are sparklers and pop its, nothing that can really cause a problem. It’s kind of a pain. I mean, I got a variety of matches too? But yeah, there’s nothing here that can explode for real.”

“Mm. I see,” Nami said, “Not a very useful ward for you then, is it? And what medical use could this stuff possibly have?”

“Oh, that’s what that’s for.” Madara gestured to a corner with a device that Nami didn’t recognize. “That machine heats up knives. I was wondering why I had it, but if the wards are supposed to have a medical application, it’s gotta be for cauterization.”

“A machine that heats up knives? Really? People can’t just use a blowtorch these days...” Sayaka shook her head with a sigh.

“I mean, it’s kind of convenient not to need to,” Madara said, “Even if it’s totally unnecessary. Plus, there’s no blowtorch here. Guess that, too, would be too dangerous to put into my hands...”

“It it?” Nami asked.

“Yes, absolutely. I would just melt the bars off the windows and climb out or something. I’m so unpredictable, even I don’t know what I’d do. But I totally would have blown this place up with fireworks if Monokuma gave me real ones. Wouldn’t hurt anybody, but I have a rebel’s soul. Gotta
hurt the building. But I can’t because whoever made my ward had the foresight not to give me the opportunity.”

“Aw. Well, if we both get out of here, can I watch you blow something up sometime?” Sayaka asked.

“Huh? Well, yeah, I guess,” Madara said, “If we both got out of here, somehow, then I’ll totally show you however many explosions you want.”

“Cool,” Sayaka said, but then frowned as she crossed her arms. “You shouldn’t talk like that, though. Somehow? Really?”

“Actually I was talking about you. You’re not exactly the most well-built person for surviving,” Madara said.

“Now that’s a fucking lie,” Sayaka said, “I mean, well, I’m technically not. But you weren’t talking about me.”

“Why are you like this?” Madara asked.

“It’s my Ultimate Talent,” Sayaka reminded him, “I’m the best of the best in the mob. Of course I can tell when you’re lying. Have a little more faith in yourself!”

“Ehh. I wouldn’t say you’re completely able to tell when people are lying, but I guess that’s fair.” Madara gave noncommittal jazz hands at his sides. “I still don’t expect to live through this thing, but it’s not like I’m hating myself or anything. Just, kinda, there’s no way I could really make it.”

“Well, uh… You never know?” Nami offered.

“Oh, I know.” Madara dropped his hands to his sides, then smiled. “Don’t worry about it, though.”

“What?” Nami asked.

“Monokuma told me so,” Madara said, “That I’m probably doomed. That’s all. But you know, I kinda can’t help but believe it.”

“Is there a reason why you believe it?” Sayaka questioned, furrowing her brow.

“Paranoia? I dunno, folks. Like I said, I’m so unpredictable even I don’t know what I’m gonna do. Also don’t really know how I feel or why.”

“Big mood,” Nami said.

“Nami!” Sayaka exclaimed, a bit put off by that.

“I’m kidding, I kinda do,” Nami said, “I mean. Like. Um, I’m not gonna pass out or anything again. If I didn’t break down during that trial I probably won’t.”

“Good.” Sayaka squeezed her hand.

“About that trial…” Madara sighed and crossed his arms. “I’m sorry about that. My behavior was kinda out of line, there. It’s… Fuck. I thought that I was being clever, but really, I was just upset that my friend was dead.”

“It’s understandable,” Sayaka said.
“It’s not. Not really.” Madara shook his head. “I mean, look at you. You were friends with all three of the victims, and you still kept a level head. You knew it wouldn’t be as obvious as Oishi, and you were able to show forgiveness to the actual culprit.”

“I mean…” Sayaka looked away from him. “I was really mad, at first. But the thing is. Before we even really knew who did it, we’d already heard what those two did, to some extent. That they killed Kaede… And, I mean. I understand it. I wasn’t surprised to hear what they did.”

“I was,” Madara said, “I was really surprised to hear about all of that. I never thought that Kyosuke was a jealous or violent person at all… Or such an idiot that he’d think Akamatsu was the evil king without any evidence yet.”

“You knew him online, right?” Sayaka asked. Madara nodded, so she continued, “Then of course you didn’t know. He was pretty good at pretending like he… Was a good person, I guess. It’s easy to be blinded by a nervous personality, but I kind of already knew that he wasn’t… Genuinely nice. He was anxious and timid and nerdy, or whatever, he acted nice, but he also. You know. Kinda thought that he deserved something for being that kind of person.”

“Should you really be badmouthing the dead?” Madara asked.

“I’m not badmouthing him,” Sayaka said, “I’m just telling the truth about him, the truth that he was able to keep hidden from you… Fuck. I understand how you were friends. I’m not telling you not to mourn him or be upset that he’s gone. At the same time, I just… Kind of only knew him as an accessory to Yuuri. We wouldn’t have been friends without that mutual connection. Never would’ve been.”

“…Yamaguchi,” Madara muttered, noticing the tears that were pricking at her eyes. Her nails were digging into Nami’s palm, but she knew it wasn’t on purpose, she didn’t mind.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, this is fucking stupid.” Sayaka brought her free hand up to cover her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut, “Let’s go. Let’s go, Nami.”

Madara didn’t try to stop them as they left his ward.
3:00 PM / 1500 Hours

Upon returning to the hallway, Nami said nothing. She could tell that Sayaka didn’t actually want to talk about or deal with these feelings right now. She just needed time to compose herself. It took a good ten minutes till her breathing was normal again. She didn’t smile as she turned to Nami, but she wasn’t trying to hide her emotions, just postpone them. She spoke softly, “Ueda’s ward, right? That’s what we should take a look at next?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Nami said. Sayaka led the way to that door, then hesitated in front of it.

“You go first,” She said.

“Okay,” Nami said, and reached out. Just like the previous wards, Kurou’s was fashioned after a particular location, this time being… A home improvement store. Well, of course.

“Oh, hey, you two,” Randy greeted them, not Kurou himself.

“Hi Randy,” Nami said, not at all surprised to find him in this ward.

“I was contemplating building a bookshelf,” Randy told the girls.

“Where would you put it?” Sayaka asked.

“I dunno. Just wanna build one,” Randy admitted, “Cause there’s this stuff here and I thought that a bookshelf might have some kinda good use somehow or something.”

“That’s fair,” Sayaka said, then thought for a few moments as she looked up at the ceiling. “Hmm… Well, why don’t we ask Shinoe about that?”

“Oh?” Randy failed to get her drift.

“Well, Hako already promised her the plushies,” Sayaka explained, “Of our friends… But it would be nice to put them somewhere we could all see them. Like on a shelf. Right?”

“That would be nice,” Nami said, “We could set it up in Cafe Monokuma.”

“Hey Randy?” Randy asked.

“Cafe Monokuma?” Randy asked.

“Didn’t you notice it on your way up here?” Sayaka asked, to which Randy shook his head.

“…Okay, well, that’s stupid, but yeah. Oishi’s ward was removed, and on the opposite side of the hallway is Cafe Monokuma. It’s replacing the dining hall, since, well, there is a point to be made against eating there for most people with normal sensitivities.”

“I see! That makes sense!” Randy said, “I’m actually kinda glad about that. I mean, myself, I don’t think that it would’ve stopped me from eating in the dining hall… But I know I got a sturdy stomach. At least, the kids who didn’t already deal with two trials didn’t have any sorta chance to get thick-skinned against this shit?”

“I mean, some of them are older than you,” Nami said, “But you’re right! Even people who aren’t
like us and didn’t deal with this sorta stuff before the Killing Game, at least had a couple deaths to get used to it."

“Of course…” Nami brought up, “If both Goro and Kyosuke really are dead, then, we’ve already lost just as many people as we did before the reset.”

Sayaka and Randy were silent, both staring at her for a non-zero amount of unpleasant moments. She was the only one of the three who’d actually taken the time to think about and grasp the math of the situation, after all. As smart as the other two were, such a technicality wouldn’t just cross their minds normally. Both of them were more focused on grappling with the individual deaths, without seeing the bigger picture of the fact that the group had actually been set back in one trial to the point it had been before.

“Jeeze…” Randy shook his head. “Gotta be like that, Nami?”

“Sorry,” Her apology was sincere.

“It… Makes sense, no, you’re right. Course you’d notice that,” Randy admitted, “You gotta keep track of the details, and all that. This whole time I thought I was learning so much from Kaede, but you were gonna be a better detective all along.”

“I’m a rotten detective,” Nami said.

“Huh?” Sayaka was the one to question this.

“I’m not a detective at all, you know. I’m an attorney. Defending the innocent and prosecuting the guilty... I’m not a detective. I’m the person who needs detectives like the two of you most,” Nami explained, “Without your evidence and deductions, I’m nothing. I can’t find important evidence all by myself. All I can do is use it.”

“Still, I…” Randy started to protest, but gave up. He realized he couldn’t say anything that wouldn’t sound foolish aloud.

“I know it’s hard,” Nami assured him, “But we all worked together. And we all will, if you’ll let me, if anything else bad happens.”

"When something else bad happens," Sayaka mumbled.

"Yeah," Randy agreed, though it didn't seem like he wanted to. "Akamatsu didn't turn out to be the Evil King, after all. So, we're still where we were when that stuff started. At least two more deaths need to happen for us to get out..."

"Well..." Nami decided to bring it up. "I don't know why Monokuma hasn't told us this, but there's usually a pacifism clause."

"Huh?" Sayaka asked.

"I only just remembered it. I didn't know about it before I was working on Goro's case," Nami explained, "But I think that most Killing Games do start off with some disclaimer... That everybody can get out if they manage not to kill for three years?"

"Well, I guess we should ask him?" Randy offered, "Monokuma?"

"Monokuma arriving on the scene! But you of all people really oughta respect, my preferred pronouns are it-itself! Get it, cause I'm just a little creature and I cannot change this?" Monokuma
was summoned by its name as always. "Sorry to step on your toes with that meme there, Nami, but if it's any consolation I learned it from you!"

"Well, okay," Nami said.

"To answer your question..." Monokuma gave an exaggerated shrug. "I dunno why it didn't get mentioned to start off? Er, anyway. The truth is that not all Monokumas are as honest as yours truly! No Killing Game in the past has ever actually had the win condition programmed in for three years to pass. It won't happen. Anyone who tries, well... It's always made sure that it'll happen somehow. Even if it takes something really stupid like forcing somebody to commit a murder against their will... I won't do that to you guys, but all that waiting three years would do is mean that you've spent three years here."

"I see... Well, that's kinda depressing, but I'm not surprised," Randy said, "I mean, with all the atrocities that Despair commits, it isn't like. That horrifying that they'd lie about letting people live if they wait three years."

"Yeah..." Monokuma agreed, "Well, goodbye!"

"So," Randy said once Monokuma was gone, "We really are back at square one."

"We are," Sayaka said, "And it's... Such a pain, isn't it? Whoever's the Evil King isn't allowed to admit that they are, in any way. It's like the way the lie serum worked. And the way it's written, defeat... Probably means that something like suicide, or asking to be killed, won't work."

"What about getting executed?" Randy wondered.

"Hm..." Nami thought for a bit. "Well, it probably depends. If the king legitimately wanted to get away with the murder and doesn't confess to it, then yeah, they've been defeated in their murder mystery."

"Mm. But of course, somebody couldn't manufacture their intentions." Sayaka frowned. "We know that Monokuma's big on wording, so we do have to consider that the word 'defeat' means these things."

"Yeah... Well, I'm gonna start making that bookshelf," Randy decided.

"Cool. We should check out Nami's ward," Sayaka said, and Nami squeezed her hand a little to assure her that was fine.
4:00 PM / 1600 Hours

Sayaka and Nami had already had quite the afternoon, but Nami’s, at least, was about to become a bit more quite. Her ward… Would it have been made available when this floor opened up, if she hadn’t yet remembered her talent? She had no idea if it would have, or if it would have been kept a secret until she earned that memory for herself.

The ward followed the pattern of all the others on this floor, of resembling some other interior environment. Hers was, of course, a courtroom. The walls were lined with what seemed to be case files, since all the legal books had already been stored in Riko’s ward. Nami caught herself chuckling at the memory of how she could wrap her head around the dense legal texts without knowing why at the time.

“Yes?” Sayaka asked.

“Yeah. Sorry. Got distracted, thinking about something.” Nami slowly moved forward, out of the gallery. She found the prosecutor’s table, since admittedly, that was the one she was used to recently, and felt like described her role in the recent trials anyhow. As soon as she was standing at it, Monokuma made another appearance.

“Hate to oversaturate you with my presence, but since you finally got here, I wanna explain how it works,” It said, “In this ward, you can practice your gameface for the trials! Pick a side, pick one of the randomly generated characters, and you’ll either defend or condemn that character against a computer that will tell you if your arguments are valid or not.”

“Oh. That’s… Interesting.” Nami seemed to be zoning out as she looked through the options of generated cases and characters.

“Hey, Red,” Monokuma said, “While she’s distracted, come over here. I wanna say somethin’ to you.”

“You’ve said a lot of things to me today, why can’t Nami hear this one?” Sayaka asked.

“Cause I didn’t wanna embarrass you!” Monokuma explained, waving its arms around. “I just wanted to say… You like her, right?”

“Ah!” Sayaka looked away, her face flushing near-immediately.

“So I’m right. Anyway, I just wanted to say, go for it. You’ve got my blessing,” Monokuma said.

“Why would I need your blessing?” Sayaka questioned, her embarrassment turned to confusion.

“I dunno,” Monokuma said, “But I figured you want it from somebody, right? Nami’s a lady after all, but she’s got no family left to give you their blessing to go for her. So I’m the next best thing. Right? Cause, you do respect me, yeah?”

“I guess so,” Sayaka said.

“So you get my blessing,” Monokuma said.

“Okay,” Sayaka said, then closed her eyes and crouched down. “…Thank you, Monokuma.”
“You’re allowed.” Monokuma put a paw on her head. “You’re allowed to be happy, okay, Yamaguchi?”

“Yeah. Thank you.” Sayaka nodded, then stood back up and looked to where Nami was still scrolling through her options. “Tomorrow’s her birthday, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Monokuma said.

“Do you think it’s cute to ask somebody out at a time like that?”

“I dunno about cute, but I bet she’d like it.”

“Thanks.”

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5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

Nami spent a while just looking at the options in her ward, and didn’t end up actually using any aspect of it before it was time for dinner. Monokuma made an announcement that Cafe Monokuma was the place to eat now, and that once everybody was there the new motive would be delivered. Well, the fever would be announced. Nami and Sayaka already knew what it was, but the others didn’t. They arrived at Cafe Monokuma and sat down.

Amai had made food, less extravagant than before, but still a meal. She served individual plates without flair or any pleasantries, just dropping them off. Still, Nami noticed looking around that Amai seemed to have at least taken people’s tastes into account, and likely allergies as well. The omurices had different ingredients for each person… So she paid attention to what people took from her buffets.

“She won’t eat anything she didn’t cook herself,” Sayaka noted, “Well, she ate Yuuri’s baking too, but that’s it. So she kinda still had to cook even if she didn’t feel up to it…”

“But she still paid attention to what people’s tastes and stuff were,” Nami said, “Yours has tomatoes in it, nobody else’s does. Mine doesn’t have any mushrooms or garnish, most of the others do.”

“Yeah,” Sayaka said, “Now that you mention it. She’s thoughtful, when it comes to this stuff.”

“Mm,” Nami agreed, then took a bite of her food. It was so good, jeeze. Separate the art from the artist, Nami Kaguya, this is still the best cooking you’ve ever eaten. “I guess it’s important to remember that the version of Oishi we saw at the trial… Isn’t the only one.”

“She was out of line,” Sayaka said, “She was being too cruel to Hako. But she’s still a person. Nobody’s all evil.”

“Nobody?” Nami asked.

“Pft.” Sayaka rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe some people are. But how’s this? Nobody who’s not despair yet is all bad?”

“That’s better. I’ve seen a lot of people who are all bad,” Nami said, “Working in the courts, and all.”

“Do you… Think anybody here is?” Sayaka asked.
“No,” Nami said, “Nobody who’s been in this hospital since we have… Is really bad. Tomoe, Nozomi, Kyosuke… All could have been better people in the future.”

“Do you think we’re being too soft on Bakura, knowing what he’s been through?” Sayaka wondered.

“No,” Nami said, “I think that between that trial and… Everything. If he is alive, he’s been punished plenty. Right?”


“The same reason I couldn’t put him away,” Nami assured her, “Too big to fall, yeah? You’re a Yamaguchi before you’re a vigilante. There’s politics in that sort of thing, aren’t there?”

“There are.”

“Hey everybody!” Monokuma appeared.

“Hi Monokuma,” Several people were compelled to echo, the girls included.

“Thank you, thank you kindly. I’m very sorry, but I simply must introduce you brats to the latest motive. Upupu… Ah… No, I can’t even pretend to be excited. It’s old hat by now! That’s right, it’s Despair Fever. It technically started spreading several hours ago of course, by which I mean, patient zero was infected. This wheel-” The wheel appeared. “-Will tell us who that was. Let’s spin!”

“Oh!” Monokuma realized as the wheel stopped. “Looks like patient zero… is me!”
“I… wasn’t expecting that,” Monokuma admitted, “I thought I totally would have been able to tell if I got infected but it turns out I’ve been wandering around sick with Despair Fever for hours… Great.”

“How would it affect you, though?” Tsukasa wondered, “Being, not a person and all.”

“No idea!” Monokuma exclaimed.

“Wow,” Sayaka said, “Well, Hako’s ward is upstairs, and it has medicine that takes two days to cure Despair Fever, and masks. Anyone wants one, I’ve got some here. Monokuma, you can medicate yourself, right?”

“Yeah it’s no worries,” Monokuma said, “Unless I end up doing what Fujishiro was talking about and lose the use of my legs!”

“If that happens, I guess I’ll help you,” Sayaka said, “As long as carrying you around and giving you medicine doesn’t count as hurting the headmaster.”

“It doesn’t… I mean, come on, you know pretty well what does and doesn’t count!” Monokuma exclaimed, and if it could have blushed, it probably would. After all, Sayaka had held it in place back in the Runner’s Ward that time by balancing her force to be restraining but not harmful.

“Just double checking. I don’t want to end up dead just because I pitied the thing that put us here.”

“That’s fair, that’s fair,” Monokuma said. The others started to collect masks from Sayaka.

“Should warn you those things aren’t foolproof, but they should help, yeah. Of course, only the medicine, not any of the other stuff, would have been in the ward if Hako died before now, and you’d have had to get locked in to access the medicine.”

“Huh? That’s… Oh,” Box mumbled, “The group’s being rewarded for keeping me alive? Isn’t that unfair?”

“Well, admittedly, this is a pretty important case, but there would have been a sort of advantage for having Yushu’s ward open for real too, you know. In a way, everyone gets rewarded for everybody who’s kept alive a certain amount of time.”

“That makes s…” Tsukasa started to agree, but trailed off as he watched Box stand up, plate in her hands, and leave. “Well, where’s she going?”

“Maybe she just wants to eat alone,” Monokuma said, “But that’s the fastest I’ve ever seen anybody leave, and Asahi leaves pretty fast!”

Riko, however, wasn’t departing yet. Actually, she didn’t even have a plate… Nami assumed that Amai planned to make her something a bit later so that she could eat it while it was still warm, which was kind of her. Still, it was confusing why Box had left like that; it wasn’t like anything bad or overwhelming had happened, Nami thought.

“So… Despair fever. Nobody actually going to… Explain what that does…? Just that we can get better in two days?” Tsumugi questioned, half-raising a sheepish hand.

“Well,” Mitsuru said, “It kind of just does a lot of random stuff? We’re only going to experience
the first phase, so…”

He went on to describe symptoms as he previously had, listing off the same examples of what could happen to the people who got sick, and assuring everybody that it would end up okay in the end. Monokuma had already left, noting that it was’t able to completely stay away, and would still come anytime its name was stated and couldn’t avoid this. Nami wasn’t sure why it was willing to try avoiding the spread of Despair Fever; She kind of would have expected it to go around hugging everybody to try and spread it faster.

“I see,” Amai said, adjusting her mask, “I’ll probably spend some time alone then, whenever I can. If I got sick, then who would cook? It’s not like I can just throw caution to the wind and feed you all food made by a contagious person!”

“Oh, that’s a shame, but I understand.” Kurou was the only one who’d say that, though. Riko took so much caution with her health anyway that she would probably still be allowed to spend time with the chef, and nobody else actually wanted to spend time with Amai anymore. Sayaka had discovered she had better options for friends, and Amai burned the bridge with Box all on her own.

“Sorry, Ueda,” Amai struck a pose, “But my incredibly cool self just can’t take any risks. I won’t be lonely! There’s no way Asahi will catch it!”

“That’s what I thought,” Kurou said, then sighed, “But you know, we were friends, so I’ll be a bit lonely, won’t I?”

“Heeeey,” Torimi called out, “You could hang out with me some more!”

“And me, of course,” Mitsuru reminded him, “Of course, I understand looking for new friends in this context, but if you do get lonely, I’m always ready to be a friend.”

“Thank you, Mitsuru,” Kurou said with an amiable nod his direction. “And you of course, Shinoe. I do quite enjoy your company.”

“Gooooo!” Torimi giggled.

“In general, we do need to be a bit careful here, with who spends time with who,” Randy said, “I mean, if we do all hang out randomly with each other, then the fever won’t be isolated. Especially since Monokuma didn’t know yet that it was sick, I guess we have no way of knowing this early on.”

“Nami and I will stick together,” Sayaka said, “We both were close to Monokuma before the fever got announced, and before we got masks, so it’s possible it already jumped to us.”

“Mm, but…” Tsumugi spoke up, “Separating ourselves, hiding away, those sorts of things… I don’t like the idea of that at all…”

“Why not?” Mitsuru asked.

“That’s what happened last game. After the third case… We all got split up and stopped eating together, and stuff. Kaede and I were usually in my lab… Like the wards here. Ouma was in Sairaha’s lab alone most of the time… And, well, because we were all split up like that. It took us several days to realize that a friend of ours was dead. His body was hidden under the floorboards.”

“...Oh, yikes,” Nami said, “We don’t want that happening!”
“Obviously not!” Amai snipped, then looked to Tsumugi again, “Well, all of us except the people who are definitely sick, are gonna come to meals, right?”

“That’s true…” Tsumugi said, “I just think that trying to isolate and overcompensate this way is too much for this kind of motive. I don’t think anything about it is actually… Going to motivate a murder, right? We’ll just get sick for a few days and then it’ll be fine. You’re all making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Ah…” Randy realized, “Shit, she’s right, isn’t she?”

“I didn’t even think about that. It really isn’t so important,” Tsukasa said, “We got so caught up in how to prevent the sickness, we didn’t think about if it’s worth preventing. Two days of a bizarre illness isn’t really that troublesome.”

“It would have been a worse motive if Hako was dead,” Mitsuru said, “And it was difficult to get the medicine. As it is, it’s a mild inconvenience, isn’t it?”

“Yeah… The real motive would have been if we gave into the instinct to split up like that,” Tsumugi said, “At least I can… Do this much, for us.”
“Thank you, Shirogane,” Randy said, “If you didn’t mention that… Yeah. Splitting up into small groups seems like kind of a shitty plan when we look at the bigger picture.”

“Mm… No problem,” Tsumugi said, then stood up. “Although, I really don’t mind being alone myself, it’s just… It’s a terrible idea to lose track of each other. Just because this place is getting large enough to make that easy doesn’t mean that we should.”

“Well, hey.” Randy stood up, himself. “Do you mind if I tagged along with you?”

“What… for?” Tsumugi questioned, and adjusted her glasses.

“He was close to Akamatsu too,” Tsukasa spoke for his boyfriend, “So it makes sense for the two of you to talk about it.”

“I guess so?” Tsumugi said.

“I mean, well. We both knew her well. We can probably help each other deal with it more than anyone else can?” Randy offered. “I get it if you don’t want to, though.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Tsumugi waved her hands and giggled nervously. “Sorry, you’re right. Forgive me. I’m a little… out of it.”

“I’d be kinda surprised if you weren’t, let’s be real,” Randy admitted, then approached Tsumugi and joined her to leave Cafe Monokuma.

Then there were nine. Tsukasa approached Nami and Sayaka’s table, pulled out one of the two empty chairs, and sat down. “Hope you ladies don’t mind if I join you for a bit?”

“Not at all,” Sayaka said, “How are you doing, anyway?”

“Is it bad for me to say that I’m holding up just fine?” He asked, then looked away from them and sighed. “I mean, obviously not fine. People are dead, and that’s messed up no matter how you look at it! But at the same time, well. I haven’t really gotten close with anybody new. It’s just Randy and Nami, who I knew before I even got here.”

“In some ways, that’s good,” Sayaka said.

“Never would have expected you to be more of a lone wolf than Sayaka though, Tsukasa,” Nami said, “I mean, when we first arrived, she said she wouldn’t be friends with anybody. And you’re a good guy, so I’d expect you to, you know?”

“I guess so, but aren’t I also a normie?” Tsukasa asked, scratching the back of his neck. “Compared to all the rest of you, I’m not really worth a second thought. It isn’t like there’s anybody I don’t get along with, particularly. Or, not any more.”

“Yeah, um… What was the deal with you and those two, anyway?” Nami asked.

“Kyosuke and Ruka… Well…” Tsukasa crossed his arms. “I guess I wouldn’t even say that I disliked them, but we definitely didn’t get along. Kyosuke threatened to kill me right after the first motives were revealed. I guess because Randy and Ruka had the same job…”

“Seven eleven, right?” Nami remembered from the first trial. “Why would that have been such a
problem, though?"

“I’d be fine to tell you,” Tsukasa said, “But it isn’t my call. If Randy still wants to avoid talking about it, in Ruka’s memory or something, then it’s not my place to blab about it.”

“That makes sense,” Sayaka said, “Out of respect, I won’t talk about it either.”

“Jeeeeeze… My best friends here won’t even tell me about a mysterious motive…” Nami complained, “Just kidding, though. Keep your secrets.”

“We will,” Tsukasa said.

“Uhh, anyway,” Nami said, “I kinda wanna go to sleep early tonight…”

“Don’t you do that most nights?” Tsukasa asked.

“Unintentionally, yes. But I’m really tired. No batteries, babey.”

“I mean, same,” Sayaka admitted, “Today’s still… The day the trial happened. It’s exhausting. Tomorrow should be a better one.”

“Tomorrow’s Nami’s birthday, isn’t it?” Tsukasa asked.

“Huh? Did I mention it to you?” Nami wondered.

“Not since we’ve been here, but I remembered it. I was the only guest at the birthday party that Tomoe threw for you back in middle school, after all.”

“Ohh… That’s right,” Nami said, “That was nice. Tomoe always threw nice parties for me. She was always civil to you, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah. I guess she knew that I wasn’t a threat to you,” Tsukasa said, “We never really got along, but we didn’t not get along either. I mean, I did forget her. With you, you’ve changed a ton so it makes sense I’d forget you, and we know your memory was screwed up when you got here…”

“Mm, and Tomoe just ignored the fact that we met you before,” Nami said, “Cause if I forgot you then I got to forget the bad stuff from that year too…”

“…Hey, Nami,” Sayaka said, “You don’t gotta answer me, if you don’t wanna, but… How much bad stuff do you really remember?”

“Huh? Oh. Well, I still don’t remember the stuff from middle school, not really. I remember being there, I remember the result. I don’t remember anything that I felt back then, though.”

“What about Kirara?” Sayaka wondered.

Nami stayed silent for a bit, contemplating that answer, but then she gave it, “I don’t think I’ve forgotten anything else about Kira, anymore. I remember how she messed with my mental health. I think… A whole lot of that was just me, there were times I forgot where she wasn’t even doing anything wrong. But she did, sometimes. And she fucked me up for a little while there… I don’t think she deserved to die, though.”

“You’re a softy. You don’t think anybody deserved to die,” Tsukasa said.

“That’s not true,” Nami protested, “There are people who deserve the death! You think I could get along with Sayaka if I didn’t believe that? Geeze! If somebody put me in a room with Matsubara
and gave me a rock, I wouldn’t not use it! Would that be fucked up or what? I don’t care cause the law couldn’t stop him so I should.”

“I definitely don’t think you should be in a room alone with Matsubara,” Sayaka said, “Especially with a weapon as unreliable as a rock.”

“Ehh… That’s probably true,” Nami admitted.

“Somebody’ll kill the guy, someday,” Sayaka assured her, “Plus, I’ll protect you from all the guys like him and girls like Kirara.”

“There… Aren’t any girls like Kira,” Nami said, “Which is really a good thing for the world, yeah. But it’s kind of unique that she was horrible to me the way she was.”

“Uh… Guess that’s fair,” Sayaka said, “Kinda unusual for somebody to be a piece of shit cause they’re interested in studying the particular reactions to that shit relating to your brainweird. But, you knew what I meant, right?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “Thanks, Sayaka. If I ever need you to protect me, I know I can rely on you… I mean, I don’t think anybody else could fool me like Kira did, these days, but just in case…”

“Mm. We’re both here for you,” Tsukasa said.
Sayaka and Nami ended up wandering out of Cafe Monokuma soon after. Sayaka had grabbed her hand again, and Nami was starting to wonder if Sayaka actually meant something by that… But quickly stopped herself. After all, why would Sayaka be interested in her? Girls usually weren’t, after all. Nobody but Kira had shown any legitimate interest in Nami’s time acting as the Ultimate Attorney, and given how things ended with Kira, the fact that the appealing traits to that woman were what Nami would personally consider negative ones, she wasn’t exactly keen to believe that she was actually a desirable person to anybody resembling normal.

Maybe that was a little bit self-defeating, though. Nami needed to avoid thinking that way; It wasn’t a common occurrence, sure, but even occasionally putting herself down couldn’t be good for her. Then again, neither was letting herself think too much of something which may mean nothing at all.

It was still ridiculously early, but Nami did just want to be done with this day.

“I might… Go to sleep,” Nami said.

“Mm,” Sayaka agreed, “Me too. It’s been a long day, and tomorrow will definitely be better. It’s your birthday, after all.

“Number one birthday gift: catch Despair Fever,” Nami joked, “But, for real. It’s kinda weird… This is gonna be the first birthday where I don’t even talk to Tomoe.”

“Oh… Right,” Sayaka mumbled, “I forgot, that might be a reason that your birthday’s not so great, huh?”

“Well… I want to look on the bright side, you know?” Nami said, “So I want to try and have a good day, even in this situation. I’ll miss her, yeah, but… I don’t want to let this Killing Game ruin everything for me.”

“God…” Sayaka clicked her tongue and shook her head in the opposite direction of Nami. “You’re so… I dunno, strong? Fuck. You’re doing better with this stuff than me, that’s for sure.”

“I uh… I am?” Nami questioned, pointing to herself.

“You’re actually handling this shit. I’m just pretending like I can. So, you’re doing better,” Sayaka said, “You’d think somebody like me should be able to handle death better… Be able to handle it any amount better than I am?”

“It’s…” Nami tried to think of how to explain it. “Well, Tomoe and I were apart for years, so that’s probably part of it. I was more torn up about her when I remembered less, but now that I have years that we barely talked, it’s… Easier to deal with. Like I kind of already mourned her when she left, because I knew things wouldn’t be the same between us, even if we still talked.”

“Mhm, that, makes sense,” Sayaka said.

“And in general… For Tomoe, and Rei, and Goro… I don’t know if I’m handling it or if I’m postponing it,” Nami explained, “I mean, other people might die, so… I think I’m just holding onto all of my grief until I can get it out all at once for everybody?”
“...Oh. Well, that’s not handling it well at all,” Sayaka said.

“It really isn’t!” Nami agreed, “But it’s working for me, so.” She gave a shaky double-thumbs-up.

“Be careful, okay?” Sayaka said, then closed her eyes and sighed. “It’s just... Ugh. I can’t stop thinking about how things could have been different. I just... Is it bad for me to say that, I think, everything could have been better if it was just me and Yuuri, and Kanoshi was never there? If just the two of us could have been friends and looked out for each other?”

“I don’t think it’s bad,” Nami said, “But it’s not good either. Like, that can’t be good for you.”

“Maybe. But it’s working for me,” Sayaka smirked as she turned Nami’s own words back against her. “So how ‘bout that? It makes me feel a little less bad about this whole thing if I know that it wasn’t perfect anyway.”

“Well, that makes sense,” Nami said, “But you can’t change the past. I had to wonder, too, if things here would have been different if I’d done something else. But nothing’s going to change just thinking that...”

“I know,” Sayaka said, “Obviously, nothing’s gonna change. And I have no way of knowing what different choices or situations would do, to where I ended up. Nobody can actually imagine a thing like that. But thinking that it could be different, you know, makes me think there’s a version of me somewhere out there where it was different, and it was good that way. So I can try to be satisfied with where I am...”

“Do you think that you can be? Satisfied?” Nami asked.

“Um,” Sayaka hesitated for a bit, and they were both quiet, hearing only each other’s breaths. They were just in the hallway of the hospice ward, but nobody else was around at all, anywhere. Riko had already come and gone from eating in her room, and it was really too early for anybody to reasonably be going to sleep. So they stood there. Then, Sayaka practically whispered, “I don’t think that I can. I know that I can. I don’t know how long it’s going to take, but it’s going to happen... No matter how hard it is.”

Nami squeezed her hand a bit. She squeezed it back, and there weren’t any other words.

Who knew if that meant anything? It didn’t need to. In that moment, it didn’t need to mean a thing besides two people, sharing a small comfort. The question of ‘what does this mean’, between these girls was one that didn’t need to be answered just yet. One was ready to give an answer, the other was unprepared to hear one, but tonight wasn’t the right time to resolve that. The answer had until tomorrow, to shape and present itself.

So they split up, softly, with the question hanging between them to wait for that answer. Waiting, silent, and smiling in the hearts of the asker and the answerer. Until tomorrow.
Daily Life: Day Ten (Twenty)

6:00 AM / 0600 Hours.

Nami Kaguya was twenty years old today.

Today, September nineteenth. Today, the tenth day in the Killing Game.

Today, when either eight or seven people were dead, and either twelve or thirteen people were alive. She was alive. She was one of twelve or thirteen people who were alive.

Today, Nami could legally drink in her country, not like that ever mattered before.

Today, Tomoe Kaguya would have been twenty. Instead, she died at nineteen, a sacrifice to Despair who never should have met her twin sister again.

Today, Nami Kaguya was twenty.

Today she was okay.

Nami took a deep breath, climbed out of bed, then got ready to face the day. Showered, dressed, she was cute. Yeah, weird, she was cute. She was cute? This was a fact, for the first time. Was being twenty what it took for her to bloom, or was she managing to put behind her all the time she couldn’t see it herself?

Last night’s question crept up on her again, and she thought, now, today, she was ready to hear an answer to that. Now she could entertain the idea that holding hands and promising futures to each other implied that she could be loved, maybe. Maybe she could receive a birthday gift like that. Just maybe.

So she left her room and walked upstairs, making her way to Cafe Monokuma. She wasn’t the first person there, by any means. In fact, she walked in to see the Cafe decorated nicely, and there was a cake on one of the tables in the center.

“Happy birthday, Nami!” Tsukasa greeted her with a wave. Now that Nami took a look around, everyone was present. Amai was back in the kitchen area of course, with a fierce pout on her face, but everybody else was ready to welcome Nami into her latest year on this bitch of an earth.

“Ah… Thank you!” Nami exclaimed, then furrowed her brow as she took a look around, “But, isn’t this a little bit early for all of you?”

“Well, you probably failed to notice,” Monokuma, who was also there, spoke up, “But I actually played the generic morning announcement in your room half an hour late. You know, for the sake of the party.”

“Really?” Nami asked.

“Yeah. So you’d wake up late and get here at a reasonable hour and all.” Monokuma nodded with its arms crossed like it was incredibly proud of itself for its very small part in planning this surprise.

“Thank you,” Nami said.
“Um. Just so you know!” Box spoke up, “Oishi isn’t pouting back there because she’s upset that we’re having a party for you… She’s pouting because she didn’t make your cake.”

“I got here early just so I could do it,” Sayaka said, “It might not be as tasty as a cake from Oishi, but I kinda thought it’d be more personal if somebody who’s actually your friend made it. You know?!”

“It’s great… Thank you,” Nami said, “You didn’t need to all do this, though.”

“It’s the least we can do,” Madara said, “You did carry us through that whole trial and all, since your birthday’s gotta be here, we can show our appreciation a little bit.”

“Not to mention, you’re our friend,” Tsumugi said, “Even if we didn’t have anything to thank you for, of course we’d celebrate your birthday.”

“You always worked on your birthday before, Namine,” Torimi said, “So today you should just relax. And spend some time with us!”

“The real birthday party was the friends we made along the way,” Nami said.

“Yes! And the actual party,” Mitsuru said, “We did work hard putting this together, after all.”

“Yee,” Nami said, and pressed her hands together.

“Come on, sit down,” Randy rushed up and grabbed Nami by the shoulders, steering her to a seat, “Eat some cake! You’ve got to, cause some of us have presents for you, too.”

“Presents? In a Killing Game?” Nami asked.

“It’s more likely than you think!” Randy proclaimed, “I mean, we did have those hobby things in our rooms and stuff, after all.”

“You really didn’t have to do all this,” Nami said, holding her hands to her face to hide her nervous blush. She was kind of overwhelmed by all the kindness her friends were showing her, especially in this situation where it was possible she’d never end up able to repay them. That overwhelming feeling was swiftly dissuaded, though, when she felt Sayaka’s hand on her shoulder.

“Obviously we didn’t have to,” Sayaka said, “I mean, come on. You really think we’d do this for just anyone? Nozomi wouldn’t have even wanted something like this from us. We’re throwing you a party cause we wanted a party, let’s be real. The fact that it’s our friend’s birthday is just a good excuse.”

“Ah…” Nami laughed a bit at that, and that it was definitely blunt honesty from Sayaka.

“She’s exaggerating!” Box tried to smooth the situation.

“She’s not,” Nami said, “And that’s good. I’m glad that I could be an excuse for you all to have fun and eat cake…”

“Speaking of fun,” Tsukasa said, “I’m going to be in the arcade most of the day, myself. If you’d want to play something with me, or a few of us could play a party game together if we’re all there at the same time.”

“Generally, though,” Tsumugi said, “We wanted to do something nice, but calm. I know that parties can become an unpleasant thing instead, if you’re expected to follow some itinerary or
spend all your time with everyone.”

“Well, I don’t know if it would become unpleasant,” Nami said, “But, yeah, thank you. It’s nice to be able to spend my birthday like this… Well, let’s try Sayaka’s cake, right?”

“Before breakfast?” Mitsuru wondered.

“Cake is a perfectly serviceable breakfast,” Nami said, “Or at least, it’s equally as serviceable as eating dessert after breakfast. Neither of them are really the standard.”

“It’s a strawberry cake,” Sayaka said, “So if any cake’s gonna count as breakfast, it’s this one. There’s real fruit in it!”

“Oh, I like strawberrry.” Nami giggled a bit.

“Good! It would have given away the surprise if I asked what you like, so I just went with what I thought you’d like…”

“Well, my favorite type of cake is cannoli cake, but that’s weird,” Nami said, “So strawberry is perfect!”

“I’m glad,” Sayaka said, then everybody started to take slices of cake and sat down.
Nami ate her cake first, then breakfast as provided by Amai. This time, it was a traditional Japanese breakfast, so she was glad that she’d had Sayaka’s delicious strawberry cake. Natto, raw egg, and fried mackerel didn’t appeal to her at all… Leaving her with a bowl of white rice and a bowl of miso soup. She put some soy sauce on the rice to make it more interesting, ate the components she liked, then passed the extras onto Sayaka, who traded her miso for the mackerel, natto, and additional egg.

Adding the egg to her rice made Sayaka’s bowl a little bit saturated with the protein, but she seemed to enjoy it greatly. She also saved the mackerels for last, then scarfed them down in minutes. Evidently, her favorite part.

“You like Japanese breakfast, don’t you, Sayaka?” Nami asked, still working on her second bowl of miso.

“Mm!” Sayaka answered with half a mackerel hanging from her mouth, then bit through it and took the remaining half away, swallowed what she bit off, then answered, “It’s nostalgic! I ate this sort of stuff all the time growing up. When left to my own devices I usually end up with sweets or pancakes instead, but it’s still really tasty.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Nami said, “I don’t really like this stuff… I don’t like cooked fish, or fermented stuff, or raw eggs because they’re all slimy.”

“Someday you’ve got to make a list for me,” Sayaka said, “Of all the stuff you don’t like to eat.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No, I mean.” Sayaka turned away, face turning pink. “So that I can cook for you, you know?”

“Ah… Oh!” Nami caught her own cheeks warming. “Right! Thank you, that’s… Actually very kind of you. Wow.”

“I mean, I kinda just want to. Not kind or whatever.” Sayaka clicked her tongue, trying to save face, but she really wasn’t able to. So she’d change the subject instead. “Um… I know that this is your birthday and all, but do you think that you could help me with something when we’re done eating? Everyone’s planning to give you their gifts throughout the day if they have any for you, so it should be fine if we leave.”

“For sure,” Nami said, “You don’t have to preface it like, I know it’s your birthday. I’ll help you anytime. Even at peach time.”

“Do you like peaches?”

“Only if the skin isn’t on, I don’t like the fuzz,” Nami answered.

“How about peach cobbler?”

“That’s good. The skins aren’t even fuzzy if they’re included there. I also like nectarines!”

“Cool,” Sayaka said, then stood up, having finished her mackerel now. Nami picked up the soup bowl, finished off the rest of it, then accompanied Sayaka out. Nobody asked where they were going or anything, making good on their statements that they wouldn’t be stifling her over the
course of her birthday.

“So,” Sayaka said once the pair of them had left the room, “The truth is, it turns out I didn’t have leatherworking stuff in my closet. When I looked in the back of it, actually, I found something that’s… Not really a hobby at all. Or at least, not mine.”

“Oh? What?” Nami questioned.

“Well, uh. I found some clothes. And you have a good fashion sense and all, so I thought maybe, it would be nice if you could help me. Put together an outfit?” Sayaka covered her face. “I must sound so fucking stupid right now oh my god…"

“You don’t sound stupid at all,” Nami said, “Why would you think that you do?”

“Most people don’t need to ask for help dressing themselves…” Sayaka mumbled.

“Well, plenty of people ask for advice.”

“It’s. I mean, I wouldn’t be able to on my own,” Sayaka admitted, “Because I can’t really… See colors.”

“Huh?” Nami asked.

“It’s. Not that weird, is it? Fujishiro told me that one of his girlfriends has the same thing. Everything’s grey except for the color red. Real red, that is. I can’t even really see pink. So I don’t wear colors. I can tell what’s white and what’s black and what’s red and that’s it, okay?” Sayaka was leaning over, like she wanted to curl in on herself.

“Well, I guess it’s not that weird,” Nami said, and put a hand on Sayaka’s back. “Just, it’s kinda surprising. You’ve got such a good eye for detail, you know? I never would have expected it. That you can do all that, and you can’t even see different colors? Wow. You were too powerful, Sayaka. The world had to nerf you.”

Rather than continuing to curl in on herself or get upset, Sayaka started to laugh instead. It wasn’t a laugh like she thought anything Nami said was funny. She was just relieved. It wasn’t like this was the worst thing about her. Nami already knew that Sayaka had been one of the children stolen by the Cult of N, that she was raised by the yakuza, that she was the urban legend called ‘red’ who murdered rotten people who hurt the innocent. Even still, this…

“Sometimes it feels like…” Sayaka explained, “I’m not really a human. Like I couldn’t possibly be human, because of the things I’m able to do, and the way I feel, down to the way that I see the world… And even if you think it’s fine, the way I’ve been in the past, this is just one more thing. It could have been the point where I become a monster, right?”

“I’d never think that you’re a monster, Sayaka,” Nami assured her, “It wouldn’t happen, okay? Just… Don’t let other people hear you talking like that, right? They’ll start to think that you’re the AI.”

“What if I was?” Sayaka asked.

“You’re not. I think I know who it is, actually, but that person will tell us when they’re ready. Monokuma itself said that any ability an AI has can’t be used to dispose of evidence or commit a murder, so I don’t think it really matters.”

“Ah… That makes sense,” Sayaka said, “Thanks for being cool about. All of this.”
“I mean, it’s normal, I think,” Nami said, “Or not, normal, but not something that is going to change my opinion of you at all. Or, I mean… Ugh. Can’t words. I do now know more about you! But it doesn’t make me like you less or think you’re worse or less of a person?”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I guess, it was kind of a silly thing to be worried about, but…” Sayaka sighed. “I guess it’s just that, I care a lot about what you think. And it’s something I hate about myself. So I was scared.”

“I mean, jeeze, if I got hung up on all the things I hate about myself, I never would have started talking to anybody,” Nami joked. She got an actual laugh from Sayaka this time.

“You big… idiot.” Sayaka pouted. “I don’t like hearing that stuff, you know!”

“Well, for me, self-loathing is a bit of a normal part of the package, but see? I don’t like hearing you say stuff like that either. I think the stuff we hate about ourselves, is usually stuff that other people won’t even think twice about?”

“I think you’re right. Now, come on. Help me be cute.”

“What, like you’re not already?”

“Shuuuuut up!”
Daily Life: Day Ten (The Answer)

Upon arriving in her room, Sayaka immediately went to the closet and pulled out the clothing from the back. There wasn't a ton, but the selection was still pretty good. Nami looked it over, and was surprised to see that it seemed there were some interesting options here. She actually pulled aside a few of them right off the bat, "Green isn't your color, and that's what these ones are. Tori's your size though, and she might want to stop being dressed like a caricature of her talent at some point."

"Oh, nice," Sayaka said, "I can't tell what any of these things are."

"Well, before I put something together for you, do you have any preferences?" Nami asked.

"Um, I would rather long sleeves," Sayaka said.

"Alrighty, I can do that," Nami said, and started sorting through the piles of clothes that Sayaka had pulled out. Some of them were definitely not on the block for Sayaka, being colors that Nami thought wouldn't be as flattering on her, or being styles that didn't suit Sayaka's one requirement. Nami wasn't going to ask about that preference, since she was sure that if it had a reason, Sayaka would tell her when she was ready.

Eventually, Nami came up with an outfit. She lay it out on Sayaka's bed, then pointed to each aspect of it and explained, "The shirt's pink, the skirt is beige, and I just think it'd be cute with these black leggings and the combat boots you wear. I wanted to match it to your shoes since you don't have any others here, I think."

"Ah, that's good thinking," Sayaka said, "Thank you. You're right, there aren't any other shoes. And I don't think I'd share a shoe size with anybody here."

"Probably not. You are really small."

"So you think... This will be cute on me?" Sayaka asked, staring at the outfit that she could only partway comprehend.

"Super cute, for sure," Nami said.

"Is pink really my color?" She wondered.

"Well, I think that you'd be cute wearing some lighter colors sometimes, yeah," Nami said, "I left out most of the stuff that was darker colors, like navy blue, and the greens. Also the bright orange, but coral would be cute on you, for sure!"

"Wow... Thank you, Nami." Sayaka laughed a bit.

"Anytime! Actually, I kind of like this. Being the one who knows my way around dressing nicely," Nami said, "I mean, it's kind of the standard that trans girls get shown this stuff by their cis girl friends, not the other way around..."

"Well." Sayaka shrugged. "I didn't exactly have a standard girlhood. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, though!"

"I'll enjoy myself more once I get to see if I'm right, that you'd be cute in an outfit like this," Nami said, then hesitated a minute. "Oh, worm?"
“Wh… Huh?” Sayaka didn’t get that one.

“Oh! I mean, well. If you did start wearing this outfit, then all the girls who are alive right now will be wearing skirts. It’s a no-pants zone,” Nami said.

“Ehh… Huh. Guess you’re right,” Sayaka said, “No-pants zone. I don’t mind that.”

“Well, me neither,” Nami said, “Just something I noticed.”

“Girls do look very good in skirts.”

“I agree.”

“Well then. I’m gonna go… Put this skirt on,” Sayaka said, then bundled up the outfit and took it with her into her bathroom. Nami sat down on the bed, because she was tired of standing up. It wasn’t long before Sayaka returned. She’d added one bit of flair of her own, trading out the ribbons holding her pigtails for larger bows, which complemented the generally sweeter look.

She blushed, and struck a sort of awkward pose to show the outfit off. “How do I look?”

“You look great!” Nami told her, pressing her hands together. “Those bows are a nice touch, too… It’s really cute, but you still have that menacing aura too. I think it suits you.”

“I still have a menacing aura when I’m wearing pink? Really?” Sayaka asked.
“Yeah, because the menacing aura is sort of built in,” Nami said, “I felt menaced the first time I saw you, even though all I knew was that you were very short and holding a metal bar.”

“Aw, thanks. I think.” Sayaka dropped her arms to her side, then gave a nervous giggle. “Jeeze. This is… Kinda the first time I’ve really felt like I get to stop being serious? Like. I dunno, this might sound stupid, but… Kind of like I get to be Sayaka. Not Yamaguchi, not Red. Just Sayaka.”
“Everyone needs some time like that, I think,” Nami said, “I’m glad.”

“I got close, when I used to hang out with Yuuri sometimes… But.” Sayaka frowned. “Not quite. Because, well. Fucking stupid, yeah? But I’m wearing colors I haven’t been able to wear before. It’s so embarrassing to admit the things I can’t see, and even more to ask somebody to help me with it…”

“Then, I’m honored that I’m the person you decided to trust with both things,” Nami said, “And happy that you believed in my sense of style enough, too.”

“Well, of course I believe in your sense of style. Even if I can’t see what colors are in your outfit, you look super cute. And especially cause I know that’s the sort of thing you wore on a normal day before, and not just something that Bakura came up with!” Sayaka crossed her arms and gave a self-satisfied nod. “I mean, even Oishi admitted that it’s a good look on you.”

“Ah, thank you!” Nami blushed.

“H-Hey, Nami,” Sayaka started.

And the question returned.

“Yeah?” Nami asked it.

“I think that I like you,” Sayaka answered.

“Like, like me?” Nami questioned again.

“Yes,” Sayaka confirmed. Then she had her own question. “Can I kiss you?”

Nami wasn’t expected to be somebody giving an answer. Still, she nodded.

Sayaka was soft, and gentle, and she wasn’t like anybody else Nami had kissed before. Was this the first time that Nami had honestly liked someone she’d been with? Well, now wasn’t the time to think about the particularities. Now was the time to be happy.

Because she was, in fact, very happy.

And so was Sayaka.
“Ah…” Sayaka mumbled after they pulled apart, face so flushed she’d probably be able to tell if she looked in a mirror. “We should probably head back out, though. To see the others and all. Go to the arcade or… Something?”

“We probably should yeah,” Nami agreed, “But uh. First. Are we like… girlfriend now?”

“Yes, Nami, I would say that we’re girlfriend!” Sayaka stammered out. “I-If you want to be!”


“It’s not like I did a good job hiding it.” Sayaka crossed her arms and looked away. “I’ve just been holding your hand for the past several days. Basically described exactly you when we were talking about our romantic types. But you know, totally not flirting at all.”

“I mean, handholding could have meant nothing, I didn’t want to assume…” Nami said, “And if not noticing I was your dream-girl is a sin, then you’re guilty too, cause I totally ended up describing you!”

“Nonsense,” Sayaka said, “You don’t know how I look in glasses. And… I dunno if I’d say I’m more confident than you!”

“You’re the one who ended up confessing first, so I’d say that kind of proves you are.”

“Hm… You make a compelling argument,” Sayaka admitted, then stood up and clasped her hands behind her back. “Well… Before we go talk to the others, I guess I have a question too. Do you wanna let people know that we’re, um, together now?”

“I mean, I can’t see why not to,” Nami said, “The idea that it would put us in more danger isn’t really a big thing to think about, right? Akamatsu was killed for completely different reasons, while Randy and Tsukasa have been fine… Plus, if we go by pattern, there won’t be another double murder.”

“Pattern?” Sayaka asked.

“Well, maybe it’s just the order the motives are given in, but usually the third case is the only one with multiple victims,” Nami said, “At least, as far as I can remember. Goro could tell you more about it, but…”

“Yeah…” Sayaka mumbled, then grabbed Nami’s hand and pulled her towards the door. “Well, come on. We need to head back out, right?”

“Mhm,” Nami agreed, and they left Sayaka’s room. As soon as they left, they found themselves face-to-face with Box.

“Oh!” Box exclaimed, and took two sudden steps backwards from the girls. “Sorry, you surprised me. How are you both?”

“We’re well, thanks!” Sayaka said, then seemed to freeze up in place for a few moments before she blurted, “We’re dating now-”
“Huh?” Box tilted her head just a little bit too much to the side, and blinked. “Now? That’s odd. I thought that you already were. I mean, as of… Two days ago? That is the impression that I got. You were already acting as you do as a couple, after all.”

Nami thought that wording was a little strange, but then again, Box had been acting strange for the past few days anyway. Leading up to, and especially after the trial, it seemed that the collected demeanor she initially put forth was coming apart at the seams. Nami didn’t blame her, of course. And she knew her own everyday language was something resembling nonsense too, so who was she to judge?

“Well!” Sayaka clearly had no idea how to respond to that. “We weren’t! Yet! But now we are, yes, so. You know that. I don’t know. Um. Ohhhh fuck… Oishi is gonna have a field day with this…”

“Why?” Box asked.

“Because she knew,” Sayaka groaned, “And she threatened to tell Nami before I was ready too… And I told her she was wrong but she was right and now she’s gonna hold that shit over my head.”

“Well,” Box said, with such a sweet smile on her face. “I think that being teased for being an obvious tsundere about your crush has got to be far superior to being ‘teased’ with the idea that all of your memories of a normal life are a lie and you previously attempted suicide.”

“Hey now,” Nami said, “It’s not Sayaka’s fault that—”

“No, that was insensitive of me,” Sayaka admitted, “I didn’t think about… I mean, by comparison. That’s right. You’re right, Hako.”

“Ha…ko,” Box mumbled her own name, then wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I don’t know why I said that, I really don’t. It’s not very kind. It isn’t what a friend should say. You are my friend and I care about you so, so much. I don’t want to hurt you. Never want to hurt you. I’m just hurting. I’m sorry. Oishi’s so unpredictable and she… hurt me. I couldn’t… I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t just apologize like that.” Sayaka’s voice was suddenly snippy, but not in a cruel way. “I did fuck up and say something insensitive to you, you had the right to be upset about that. This kind of passive behavior is probably why it built up on you like that… Why, if Oishi’s right, you did that.”

“Oh, I did,” Box said, and clenched her fists. “As soon as she told me, I remembered. I remembered it, and every bad feeling from back then too came back. It’s true. But I… I don’t know how else to be useful to anybody?”

“You don’t need to be useful?” Nami said.

“Easy for you to say. You’re helping us through these trials so much…” Box looked away. “And I can’t even keep them from happening. I should be able to, shouldn’t I? After everything, I…”


“What?” Box questioned.

“I said, hit me. You’re mad at Oishi and I said something stupid and you’re trying to make yourself not mad at me for saying it, but fuck! I’m kinda stupid! I bet I’ve said all sorts of shitty stuff that’s upset you and you never said anything,” Sayaka said, “So just like, hit me. One time, or more. Whatever you need to let that shit out.”
“I don’t want to,” Box said.

“...Eh?” Sayaka was surprised now. Nami was just watching how this would unfold, because it didn’t directly concern her. Plus, she kind of expected Box would turn that offer down.

“I don’t want to do that. Physical violence wouldn’t make me feel better. I just…” She sighed. “It would make me feel worse, yeah. I don’t know what would make me feel better, though.”

“...Alcohol?” Sayaka offered tentatively, with an awkward shrug.

“That’s not exactly a good idea either,” Nami finally chimed in.

“Mm… No, but maybe, one night. It makes you forget stuff, after all. Since my problem is stuff I already forgot once, maybe it would be okay to forget it again a little bit more,” Box said, “It’s not a good idea. I know it’s not. But it’s something I haven’t tried yet, to be okay, to pretend to be okay. It’s better than the alternative, right? The alternative…”

Nami could have sworn, for a second there, that she caught scar tissue where the sleeves of Box’s blazer rode up, but at a second glance they were gone. Was she seeing things now? Well, it was just a glance. She imagined something there which wasn’t, because of the context. Wow, morbid.

“Then, tonight,” Sayaka said, “Cause, it’s less sad to drink at night, you know. We can have a girls’ night.”

“Ah… Can Asahi come too?” Box asked.

“Of course. We need a sober friend, after all, so we’re not just sitting ducks to get killed,” Sayaka admitted.

“I never said I was going to-” Nami started.

“The nighttime rotation in the gift shop includes Strong Zero. Don’t you want to have a girls’ night?” Sayaka asked.

“Um… Well, yeah. I guess I do,” Nami admitted.

“That’s sweet of you,” Box said, “So we’ll meet up again after dinner?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Sayaka confirmed, and gave her a thumbs-up.
Box went off on her own way, so Nami and Sayaka moved on to the arcade. It was already ten by the time they arrived, having spent quite a chunk of time between breakfast, getting together, and talking to Box. At the arcade, though, Tsukasa was still there exactly as he said he would be. Also there right now were Riko, who was playing a game alone, and Randy. Randy and Tsukasa were playing Dokapon Kingdom, which was a strange game to be playing.

“Hi Nami.” Randy noticed her first. “Me and Tsukasa are trying to see if we can beat this game before we end up dead or the game ends.”

“Makes sense. Dokapon is ridiculously long for a multiplayer board-game-style video game,” Nami said.

“Isn’t that kinda morbid, though?” Sayaka wondered.

“Dokapon can take like, thirty hours of active play time, to finish one game of it,” Randy explained.

“It’s not a very good party game. It is a good game, generally speaking, though,” Tsukasa added.

“I see. Do you mind quitting that good game so that we can play one together, though?” Nami asked.

“Don’t mind at all,” Tsukasa said, and opened the menu to save. That was plenty of Dokapon Kingdom for one day, frankly.

“Cool, let’s play…” Nami trailed off, realizing that she hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Uh, how about Jackbox?” Sayaka offered with the clutch save. She might not have been a real ‘gamer’, or a real ‘person with a social life’, but it seemed that she at least had some knowledge of it. Thinking on it, hadn’t Sayaka known Tokou Nozomi online? That was exactly the sort of game that friends online might play, anyway.

“Whoa! Uh, do we have those?” Randy asked.

“Yes,” Tsukasa confirmed. “In fact, we have all of them, on multiple different consoles. It seems that Monokuma’s got its own servers set up, though. The lobbies direct to a different site that we can access from our Monopads.”

“Why go to that trouble for something like this?” Sayaka wondered.

“Probably for a motive.” Randy shrugged.

“I’ll allow it,” Nami said, “By which I mean, yeah. Goro mentioned that motives based on ‘sleepover games’ like Truth or Dare, Two Truths and A Lie are common. It wouldn’t be that out of line to try basing a motive on Fibbage or Split The Room.”

“Hey, I heard that,” Monokuma said, and appeared. “You said my name, so I at least had to listen in. Sorry! What sort of stuff are you brats accusing me of now?”
“I mean, you do know. You were listening. You said it yourself,” Nami said.

“It was hyperbole, alright? Look, fine. *maybe* this stuff was in the works for a possible motive, but like, there’s still twelve of you and this uses eight people maximum!” Monokuma proclaimed, “At this rate, by the time there’s few enough people that this thing could be a motive, you’ll already have every floor open. So, like, that’s close enough to victory you wouldn’t let a silly thing like this motivate you anyway…”

“Like you’d let that many people make it to the end,” Randy scoffed.

“Why wouldn’t it?” Sayaka wondered.

“Uh, well, what everyone who really watches it says… That’s never happened before,” Randy said, “It’s five or less, almost exclusively, right? That’s what they said.”

“If I wouldn’t let that many people make it, I’d really like to know what you think of the Evil King’s Game, good grief…” Monokuma dipped its head as if it was pouting.

“Oh, good point. I guess that with four extra people, then more than eight *could* do the Mastermind Trial thing with evidence, huh?” Randy realized, doing the math in his head. With four more people than usual, didn’t that take the number down to nine or less instead?

“Well, I mean. This weird quadruple death is kinda unprecedented, but I think so, yeah,” Monokuma said, “There’s all sorts of ways that you could end up with a bunch. I mean, I’d put my money on like, eight. Including me, of course.” It struck a pose.

“...Stupid.” Sayaka reached down and pet its head. “What’s the Despair Fever doing to you, anyway?”

“I think this particular symptom is called sappiness. Kinda pathetic, really,” Monokuma said, “I heard you and Nami finally got together. You’re real cute… I’m almost jealous.”

“You’re a bear,” Nami said.

“Hey! I can be jealous anyway! It’s not like I haven’t got a heart…” Monokuma gave a heavy sigh. “I was in love too, once. Course, there’s no way you’d understand. My heart is a temple, and you are the heathens who fail to acknowledge it!”

“Whatever you say, Monokuma,” Sayaka said, “Why don’t you head on back to… Wherever you hang out when you’re not bothering us?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just one more thing. You look great,” Monokuma told her, “That’s the gospel truth! Truly a worthy girlfriend for Kagu-”

It vanished before their eyes with a loud pop. Okay, weird. Then again, Monokuma was sick.

“Ah!” Randy exclaimed, “Nami-guchi!”

“Eh?” Sayaka fixed him with a look of judgmental confusion.

“What he means to say,” Tsukasa translated to normie, “Is that he’s surprised and happy to hear that it seems you two have become an item, since you didn’t rebuke what that bear said.”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s true,” Nami said, “We sort of just did, yes. It’s pretty great.”

“I’m really happy for you.” Tsukasa smiled. “Anyway, I’ll get the game set up.”
“Cool,” Nami said, “I’ll ask Asahi if she wants to play with us, too.”

“Oh, good idea!” Sayaka said. Nami nodded in gratitude that her genius was acknowledged, that Jackbox was probably the perfect party game for Riko, since most of the games were entirely text-based anyhow. With that, Nami wandered over to where Riko was.

“Hey,” She greeted her, “Would you wanna join us for a party game? We’re thinking of playing Jackbox.”

Riko finished what she was doing, paused the game, then wrote her response. “I don’t know what that is, but it sounds fun. I’ll get somewhere I can save then join you. Are there multiple rounds?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Do the first one without me so I don’t hold you up.”
While Nami was talking to Riko, Tsukasa had gotten the game set up, so she returned to find that the lobby for ‘Fibbage Enough About You’ was already open.

“Asahi’s going to join us, but she wants us to do a round first without her so she can finish up what she’s doing on her game,” Nami said, “So… We’re playing this one?”

“Well,” Tsukasa said, “If it’s okay with you. It’ll be kinda interesting, with the four of us. Since we all get along pretty well, but we’ve all known each other for different amounts of time in different ways, right?”

“Ah, yeah,” Nami agreed. This particular game was one where a question was asked about one of the players. The player in question answered truthfully, and everyone else answered with convincing lies about the player. Then, the others had to figure out which answer was the actual truth. Tsukasa was right that it would be interesting with this group of people. Through their Monopads, they connected, and it automatically assigned their regular names. Though stupid nicknames were discouraged in this particular game mode, it was a little disappointing to see that the option wouldn’t be there in general. It only made sense, though, since each Monopad could belong only and specifically to one person.

Nami answered the question she got; “If you could delete one emoji, which would it be?”. Obviously her answer was the cat face emojis, because :3 was infinitely cuter than any emoji that websites would grossly automatically transform it into could ever be. There was also the possibility for an actual cute cat emoji out there, but she had yet to see it.

The first prompt that appeared on the screen was “What was Sayaka’s favorite childhood pet?”. Nami glanced down at her Monopad to enter her answer. Never had one. It got flagged for being too close to the truth, which she blinked at. Huh. She’d just hazarded a guess based on what she knew of her girlfriend’s past, but she’d been right after all. Instead, she put down “Ratbolg the Rat” for a lie. Probably not convincing, but…

The options came up on the screen. Never Had One, Ratbolg the Rat, Five Lizards, Cat named Precious, and Dog. Nami… Could tell by looking at them who had put each answer and neither of the boys had really tried to be convincing. Randy put lizards and Tsukasa’s normie ass put Precious, then Dog was inserted as an extra by the game itself. She cast her vote for Never Had One. Everyone got it right.

“I tried to put that as my answer myself, but it told me I was right,” Nami said.

“None of you even tried to name a pet that made sense…” Sayaka sighed. “I think that question is kinda meant for people who’ve actually had multiple pets to pick from?”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Randy said, “But I honestly thought that if you did have a pet, it would’ve been five lizards!”

“Five lizards?” Sayaka questioned back.

“Yes. Five lizards. Geckos to be exact, I think,” Randy said, “If you had pets they’d be five geckos. Maybe of different types.”

“Heh… You’re wrong,” Sayaka said, then looked to Nami. “Well, girlfriend, wanna give it a shot at what pet I’d have if I did have one?”
“Well definitely not a rat named Ratbolg,” Nami admitted, “I think it’s more likely that you’d have a corvid.”

“A corvid?” Sayaka asked.

“Yeah. Like, a magpie or a crow,” Nami said, “Depending on how large you’d want it to be.”

“...Oh. You’re right,” Sayaka said.

“I thought I might be.”

“...Fuck you, now I actually want a pet crow,” Sayaka said, pouting. “How dare you make me realize my deepest pet desires?”

“Well, we can get a crow,” Nami said, “When we get out of here. I mean. If you want?”

Nami immediately realized that implied she was expecting that they’d still be together- That they’d live together, after the Killing Game, and she turned red. Well that was-

“Hey, you know,” Randy said, “Head in the game! It’s already on the next prompt.”

“Oh shit!” Sayaka exclaimed, then turned her attention to her Monopad, as did Nami. The prompt this time was what Randy’s childhood fear was. Nami decided to actually give an effort to be convincing this time and put down ‘tornadoes’, since she knew that was a pretty normal thing for kids to be worried about even if they grew up in an area which didn’t have them.

Then, the options popped up on the screen. Tornadoes, Getting Kidnapped, The Dark, Frogs, and Carbon Monoxide Poisoning. Nami looked at it for a bit, then decided to cast her vote for frogs. That got her vote, but was Sayaka’s lie. Her own lie didn’t get a vote. Sayaka’s vote went to Getting Kidnapped, and the author of that one, Tsukasa got the correct answer with Carbon Monoxide Poisoning.

“Well, I have the advantage in this scenario,” Tsukasa admitted, “I should hope that I know my own fiancé pretty well.”

“Excuse?” Nami asked.

“Pfft! Well.” Randy waved his hands dismissively. “We sort of may have said that we want to get married after this whole thing is over. Not like I was jealous of Ueda being able to be all ‘I’m twenty and I’m married’ or anything.”

“Yes that makes sense,” Nami said, “I’m disappointed my lie fooled nobody. Tornadoes are a fear along the same lines as that.”

“Well, I have the advantage in this scenario,” Tsukasa admitted, “I should hope that I know my own fiancé- boyfriend, pretty well.”

“Excuse?” Nami asked.

“Pfft! Well.” Randy waved his hands dismissively. “We sort of may have said that we want to get married after this whole thing is over. Not like I was jealous of Ueda being able to be all ‘I’m twenty and I’m married’ or anything.”

“But also why weren’t you scared of being kidnapped?”

“I mean, I should’ve been? Or maybe not. Uh, it’s complicated, yknow? A sort-of-kidnapping was how I ended up in this country, anyway,” Randy tried to explain, “I was learning Japanese from a
guy, he told me to come on vacation with him here, I did, he left me behind. The rest is history!"

“I wouldn’t have expected that,” Sayaka said, then held out a hand in his direction. “Kidnapping buddies.”

Randy gave her the expected high five. “Well, I’m not as much a kidnapping buddy as the other N kids were, but yeah. We’re buddies!”

“I met an Ultimate Buddy one time…” Nami mused, then looked at her Monopad again. Oh, it was time for her friends to make up lies about her. She just waited it out while they put their entries in for what emoji they thought she hated.

The options this time were Cat Face Emoji, Poop Emoji, Closed Eyes Laughing With Tears Emoji, Green Heart Emoji, and I Can’t Name Emojis. Nami could tell that the poop emoji was the game’s default addition, and the last one was Tsukasa’s entry, but she couldn’t tell which of the other two was Randy’s and which was Sayaka’s. She did appreciate the official name being used for Closed Eyes Laughing With Tears Emoji, though.

The votes came in. Two for the laughing with tears, which was Sayaka’s, and one for green heart, which was Randy’s.

“You don’t like the cat face emoji?” Sayaka questioned.

“No because :3 is cuter,” Nami said.

“How did you do that with your mouth?” Tsukasa asked.

“The same way I use colored truths, by accessing the metaverse,” Nami spouted more nonsense.

“Ah… I see,” Tsukasa said.

“I thought you’d prefer purple heart. Or wi-fi heart,” Randy said.

“I do, but I recognize the necessity of the green heart emoji’s existence. And frankly, Sayaka’s would be valid for the meme theft, but the what if we kissed in the memes have redeemed it for me. I do appreciate the full official name there, too. Nice knaaw-ledge.” Nami gave her girlfriend a thumbs-up.

“I don’t know what any of those words meant, but I’ll take you at your word,” Tsukasa said.

“What’s the what if we kissed in the meme?” Sayaka asked.

“It’s like, a joke where you say stupid stuff like ‘what if we kissed in the Chernobyl cooling pool’,“ Nami explained.

“Oh. Like. What if we kissed in the Killing Game?” Sayaka asked.

“Very funny,” Nami said, then leaned over and kissed Sayaka’s forehead. Then, it was the next round of the game. This time the question was posed about Tsukasa, which made sense, he was the only person left this round. This one was actually a bit less small-talky than the other ones had been; “What’s the most illegal thing Tsukasa has ever done?”

Nami obviously put in exploited the working class for her lie because he was a CEO. Eat the rich even if the rich are your best friends.

The options that came up were embezzlement, exploited the working class, shoplifted, jaywalked,
and paid for sex. She thought for a minute, then put down embezzlement just in case. Sayaka voted for jaywalked, which turned out to be a game-generated lie. Then embezzlement was… A lie entered by both Randy and Sayaka, great. Then the truth, which of course Randy got right, was paid for sex. Huh?

“Well first of all none of us would have guessed that and second of all stop answering in ways you know only the other will know,” Sayaka said.

“We’re just answering truthfully but we know each other well,” Tsukasa said, “Anyway, isn’t the point of this game to fool people but not everyone? Randy and I are the dream team for that. We don’t mind sacrificing secrets for the greater score!”

“But you’re so… Normie…” Nami complained.

“Well, he is sort of stretching the definition of ‘paid’ there,” Randy said, “But that’s all we really need to say on the matter.”

“Sore spot?” Sayaka asked.

“Not at all!” Randy said, “But not important either. Let’s move on.”
The four friends finished up that game with its two more rounds. Randy and Tsukasa were winning through the main portion, but Sayaka and Nami pulled ahead, with a victory for Nami, in the last round. When presented with one truth and one lie from the same player, they got each other’s correct and fooled the other two, and Tsukasa actually slipped up to vote wrong on Randy’s too because he worded it in a fairly incoherent way.

“Your strategy… Failed.” Nami gave the boys her joking finger guns. “A winner is me.”

“Well, it only failed because I’m bad at typing,” Randy said, “It isn’t like I meant for it to read that way. I just used the wrong kanji. I mean, I’ve been in this country for five years, learning the language for seven. Seven year olds don’t have a grasp on complicated kanji, so why should I?”

“I guess that’s a fair point,” Tsukasa said.

“Hi Asahi,” Sayaka said, looking up at Riko who’d just walked over. “Good timing, we just finished the first game. Fibbage Enough About You, it’s kind of like Never Have I Ever but, you know, not.”

“So it’s about personal information?” Riko asked.

“Yeah,” Sayaka said.

“I’d rather not play that one then, I’m sorry,” Riko said, then sat down on the floor. “Are there others?”

“Oh yeah, there’s plenty,” Tsukasa said, “We can play Quiplash. That’s one where you try to come up with the funniest answer to a question and doesn’t have anything to do with personal info or anything.”

“That sounds good,” Riko said, then set her whiteboard down to pull out her Monopad for the game instead. Tsukasa got Quiplash set up in the meantime, then they all connected, still without the option of picking silly nicknames. Unfortunate. The game went on, and it was really a mostly standard game of Quiplash. Riko ended up with a commanding lead, which was only solidified by the one titular Quiplash achieved during the course of the game.

In the obviously Killing-Game-Specific question ‘_____ was secretly Monokuma the whole time’, Riko trounced the answer of ‘Shinji’ with her own ‘Kurou’s Infant Daughter’. There was something so particularly entertaining about the idea of an actual baby being in control of Monokuma, especially compared to the idea of their friend who was sort of a prick being the one in charge. Tsukasa shrugged off his loss and admitted that he couldn’t really think of anything, his defense for the fact that he never got more than one vote on any of his answers and came in dead last overall.

After a few more games, the group tired of Jackbox, because there was only so much a person could tap into their own creative comedy in one day. Once they were finished and packed up the game, Randy wandered over to a different part of the room, then returned with something he held out to Nami. She reached out and took it, discovering that it was a light purple scarf.

“It’s your gift from me,” Randy said, “I know it doesn’t really go with what you’re wearing now or
whatever, but I think it would be a nice addition to your regular wardrobe, if you wanna use it?”

“Well, I don’t really care if it doesn’t go with my outfit,” Nami said, and slipped it on, “It’s really soft and warm… Thank you, Randy.”

“I mean, it’s the least I can do! I figured, I’m knitting random stuff anyway, may as well actually make something that someone might appreciate,” Randy said, “So, I’m really glad that you do.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything for you. My hobbies don’t really work for that.” Riko showed Nami her whiteboard.

“Huh? You don’t have to apologize… I wasn’t expecting any of this in the first place,” Nami said, “Wouldn’t I be kind of rude to say ‘oh no, I feel jilted because you didn’t have any gift for me while we’re in a Killing Game’? Really rude, actually. It’s rude enough to expect a gift when the scenario normally allows for it.”

“Still, I feel bad. I’ll get you something when we leave,” Riko said.

“Oh yeah, I just remembered,” Sayaka chimed in, “Asahi. We were going to have a girls’ night with Hako, and she asked if you could come too.”

“Of course. I quite like to spend time with Box,” Riko answered.

“I gotta say, it’s interesting. You were closer with me and Rei, but nobody else, for a little while there… But now you’re friends with two different people who are sort of fighting with each other?” Nami wondered.

“It happened quickly. Ueda asked me to help him befriend Oishi since we were two people she couldn’t really get anything on. And I became closer with Box when I found out that she sometimes goes nonverbal, too. Pretty much the moment when she started seeming like an actual person and not just a perfect helper.”

“Well, I think she was kinda always an actual person…” Nami said.

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant. Obviously she always was, but I hadn’t seen her show any weakness before then, so I felt like I couldn’t really relate to her. Being the weakest person here and all.”

“Hey, don’t say that about yourself…” Tsukasa complained.

“It’s the truth. Physically speaking I am by far the weakest, the least strong, the most frail. I can’t relate to anyone who’s completely confident and doesn’t have a weak spot that I can see.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Nami said, “But you got along with me and Rei just fine…”

“Of course I did. You weren’t exactly secretive about the fact that you have amnesia, and Rei was a very soft-hearted girl even if she tried to hide it. I don’t think she could have committed a murder even if she was face-to-face with a coldblooded killer who wanted her dead.” Riko wouldn’t make eye contact as she held this message out, then wrote an addendum. “Not to speak badly of her, of course. She took a bullet intended for me, and she was my friend. I’ll be grateful forever.”

“Me too…” Nami mumbled, “Not grateful in the same way as you, obviously. But grateful that I got to meet her, that she was in my life even if it was just for a little while…”

“If either of us make it out,” Riko wrote, “We need to find Natsuki.”
Right, Natsuki Nagata. The fourth member of that friend group, the girl who was left behind to witness her best friends dying on national television. Of course that was a girl who’d feel put out if she couldn’t hear from the very people who were present for Rei’s last moments.

“We will. Don’t worry,” Nami said, “Both of us.”

It was an empty promise, because there were only so many people Nami could say that she’d be able to escape from here with. Even so, if she made that promise to everybody… Then until anybody else died, she could entertain a small hope of keeping it.
Nami and Sayaka decided to be finished with the arcade for now. Riko went back to her game and the boys returned to Dokapon Kingdom, so it was just the two of them again. It wouldn’t only be the two of them for too long, though. Even with the continuing expansion of the hospital, if people were actually moving around they were bound to run into each other. In this case, it was the two people in the place who were over six feet tall; Mitsuru and Kurou.

“Hello, giants,” Sayaka made the same observation as she greeted them. Mitsuru in particular was a full two and a half feet taller than her, wasn’t he?

“Oh, hey!” Mitsuru greeted them, “How are you doing?”

“We’re doing just great!” Sayaka blurted, then hid her face. She was having a bit of a difficult time with this whole ‘having a girlfriend’ thing, it seemed. Or at least, at being smooth about it.

“That’s cute,” Mitsuru said, seeming to immediately understand her meaning there. Kurou nodded along. Well, they were both adults who were in what seemed to be individually stable relationships, so it wasn’t surprising they’d be able to spot a new couple.

“I’m afraid, Nami,” Kurou said, “That although I’ve actually got the means to create a gift, I can’t say I know you well enough to have any idea what you’d like. So, any requests?”

“Um…” Nami wasn’t sure, put on the spot like this. What sort of thing would she like made out of wood? He was a carpenter. A shed. No! Not a shed! What!

“If you were curious,” Kurou said, “I am fairly skilled at carving as well. I can’t make anything too small or detailed, but if you wanted a statue of a particular animal or something…”

“Rat?” Nami asked.

“Well, carving a rat should be pretty easy, I’d think,” Kurou said, “Is that your favorite animal?”

“I dunno… I don’t think I have a favorite animal. I have a favorite creature, and that’s centipedes. I like rats because they’re big in the meme scene, though.” Nami struck a stupid pose. “Rats, rats, they’re the rats.”

Sayaka hesitated only a moment before also striking a pose, her back to Nami’s. “They prey at night, they stalk at night, they’re the rats.”

“How delightfully strange!” Kurou exclaimed.

“Well, that’s just a meme that Nami likes.” Sayaka dropped the pose and ran a hand through one pigtail to drop it behind her shoulder. “I don’t really know its origin or anything. Goro… Was gonna make you something with that, wasn’t he?”

“…He was,” Nami said, “But I guess he never got the chance.”

“Oh dear,” Mitsuru said, “Well, you never know. He still could, couldn’t he?”

“Hako certainly seems to think so,” Kurou said.
“I don’t have any reason to doubt her… But I also don’t want to get my hopes up,” Nami admitted, “As much as Monokuma’s specific wording has been important before, it’s still completely possible that he really is dead. After all, there was only one culprit still alive during the trial…”

“Isn’t it kind of unfair to keep calling him a culprit?” Kurou asked.

“Hm?” Nami questioned.

“Well, given the situation. Culprit sounds so condemning,” Kurou explained, “And I think that it’s definitely not as black and white as that.”

“Ah… I’m not sure I would’ve expected that from you?” Sayaka said.

“And why not?” Kurou asked.

“You’re kinda… Upstanding… Er…” Sayaka scratched her head. “You know what, I’m not going to try justifying myself. Let’s just eternally assume that you give off a certain impression and that impression is consistently being dashed to the pavement by your actual beliefs and experiences?”

“I can agree to assume that,” Kurou said, then pinched his chin and chuckled. “As it stands, well, what happened was a tragedy. And it was certainly manslaughter for that matter, if nothing else. It’s not a pleasant thing that two men died, of course not. At the same time, we did hear about the events of that night in detail, and it seems Monokuma confirmed that all we heard was the truth. Calling Bakura a culprit forgets his circumstance.”

“What would you call him instead, Kurou?” Mitsuru wondered.

“Well, I’m not sure. We could use the term from the rules, though, couldn’t we? He was just, the blackened. Not a culprit or a murderer, just… Stained by his actions. Is that fair?”

“I mean, I sure think it is, but why do you?” Sayaka asked. “I mean, we’re still rolling with that assumption, but I gotta say that part of that impression’s that you’re a normal family man who’s just real good at a talent, and sometimes got wrapped up in yakuza business? I guess that you might get an opinion on manslaughter from that stuff, sure, but this is a pretty damn well developed opinion?”

“Oh, well that’s simple,” Kurou said, “I have to have a developed opinion on the matter. The very first time I met Ayu was when I witnessed her killing somebody.”

“E-Excuse me!?” Sayaka questioned. Nami was somehow unphased, and it seemed that Mitsuru already knew this. “I thought you said you’d never seen a human corpse!”

“I haven’t. I left and shut the door immediately, and he wasn’t dead yet when I walked in.” Kurou shrugged, as if this was the most natural thing to be discussing.

“Why was she… What?” Sayaka asked.

“Well, it was also a situation that would qualify as self-defense, as manslaughter. As the Ultimate Scout, of course she carried a pocketknife; And this boy, he was despair and everyone at school knew it, he had found out she was not only an Ultimate, but working with Future Foundation. At that point, it was him or her. So forgive me if I’m happy with the result,” Kurou explained.

“Ohhh, okay,” Nami said, “So that’s how you two know each other, and how Future Foundation knew about you to ask that thing about your daughter?”
“Precisely,” Kurou said, “It seems that I just end up stumbling onto all sorts of connections. Ayu was the only other Ultimate in our entire high school, in any year. Even so, it seems that I do meet them at every turn… Then again, Future Foundation has many of those connections itself. It’s through them that I met the Ultimate Roboticist…”

“Rei?” Nami asked.

“Uh, I don’t think so, but it was close to that,” Kurou said.

Right, Rei had only said that she ‘may as well be an Ultimate Roboticist’, but her official talent was still as the Ultimate Electrician. Still, odd that the actual one would have an apparently similar name, wasn’t it?

“Oh, okay,” Nami failed to say any of her actual thoughts in response.

“Still, it’s funny, isn’t it?” Kurou laughed and put both arms behind his head. “There I was, thinking it was crazy coincidence that I met, what, five separate Ultimates at different times? Then I end up here, and, you know. There’s fourteen more that I never met before. Eighteen more, if we count the ones who died before I got here… I think it’s because of that, that I’m not scared.”

“You think coincidence will save you?” Sayaka asked.

“That’s not it,” Mitsuru said, with a soft smile at his friend’s zen attitude.

“It really isn’t. It’s more like, well, why should I be scared of dying here? As long as even one person from inside this place survives, the world will be better off for getting them. If I’m gonna die, it’s just because someone else is going to do something better than I could.”
“Hey…” Sayaka noted, “I haven’t really seen Shirogane anywhere other than meals, even though she’s the one who said we shouldn’t be splitting up too much. Do you think we should look for her?”

“That’s… Oh, I guess you’re right,” Nami realized, “I sort of just thought she’d want to be alone, since her girlfriend died… But now that you say it like that, the worry is upon me.”

“Yeah, I thought it might be,” Sayaka said, “I mean, not like I know her that well. Maybe you’re right. But, fuck, it’s kinda… Weird. That she’d contradict herself like that, right? I wanna find her.”

“It’s a good idea,” Nami said, “But I don’t even know where to begin to look. She wasn’t in the arcade, and if she was going to be there, I think we would have passed by her…”

“Let’s check the pool,” Sayaka said.

The pool… Since Rei died there, they dropped the idea of scheduling pool use. Nobody really wanted to swim where somebody had drowned, at least, not that close and not that personal. Surely they’d swam at beaches where there had been drownings, just like Nami had probably turned up in at least one cot in her time that had belonged to somebody’s last moments.

Twice she had been struck with the thought that she was used to waking up in hospitals, but that was the least of her concerns when she actually reclaimed the memory. It was common after all, but not for the reasons she entertained. From time to time, she was attacked by a disgruntled criminal or one of their family members, but more often, she now understood, it was just a side effect of being with Kira.

Always her own fault, it had been. Right? Kira was so worried because she hurt herself so often. Now that she had taken hold of her memories, she knew the truth, and shuddered to think she’d been so easily manipulated before. A huge weak point of hers was that issue with her memory. She understood it all too well; She’d been warped into believing certain things were her own actions each time she came to from a memory blackout, but Kira had never manipulated that to the full extent that would have been possible. At that time, she could have believed anything.

At the same time, she couldn’t do away with this weak point. If she tried too hard, thought too much, she felt the edges of something that she really did want to keep locked away, the memory of the first time in her life she’d come face to face with the depths of evil that human beings were capable of… That time, one time, because of Tomoe. Because Tomoe stood in the way of any other transgressions against her.

Someday, she’d remember. It would only be fair to Tomoe’s memory to acknowledge it, experience it for real, and try to recover instead of repressing. Now wasn’t the time, though. She needed to be in a better place, physically and mentally. Getting a girlfriend didn’t exactly take Nami out of the mindset the Killing Game had instilled in her. It helped, but, well. Her sister was still dead, several of her friends were still dead. Even her girlfriend could still die, so forgive her if she wasn’t made of sunshine with romance.
Upon arriving at the pool, however, Sayaka’s hunch proved correct. On the far end, as far as she could get from the part of the pool Rei drowned in, was Tsumugi. She was wearing a simple school swimsuit, made a bit interesting with polka dots but not especially noteworthy in any way. Her feet were in the pool and she was staring blankly. An unfamiliar jacket hung over her shoulders.

“Shirogane?” Sayaka called out, “Have you been here since breakfast?”

“Mm?” Tsumugi looked up, and made eye contact, “Oh, you’ve found me.”

“Yeah. But if you really wanted to hide, you’d be in your room, right?” Sayaka asked.

“...No,” Tsumugi said, “I don’t like it in there anymore.”

“Because Kaede slept there too, right?” Nami asked, “That was why she could leave her Monopad lying around. She didn’t need it to get in at night, just needed you to let her in.”

“Mhm,” Tsumugi confirmed, “So I’ve been places people don’t go much. The infirmary, Yushu’s ward, here. I thought I might even go swimming, but then I just... sat here for hours. Monokuma came and put this jacket on me so I wouldn’t catch a cold, though. That was very kind of it...”

“Hey, wait. Where’d you sleep last night?” Sayaka asked.

“That was in Yushu’s Ward. I haven’t slept in my own room since Kaede died, and I don’t plan to,” Tsumugi said, “I guess that was unsafe of me. After an hour, that’s what the timer said, anybody could have walked in and been locked in with me. I could have been killed. Or worse... Well, no. Nobody here would do worse than killing me. I trust you that much. As long as there’s nobody secret.”

“Nobody secret?” Nami asked.

“Well, last time... There was a non-participant present in the game. He was supposed to play the role of the Mastermind if the actual one got killed, I think? It’s all so foggy, you understand...”


“But, I don’t know if that could happen. Even Monokuma is a participant, right?” Tsumugi leaned her weight on one arm.

“Probably not,” Sayaka said, “Unless the one AI really isn’t Monokuma, and also isn’t one of us at all.”

“Ugh...” Monokuma sighed as it appeared. “Stop talking about me! Do you wanna get sick?? Anyway I am morally obligated to inform you. The maximum number of participants alive in the game at any given time has been seventeen. There are no non-participants currently present.”

“Why are you morally obligated to tell us this? Wouldn’t you prefer us to be confused?” Tsumugi wondered.

“It’s got this Despair Fever symptom called sappiness,” Sayaka stage-whispered, “That’s probably also why it gave you a jacket. It got all irrationally attached to us suddenly.”

“Hey now! It’s not like I don’t always care about you! This darn fever just turned my tsun and my yan into dere.”

“Sure,” Sayaka said.
“Anyway, Kagu,” Monokuma used that weird name again while addressing Nami, “You’re the only one who didn’t say my name just now, so like, thanks!”

“Since when do you call me Kagu?” Nami asked.

“Since…” Monokuma seemed to blank on the answer for a minute, but still gave one, “Since I got sappy and wanted to give you a nickname. Nami doesn’t get any shorter than it already is, so Kagu it is.”

“...I guess!” Nami shrugged, then Monokuma left.

“What an odd bear,” Tsumugi said, “It behaves so much differently than mine did…”

“Oh worm?” Nami asked.

“Yes… in the previous game, Monokuma always seemed like it was having fun, even when things went wrong for it. And it certainly wasn’t kind to anyone other than… The…” Tsumugi started to shiver in spite of her jacket. “Oh. Oh, that was… It was… Angie?”

“Are you okay?” Nami asked.

“Angie… It was… But why would she… Despair?” Tsumugi questioned, bringing her hands up to clutch at her head again. “Oh, no, I… Ah… I must be remembering wrong… I’m sorry, I need to go, I’ve got to go.”

Tsumugi stood up, drew the jacket around herself, and fled the pool still in her swimsuit.
Daily Life: Day Ten (A Chocobo)

It was uncomfortable, to be left standing here alone. Nami thought so, and looking at Sayaka, it was obvious she was feeling it too. The smell of chlorine was suffocating, and without the concern of finding Tsumugi here, it came right back down that this was the scene of a murder, that Nami discovered her friend dead here. That Sayaka heard the splash.

Let’s get out of this place.

The pool, and the Killing Game, but the latter would take a lot more time, wouldn’t it? Nami was kind of helpless in that respect. She didn’t have a clue who the Evil King was, and even if she did, she couldn’t kill them. She wasn’t the Evil King herself, of course, so looking for the ‘gun’ wasn’t relevant. It was out of her hands. But she wouldn’t let herself feel useless.

After all, when something did go wrong, she was invaluable with her talent! It was always good to have somebody ready to mitigate a bad situation, so she didn’t mind that it left her ‘helpless’ or ‘useless’ at any other time. Being useless was okay during these peaceful times, it meant she wasn’t needed, and she liked that. It was comparatively pleasant.

2:00 PM / 1400 Hours

Once leaving the pool, Sayaka and Nami made their way back towards the main wings, leaving the empty ones behind. Just as soon as they walked by the gift shop, they stopped and saw that Torimi was at the rack where Nami had found the pig keychain before. It seemed like the plush keychains in the gift shop rotated a little more than the other contents, since there seemed to be something completely new there.

“Tori!” Nami called out to her from the doorway, “How’s it going?”

“Oh!” Torimi startled, then turned around, the new item clutched in her hands for Nami to get a good look at. It looked like a chocobo. Nice, something that she’d appreciate more than just a normal animal. “Namine! Have you been at the arcade?”

“Ahh, you know.” Torimi shrugged. “I had tarot cards in my room so I did a few readings. Not much else.”

Nami furrowed her brow. Something wasn’t quite right here…

“Readings, huh? What’d you get?” Sayaka asked, then blinked as she thought. “Well, I guess my first question is what you were reading on.”

“Oh, you know things about tarot?” Torimi asked, then smiled. “You should have told me sooner. I’ll do a reading for you sometime, okay?”

“Well, not a whole lot,” Sayaka admitted, “But enough. It’s not like it’s an uncommon thing to see, really. Even though it’s not usually seen like a super traditional Japanese thing, it’s sort of gotten itself mixed in there. Growing up the way I did, I’ve seen loads of readings done! Never, uh… Got one, though.”

“Then I’ll gladly do one for you sometime,” Torimi said, “Anyway, the ones I did this morning were all for myself. Results… inconclusive. Ask again later.”
“You… Can do that with tarot cards?” Sayaka asked.

“Well obviously I can. I’m an Ultimate,” Torimi chided her, “I’m not going to force meaning out of the cards if they don’t want to channel anything today. Sometimes they just turn out normal cards with no meaning! Not usually when I read for other people, but if my heart’s not in it for myself, then how am I supposed to find any truth? I ain’t.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” Sayaka said, then seemed to realize something. “Hey! Do you want to join our girls’ night?”

“You huh?” Torimi asked, tilting her head to one side.

“We were going to get drunk with Box,” Nami explained, “And Asahi will also be there. But not drinking because she’s got to keep her mask on around people and all.”

“Oh. I think I’ll pass,” Torimi said, “It seems fun, but I bet I’d be out of place. I dunno Hako real well and it kinda seems like she doesn’t like us ‘replacements’ or anything?”

“I don’t think she dislikes you either,” Sayaka said, “I just think that she feels more loyalty to the rest of us cause we’ve known her longer? At worst she’s neutral about you lot.”

“Neutral, huh? Well, still. Don’t wanna intrude,” Torimi said, “Besides, I might have my own plans tonight.”

“Oh? Plans?” Nami asked.

“Maybe. I haven’t made them yet, but it could happen!” Torimi said, “And even if I already did make them, I wouldn’t tell you. A girl’s got to keep some things close to the heart, right?”


“I will.” Torimi stuck her tongue out, teasing Nami with the forbidden knaaawledge.

“Anyway… You found a chocobo?” Nami pointed to the keychain.

“Yeah! Isn’t it precious?” Torimi held the yellow bird close to her cheek and beamed wide. “I love it so much… Merchandise plushies are so hard to find these days, you know!”

“They are?” Nami vaguely recalled Torimi complaining about that before, but she couldn’t imagine why they would actually be that difficult to track down.

“Mhm. Haven’t you ever noticed my collection lacks a bunch of them? Most of what I have are vintage or limited edition,” Torimi said, “Animals have a more universal appeal so not a lot even get made. I hear there used to be lots and lots…”

“Oh, now that you mention it, you’re right.” Nami hadn’t seen franchised plushies anywhere in stores, but it never really registered before now that she hadn’t. She just sort of assumed based on old memes about bootleg pokemon plushies and the like, that they’d still be pretty common, but regular animals did have a more universal appeal in a world where a lot of kids grew up without exposure to pop culture. Nami didn’t hear the entire story or anything, but she did know that Kaede qualified as one of those kids.

“Of course I am,” Torimi said, “And it’s even better that this merchandise plushie… Is a chocobo! I’m gonna go find a place to put him.”
With that, Torimi ran off with a spring in her step, but Nami couldn’t help being a bit confused by that entire interaction. Something was definitely strange about that whole thing, and she was pretty sure she knew full well what made it strange, but at the same time…

What exactly was going on there?
Daily Life: Day Ten (Madara??)

3:00 PM / 1500 Hours

After being left in the dust by a somehow inaccurate Torimi, Nami and Sayaka weren’t sure where to go next. This was exemplified by the fact that they both stood in silence for the better part of a minute, evidently trying to think of what their next destination ought to be. There was the temptation, at least on Nami’s end, to just grab a movie while they were right here in the gift shop and give up on this whole group socialization thing to just relax and watch something memey with her girlfriend, but…

Then there was a loud fucking crash!

Nami whirled around to discover that they were, in fact, not left alone in the gift shop when Torimi left. Standing there now, because he’d somehow managed to knock over three racks of merchandise not in the process of falling over but in the process of standing up, was Madara. What was he doing, exactly?

“Fuck!” Madara exclaimed, “I don’t know how I got here!”

“...Okay.” Sayaka blinked, and it was obvious she shared Nami’s sentiment. No matter how odd that encounter with Torimi was, this was already hurtling down the road to even stranger.

“I mean that for serious. I woke up on the floor here. Dunno how that happened?” Madara lifted a hand to scratch the side of his head, but then lowered it as he stared, wide-eyed, at the girls.

“Why’s there so fucking many of you?”

“There’s two,” Nami said.

“Eh-huh. Right.” Madara took a step backwards, and his arms went limp, swinging at his sides.

“Course there’s only two of you, what the fuck am I saying? Fuck. Fuck!”

“What’s going on?” Sayaka asked, and almost took a step closer to him, but thought better and stayed put instead.

“Never been like this before,” Madara said, “Two or three, maybe four. Shadows or distortions. Not like this. Fuck. It’s like clones this way. Five.”

“Madara!” Sayaka snipped, but Nami stuck her hand out to stop her and intervened instead.

“Take a deep breath, okay? There’s only one of each of us for real. We’re the only ones talking to you, right? Or at least, the only ways saying normal words?” Nami offered.

“Sure, but why you gotta yell about it?” Madara asked, then brought his hands to his ears. “Shit! Why I gotta yell about it?”

“You’re not yelling. You’re not even talking very loud. Neither am I,” Nami said, but she’d reduced her voice, though not so much that he wouldn’t normally be able to hear and understand her. Even if whatever was happening made things seem louder, he’d still have normal hearing when it came to comprehension. “Don’t cover your ears. Close your eyes and walk towards my voice. I’ll keep talking, alright? Um…” She blanked on what she could repeat to keep him moving
her direction, and landed on something stupid. “Aeiou, aeiou-”

She repeated the obnoxious phrase until Madara was close to her, to instead say, “I can reach you. If I grab your wrist, will it be okay? They can’t touch you, right?”

“Do it gently,” Madara said. So, she did. She wrapped her fingers around the hem of his glove; he had very small wrists, so she was barely actually brushing him as her fingers made a handcuff.

“I’ve got you, okay? Open your eyes.”

He did, then took a deep breath. “Yeah. Yeah it’s obvious now. You’re the real ones. Nami. Yamaguchi.”

“Can you tell me what happened?” Nami asked, “Did you get Despair Fever?”

“Despair… Uh… Yeah, I might’ve. That would explain it,” Madara said, “This shit’s never been so bad before, I mean.”

“Before?” Sayaka asked.

“Well, I was hoping I wouldn’t actually have to, you know, tell anybody about this stuff, but here we are,” Madara groaned. “So, I hallucinate sometimes. Pretty randomly. Usually it’s pretty obvious, but I think that even if I know reasonably that it isn’t real, my brain wants to think it is, so it’s kinda tough. I’ve gotten good at ignoring it normally, but this was kind of intense. I mean, everything’s still… Really loud?”

“We should talk to Mitsuru again, at dinner,” Sayaka said, “He might be able to explain what’s going on. He knows a bunch of the symptoms.”

“Oh yeah, he did, right?” Madara stumbled over his words, and also physically stumbled, grabbing onto Nami’s shoulder for support. “Shit. I’m sorry. Sorry you had to see this, too. I’m not… Usually this much of a mess, you know?”

“It’s okay, I usually am,” Nami assured him.

“...Sorry I got pissy,” Sayaka said, “It didn’t… I didn’t connect that you might be having a moment. I just thought you were dodging my question.”

“Nah it’s fine. I’m kinda surprised Nami figured out what was going on at all,” Madara said, “You, like, got experience?”

“Well, not with hallucinations,” Nami said, “But I do have tough moments like that sometimes. I have memory problems, you know? Anyone who was there can kind of attest that I had a pretty bad breakdown during the first trial.”

“Oh.” Madara looked away. “Right. Yeah, I missed a lot, huh? From where I stand it kinda seems like most of you have really got it together. I mean, uh. Not Oishi, or Hako, or Bakura if he’s still around… But. I gotta keep on your level.”

“Aww, Madara.” Sayaka put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “None of us have it together. Not really. I mean, Mitsuru and Ueda are kind of above all this stuff, but the rest of us are still just trying our best.”

“You’re not? And what about Randy and Mizuho?” Madara asked, “Even if I grant that more people are having a tough time than I can see, it’s still like… I can’t just let everyone know that
I’m fucked up. I’m already a ‘newcomer’, and my one friend I already had here is dead. I can’t become any more of a weak link…”

“Is that why you thought you’d end up dead?” Sayaka asked.

“…Kind of, yeah,” Madara admitted, “This shit was gonna come out eventually? And I’m just lucky it’s you two. I think I can trust you not to kill me. It’d be easy right now, after all.”

“I don’t think that will be a reason for anybody to kill you,” Nami said, “I mean, nobody’s gotten killed because of mental illness yet. I guess that it’s sort of been a factor, sure, but it hasn’t been the reason anybody’s been targeted? We’re literally all just one big collective mess.”

“Figuratively,” Madara corrected, then gave a soft and bitter chuckle. “Ah, guess I’m starting to get a bit better if I’m correcting grammar.”

“It’s just Zilennial Talk, Babey,” Nami said.

“I don’t… Know what that means,” Madara admitted, then let go of Nami and stood up straight, taking deep breaths.

“Is everything still being loud?” Nami asked.

“It’s not exactly loud for real. It’s just making my head pound,” Madara explained.

“Well, there’s headache medicine downstairs in the infirmary,” Sayaka said, “What works best for you with these kinds of things?”

“Technically, fioricet,” Madara said, “But that’s migraine prescription. So, acetaminophen of any sort.”

“I’ll figure out which one is that,” Nami said, “I think I’m pretty decent at figuring out what Mono’s medicine names mean.”

“Mono?” Madara asked.

“Well, it comes whenever its name is said, or at least eavesdrops, so I figured that I may as well make things easier on it with a nickname. It just started calling me Kagu, too, so I guess we’re at the nicknames phase of our intense and very serious rivalry,” Nami said.

“You consider yourself its rival?” Sayaka asked.

“Hm.” Nami touched her own ahoge. “I kind of assumed I was, cause I have an ahoge and I am legally skilled. That person always ends up being the primary enemy of the big bear upstairs. Goro already called me the protagonist before I even found out my talent.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Sayaka said. With that conversation done, the group went downstairs.

Nami managed to not only find Acetaminophen, but also Butalbital. Those were two of the three ingredients Madara cited as being found in fioricet, so that was able to help him out. He also mentioned that butalbital was actually a controlled substance, causing Nami to take a closer look. It was filled just the same as the normal medicines, but hadn’t she seen a controlled substance filling its bottles less, recently? She couldn’t quite recall, since it had turned out to just be unnecessary information to the case at hand, but she decided that it probably didn’t warrant investigation at the moment.
Daily Life: Day Ten (Dinner)

After medicating Madara, he started to hear things normally again, so Nami invited him to watch a movie with her and Sayaka, figuring that he’d rather be on the safe side and stick around with them. She was correct, and he agreed, but while they were stopped in the gift shop to pick out a movie he did grab a pair of headphones, just in case the headache started to come back. Nami, again, picked out a movie that was legitimately good instead of something that was only memes, because Madara didn’t need that right now. This time, the Lego Movie. Look, she never said it wouldn’t have any memes.

5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

After the movie, the group of three went up to Cafe Monokuma. They got lucky, and Mitsuru was sitting alone, so they took the other three chairs at his table to discuss the matter of Madara’s potential Despair Fever.

“Ah, hello, Madara,” Mitsuru greeted him over the other two, a bit surprised at his presence given that he’d previously established himself as a comparative loner.

“Hey,” Madara said.

“We were actually wondering something,” Sayaka said, “Some… Stuff happened earlier, and like, we wanted to know if you knew if it could be a Despair Fever symptom or some shit?”

“Oh! Of course. I’ll share any knowledge that I have available,” Mitsuru said.

“Well, basically,” Madara said, “Everything that normally happens was happening worse.”

That was definitely a half truth; It wasn’t all that normal, but it was stuff that normally happened to him, and despite the reassurances she and Sayaka had given, Nami understood that Madara would prefer to keep this issue close.

“Oh! Yes, hypersensitivity is a relatively common symptom of Despair Fever, so of course I’ve heard of it,” Mitsuru said, “In fact, I even know that it can be a big reason why the fever got identified, as it’s a strange symptom to suddenly develop without a history of those sorts of things. So many of the symptoms are subtle things that can fly under the radar, but that one is… Unfortunately for you, I must say, quite obvious.”

“Yeah. It sure is.” Madara crossed his arms. “Well, I’ll get some of the medicine from Hako’s ward after dinner. Speaking of, where’s she at? Isn’t she usually early?”

“Huh… She was here,” Mitsuru said.

“And we have plans with her later,” Sayaka added, “So she’ll probably turn back up. Maybe she just wanted to get something done before then?”

“I think she just started getting self-conscious about eating my food or some shit,” Amai cut in as she set plates down in front of the four, “She already got her meal, and left with it immediately.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Sayaka said.

“…I guess so too,” Amai admitted, “Do you think I went too far or something?”
“Uh, yeah,” Nami said.

“Nobody asked you. I was questioning my friend,” Amai snipped.

“Well, I agree with her,” Sayaka said, “You did. We didn’t all need to know that about Hako… Even if she did hurt you, it was a fucked up thing to say.”

“I… Mm.” Amai looked away. “You said you had plans with her? Could I talk to her, one on one, first?”

“Are you going to apologize?” Sayaka asked.

“I’m gonna try.” Amai made a popping noise, then wandered away.

“She’s… Well, she’s something,” Mitsuru said, “And here I thought that Iwa-tan was abrasive.”

“Your girlfriend’s abrasive?” Sayaka asked.

“Not in a bad way! She’s just a very blunt person. Sort of like you, to tell the truth, but more mature about it. And she certainly doesn’t ever try to conceal her feelings.”

“I-I’m mature!” Sayaka protested.

“Mature girls aren’t tsundere,” Mitsuru said matter-of-factly, “Well, you’re mature in certain ways, of course, but nobody would ever describe you that way if asked about you. They’d say, probably… Frightening, with a short temper, maybe that you’re tsundere, and that you’re impressive. Iwa-tan would be described as having a malicious aura and being a very mature, refined woman with an embarrassing soft spot for her lovers.”

“Oh, I see,” Sayaka said, somehow being completely convinced to drop the argument by Mitsuru’s excellent response.

“In any case, I suppose that Oishi serves as proof that there’s a difference between somebody who hurrs insults for the sake of it, and somebody who honestly believes every word she says,” Mitsuru said, “If Iwa-tan says something that seems cruel, it’s likely that it’s honestly how she sees you.”

“You don’t think Oishi actually hates everyone?” Madara asked.

“Well… I think if she does, then she may just hate herself more. You saw how badly she reacted when you insulted her back.”

“That’s… I didn’t think of it that way. Thanks, Fujishiro,” Madara admitted, “I was starting to think, she was just all bad. But then again, I was cruel to her too. Even if she said such awful things to Hako…”

“Oh, I don’t like her in the least. Really, I’m saying that in order to place others beneath you, you have to actually be better than them,” Mitsuru said, “My girlfriend actually is better than other people. Oishi is not. That’s the difference I’m referring to. And of course, she’d know this about herself.”

“Huh. Kind of thought you’d be all over helping her,” Nami said, “Didn’t you say you wanted to protect us ‘kids’?”

“When I said that, I didn’t realize you would be twenty as well quite soon…” Mitsuru admitted, “In any case, well. It’s true that I’d like to protect all of you, but at the same time. When it comes
to that… brat, Kurou has her under control.”

“Oh?” Nami pondered.

“I mean, it’s the truth. He certainly does,” Mitsuru said, “I like to help people, yes, but I have my limits. Not of the number of people I want to help, but of the quality of them.”

“And. Oishi breaks that for you, but I don’t? Bakura didn’t?” Sayaka wondered.

“Not at all. You and Bakura were both thrust into unfortunate circumstances, and still find ways to show kindness,” Mitsuru said, “Even if you might both lash out at times, I believe neither of you would ever reveal a secret just to hurt somebody. Pettiness, I guess. Yeah, pettiness is where I draw the line. Petty kids don’t need my help.”

“That’s a reasonable line to draw,” Madara said, “I mean, everyone’s petty sometimes, but in this case it makes sense. It was kind of uncalled-for revenge? I was being petty too, in that situation…”

“Well, if you wanted me to protect you, I think I still would. It was more like a one-time thing as far as I could see, though. You do seem like you can take care of yourself just fine,” Mitsuru said.

“It’s true, I can,” Madara confirmed, “Thank you, though. I guess I like your moral code, or whatever?”

“Well, I’ve had plenty of references to go off of,” Mitsuru said, “Technically, I should show compassion to everybody, even if they’ve wronged me… But maybe that’s the reason that I’m still agnostic. I’m just not quite good enough for any of the religions I’ve studied.”
6:00 PM / 1800 Hours

Once dinner was finished and everybody started to leave, Box met up with Nami, Sayaka, and Riko outside of Cafe Monokuma.

“Hey, Box,” Nami said, “Oishi actually wanted to talk to you, first. If you’re okay with that. I’d be totally cool leaving her hanging, but I thought I’d let you know? She’s back in the Cafe.”

“Ah… Well, I think. I guess I should,” Box said, and walked into Cafe Monokuma. She was hesitant, and worried about what Amai would say. She was mostly expecting that she’d be chewed out for leaving with her plate at each meal since the last trial. She was surprised to walk in and find Amai holding what looked like a file folder.

“Hi there, you,” Amai said, her voice small and more gentle than she ever usually sounded. She thrust her arm out, holding the file folder towards Box. “This is for you.”
“What is it?” Box asked, but reached out to take it anyway.

“It’s all the information that I have on Box Hako. Every bit of it. Giving it up… Probably won’t mean much, since I have a lot of it memorized. That was probably obvious during the trial,” She lowered her arm and clenched both fists. “But, you know, we grew up together. So there’s a lot more than what I said. Good stuff and bad stuff. I don’t know how many of those memories you have… But if you ever want them, you can read that. And now, I can’t read it.”

“...Is this the only copy?” Box asked.

“It is. I could have copied it in the Journalist’s Ward, sure, but hand to God I didn’t. That’s the only one that exists,” Amai said.

“Why are you giving it to me?” Box asked.

“Maybe it’s an apology,” Amai said, “Maybe it’s something else. That’s up to you. Anyway… Have a nice night.”

Then, Amai was gone. Box stood there for a bit longer, then left as well, reconvening with her
friends. “She was apologizing to me.”

It wasn’t so much an apology, really. Box was going to pull another meaning from it, but she wasn’t going to tell anybody that.

“Oh.” Sayaka noticed what she was holding. “She gave up your file?”

“Um, yes. The only copy of it,” Box said, then smiled. “I don’t think I forgive her, but I feel a little bit less horrible now to know that she wants it, instead of just wallowing in awkward and unpleasant tension between us.”

“You still wanna get drunk?” Sayaka asked.

“Oh, yes, certainly,” Box said, “This didn’t make me feel that much better or anything. And, really, I’m very tired of existing. As long as it’s just sometimes, it’s nice that something could let me take a break from that.”

“Yeah, that’s how I think of it!” Sayaka said, “It’s just a break from existing so much! In moderation!”

“Have you gotten drunk since being here?” Nami wondered.

“Nope,” Sayaka said, and clicked her tongue. “So I think that constitutes occasional enough, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m not judging,” Nami said, “I was kind of just curious. I mean, Rei did.”

“Right. Sorry, I just feel like I gotta clarify, cause. It’s true, Yuuri drank too much. And I was his friend so I kinda feel a little bit like I’ve got to prove that it wasn’t just alcoholic company,” Sayaka admitted.

“None of us are going to think that about you,” Riko assured her.

“Thanks,” Sayaka said, then started to walk downstairs, “Anyway, we’ll get some stuff from the gift shop, then…”

“We can hang out in my room,” Box offered, “So that none of us need to use any stairs. And since this is for my sake, it makes sense that I’d arrange the venue, right? Even if it’s just something this simple.”

“Nice.” Sayaka gave a thumbs-up, then they put that plan into action. Sayaka was somehow able to carry six bottles at a time without any visible difficulty, while the other girls could only manage four. It wasn’t like they expected to go through all this, they were just getting options. And cans of Strong Zero, for Nami’s sake. The evening rotation was far superior; Monokuma’s gift shop did not encourage day drinking, when it came to good selections.

The alcohol gathered, everyone went to Box’s room. Nami and Sayaka had of course been there before, for investigations, and it wasn’t much different now. It was a bit messier since she’d moved the polyfil beads out of her room and back in, and those things were notoriously difficult to clean up, but it otherwise wasn’t very different from anyone else’s room.

“Welcome, I guess?” Box said, gesturing around herself, then sat down on the floor by the coffee table where the bottles and cans had been set down. She reached straight for a bottle of plum wine.

“I thought you said you’d never got drunk before?” Sayaka wondered.
“I haven’t. But, I’ve tried it in social situations. Just never enough to really be considered impaired or whatever,” Box explained. “I mean, given the culture, of course I would have tried it in passing…”

“That makes sense,” Riko noted, “I think that it’s just easy to see you as somebody very sweet and straight-edge.”

“I’m almost offended. There’s a difference between straight-edge and hermit,” Box said, closing her eyes as she unscrewed the cap from the plum wine. “It’s not possible to network in Japan without at least drinking a beer or a cup of sake, you know! As the Ultimate Volunteer, I’ve needed to attend a lot of important meetings, and join my fellow volunteers for a drink when the work is done, too. If I turned them down saying that I’m still underage, I never would have had the connections to do any really important work-”

“And you can’t say no to people,” Nami said.

“And I can’t say no to people,” Box admitted, then solemnly sipped straight from the bottle.

“Hey now,” Sayaka said.

“What? You’re nineteen, you know by now that this sort of stuff isn’t an ‘indirect kiss’…” Box said.

“Obviously, dummy. I’m worried about Despair Fever,” Sayaka said.

Box just shrugged. “It’s air-based, you know. It’s not like primarily air-based, it’s exclusively air based. This won’t make it any more or less likely. Just like you two making out wouldn’t!”

“Wh-hey, we-” Sayaka protested, turning red, then noticed Box was smirking. “Oh, shut up! Fine, I guess.”

With that, Sayaka opened one of the Strong Zeros, took a sip of the foam that started to come out, then handed it off to Nami and *oh she was intentionally making it like an ‘indirect kiss’ wasn’t she, just to mess with Box.*

Of course, Nami would play along. She took a sip of the Strong Zero (that’s tasty stuff.) then grinned in Sayaka’s direction.

“H-Hey! You’re making fun of me!” Box protested as she looked on.

“They certainly are,” Riko signed to her, “I’d offer to help get back at them, but I’m afraid even fake romance would put me at risk of contracting something other than Despair Fever.”

“You two and your secret language…” Sayaka pouted.

“It’s not secret,” Riko wrote, “I’ll gladly teach you more any time you like.”

“Pfft,” Sayaka blew a raspberry, then got up and grabbed one of the glasses from the bathroom (intended for water) and made herself a drink with the one non-alcoholic beverage they’d retrieved (cherry coke) and rum.
Two hours later, and probably still too early to be this drunk, three of the four girls in Box Hako’s room were relatively sloshed. Lucky enough, they were at a point where it was an enthusiastic and bright kind of drunk, and not the same sort of drunk that Yuuri and Goro had experienced several nights ago, the rotten and miserable sort that could easily creep up on a good time or somebody who went into the event unhappy.

Box did go in unhappy, but with the intention of drinking her cares away for the first time in her life, and she was exactly as bubbly a drunk as one might expect of a girl like her. As much as the idea of a perfect friend, perfect daughter, was an act or performance... She was still a bright and friendly person. Somebody who was secretly antisocial or gloomy would never be able to make an act like this as believable as Box did for, apparently, many years. It was the situation which caused her performance to finally break down now, and it was the second time after a first breakdown that was much longer in the making.

This was a long and overly flowery way of saying that Box was currently jumping on her bed in a manner not dissimilar to dancing. Nami was cheering her on, Sayaka was watching with amusement evident, and Riko was still sitting at the coffee table, mixing up the next round of drinks and occasionally making odd, gasping noises that her friends recognized as laughter at their antics. Sayaka started to protest that it wasn’t that funny, but since she slurred her words in the process, it clearly was.

She was somebody who could hold her liquor, but she also wasn’t used to having a fun drunk time. Impulsive, sure, but not fun like this. With Yuuri, it was always bitter in some way, and alone it was never like she had anybody around to have fun with. And of course, if she ever did manage to start hitting drunk during family business, it was a matter of keeping that fact hidden rather than a matter of cutting loose.

Similarly, Nami didn’t get drunk often in the memories she’d unlocked of drinking anything at all. Sometimes she drank with Torimi, sometimes with Kira, and the most drunk she ever got was at celebratory parties after winning a case, which always included those two along with her other team members. She didn’t know why their Ultimate Talents were supposedly best applied to helping her with her cases, but she had to admit that it had been helpful. Both of them in different ways. No matter how badly Kira hurt her, she certainly was useful in the courtroom.

This was nice, though. Nami had a fuzzy feeling. Fuzzy in multiple ways. Fuzzy because she was here with friends and with Sayaka and she loved Sayaka so much! She couldn’t say love, though. They’d only just admitted like, after all. Fuzzy because everything was, well, fuzzy around her, she wasn’t fully aware of her surroundings. Fuzzy physically, because she kind of couldn’t fully feel her toes or her cheeks. Somehow, though, this was pleasant. This kind of thing was the reason that people did like alcohol, after all.

Sayaka actually let out a laugh, then leaned over and wrapped her arms around Nami. “This was a good idea. Thanks for being here too. This is fun and it’s nice to see Box being actually happy, right?”

But with a lot more slurring of her consonants, of course.

Nami couldn’t help but agree.
Unfortunately, Box being happy wouldn’t actually last for much longer, not because she’d end up too drunk to have a good time, at least, not right away. Rather, it was the readily expected side effect of a drunk girl fucking jumping up and down jesus christ. She stopped jumping very suddenly, landed on the floor, and dashed for the bathroom but didn’t make it quite in time, retching liquid and bile over the tiles. Liquid and bile.

Oh.

Even when drunk, Nami would recognize that. And all the joy drained from her voice as she demanded an answer. “Why the fuck haven’t you eaten, Box?”

“H-Huh?” Box asked, supporting herself against the bathroom’s doorframe. Riko tapped her Monopad and stopped the music they’d been playing.

“You haven’t eaten!” Nami exclaimed, getting up and running over to hold her by the shoulders. “Not dinner, not lunch, and not breakfast either. I’ve seen this before, you know. I’ve seen it. Why aren’t you eating? Why?”

“It’s…” Box whispered, “Not like I have a disorder or anything. Promise.”

“So what is it if it’s not that?” Nami questioned. Even though she’d met Torimi after the worst of her days starving herself, she relapsed sometimes. And when she did, it was a lot like this. An empty stomach for a drunk person could only come up with liquid and bile. The fuzziness was still here, she still felt it, even the pleasant fuzzy feeling, but it all took a backseat to her worry and concern.

“It’s… I can’t say,” Box admitted, “It’s not. I don’t think it is. I guess I should have eaten something. Something from the gift shop. I don’t know. I’m used to not eating. I’m used to it. A lot of times I don’t. Two days is nothing. Wasn’t even anything ever. Not in my memories.”

“Box, please,” Nami was pleading with her now. Just like earlier, when she and Sayaka had to get the truth out of Madara. Box wasn’t dodging the question. She didn’t know how to answer it. Nami knew, but she needed an answer anyway.

“Two days is nothing it’s always been nothing. A kid can go two days. Anyone can go two days. What’s forty-eight hours? It’s fine it’s really just. Fine. It’s okay,” Box said, “If you bring me food I’ll eat it. I’ll eat it right here don’t worry. Now that you mention it I guess I am hungry. I guess I haven’t eaten.”

“Why not?” Nami asked.

“Because,” Box said, “If I don’t bring it there, then…”

“Then what?”

“Then the person who’s in the quarantine room won’t have anything to eat-” Box blurted out, then… Fainted? Nami hadn’t seen her faint before, but that was the only way to describe the manner in which she so suddenly collapsed. It couldn’t have been the alcohol, she wasn’t drunk enough to pass out as a result, and it probably wouldn’t have cut her off mid-sentence like this did.

“...I guess that makes sense, though,” Sayaka said as she walked up to take Box from Nami, being stronger and more able to move her. “We do know that somebody’s in there. Of course, how she’d actually get the meal to them from outside…”

“Monokuma,” Nami said, her voice blank. It appeared.
“Hey now! You don’t really want a bear like me intruding on your-” It protested, but stopped when it saw Box. “Well, what happened here?”

“You don’t know?” Nami asked.

“It’s a girls’ night! Those are sacred things, so of course I cut the feed,” Monokuma said, “You better not have taken advantage of my good will to commit a murder when I couldn’t see!”

“No, she just fainted,” Sayaka explained as she set Box on the bed.

“If Box brought plates to the quarantine room,” Nami said, “Would you transfer them inside?”

“Uh… yes?” Monokuma answered, “I would in fact do that.”

“So is that what she’s been doing?” Nami asked, but Monokuma had already vanished again.

The night was a strange one after all.
Kurou Ueda was really in his element in this ward that he’d been provided with. It was, frankly, a better workshop than he’d ever had on his own. It had all the excitement of working on a site, the selection of tools and materials that its home-improvement-store appearance would imply, and yet, the freedom of his home workshop when he wasn’t obligated to create anything for anybody in particular. Of course, he had told Nami that he’d carve a rat for her, but that wouldn’t take much time, and it wasn’t like that was really an obligation. It was a gift that he was readily giving to one of his many new friends, given the opportunity.

As of today… Nami was his age. It was a bit odd to look at that girl and think so, though. Mitsuru, Riko, and Tsukasa all had an air of maturity to them, on some level. It was reasonable to see that they were just as adult as he was, but Nami still seemed younger. It had been a bit difficult even to believe her as nineteen. Then again, he thought… He didn’t know a whole lot about her, but what he did know did put her development as an unconventional thing. She already worked a job in the adult world for years, but missed out on certain aspects of childhood, as far as he could tell.

Maybe it was just because she was so goofy, though. Who was he to judge the maturity of somebody his own age? At the same time, he could probably have the argument made about him that he just matured extra quickly because of the turn his relationship took. Ayano wasn’t… Entirely an unplanned baby, but at the same time, it wasn’t like they were married yet. Kurou hadn’t actually proposed to Ayu until two months after Ayano was born, when he realized that he deeply appreciated this life and would very happily do it for decades to come.

He was just lucky that she agreed with him on that. Well, he would have been willing to be a single father to Ayano if he needed to, but he did love Ayu very much and would rather take that journey with her. Their arrangement wasn’t entirely conventional, though. Ayu was the one who suggested it. They were still comparatively young, and didn’t even have experience outside of each other. For all that love, it would probably grow unhappy in this case, given time. So it was that Ayu and Kurou had an open marriage.

So far, they’d each only taken advantage of that factor twice. Ayu did first, having a relatively chaste but whirlwind romance with a girl three years older than her, then told Kurou that she wanted him to also do something so it was fair to both of them, so he had a short affair with a coworker who’d been holding back an attraction to him for months. It was fun, but his heart still lay with Ayu. Even so, there was something kind of exciting about the fact that not only were they both bi, but had enough bisexual energy to both get with people. Kurou had to admit, it was a good idea. Maybe he and Ayu would become monogamous for real in the future, but in their youth it was good to have other experiences.

Despite that, he wasn’t interested in having any experiences here.

It was a little bit surprising when Torimi Shinoe turned up to his ward. She stood a ways away for a little while, quiet. He knew she was there, but felt he shouldn’t say anything either. For nearly fifteen minutes she just watched him work.

“What are you making?” She finally asked.

“Well, I’m going to make a rat for Nami, but as a warm-up I thought that I’d make an end table. Just to make it. I don’t think it’ll get used,” Kurou said, “Do you need something?”
“I just thought I’d come see you. I thought you might be here,” Torimi said.

“I… Okay,” Kurou said, giving her an odd look. She sounded somehow more serious than she usually did, and that wasn’t a good sign. Though he hated himself for it, his heart did jump in fear that she might have actually been here to kill him.


“Your type?” Kurou asked.

“Well, I guess I don’t really have one of those. It just usually ends up being older guys. You’re not really older, but it’s like you are. So you’re my type. Maybe you’re even not a piece of shit. Most of them are, yanno?”

“Oh. You’re asking me to sleep with you.”

“Yeah. What else would I be asking?” Torimi wondered.

“Anything but that?” Kurou said.

“Come on, you’re in a Killing Game. What better time to experiment with somebody like me? You’re not too straight for me, right?” Torimi wondered.

“I mean, I’m bisexual, but that wouldn’t matter anyway,” Kurou said, “Since you’re a girl, and all. I’m just not interested.”

“Seriously? You’re probably used to getting it in every night, since you got a wife and all. Bet she’d understand, you’ve got needs, right?”

“I mean, we’re in an open relationship, but that’s besides the point, Shinoe. You’re seventeen.”

“And you’re twenty. That’s three years.”

“Look. Three years can be a lot of time, you know? I have enough of a difficult time recognizing Nami as an adult, and she’s actually my age as of today. We’re in completely different worlds, and from where I stand, you’re just a teenager.”

“Wh- hey, come on. I’ve always been grown up enough before. That’s really what you’re gonna go for?” Torimi asked, taking a step forward. Her eyes were glassy, and Kurou suddenly realized exactly what was so unsettling about her speech patterns.
“...And you don’t actually mean any of this,” He said, “Of course not. I never gave any indication that I wasn’t loyal to my wife, and you were already acting as my friend. You respected my relationship from moment one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Really, the question is what you’re talking about, and why you’re saying it this way,” Kurou said, and crossed his arms. “You’re speaking much shorter than usual. Your accent is almost completely gone. And, you’re saying things that Shinoe would never normally say. I should have realized it sooner. You’ve got Despair Fever.”

“Huh?”

“It’s obvious. Come on.” He set a hand on her shoulder to lead her out of his ward. “Let’s get you started on the medicine so you can feel better before you make a bigger fool of yourself.”
“Good morning, everybody. It’s a brand new day, so make sure you eat a nice breakfast,”
Monokuma’s voice woke Nami. Normally, this had become something which wasn’t noteworthy,
but something about its voice was different this morning. It wasn’t upbeat and taunting the way
that it usually was. Thinking about it, what made that strange was the fact that it should have been
recovered from its fever by now. So it should have been back to its normal self in full force.

Well, Nami decided to brush that off, because she had plenty of other things to worry about right
now. Like last night… Box did wake up about ten minutes after she’d fainted, but the mood was
definitely ruined at that point. While she was out, Nami and Sayaka cleaned up, while Riko stuck
at Box’s side just in case. When she did wake up, she and Riko had a silent conversation for a short
while. Nami apologized, not for being worried, but for causing Box to faint, even if she didn’t
understand why it happened.

In the end, everybody went back to their rooms to sleep, but not before clearing the air up. Box
made sure they all knew that she did have a good time, and she ate some popcorn that Nami had
brought her. Just because the night was cut off didn’t mean that it wasn’t a good one while it
lasted, and it was her own fault anyway. She was being stupid, she said. Nami didn’t exactly think
she was, though. Even with Monokuma’s cagey answer to the question, it was clear to see that Box
had just been trying to be kind to whoever it was who was stuck in the quarantine room.

As for the fainting… That was an answer that Nami couldn’t find. It was locked away in the
memories of two people she could no longer consult. Kaede and Goro both… Weren’t there, the
two people who’d seen Box faint before. Nami never knew about this, of course. And really, those
two never got a straight answer why it happened either, but the closest they got to one was still the
approximation that Nami theorized. Box Hako probably fainted when she came up to something
where ‘what she wanted’ and ‘what other people needed’ were too much in conflict.

In this particular case, she wanted to tell the truth, but also knew that telling that truth wasn’t the
best thing for the people around her. Saying that she’d been feeding ‘the person in the quarantine
room’ would just get her friends thinking again about things that they’d managed to put, on some
level, out of their minds. Nami hadn’t been dwelling on that; On the idea that somebody was alive.
But Box confirmed it time and time again, somebody was in there, and she seemed to honestly
believe it. With the food in play, well, it was basically confirmed.

And so they had to think about it again, think and feel guilty when they had a preference for who
survived. Of course that was in conflict. And for somebody who tried so hard to be the person that
others needed, of course she’d have a physical reaction to that kind of conflict. They’d already seen
it to some extent in her nervous laughter and her nonverbal moments, this was just an extreme
level. Shutting down so that she could sort herself out.

Nami understood that. She never actually fainted in relation to memory blackouts, unless she
counted how she passed out when getting her memories back, but she did dissociate often, and she
was often feverish during and after the blackouts too. Brains were imperfect, and sometimes the
only way to get stuff sorted out was to sacrifice some other normal functions.

Well, that was last night, and today was a new day. She wouldn’t have been able to sleep if it
hadn’t been resolved then, but she went to bed without guilt or anxiety left over and got a good
night’s rest. She got ready quickly, just hopping in the shower long enough to wash away the sleep-
sweat, and found herself out of her room at only ten past. May as well go straight to breakfast, though.

And, hm. There was a small obstacle to going straight to breakfast, and that was the fact that Mitsuru was on the stairs. Not standing, sitting, or actually lying down? Sort of just an absurd position that couldn’t be considered anything, somewhere between sitting and lying. He had his arms resting casually, but his legs just sort of hung over the stairs, and he seemed quite concerned.

“Fujishiro?” Nami asked, looking down at him.

“Ah, good. Thank you for arriving,” Mitsuru said, “See, I seem to be in a bit of a predicament.”

“Oh worm?”

“I was going upstairs with Oishi, since she goes at such a reliable time in the mornings that I can utilize her company, and my legs just… Stopped working,” Mitsuru explained, “Obviously, it’s Despair Fever. She refused to wait with me and went on ahead, so I’ve just been waiting for somebody else to happen upon me.”

“Yeah I sure did happen,” Nami said, “But I kinda can’t help you. I am a veritable weakling.”

“Oh, I didn’t expect you could. It would probably take multiple strong people to move me much anyhow,” Mitsuru said, “I tried to get myself up the stairs using my arms, but my sleeves are a bit slippery, so I didn’t make it very far before I lost my grip and slid back down. But could you wait with me?”

“Of course.” Nami sat down next to him. “You aren’t worried that I’ll attack you?”

“No,” Mitsuru said.

“You trust me?”

“I want to trust everyone here, which means I can’t trust anyone. I just think that it would be too incriminating right now.”

“Huh… Yeah, I guess so. Me and Oishi would be the only suspects,” Nami said, “I wouldn’t, though. I hope you know that. I wouldn’t kill anybody here, no matter what.”

“That’s very sweet of you to say. Thank you… For sitting with me. You’d think after all this time, I could get over myself.”

“You’re over it enough that you were only hyperventilating a little when I got here. That’s probably progress.”

“Heh… Thanks.”
It didn’t take long for Mitsuru to be able to be moved. Meaning, it wasn’t long until people who could move him turned up. It took Kurou, Sayaka, and Randy working together to move him, because he really was just huge. Even Kurou was still four inches shorter than him, and quite a bit smaller in frame. It probably wouldn’t have taken all three of them, only Randy and Sayaka, were Sayaka taller. As it was, she couldn’t lift enough of his weight in a way that was comfortable to move him. Since Monokuma did confirm that the medicine in Box’s ward couldn’t be brought outside, the group got Mitsuru set up on one of the cots within the ward, which he thanked them for, before going to the cafe. Randy said he’d bring Mitsuru’s food out here for him, as well.

In general, it was inconvenient for Mitsuru, but not a big deal. The fact that he was somebody who already knew this was a possible symptom of Despair Fever definitely helped; Anybody else might have been more confused or panicked, but at least he knew why it was happening. With him situated, and his assurance that he’d be fine on his own in Box’s ward, the four who’d helped him out went off to Cafe Monokuma.

Once there, they found meals prepared, but Amai looked… Distressed, somehow. Randy wandered off to meet up with Tsukasa, but the remaining three joined Riko at the counter.

“What’s going on, Oishi?” Nami surprised herself by asking. Why exactly did she care?

“Well, um, you see.” She mumbled, strangely timid, “I think that I’ve got Despair Fever so I… Well, I still made breakfast because that’s just, w-what I do! But I completely understand if you don’t want to eat it because I made it… I don’t want to get anybody else sick, I just, didn’t know what to do…”

She sniffed, and grit her teeth.

“Having been here with her for about five minutes,” Riko noted, “I’ve come to the conclusion that she probably has a symptom of ‘weepiness’ or something similar.”

“I’ve been here with her for about ten seconds and concluded the same,” Kurou said.

“Well, isn’t it kind of obvious!?” Amai whined full force, “Of course it’s a symptom! I wouldn’t be anywhere near this pathetic under normal circumstances!”
“Are you sure about that?” Nami asked.

“Yes! I’m absolutely certain jesus christ don’t say stuff like that!” Amai balled her hands up into fists as she practically wailed. “Crying is for the weak and I’m not weak! I promise! Do you think that I’m weak? Do you? Take it baaaack! Take it back!”

“Oh! That reminds me.” Kurou turned to Nami, now ignoring his crying friend with the knowledge that she was being forced to cry by a disease. “Shinoe also got Despair Fever, I figured it out last night.”

“Huh, so there’s four right now,” Nami said, “Fujishiro, Oishi, Madara, and… Wait, Tori?”

“Yeah. She turned up and started flirting with me, and her accent was missing too,” Kurou explained, “It was really kind of unsettling to see her that way… I got her some medicine and make sure she went back to her room safely and alone.”

“Ah. That explains it…” Nami said, “I noticed her missing accent, but then Madara had some… stuff that was really obviously Despair Fever so I got preoccupied helping him out with that
“She seems… Okay, now,” Kurou said, “Obviously she’ll still have it until tomorrow, but at least she’s not being weird anymore. I wonder what that symptom would be considered.”

“Her symptoms are ‘speech abnormality’ and ‘loss of impulse control,’” Riko explained by means of passing her whiteboard past Nami and Sayaka for Kurou to read.

“How did you know that, Asahi?” Sayaka wondered.

Once Kurou passed the whiteboard back, she answered, “I don’t remember where, but I read a list of symptoms for it before, and I’m good at spotting these things.”

“It seems a bit inaccurate to say that it’s only impulse control which kept Shinoe from behaving so strangely before, though…” Kurou said.

“Well, that’s probably because it’s a general thing,” Riko said, “It would probably also be able to apply as a lack of common sense.”

“That seems more accurate,” Kurou said.

“W-Wait, are you saying that ‘weepiness’ is an official name for what’s going on with me?” Amai questioned.

Riko nodded.

“It just officially makes you cry and sad? It’s not like… Depression? Just weepiness? Wow,” Amai said, then turned and walked away before she started bawling uncontrollably again.

“Well… Really, just being in the same room as other people with Despair Fever is the way that it spreads,” Sayaka said, “That’s the danger. It’s exclusively airborne. Hako said so, and I think she’s right. So we’re not going to be any more likely to get it if we do eat Oishi’s cooking. This is kinda just me trying to say, eat it, it’s fine.”

“It’s fine?” Nami asked.

“Yeah it’s fine,” Sayaka confirmed, then started to eat from her plate. The others did as well, because she was right. Besides, they’d already basically decided that getting Despair Fever wasn’t a huge deal. It was inconvenient, and it was definitely causing problems for people, but it lasted two days as long as medicine was administered. Actually…

“Monokuma,” Nami summoned the creature again.

“What’s going on, Kagu-Kagu?” Monokuma asked.

“Silence, bear,” Nami said, “I have a question for you. In terms of the Despair Fever Medicine, what qualifies two days?”

“It’s two morning announcements since starting the medication,” Monokuma said, “Or, well, two six AMs. I recovered just moments before I made the announcement!”

“Thanks, that makes sense,” Nami said, “So it’s not any reasonable measure of time like forty-eight hours.”

“Of course not!” Monokuma said, “It’s two days in a colloquial sense. But, yes, Shinoe and Madara should be better tomorrow, Oishi and Fujishiro the following day.”
“That’s useful clarification,” Nami said, “I’ll keep that in mind. I’m glad that they’ll be better quickly. And you’re fine now?”

“I am. But… It’s not like I was totally insincere, you know,” Monokuma said, “Sappiness has to start somewhere. You know I don’t hate you guys, right? You know that… I do support you brats?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “I do know that.”

Chapter End Notes

I have a few end notes to make! One is that tomorrow’s (May 4th) my **birthday** so if you were ever gonna draw me fanart now is the time...

I'm joking, mostly. <3

The other end note is that I have some extra content I haven't shared here yet, starting with this theme songs video (Not up to date on reveals, I'll be making another ’spoiler edition’)

https://vimeo.com/302767661
8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

Monokuma went on its way, and Nami finished eating her food. Just after her plate was cleaned, Amai slammed a hand down next to it.

“Hey. I wanna talk to you.”

“Wait, me?” Nami asked, pointing at herself, then glanced at Sayaka.

“Right. You,” Amai said, then scoffed. “Not Sayaka, no. You think I’d really wanna have a private conversation with her when I’m all stupid sad like this?”

“I mean, I cannot in any way imagine that you’d wanna have a private conversation with me when you’re stupid sad either?” Nami shrugged.

“Well, too bad,” Amai said, then grabbed Nami by the forearm and dragged her out of the room. Sayaka moved to follow them, but Nami waved her off. She didn’t feel like she was actually in danger right now… Just confused. Then, they were out in the hallway, and Amai made her intentions clear. “The last time we had a serious talk, you totally made me cry, okay? But if I’m already crying… Then you can’t!”

“I made you cry?” Nami questioned.

“O-Only a little, but, you threatened me! In a Killing Gaame,” Amai wailed, but in a restrained way so that the people who were still inside the cafe wouldn’t hear. She still had volume control, even when she was overcome with tears and the accompanying sadness of them. “I totally thought that I might get killed…”

“Killed? By me?”

“Yea…” Amai nodded. “Come on. I didn’t know you yet! And you said something like that to my face… And this place is just so scary… And even my friends don’t like me… I can’t trust them at all or anybody…”

“Are you trying to get me to feel bad for you?” Nami asked.

“No I shouldn’t do that… I mean… I just wanted to tell you the truth. And tell you that even if I seem pathetic right now I’m not just going to sit by and let all of this stuff happen! I don’t wanna be afraid and…” Amai sniffed. “That starts with standing up to you, you know!”

“I uh. I wasn’t threatening to kill you or anything,” Nami said, “I guess I did threaten you though. I didn’t mean it like that. I just didn’t want you hurting my friend. Um.” She paused for a moment. “I think what I was trying to say back then was stop being a bitch because if she doesn’t bust your kneecaps I will! But like. Obviously I was all talk since I didn’t do anything to you after what you did to Box…”

“Can you blame me…” Amai choked out, then lost her restraint to shout. Unlike her malicious shouting, this was actually desperate. Monokuma said sappiness had to start somewhere, and sadness was the same way. “How the fuck was I supposed to feel!? What was I supposed to do when somebody who was supposed to be my best friend betrayed me like that!?”
“I don’t know,” Nami said, “But not like that. You have to know that.”

“I’m just… So fucking scared…” Amai brought her hands up to hide her face. “Everyone is so scary, all the time, everywhere. If you’re cruel then they can’t hurt you, you know? If you’ve got something on them, they won’t cross you. I just did what I do. She crossed me so I had to put it out there. It’s the only way I can retaliate.”

Of course, Nami still felt like this was a ploy on some level… Because it was Amai. Everything she did seemed so calculated, after all. But then, Nami had been thinking of her as a villain all this time, and maybe she shouldn’t have. What she said… Sounded familiar. Familiar in an unfortunate way if she was completely honest. Shinjiro had been scared too. He thought he’d be killed, because he was a ‘mouse in a den of foxes’, right? And that was what motivated him in the end.

He’d kill somebody to free two people from that den of foxes, and she thwarted him the only way she knew how, but there could have been another way. Thwarting a mouse who decided to poison the foxes, by trapping it… Still had an air of cruelty to it. By nature of her talent, Nami sometimes had to be cruel.

This time, she had an opportunity. She had a gap to step into and though she never expected to be doing this, she did. She took a step forward, reached out, and wrapped her arms around Amai, holding her tight. She’d gotten plenty of testimony that her hugs were comforting things, and though Amai tensed at first, she relaxed in a moment, letting sobs come over her without words against Nami’s clavicle.

There was a way to thwart a treacherous mouse without trapping it; To remind that mouse it wasn’t alone. There weren’t any foxes here at all. Only mice. Other mice, and if anything happened, those were other treacherous mice. Maybe those ones didn’t see the mice as foxes. Maybe those ones had some other reasoning. Maybe it was just one fox, like Kanoshi’s decision to kill Kaede. Maybe… Well, the metaphor might fall apart if Nami thought too much about it, but what mattered in this case was…

Nami was a mouse too. Just like Amai. She was soft and vulnerable and could just as easily be killed as Amai could.

“Nami?” Amai asked when she’d finally exhausted her pure sobs.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t understand,” Nami said, “But we’re all scared too, okay?”

“It’s not. It’s not like I wanted you to hug me or to… Amai sniffed, “Say sorry or try to get along with me at all, you know. What are you doing?”

“I just don’t want anything to happen because you’re afraid,” Nami said, “Somebody else told me he was scared, once. I didn’t like him or get along with him, but he told me he was scared. And I didn’t take it seriously enough. And he’s gone now.”

“Yeah I’m not… Gonna like you at all,” Amai said.

“You don’t have to like anybody here,” Nami said, “But you don’t have to hate us or be scared of us either, okay?”

“How can I not? You’re humans. You’re humans and I don’t have anything to make you be nice to me,” Amai whined, “Nothing. I don’t know you and I can’t find your secrets.”

“Would it help if I told you a secret about me?” Nami offered. Amai hesitated, but then nodded, so she gave one up. “And you better not tell anybody else, of course. That’s how blackmail works. I’ll
be nice to you if you don’t tell anyone else that… I actually once got tasered by a bailiff because I started dissociating in court. I ended up winning the case, but it was super embarrassing.”

“…Did you pee yourself when they zapped you or something?” Amai asked, flat for the first time since Nami had seen her this morning.

“Well, no, but you can add that to the blackmail if it helps?” Nami said, then smiled as she put a finger to her lips. “Keep it a secret. I’d be mortified if Sayaka knew.”

“Then.” Amai stuck her tongue out. “You better be nice to me. Or at least, not mean and no more threats!”

“Of course. Just try to be a little nicer to the others, too?” Nami asked.

“I already did,” Amai groaned, “I gave up my whole file on Box and everything!”

“That’s a start!”
After parting ways with Amai, the secrets safe between them, Nami made the decision to actually utilize the functions of her lab. This was an event which would take several hours and would be interesting only to her. Meanwhile, Sayaka decided that she’d keep an eye on her sister in pituitary dwarfism, to make sure she didn’t get into any trouble while she was still lacking in common sense.

**11:00 AM / 1100 Hours**

Sayaka and Torimi decided to hang out in the arcade for a while, and tackle a game that had a multiplayer story mode. In this case, they both remembered Nami once mentioning the innate absurdity of ‘David Cage’ games, and given the capability of one of them to be multiplayer, they settled on Beyond: Two Souls. It was indeed garbage, stilted and strange, but it made for a good backdrop to their friendly conversation anyway.

“So,” Sayaka said, ‘You got Despair Fever, huh?’

“Yeah… I totally didn’t realize it at first, though,” Torimi confirmed, “Cause, well, it kinda does mess with your brain. Mine did, anyway. It’s like, I didn’t have the common sense anymore to figure out that what was going weird with me could even be something like that? So I just kept going about life as normal…”

“Ueda said he figured it out because you flirted with him. That true?”

“Uh!” Torimi startled, and blushed at the accusation. “Well, yeah. Flirting’s kind of a nice way to put it, I was being super weird. Probably still would be if I ended up alone with him again though, even though I know it’s just the fever, ugh. I said some stupid stuff…”

“You seem pretty normal to me, though,” Sayaka said.

“That’s because I don’t need common sense to talk to you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean…?”

“I mean, I kinda just talk to you however I want to normally. There’s nothing against me saying certain things to you cause it wouldn’t be common sense to say it? Like, With Kurou it’s kinda… Obviously, I think he’s a good looking guy! But I know he doesn’t wanna be with me and that’s fine, objectively, right? But then it’s like, I was alone with him… I guess I planned that too, but, I just said every dumb thing that you shouldn’t say to a person who you like but you’re not gonna be with? I’m totally straight though, so, there’s gonna be none of that with you.”

“What about the fact I’m your best friend’s girlfriend?” Sayaka wondered.

“You’re good,” Torimi said, then thought for a few moments before clarifying. “I mean, if you were bad, it’s common sense not to pick too many fights with you? But it’s still just fine. Because you’re good. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of? I mean. You wouldn’t pick fights if Nami had a bad partner??”

“Too many,” Torimi corrected, “I mean. When she was with Kira… I pretty much knew what was going on. I said so a few times. But… She was kind of frightening, you know? And there was nothing that I could do. So I kept quiet to be safe. Right now, I feel like, I wouldn’t.”
“...It’s pretty fucking obvious you’ve got no common sense right now. I think if you still had it, you’d refrain from saying shit like that to me,” Sayaka said.

“H-huh?” Torimi questioned.

“I’m not angry with you or anything,” Sayaka said, “There’s no point getting mad about the past... But before now, you never even said that you met Kira. Mentioning a shitty ex kind of isn’t sensible.”

“Huh? Of course I met her. We met Nami the same way, pretty much,” Torimi explained, “We were both part of her legal team. Both of our talents are pretty standard things to see in the courtroom... We were definitely helpful.”

“‘We?’” Sayaka asked.

“Well, yeah. I can’t take all the credit. She was helpful too. Just because she was a bad person doesn’t mean that I should ignore what she was able to do?” She paused. “But mentioning that to you, who only has reasons to hate her, probably isn’t sensible either.”

“Sensible? Nahh, but.” Sayaka shrugged. “I mean, it’s not totally bad to hear that either. There’s a reason Nami wanted to be with her in the first place. To say that she had to just be totally awful kind of casts shade on my own girlfriend’s taste in women, doesn’t it?”

“Huh. Yeah. Her taste got better,” Torimi said, “But she did say recently that she thought it was a good thing that Kira was obsessed with her... before she got all the memories back?”

“I mean, having somebody obsessed with you is kinda an ego-booster,” Sayaka said, “And if it’s somebody that you like anyway, I can see how somebody could want that. I mean, I wouldn’t be super bothered if Nami got obsessed with me.”

“But she won’t because she’s Nami. Good people don’t obsess over other people.”

“Funny, coming from you.” Sayaka chuckled. “Like you know what makes a good relationship.”

“Stupid. I do know it. I just disregard it because it’s a shitty impossible ideal for somebody like me.” Torimi turned away.

“Are you sure about that?” Sayaka wondered, “What do you even mean by somebody like you? You just said that me and Nami are good. She’s trans too, so…”

“Mm, but you’re a girl. I’m not just trans, I like boys. And boys have bad masculinity problems.”

“This is true!” Sayaka admitted, “And maybe there’s more boys with bad masculinity problems than girls with bad femininity problems, I guess. But it’s not exclusive and it’s not inevitable either.”

“...Kurou did say that even though he wouldn’t sleep with me for other reasons, he did totally consider me a girl...” Torimi muttered, “I guess at least one of those exists.’

“There’s more,” Sayaka said, “Don’t just assume the worst of everyone. Trust me, I’ve tried doing that, it fucking sucked and didn’t do me any favors either.”

“But everyone who likes me at all...” Torimi started.

“Means you’re going for the wrong guys,” Sayaka cut her off. “And maybe it’s cause you’re
assuming the worst. No guy will respect you, so you’ll just take whoever shows interest in the
person they think you are? But there’s plenty of dudes out there who would.”

“...You’re better at this than Nami is.”

“I dunno about that. But you don’t have the common sense to hold back in this conversation, so,
fuck you, girl talk, life advised.”

“...Thanks, Sayaka.”
Location: Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 20th
Time: 1300 Hours

It was Ryouma Kobayashi who opened the door for them. Of the four who were ‘appointed’ to the entrance of Hope’s Vestige, she considered herself the most likely candidate to be able to handle them. And certainly the most capable of the two who volunteered for the task, the other being Kyoko Kirigiri. That girl, though willing, wasn’t suited to the job at all. The Failed Ultimates were a powderkeg that needed to be diffused, after all. Kyoko was more like a match on legs.

“What are you doing here?” Kokichi asked from the back of the group. Miu had taken the lead, remembering the way to Hope’s Vestige best. Not to mention, she was actually the most combat-ready of the small group. Technically, Kotoko was. But Kotoko wasn’t here. The planned attack to rescue Kaede and Tsumugi was thrown to the wayside earlier that same day.
“My name’s Ryouma Kobayashi,” Ryouma explained, “Twisted Hope is dead.”

“They’re dead? What?” Miu questioned, “You better get your ass right down to explaining this to us, or you’ll discover in a fucking heartbeat who’s the better-”
“I’m not a maid, I’m the Ultimate Performer. This is a costume, so you’re definitely better,” Ryouma said, “I’m a member of the True Radicals. We’re a small group of family and friends of
the current game’s participants who interpreted a series of coded messages to discover the truth about the Killing Games. Also, Nate killed Twisted Hope.”

“Oh,” Shuichi said.
“What about this Killing Game?” A voice which didn’t belong to a failed Ultimate, or an Ultimate at all, spoke up and stepped forward. “If you’re good people… Why did it still happen?”
“And are we... Too late?” Rantaro wondered.
“It’s still happening,” Ryouma said, “For the same reason that you couldn’t save your friends when the last game ended. The Neo World can’t be disrupted from the outside. All we can do is wait until a win condition is met inside the game, and everyone who survives can be rescued. Even if somebody is marked as an Ultimate Survivor, though, we should be able to get them out at the moment the win condition is met.”

“So it’s still happening?” Miu wondered. “But, the first episode… Our game didn’t even start airing until we were already out of the Neo World program.”

“About that…” Ryouma glanced back inside. “Well, Ultimate Despair sort of turned up here. Like, the real original two. The game’s being broadcast by them for the first time in more than a decade! They’re just putting it out as quick as they can with minimal edits. And you must admit, your game… Needed a lot of edits.”

“That’s true…” Shuichi said.

“But, well, you’re kinda half too late anyway?” Ryouma shrugged, but there was sympathy evident on her face. “Akamatsu was killed.”

“Kaede…” Kokichi mumbled, “How did it happen?”

“You should come inside, first. Then we can discuss stuff more,” Ryouma said, “The rest of Ultimate Hope doesn’t exactly know that those two are dead yet, so you’re still pretty wanted. Standing around in the open’s dangerous!”

With that, everybody came inside, including the unfamiliar girl.

“What about my brother?” She asked as she stepped over the threshold.

“Whomst?” Ryouma asked.

“Mitsuru. Is Mitsuru okay?” Akane Fujishiro clarified her question.
“Oh! He’s alive, still,” Ryouma said, then turned once again to the Failed Ultimates, “Anyway, Akamatsu.” She pressed her hands together and took a deep breath. “She was tricked into being inside the dining hall when nighttime hit, and got a little bit impaled because of it.”

“Tricked? Who tricked her?” Miu questioned, “She was so smart! She wouldn’t have just…”

“That would be Kanoshi.” A man walked into the room, then gestured for Ryouma to leave them be. Akane went with her, realizing that she wasn’t wanted in this discussion. The man who’d walked in had sandy blonde hair, and an incredibly tired look on his face. “My son.”

“Oh. Well, your son fucking murdered our friend,” Kokichi said, “So I hope you’ve considered that!”

“All too much,” Shoyu Kyosuke said, “I knew that you would come here and I knew I’d have to face you on this matter. Now, he’s dead. He was murdered as well. It’s frankly a long story and I’d recommend watching the footage if you can stomach it, to understand the situation, and perhaps to see your friend again. It seems she was truly trying her best to the end. I’d like to offer my sincere apologies. I can’t help but feel like this event was a failure on my part as a father.”

“Mister,” Miu said, “I don’t think you can take responsibility for that at all.”

“Me neither,” Rantaro agreed with her, “I had an outright awful father, and I didn’t kill anybody. If he couldn’t cause me to do something like that, then it’s definitely not on you that your son did. I don’t know you, but you already seem better than my dad?”
“Well, he’s dead. He can’t take responsibility for his actions. And as much as it pains me to say this about my own child, if he’d lived, he probably never would have anyway. I’m the only person who can offer any penance for the death of your friends,” Shoyu said, “So please, don’t tell me this isn’t a burden that I can take. If you’re going to do anything for me, don’t say I had no part in this. Simply forgive me for the part I’m claiming. Or… Don’t. Whichever will help your hearts.”

“Cool, then I won’t,” Kokichi said, “Forgive you, that is. Why should I? If you want it to hang on your head that Kaede got killed, then keep it hanging. I just now found out she’s dead and you already want me to say that it’s water under the bridge? I think the fuck not.”

“Kokichi…” Shuichi started, reaching for his boyfriend’s shoulder, but then lowered his head. “No, actually. I agree. I can’t forgive anybody for this right now.”

“I see the place’s been repaired since we burnt the joint,” Kokichi said, and gestured to the doors. “Our rooms from before still open?”

“Through that door?” Shoyu asked, “Well, yes. There were similar rooms in the other section of the building which had no signs of damage, so we’ve all been sleeping there.”

“Great,” Kokichi said, “We’ll take that wing, then. There’s more of us, by the way, send them our way if you can. As for Akane, she’s free to join us if she likes. Good kid. But I’d rather the Failed Ultimates and the True Radicals remain separate.”

“I don’t have the authority to-” Shoyu started to protest.

“That’s perfectly fine,” Iwako said. She was the closest thing this group did have to a leader, so she certainly did have the authority. “Though that wing’s been prepared, it’s still a bit run-down compared to the one we’ve been using. So, you’re sure of this?”

“Well, I am,” Kokichi said, then looked to his friends. “Are you with me?”

They all nodded. After all, the Failed Ultimates never had any intentions to kill Ultimate Hope. They wouldn’t take the name of the group which had; And they’d lived in this wing of Hope’s Vestige for a week before. It was familiar. But they’d stay here. They had things to keep an eye on; The Killing Game, and the people who wished they could end it.
Akane Fujishiro was a completely normal fourteen year old girl. At least, she had been, right up until her older brother got kidnapped. He’d vanished about a month ago, which was really cutting it short for the kidnappings for the thing he’d been kidnapped for. Akane wasn’t exactly a fan of the Killing Games, but she knew enough about them. She was a young girl with friends who weren’t quite as mature as her yet, and wouldn’t really take well to a lecture on the ethics behind finding entertainment behind watching actual real people die on television.

Now, the game had been going for eleven days, as her new friends told her. This was the day the first episode aired, and from here on, they’d be airing on the usual, frequent schedule, getting all the highlights from any one of those eleven days out in a day. It would still be four more days, after day one’s highlights finished airing today, before Natsuki Nagata would have her entire world shattered, and begin the very same journey that Akane had made.

There was a certain power which came with being an ordinary teenage girl. She was harmless, and it wasn’t like Towa City didn’t have citizens. Armed with nothing but her passport, credit card, and a backpack full of snacks, Akane had made her way here. She claimed she was just visiting her cousin who lived in the city. She had her blood screened for Despair Fever, and she was sent on her way into Towa with minimal checking of her motives and intentions.

She’d encountered Kokichi out on the streets. It wasn’t like she recognized him, but she sort of had a feeling that if she walked up and told him, flat-out, ‘I think my brother is in a Killing Game’, he’d grilled her much more than the city official had before bringing her back to the Failed Ultimates base.

It was one week to decipher the Ultimate Plan in secret, a day to get to Towa, and approximately three more weeks from there before the first episode aired and, in a panic, her friends brought her along to Hope’s Vestige. Here she was now.

“Akane?” Iwako asked the moment she walked into the hallway of the Vestige’s west wing.

“Oh, hello,” Akane said. So one of her brother’s girlfriends was involved in this, that wasn’t surprising.

“How did you… Er… Why are you here, exactly?” Iwako wondered, pushing her glasses up her nose in an attempt to disguise her shock.

“Well, after Mitsuru disappeared, I figured it had to do with the Killing Game… And I found the copy of the Ultimate Plan that you left at our house,” Akane explained, “So I figured it out, kind of. Enough to know to come to Towa. My friends filled me in on the rest.”

“Oh…” Iwako pressed two fingers to her temple. “I brought that copy there to explain to your mother and grandmother what was going on and where I was going.”

“Well, you didn’t tell me, so I figured it out myself,” Akane said, “And now I’m here.”

“Yeah, you really shouldn’t be.”

“Too bad.” Akane stuck her tongue out. “I’m in it now. Anyway, you’re here. Who else is?”

“Well, let’s see. There’s Ryouma, who you already met. Er… You know what? I bet most of them are in the common area. It’s my turn in the ‘lobby’ anyway. Just go to the end of the hall and you’ll
find the cafeteria and lounge."

"Thanks, Iwako," Akane said, then smiled at her. "He’s gonna come home, you know."

"I’m… Worried."

"It’s fine. He’ll come home," Akane said, "Or else he’ll go out doing something so stupid good we can’t even be mad at him, you know."

"Excuse you. If he dies, I’ll be angry, no matter what."

"Whatever you say." Akane winked and waved, then wandered off down the hallway in the direction Iwako told her. It would be pretty hard to get lost in a place this straightforward, though. She came upon the common areas, and looked around. That guy who was talking to the Failed Ultimates was still back there, but that didn’t mean the common area was empty at all. A man with green hair, Ryouma, a boy about her own age… A very intimidating man, a cute but intimidating young woman, an obvious couple… She’d just introduce herself to the group.

"Um… Hello?" She announced her presence, “I’m Akane Fujishiro, and I just got here. I’m a friend of the Failed Ultimates, and I partially decoded the Ultimate Plan to try and find my brother."

"Akane, hm?" The man of the obvious couple said as he stood up, “I’m Ice Hako, and this is my wife, Speak. Your older brother’s been quite kind to our daughter so far, so it’s good to make your acquaintance.”

"Oh, that’s not surprising. He’s kind to everyone and it’s kind of stupid, but, like, good," Akane said. “Can you all just like tell me who you are?”

The intimidating man waved. “Akihiko Yamaguchi.”

"Oh you are mafia," Akane said, "That’s reasonable."

"I also have a daughter in the game," He clarified.

"Courtney Sempers," The intimidating girl spoke up, “And it’s my little brother.”

The guy whose hair was green in a way that somehow came across as more seriously green than hers was next. “Nate Harper. Two of my ex-boyfriends are there, but I’m kinda just having a cool time. One of them already died, and the other got engaged, sooo.”

"Charming," Akane said.

"Kizuto!" The boy her age saluted. “Orihara. I mean, Kizuto Orihara is my name. I was here for a good friend of mine, but she was the first killer… I’m not gonna just go home like that, though. Um, also. I’m one of the Ultimates here. Nate, Kobayashi, and Doctor Same are the other ones.”

“Yeah,” Nate said, “Kirigiri and Naegi are around somewhere, too. They’re Ultimates, but kind of keep to themselves. Ex-despair and they actually give a shit about that. I mean, I am, but it’s not like I regret it.”

“I continue to be charmed,” Akane said.

"Jokes on you, I don’t chase women,” Nate said.

“Not you don’t chase fourteen year olds?” She asked.
“Well I don’t make a habit of it, but it isn’t a dealbreaker,” Nate admitted, then grinned at her. “Hate me all you want, I’m important here.”

“Why?” She asked.

“Huh?”

“Why are you important?” She wondered.

“Well, I killed Twisted Hope,” Nate said.

“That’s past tense,” Akane said, “But, whatever. If you want to just be a flagrantly terrible person, I guess I can’t stop you. It’s not like I’m in your group anyway.”

“You’re here, though. That kind of makes you a True Radical, right?” Speak asked.

“I joined the Failed Ultimates first,” Akane said, “Even though I’m a normal girl, they welcomed me in. And I’m already comfortable with them, so…”

“That makes sense,” Shoyu joined the conversation as he approached the common room. “Miss Fujishiro? The Failed Ultimates have extended you an invitation to live with them in the East Wing.”

“See?” Akane giggled a bit. “I don’t need to associate with somebody like you at all. I have my friends.”

“Like me?” Nate asked.

“...That too, but, you’re kind of awful in a way that I don’t personally think a lot about. I’m just a kid, you know.” Akane locked eyes with the Hakos. “It’s somebody else I don’t want to associate with. Well, it’s okay though. I’ll see you all around, of course.”

“You will!” Kizuto failed to read the room and exclaimed in earnest.

“Bye-bye,” Akane said, and did the same wink-and-wave move as she turned to go back down the hallway.
Akane reconvened with the Failed Ultimates, and they all got settled into rooms of their own. For the most part, anyhow. While Shuichi and Kokichi had separate rooms the last time they were here, they both used Kokichi’s this time, and offered Akane the one where Shuichi had slept before. It was a matter of familiarity, since there were plenty of other rooms. Reminding Akane that she was welcome with them.

Just like the West Wing, the East Wing had a lounge and cafeteria at the far end, which was where the Failed Ultimates ended up spending some time together. They had access to a television, and all the raw unedited footage from the Killing Game thusfar.

“Akane,” Kokichi said, “We were going to watch the footage from the night that Kaede died, so that we can understand what happened to her… So you might not want to be here for it.”

Akane thought for a moment, but then nodded with a squeamish look on her face. “I don’t need to watch somebody die… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Shuichi said, “We gave you the option to leave for a reason. I thought you might not have seen something like this before, and, well, you are a kid.”

“I am,” Akane said, and she went back to the room that she’d been given.

So the original Failed Ultimates were left in the common area. Miu Iruma had a laptop open on her lap, facing away from herself. That would be Maki. The laptop containing Jataro’s Alter Ego had been left back at their regular base for now, and Maki used the Vestige’s internet to send him a message of where they were now, what had happened, and to pass it on to Kotoko and their other allies from within Ultimate Hope’s ranks. Miu added in “and if Eriko shows up, tell her too, but remind her that it’s a secret that the bosses are dead”.

The others didn’t particularly know who ‘Eriko’ was, but the two OG girls supposedly had tea with her every few weeks while everyone else was out.

And so, they were now ready to see how exactly their friend wound up dead.
It was somehow worse than they expected.

Kaede was killed because she told a lie. Because she lied about being able to tell time, and was found out, and lost the trust of certain people. It was… Worse than expected, but not entirely shocking or surprising. As awful as it would be for any of them to say it out loud, the Failed Ultimates understood how it had happened. As cruel as her rankings had been, it wasn’t like Angie was completely unfounded in putting Kaede and Tsumugi down by the bottom of the list.

In short, Kaede Akamatsu wasn’t the Evil King. Yet, none of her friends would have been surprised if it had been her after all. It wasn’t like the evidence that those boys used to pin the blame on her was unconvincing. Even still, as they watched on, Kokichi… Burst into laughter.

“Damn, Bakura,” He said through his cackling. “Oh, that’s a laugh riot. Huh. Thanks, buddy.”

“What?” Maki asked.

“That kid,” Kokichi said, pointing at the tv. “He went and avenged Kaede right away for me. Not like he knew, but. You could say we’ve met before.”
“You have?” Shuichi wondered.

“Well, yeah.” Kokichi shrugged. “A guy so renowned for his entertainment management skills as that, it’s not like he manages a ton of people at once. We’ve all met each other.”

“Oh,” Miu said, “He was another one of…”

“Yeah.” Kokichi nodded. “Looks like he got real messed up, too, if he’s like this now. Say what you will about my shitty coping mechanisms, but at least they kind of help…”

“Kokichi…” Shuichi mumbled as he leaned over and gently draped his arms over Kokichi’s shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s… Fine,” Kokichi said, even the faintest hint of laughter gone from his voice now. “Not like we could’ve known I’d run into two of them in one day. It’ll be okay, though, I’ll be fine.”

“Two?” Rantaro asked.


“Are you really?” Somebody who nobody but Akane had met joined the conversation.

“Excuse you,” Maki said, “But I believe that you’re a member of the True Radicals. You aren’t welcome here. We are very close friends and would prefer not to have you intruding on our personal moments.”

“So have those personal moments in your private rooms. You can’t lock us out of your entire wing. I need to talk to Kokichi Ouma. I’m assuming that would be the grape soda crumpling under the weight of his traumatic memories right now?”

“Hey. Fuck you,” Shuichi didn’t hesitate to jump to his boyfriend’s defense. “Who do you think you are?”

“Somebody who’s bored. Nate Harper, though,” Nate said, “And I’m actually only here because I’m being uncharacteristically polite.”

“What do you want?” Kokichi questioned without looking up.

“Normally, I’d just go right ahead and do it. But I figured, I may as well not make the same misstep as the guy who killed your friend, the last time he killed somebody,” Nate explained, “I already got the go-ahead from Ryouma, but I thought since you’re here, I’d ask you too. Is it cool if I kill the bastard?”

“…Huh?” Kokichi asked, and actually sat up now.

“Matsubara. Can I kill him?” Nate asked. “There’s a lot of politics there, but given I’m in a very anti-politick group now, there’s nothing stopping me. Unless it would be harmful to your soul or whatever. You know he still has that cryptozoologist or whatever she is, right?”

“I kind of feel like you’re trying to guilt me into saying yes, but I mean, fuck. Go ahead. Why would I stop you?” Kokichi asked.

“I’unno. Trauma’s weird like that,” Nate shrugged. “Sometimes you don’t want your abuser to get killed. Or you wanna do it yourself. That’s reasonable. Anyway, thanks. I’ll let you be now.”
Nate walked off, but strangely enough, the odd encounter had halted Kokichi’s spiral in its tracks. 
Even so…

“I’m going back to our room,” Kokichi said as he stood up, holding his bad arm. It still never fully 
healed from what he’d done to it in the Killing Game. “I think I just… Need to get some rest.”

And he was gone. Soon after, Shuichi went to join him, and found him crying. He lay down beside 
him, held him tight, and joined him. For nearly a year now, they’d been struggling to survive, sure, 
but they’d been alive and known their friends were alive. Now, the horrors of the Killing Game had 
come to haunt them again.

Kaede, who they all believed so fervently could make it through a second game, was dead. There 
was never going to be a chance to save her, when she couldn’t make it to the other side at all. Five 
of them, counting Maki, had escaped. But not Kaede.

Shuichi still had some hope that promise could be fulfilled. The promise he had with his friends 
who were still trapped there.

"You and me, and Saihara. Maybe Ouma too? Or who knows, everyone here. We’ll all go to 
space."

Kaede promised that.

What a liar.
Daily Life: Day Eleven (A Question Of Legs)

Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 20th
Time: 1700 Hours

Nami finished with her ward just around dinnertime; That was how long it took to try a whole two of the practice cases, which was nice. Of course, for somebody who wasn’t a Ultimate Attorney, it would definitely take more than seven hours to try even one of those, but it wasn’t like a computerized lawyer was all that difficult to outsmart in an absurd amount of time. That, and Nami was well-known for finishing most of her cases in three days at most. It was only the high profile or unusual ones which actually took the normal amount of due time. Anything standard that was assigned to her was really just an absolute massacre of her opponent.

But, now it was time to eat. She felt a bit odd that she’d lost an entire day to her ward, but at the same time, she really enjoyed it, and was it all that different to deciding to set a day aside to play video games and get nothing else done? She decided that it definitely wasn’t, then stopped into Box’s Ward on her way back to Cafe Monokuma.

“Hey, Fujishiro. You doing okay?” Nami asked, stepping inside to at least have a short chat with him.

“Oh, hello Nami,” Mitsuru greeted her, “Yes, well, as okay as I can being completely bedridden. Though, it’s not so bad. I’ve read four books today alone.”

“Wow! That’s a lot of books. Would you like some more?” Nami asked.

“That would be great, actually,” He said, “More from… Akamatsu’s ward, would be nice.”

“Yeah?” Nami said, and sat down on the cot next to him. “They’re fun reads. It’s easy to see why she liked them so much…”

“I was never much somebody for reading fiction before,” Mitsuru admitted, “It was sort of… If I had the time, I needed to put it into my studies. I’ve been so busy for so long, it’s actually kind of nice to get this opportunity to relax.”

“Your life is a pretty busy one, huh?” Nami noted, “A scholarly Ultimate Talent, an unconventional family, and two whole girlfriends... Not to mention Future Foundation stuff. Um, how’d you even find time to do all of those things?”

“Well you see, you can add up to six additional hours to your day by limiting the time you spend sleeping,” Mitsuru said, “So, basically, not in a healthy way.”

“...Oh. Well, yeah, that’s no good,” Nami said, “When we get out of here, take some time off or something, jeeze.”

“I’ll give it a shot, anyway.” Mitsuru chuckled.

“So, I’ll get you some more books... And I’ll bring you dinner, right?” Nami offered.

“If you would, that would be very kind of you,” Mitsuru said, “It’s a shame that Monokuma seems unwilling to provide a wheelchair or anything to allow me to remain mobile, but I suppose that would be a bit too much counteraction, wouldn’t it? It probably already thinks that it’s more than
enough to give us the medicine at all.”

“I agree it wouldn’t be much of a motive if you were able to move around anyway,” Nami said, “So it’s probably that Monokuma isn’t even allowed to give you one. Its ability to create stuff seems to be kinda limited… So it probably can’t actually give us anything else to help with this, even if it wanted to.”

“You think it wants to?” Mitsuru asked.

Nami thought for a few moments, then nodded. “I do think so. It’s bound by the rules of the world that we’re in, but… It’s not really enjoying this thing any more than we are. Maybe it thinks it’s interesting, but not fun.”

“Whatver you say,” Mitsuru said.

“I’ll get you that stuff,” Nami said, then walked out of the ward. The air had definitely become a bit cloudier there; She was so used to Sayaka’s company that it was strange to actually come up against somebody who still considered Monokuma an evil being just by sin of its being Monokuma. Nami and Sayaka so readily acknowledged that it too was a participant, and that it wasn’t exactly willing, it was strange to remember that there were certainly peers of theirs who didn’t.

This by no means meant that Nami thought Monokuma was a virtuous being, either, but maybe something more like chaotic neutral? Still in the bastard zone, but like, it kind of had a good heart too.

She went downstairs to Akamatsu’s ward, retrieved the books, then stopped in Cafe Monokuma for Mitsuru’s meal. She brought them to him, made sure he was okay with eating alone, then returned to the cafe once more. Torimi and Sayaka were sitting at the same table, so she joined her tiny girls.

“So, how’s Fujishiro doing?” Torimi asked once Nami sat down, and she was at once taken aback again by the lack of accent, but composed herself quickly enough to answer the question.

“He’s doing alright. Already read four books, so I brought him some more along with dinner,” Nami explained, “Did you ever realize how busy that guy was in his everyday life? It’s like, whoa, tall child, you gotta stop burning the candle at both ends!”

“In his everyday life? Um…” Sayaka froze as she came to the same realization that Nami earlier had. “Oh what the fuck. How’d he do all that stuff?”

“He said it’s because he never got enough sleep,” Nami said, “So, like, he’s actually kind of enjoying being forced to relax by the fact that he can’t really do anything.”

“Hey, speaking of that,” Monokuma joined the conversation, but it had just been hanging around in the room already. “I heard part of that conversation. Thanks for sticking up for me, but really, you don’t have to do that! You guys can hate me all you like! Anyway, you were right, though. If a failed murder attempt got somebody’s leg cut off or something, I can totally offer a wheelchair. Since this is Despair Fever, though, it’s totally impossible. Oh, and if I gave somebody else a wheelchair for another reason and they offered it to somebody who can’t walk with Despair Fever, the wheelchair would vanish.”

“Vanish?” Torimi asked.

“Yeah it would just straight up vanish,” Monokuma said.
“That’s Neo World, babey!” Nami joked. “For real, though, thanks for clarifying. Why didn’t you do it with Fujishiro, though?”

“Well, I don’t think he woulda believed me,” Monokuma said, “So it’d kinda be a waste of breath, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess that’s fair,” Sayaka said, “Hey, why aren’t we a waste of breath for you, though?”

“Cause you listen like good children,” Monokuma said, “Of all the heathens here you are by far the least blasphemous. Except that makes my insult sound actually religious. Please keep in mind when I call you heathens it’s just because it’s a funny insult. I’m totally agnostic!”

“So you’re not involved with the cult of N?” Torimi asked.

“...Why would you think it was?” Sayaka wondered.

“Cause despair.” Torimi shrugged.

“Nope! I mean, really, I’d never associate with those fuckwits,” Monokuma said, “Cult mindsets aren’t really my thing you know? They’re always just the same. Mob mentality enabling shit behavior under the controlling hand of a single megalomaniac? Booooring. Killing Games are much more fascinating. Even times like now, though! You’re so sweet, getting along even when you know that somebody is going to die.”

“Aww, thanks Monokuma,” Sayaka said, holding a hand to her chest, but then dropped her smile. “Can we end this conversation now, though? Forgive me if I’m a bit annoyed to hear my childhood traumas referred to as ‘boring’.”

“Right. Sorry bout that, Sayaka,” Monokuma said, then wandered off to bother a different table.
Daily Life: Day Eleven (Being Box Hako)

6:00 PM / 1800 Hours

A certain girl sat alone in her room, a half-eaten microwave meal in front of her. She’d forced herself to eat some of it, but she couldn’t possibly stand to take another bite. It was disgusting. Disgusting, disgusting, disgusting. A lot of food was, to her. She couldn’t eat so many things but she ate them anyway because what else was she supposed to do? Inconvenience anybody? She didn’t dare do that. Not at all. Besides, when she was younger, she’d eat just about anything, right? She had to uphold that fact. She had to uphold whatever she could when all of it was slipping, slipping out of her grip and out of control.

Who was she even supposed to be anymore?

Nothing warm from the gift shop was truly edible. There were some things there which she didn’t mind at all. Popcorn was nice, after all. A lot of things were nice. Just a lot more things were bad. Slimy and disgusting, so much food was slimy and disgusting. And any microwave meal certainly was. Even if it wasn’t slimy and disgusting for a few bites, she’d chomp down on a bit of gristle in the poor-quality meat, or whatever it was, and then she couldn’t even touch it again for fear of biting into something so viscerally awful twice in one meal.

Amai’s food was special. None of it was ever slimy and disgusting, because she was the Ultimate Chef, and a true chef didn’t just understand flavor, but mouthfeel too. Of course, there were some foods which could never be cured of their slime qualities. She just didn’t eat those. Even so, she was willing to go for something like this if it meant that person got proper-

Well, okay. It was more like she was willing to go hungry if it meant that person got proper nutrition, because she really just couldn’t stand this stuff. But she couldn’t admit that when Nami asked, and she definitely couldn’t ask Amai to make two plates now. Even with that ‘apology’... It was an apology in some sense, no matter how she took it. She actually couldn’t deny that. Still, there was a tension between them, and Amai didn’t like the idea at all that somebody was alive in the quarantine room, so she certainly couldn’t convince her to humor the idea at all.

Why was it so common that she had to be miserable for others to be happy? It wasn’t really fair if she thought too hard about it. People deserved to be happy. She wanted them to be happy. She had the drive and the talent to make these people happy, in some cases she was the only one who could. In this case, she certainly was the only one capable. Right. Well, maybe.

Who knew. It wasn’t like she could tell the future. It wasn’t like she’d ever experienced this before. All of this... Was so unfamiliar to her. All the walls she’d built were falling to pieces and this time, she couldn’t pick them back up. Even though this was the Neo World program, it was certainly reality. There was a huge difference between real and false and if she made any mistake now, there was nothing she could ever hope to do to remedy it or be any better. She was lost.

For the first time in a very long time, she had no idea what to do.

It was kind of terrifying.

She took a deep breath, and leaned back to lie down on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. Stop thinking for a bit, why don’t you? Just stop for a moment and understand that everything is not quite as rotten as it might feel right now. Well, that won’t work. It’s a Killing Game, it doesn’t get much more rotten than that, does it?
“I’m Box Hako,” She said aloud, hoping the affirmation of her identity might help in some manner, but it didn’t. Her voice choked up and she squeezed her eyes shut and she rolled over onto her side. Yeah, that didn’t work, did it? She wasn’t Box Hako enough for Amai. She wasn’t Box Hako enough for Ice and Speak. She wasn’t enough. She never had been and she never would be.

When Box first started school, she would always find the kid who didn’t have lunch and give it to them, because she wasn’t that hungry anyways. She ate breakfast and she had dinner waiting at home, but the kid without a lunch might not, she thought. So she gave her lunch up over and over and her teacher told her parents, what a sweet girl, how kind of her to think of her peers like this. And her parents scolded her when they got home for wasting food. She asked if she could bring two lunches and just share one of them, then, and they said that she couldn’t do that either. The next day they sent her to school without lunch and somebody else shared theirs with her, paying it forward.

The same teacher asked if she forgot her lunch, and she said no, her parents didn’t give her one because they didn’t want her to give it away. She was always taught to be honest after all. She was taught not to tell lies. She was scolded again and told not to take handouts from others. She didn’t really understand any of what was happening with that, though. She didn’t understand much at all, back then. But slowly, the conflicting messages rose to shape a girl who meant nothing to herself.

It was hard, to try and be that girl. To try and be Box Hako. Everybody needed something. Everyone expected something. And she could provide it, sure.

*But not without losing bits and pieces of myself-*

Don’t think that way, it’s not like you had a self in the first place, what are you even talking about? All you have and all you are is what other people can take from you. They take and take and you just keep giving. It’s like if you were mugged for your wallet and you said, here, just take the whole purse. But what else can you do? Who else can you be? You aren’t anyone at all.

So be Box Hako.
After dinner was finished, Kurou invited Nami and Sayaka to keep him company in his ward while he continued working on that end table, and then on to carving that rat for Nami. Of course they agreed, because frankly, there was no reason not to. Neither of them had plans or anything better to do that evening anyway, and it wasn’t like spending time with a friend of theirs was an inconvenience either. His ward was strangely pleasant to hang around in.

Home improvement smells had that distinctive smell, and his ward was no exception, that just made you feel like you absolutely knew what you were doing even if you didn’t. It was the feeling which led to foolish dads wiring their own homes backwards and plastering entire holes in their walls with caulk. Sayaka and Nami, however, had never had the experience of being a foolish dad, and certainly never would, so the smell served only to comfort.

“So,” Kurou said as he returned to work on his interrupted end table, “You girls have been dating for more than a day, now. How’s it going? You making sure to leave space?”

“Leave space for Jesus?” Nami questioned.

“Oh, no, not that,” Kurou said, “I mean God is well aware I don’t have room to judge, myself. I mean that you’re not spending every moment together, right? I know you might want to, in a new and shiny relationship, but trust me. The healthiest of married couples still make sure to get time apart.”

“Ah! Of course,” Nami said, “I spent seven hours today doing self-care by arguing with procedurally generated attorneys in my ward.”

“And I played a terrible video game,” Sayaka added in, “Don’t worry! We totally get it.”

“That’s wonderful,” Kurou said, “It’s good to hear it. Actually, that was a problem that Ayu and I had when we first started dating. We thought it was enough to just spend time with each other, when actually, we weren’t getting to know each other at all. We spent all day together, and at the end of any of those days I still couldn’t tell you a single thing that we actually had in common.”

“Aw…” Sayaka said.

“We worked it out, evidently. We realized that we only knew of one shared trait between us, and actually sat down and talked. As soon as we started to actually be friends, our relationship flourished, but we also needed to make sure we had some time apart, or else we would have been complacent again,” Kurou said, “Though, now, we get along actually great and it’s more ‘we need alone time once or twice a week’.”

“You two seem really cute,” Nami said, “I’m glad you didn’t let Tori homewreck you, you know. She’s normally not like that, but, Despair Fever and all.”

“Oh, it’s quite alright. I realized what was going on and I don’t hold it against her,” Kurou said, “But, she wouldn’t have homewrecked us. One of the many things that Ayu and I do in fact have in common is how much we like, well, people. Getting married this young, with that fact in mind, monogamy would have been a bad idea. No, I turned her down because it seemed wrong, morally. She’s seventeen, and I’m twenty with a child.”
“Good on you. She would’ve regretted it,” Sayaka said, “She basically told me as much. I think she values you as a friend way more than she values you as a potential fling.”

“Now, that’s good to hear,” Kurou said, “I was a bit worried that we saw each other differently after that, even knowing that her rational thought was, er, impaired.”

“I don’t think so either,” Nami said, “I mean, people say dumb stuff to their friends all the time. I’m kinda just glad that she ended up bothering you instead of Madara. That guy’s got, like, a complex about this stuff or something.”

“Hm, now that you mention it, that does make sense. In that case, I’m glad that I was the one who was targeted by her fever,” Kurou observed, then scratched at his chin with a long look at the end table which was mostly finished. “What did I fuck up here?”

“Neither of us could tell you at all and it looks like a totally normal end table to me,” Sayaka said.

“No, I’m pretty sure I… Did something wrong?” Kurou seemed very confused by this. “Ah, well, I’ll figure it out. Sorry about that, it just doesn’t look quite right. Maybe I was too distracted talking to you. No offense, though. To distract me, it had to be quite the enjoyable chat.”

“Sorry!” Nami said.

“Oh, for real, don’t apolo…” He trailed off, then grinned at something behind those two. “Oh, Amai! Did you need something?”

“…Not really, I kinda just wanted some company and I can’t find Asahi?” Amai admitted, wiping some of the seemingly unending stream of tears with her sleeve. It was kind of absurd to see her this weepy over nothing in particular. “But I can go, if it’s a problem for me to be with you here…”

“It’s not a problem,” Nami said, and that seemed to be the assurance that Amai needed to walk the rest of the way into the room. She knew that Kurou wouldn’t have a problem with it, and Sayaka wouldn’t mind because she still had some affection for her rudest friend.

“Thank you…” Amai whined, then scoffed, “I fucking haaaaate this weepiness thing. I’ve drank so much water today. Gross.”

“You could just drink a beverage you like?” Sayaka said, “I mean, most things that are diuretics aren’t so strong that they don’t still hydrate you.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Amai questioned.

“It’s food chemistry. Shouldn’t you know this?” Sayaka asked.

“I dunno. Guess I missed that,” Amai said, “But last I heard only water actually hydrates you.”

“That’s an urban myth,” Sayaka said, then chuckled. “Are you usually gullible with those things?”

“Uhh, if I was, how the fuck would I know?” Amai asked and gave a shrug. “Cause I haven’t been set straight on them yet or whatever. Don’t act like you’ve never gotten fooled by this stuff…”

“I haven’t,” Sayaka said, smirking. She seemed to be having fun arguing with Amai in this context; They had been friends, after all, and something this harmless could constitute banter.

“Are you sure?” Amai asked, “I might think of one. It’s really not great to wash your hair only once a week…”
“My hair…?” Sayaka asked, then touched the end of one of her pigtails, dazed. She seemed caught off guard by that, and the playfulness evaporated. “Is it already obvious?”

“Obvious? Nah,” Amai said, but then sniffled and asked in what constituted a whimper, with at least some sincerity behind it, “Are you… okay? Was I wrong about, the reason, or something…? I thought I was just being silly. Your hair looks fine it just gets a little weird sometimes? Never looks gross or whatever…”

“Okay,” Sayaka said, “I guess you’re right. Okay. I’m sorry. I was having fun, it’s… Not your fault, I think. Goodbye.”

With that, Sayaka turned and walked out of the room, slightly fast but not in any way like she was storming off. She was just leaving in a way that begged nobody follow.
Sayaka Yamaguchi had a few reasons to hate herself, she thought.

It wasn’t that she actually felt overcome with guilt at anything she’d done or who she was expected to be, or anything like that. That was a beast which only reared its head in interpersonal relations, when she started to worry what it would make people think of her. The color red, and its name she earned. Her body count. Her ultimate talent. If she was a monster, she was okay with it for herself, but it did cause trouble if she caught herself wanting human connection.

Somehow, she’d found it.

So it was none of that which she hated herself for.

One, two, three steps. Nobody’s here and nobody sees. Nobody, nobody, not this time. Not like when Goro had his breakdown, or when Kaede was murdered. Nobody here to see. No witnesses. Since when did she care about witnesses?

Hurt scratch kill break bleed, bleed and break and break and break and break and break and-

Nobody’s here and nobody sees and nobody dies and she wouldn’t really do that even now she wouldn’t really do that.

Even a murderer, she wouldn’t murder. She had enough of a mind for that right now. Nami. Aaaaaaaaaaaa Nami. Couldn’t murder, no way, not with Nami, not when she’s right here and she understands and you are not a monster you are not a monster you are helpless

Sayaka Yamaguchi hated herself because she was 124.5 centimeters tall, 49 inches, four foot one. Sayaka Yamaguchi hated herself because no matter what she did she was still so weak after all. Sayaka Yamaguchi hated herself because she didn’t kill him. Sayaka Sayaka Sayaka hated every single little thing about having ever been a child at all.

Why couldn’t she be taller? Why couldn’t she just take the medicine? Growth Hormone can be synthesized and she really could have, should have, gotten some. Why didn’t she? What happened? Why not? It certainly wasn’t her dad’s fault. He would have gotten it for her. Why’d she have to be so small? It wasn’t like she hated it because it was her height or because she couldn’t reach shelves or because she could never be taller than a girlfriend.

And she certainly didn’t hate it because she was small and frail, she could win a fight in spite of her height or because of her height depending on the matchup. For the part of her that could have been a monster, it was just a tool.

For the part of her which was helpless, what a curse it was. 124.5 centimeters. When she was six she was 118 centimeters. She didn’t grow very much at all. If she were taller just a little bit bigger and taller maybe she could stand it but she couldn’t and-

“Hello, princess.”

His voice echoed in her head as she stared at the mirror. Her bathroom. Her hair hung limp around her shoulders, released from its ties for the first time in eleven days. First time in eleven days. No wonder it looked so bad no wonder-
“You look lovely, don’t beat yourself up.”

She clutched at her chest as if she could claw him out. Why was he still here? Why? Why why why why couldn’t he be gone she had Nami now she was in love she couldn’t have him here she couldn’t still be hearing him and if she ever ever ever saw him again she’d have to kill him for real please just die die die die die die die die die die die die-


Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave-

Well it was less than forty, huh? That was why that was it she didn’t do it enough how did she mess that up she was an esteemed member of the yakuza right? Even at that age she should know how to kill somebody.

Back to the mirror. Hi. I’m Sayaka. I thought I killed the man who raped me but I’m six. I know how people die. I know the axe was sharp. He had me chopping firewood.

But each log took me how many swings? Ten or eleven eventually. I couldn’t split logs like an adult. I couldn’t split a man like an adult.

He came back for real and every time.

“You look so much nicer with your hair down, princess.”

It’s kind of childish to wear these pigtails, right? But I’m not a kid. If I let my hair down, then I’m a kid. It’s how he likes me. It’s how I was back then. Why do I have to see this?

Sayaka tore her eyes from the mirror and managed to get herself into the shower. She tried to shampoo her hair without taking the pigtails out because she couldn’t stand to be this way. Even if she avoided the mirror. Her hair on her back, falling over her shoulders, the feeling was impossible. It didn’t work. It wasn’t effective enough with the hairties in. Eventually it would look disgusting and people would notice.

Disgusting. How was she so disgusting? Why did she think that she could be with Nami? Why did she think that she could be with anybody? Somebody like her whose body gave up on itself. Who said my life is over now I’ve been defiled so and let’s not ever grow up. You’re still his princess and you always will be. There isn’t an escape.

She dropped to her knees in the shower. How rotten could this get? How rotten could she be? From the inside out like crabapples.

She reached out and pressed her palm to the ground, took her other arm and-
Slipped.

Slipped and failed in what she was trying to do and with the moment passed, her arm would stay unbroken. For now. For tonight. That didn’t mean she was feeling any better, but the self-destructive urge was exorcised without incident.

She was face down in the shower, but the drains here worked just fine, she wouldn’t drown. The shower wouldn’t run cold either. It was the Neo World program.

Sayaka was free to stay there, cheek to tile, strands of hair stuck between, for as long as she… Did. Wanted? Needed? Neither of those fit. She didn’t want to be here. She didn’t need this. This wasn’t catharsis. What was this? Why wasn’t she getting any better? Why?

It had been fourteen years since the first time that she met Kiyoteru Tanaka.

Thirteen since she first broke down seeing herself the way she was that day.

Ten since a stranger called her princess and she screamed in his face and accidentally stole a slim jim from the convenience store that he was working at.

Nine since she broke her leg on purpose the

Severn since she found out that he wasn’t really dead.

Five since he found her again.

Three since he told her-

And then he did

He came for her over
over
and
over.
Forever.
Approximately two months since she last saw him in person.

Who knew how long till she would again.

She’d be better off.

So would Nami.

I wish I could just ----
Nami didn’t stick around much longer.

Trying to understand that Sayaka probably just needed to be alone, given the demeanor she put off when she left, Nami did make an attempt to stay in Kurou’s ward, but the anxiety was too much for her to have much of a conversation with anybody. She decided to, before she went back to her room, at least check on Mitsuru. It was just an anxious action, to feel like she was being useful or doing something worth doing when she had this pit in her stomach.

“Nami?” Mitsuru already seemed worried when she walked into the ward.

“Hi,” She said, “Are you doing okay? I wanted to check in on you before I went to bed.”

“Is something the matter?” He asked.

“I’m worried about Sayaka. She started acting kind of weird, then left,” Nami said, “But there’s nothing I can really do about that, I think she probably went back to her own room… It’s still kind of stressful.”

“That’s understandable,” Mitsuru said, “Do you think that she may have gotten Despair Fever as well, though? She’ll recover much quicker if she starts the medicine before tomorrow’s morning announcement.”

“I don’t think it is,” Nami said, “I think it’s just a good old-fashioned wholecloth meltdown?”

“Reasonable,” Mitsuru noted, “Those too are valid.”

Nami snickered, just a bit. “Sorry. Valid is a meme.”

“I didn’t intend it that way, but it’s nice to get a laugh when you’re not doing well.”

“I mean. I wouldn’t say that. I’m, fine, except that my girlfriend isn’t doing well? I don’t think I should call that not doing well personally? Um?” Nami protested, “Can I?”

“You can. I mean, think of it this way. Would you say that Iwako and Sasane have no right to be upset that I’m here, because I’m the one who’s in a Killing Game?” Mitsuru asked.

“…No, I bet it’s pretty traumatic to know somebody you love is stuck in one of these things, and you’re out there, and they’re in here, and you’re not the sheriff and you can’t do anything about it. Still she’s just having a breakdown, I… Should be stable so that if she wanted my help I could be there for her, not also panicking because she’s doing badly.”

“Don’t get caught up on what you think should happen. That’s kind of ridiculous. People aren’t perfect,” Mitsuru said, “Far from it. Just deal with things the way you deal with them and don’t let things like ‘I shouldn’t feel this way’ make you feel worse.”

“Oh. Heck, that’s good advice,” Nami said, “Have you always been so wise?”

“Maybe. Or maybe I’ve ascended to nirvana from sitting here all day,” Mitsuru said, “I’ll catch up on sleep myself soon, though. Oh, and so you know, Randy has already volunteered to take me
breakfast and help me with the medicine in the morning. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Ah, it wouldn’t be a problem, but thanks for letting me know,” Nami said.

“I have some advice,” Mitsuru said, “Of course, I couldn’t do this at the moment anyhow, but… Yushu’s ward does have those treadmills. I don’t know if you’d enjoy that sort of thing, but some exercise might help to work off some of that stress.”

“I am couch potato…” Nami said, “But, you might be right. And Sayaka would probably appreciate that kind of thing even if I don’t.”

“Plus, the limit on leaving the room sort of forces you to set the time aside, thinking about it,” Mitsuru said, “If you do try it, could you let me know how it goes? And how Sayaka is holding up, too. She’s a good kid, so I hope she feels better soon.”

“I hope so too. I really like her, you know,” Nami said.

“Do you love her?” He wondered.

“I… Don’t want to say that I do. We’ve known each other eleven days. We started going out yesterday,” Nami said, “So, I don’t think that I should.”

“What did we just say about should, Nami?” Mitsuru prodded.

“…Shit.” She drooped her head. “Okay, I think I kind of love her. If I know what love is. I thought I was in love before and this already feels way better than that did? It’s just. Is that too fast?”

“It’s a Killing Game, Nami,” Mitsuru said, “These things happen here, more than anywhere else. It was during theirs that Iwako and Sasane really fell for each other, and historically, people fall in love in short stretches of time during high-stakes situations commonly. Don’t think you shouldn’t already love her. Just let yourself love her.”

“That… Make sense,” Nami said, “I reiterate, when did you get so wise?”

“It’s my Hidden Skill,” Mitsuru said, “You unlocked it by being a good friend.”

“Aww, thank you!”

“You should definitely get some rest, though,” Mitsuru said, “I can only keep your mind off of things for so long, and everything’s better after a good sleep. You agree?”

“Yeah. A lot of problems don’t look as bad in the daylight,” Nami agreed, then waved a bit as she left the ward again. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay? I’ll keep you updated.”

“Thank you kindly,” Mitsuru said as the door shut behind her.

Nami may have decided to visit him again just out of anxiety, sure, but Mitsuru actually did help her to handle her current feelings and come to terms with feeling them. She hadn’t realized she was emotionally stunted in that minor way, but it was nice to acknowledge it and realize that she was allowed to feel the emotions that she already had.

She returned downstairs, to go to her room, but paused and went to knock on Sayaka’s door. Just in case. Moments later, Sayaka opened the door. She was wearing her pajamas, and her pigtails were sopping wet, evidently tied up again recently.

“Are you okay?” Nami asked.
Sayaka didn’t say anything for a few moments, and when she did, it was a sudden burst. Her voice was cracking but she practically shouted in earnest, “I love you!”

“...I love you too,” Nami said, “I do. Sorry if that’s weird. I love you.”

“I don’t want to lose you. If we get out of here I… I might… You might realize you should hate me or. Or I might get stolen away again,” Sayaka hissed through gritted teeth, staring into Nami’s eyes, “But. I. I want to stay with you?”

“Sayaka,” Nami said, “I might not know all of it, but I do know what happened in a general way. It’s going to be okay. I’ll be by your side and… I’ll do everything I can to protect you.”

“Could you,” Sayaka whimpered, grabbing for Nami and burying her face in her chest. “Could I sleep in your room tonight?”

“Of course,” Nami said, “But first, let’s stop by the infirmary. You need some bandages on that hand.”

“I broke the mirror…”

“That’s a mood, so don’t feel bad.”

“...Thanks.”
Chapter Notes

This chapter's weird as hell. Anyway one of each of the sections in the first part corresponds to a living participant. Good Luck!

2:00 AM / 0200 Hours

There isn’t.
Anything.
Here.
-

Let’s go up in flames together
Not for any reason.
You never needed that, did you?
-

A sea of what could only be blood
or perhaps it was just hibiscus tea?
She always liked that, didn’t she?
Drowning, falling, reaching out.
Not for a hand.
For an anchor.
-

There’s a forgotten shadow. There’s a forgotten shadow.
Will you remember this poor shadow?
-

There’s somebody wearing your face.
That’s stupid.
There’s a reason you got rid of it.
-
Take the time to cry.
You’ve got no water to hit in your pool right now.
That’s going to hurt.
-
You will destroy this future.
I’m so very sorry for your loss.
I guess you could stand to be a little more trustworthy.
-
If you keep admitting things like this then you won’t ever ever ever ever, never never never never, be any better.
Why pretend I’m not a perfect match?
-
She fucking hates you.
I know she does.
You do too.
No matter what she says…
All humans are just like glass to you.
-
Once upon a time we shared a wish of death.
But I guess all lovers grow distant with time.
-
How much longer can you keep it up?
How much longer can you keep this up?
How much longer can you just give up?
This emptiness will eat you alive.
But you might like that, you sick freak.
She’s always waiting.
It’s funny, isn’t it?
She screams again.
Hilarious.

Did you ever think about how there’s a certain sort of death in your eyes? You’ve seen it in a bunch of other eyeballs too. It’s funny how death congregates there. You can’t see death or delight anywhere else on the body. Can’t see it in the hands or the ears or the legs or the stomach or the neck or the neck or the mouth because even words can’t share that sort of thing. It’s kind of beautiful, that everybody who meets you doesn’t need you to say anything as long as they just take a look at your eyes and see that the light inside them’s been gone a very very long time. People like you are just perfect, flawless, stunning. For some. Light means you want to fight and if it’s gone then it’s so hard to make you even try to live. Everywhere you go people will look in your eyes and it’s great because they’ll just immediately know.

They can do whatever they want to you and you just won’t do a thing about it. Your whole life. Too bad you’ve still got this old thing. Pretty worthless to you.

Why not just sell it like your soul?

She could probably be well-liked
If she only admitted
The fact
That she

----------------------

3:00 AM / 0300 Hours

It seemed for a moment like Nami Kaguya was dead. She felt all the aspects of death. A terrible injury through her midsection. Blood, stuck all along her arms and back. Then, she realized that if she were dead, she couldn’t feel these things, and the hole in her midsection was a dull ache and not at all agonizing the way it ought to be.

She sat up, and looked around.

It seemed like everybody was in a similar situation, spread over a plain that was somehow both dusty, and sopping wet from the rainstorm raging above. It would be dusty if it was dry, Nami decided. She also realized she was actually the first person to realize this was a dream and regain control of her own supposedly dead body. Well, if it was a dream, was everybody else fabricated?

...No, she didn’t think so. The Neo World program could definitely make a collective nightmare. She stood up, and wandered over to the nearest other body. It was Tsumugi.

“Shirogane,” She said, “This is a nightmare.”
Tsumugi sat up and blinked. Unlike the others, she didn’t have a visible injury, but it looked like she would have coughed up blood in her dying moments if she were an actual corpse. “Oh. Yes, I guess that makes sense.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Nami said, then held a hand out. Tsumugi took it to get to her feet, then brought both arms in close to herself. “I’m dreaming. You’re dreaming?”

“Yes, I’m dreaming,” Tsumugi said.

“Cool. So we’re all dreaming,” Nami said, “Dream people never confirm it’s a dream. They very convincingly tell you that this is the real life.”

“...Now that you mention it, you’re right,” Tsumugi said, “So how are we both dreaming?”

“I think we all are,” Nami said, “I don’t know how, though.”

“It’s a scripted event,” Monokuma’s voice came out of nowhere and Tsumugi practically jumped out of her skin.

“What!” She questioned.

“Sorry, only my voice gets to be here since my body doesn’t really have the ability to look dead and stuff,” Monokuma said, “But I’m still a participant, so I got roped in too. I realized right away, since I knew it was scripted, but I… Wasn’t allowed to warn you. You both had different nightmares before turning up here, right?”

Both the girls nodded, even though they didn’t even know if disembodied Monokuma voice could see that.

“Then it’s confirmed.” So Monokuma did see them. “Night of day eleven into morning of day twelve. Collective nightmares. It was planned for this game, no matter when the murders happened or anything. Extra standalone motive I guess.”

“...Okay,” Tsumugi said.

“I’m going to explain it to the others, since the ban on warning already got lifted, obviously,” Monokuma said, “At least I can try to mitigate the damage a little bit. Are you two okay, though?”

“The first nightmare was kind of rough,” Tsumugi said, “But I’m not any less okay than I am when I’m awake.”

“That’s worrying, but we don’t have time right now to unpack all of that. If you wanna talk in real awake hours just lemme know,” Monokuma’s voice said, and then definitely left them alone.

A collective nightmare… Jeeze.

The people who developed this game must really hate them.
Daily Life: Day Twelve (Is it fine?)

7:00 AM / 0700 Hours

“Hey, Monokuma here. The time is now seven in the morning. I couldn’t do anything about those of you with alarm clocks, but if there’s one thing I can do, I can totally move my personal wakeup call an extra hour,” The morning announcement played, “So, that’s something, I guess…”

Nami woke up with Sayaka in her bed. It was uh… Innocent? Could something be called innocent if it was romantic, but not sexual? Were innocent bedtime encounters reserved only for those which could be considered platonic? Did the people know that the term platonic referred to the fact that Plato was one of the first scholars to say that maybe teachers and students shouldn’t bone? Wow Kanoshi could have used a lesson in that-

Fuck that was kind of a mean joke to make, but Nami had just woken up. Her brain didn’t have enough cylinders to restrain itself from mean jokes. Also, the fact that she’d had terrible nightmares all night long. But, she got herself together, sat up, and put a hand on Sayaka’s head. “Hey. Are you, okay?”

“...I dunno about okay.” Sayaka said, “But I couldn’t really get any worse overnight, no matter how many nightmares we were dealing with. So I guess I’m actually doing a little bit better.”

“That’s good to hear,” Nami said.

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Cause you had nightmares too, dumbshit, why else? I mean, you also had to deal with me last night, so feel free to factor that in too…”

“Heh.” Nami chuckled. “Good point, good point. I was more worried about you, though. My nightmares were… Disorienting, but I think that I’m actually fine. Maybe that’s because I was preoccupied with hoping you were okay, that they couldn’t really get to me.”

“Still.” Sayaka stuck her tongue out. “I’m allowed to get worried about you too.”

“Of course. Thanks for that, Sayaka.”

“I’m your girlfriend. It’s my natural state when anything bad happens.”

“Then, I’m grateful that you’re a good girlfriend and your natural state is to worry about me instead of reveling in my suffering? Or, for a real life example, analyzing it?”

“The bar is on the floor,” Sayaka said, but then struck a pose, “Good thing I’m still taller than it, then. Ah, I’m making jokes about it. There’s the proof I’m doing better.”

“Do you want to talk about what actually happened?” Nami asked.

“Right now, I really don’t. I’ll… Tell you when it’s necessary. I don’t think it is yet, though. It’s a downer sort of thing. Really personal, even for you. Maybe especially for you. I told Yuuri the first night we met, but that was commiserating.”
“I understand,” Nami said, “That’s why I asked if you wanted to. Should we go to breakfast?”

“We should,” Sayaka said, “I showered last night, so you can have it, and I’ll get dressed.”

“Cool.” Nami gave her girlfriend a thumbs-up, retrieved an outfit for the incoming day, and got her shower. When she returned, Sayaka was dressed for the day as well, so with that settled they went to face the day. Upstairs, to Cafe Monokuma. As soon as they arrived there, they noticed that Madara looked… Odd. So they sat down across from him.

“You okay, Madara? The fever should be gone by now, right?” Nami wondered.

“It is,” Madara said, “But, well, it’s not like that’s the only problem to contend with right now, is it?”

“Oof. Rough nightmares?” Nami asked.

“Yeah, uh.” He lowered his voice so only those two could hear him. “That sort of stuff’s pretty tough to deal with when no matter how absurd the contents of the dream are, it’s possible you’re awake.”

“…Oh yeah. That does sound freaky,” Nami said, “It doesn’t even have to be realistic to try and convince you, huh?”

“Right,” Madara said.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that… And, oh. The fever didn’t actually end until the morning announcement, right?”

“That might also explain why it was so overwhelming, yes,” Madara said, then grimaced as he rested his forehead in his palm against the table. “Did either of you end up with, just. Redoing memories in the mix? Most of it was pretty abstract, and that mass death dream, but there was one…”

“I didn’t,” Sayaka said, “But I’ll level with you for a minute. I kind of did a good amount of that before I went to bed, still awake and everything. May have hit the ceiling for that in my mental health boogaloo.”

“Good god, it’s contagious,” Madara said, looking between Nami and Sayaka.

“Owo?” Nami said aloud, and made her best approximation of the face too.

“The nonsense language. Mental health boogaloo?” He asked.

“Ah, no,” Sayaka said, “I meme independently of my lovely girlfriend. I have tangential knowledge as they apply to history, since I studied it a good amount.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Anyway,” Nami said, “I did get a memory repeat, now that you mention it. I guess it would have been really stressful if I didn’t already get all my memories back, but it wasn’t… That bad. It was just Kira. I mean, bad, but. Eh.” She shrugged. “I’m actually not super traumatized by that stuff when I can actually remember it all.”

“Good for you,” Madara said, “Mine was kind of bullshit, though. Like, of all the bad memories I’ve got floating around, it had to be the one that was almost good… Whatever. Sorry, you don’t
need to hear about my bullshit.”

“If what you want is to talk about your bullshit, what we want is to listen,” Nami assured him.

“If I was gonna talk to anybody, it’d be you two. Not because I value your friendship, but because you already saw me make a total fool of myself the other day, so there isn’t really much more I could say to embarrass myself,” Madara said, “But at the same time, well… Is it really worth listening to?”

“I mean… Yes? If it would help you?” Nami said.

“You’re so wholesome,” Madara said, “But, I think… Well, it might help me, but I’ll leave it for now. If you heard it, then you might just fail to want anything helping me at all.”

“I think you’re just being paranoid,” Nami said.

“Tch.” Madara stood up, and tapped the table as he did. “I don’t know. If I told you a single story about a person who abandoned me, I think you’d get inspired. So, we can let it be. Can’t we?”

“I mean. Obviously you should only talk about it if it would be good for you,” Nami said, “But this seems like a weird reason not to.”

“Maybe. But you’ve already been made aware that I’m a weird person. See you round.”
After eating breakfast, Nami remembered something. She meant to mention it sooner, but then there was the matter of the nightmares which put it out of her mind. She was actually reminded of it by Randy standing up, because he was a lithe boy. Not that she was looking his way, but the thing was, she only had 75% control of her eyeballs at any given time. The other 25% usually presented itself as dissociation, but today, it was reminding her that one of her friends had muscles.

“Hey,” She said, “I just remembered. Fujishiro had some advice for me yesterday… He said that it might help, to work off some stress. Using the treadmills in Yushu’s ward.”

“Huh?” Sayaka asked, “In there?”

“Well, that’s where the treadmills are. Also, being stuck in a boring room full of treadmills is kinda the best motivation to actually use them, isn’t it?” Nami shrugged. “Doesn’t seem like my kind of thing but, you’re athletic and angry a lot, so maybe? And I’d do it with you if you wanted. Solidarity, babey.”

“...Yeah, let’s do that,” Sayaka said, “I bet a lot of people could stand to run off some steam, though, so we should ask if anyone else wants to… Oh, wait.”

“Mm?”

“We don’t have any gym clothes, so I guess that plan is in the trash,” Sayaka said, “Nothing from my closet would work… Maybe your pajamas would, but mine wouldn’t, and I sure can’t fit in yours…”

“Oh. Well, that’s no reason to give up,” Nami said, “Monokuma?”

“You can’t just ask Monokuma to solve every little problem!” Sayaka teased.

“Watch her,” Monokuma said, “What do you need, Kagu-kagu?”

“We wanted to use treadmills. But we have none gym clothes left sweat.”

“Oh! Yeah, I am allowed to fix that,” Monokuma said, “So you can ask me to solve this little problem. If you really want to lock yourselves in the Ultimate Runner’s Ward, you’ll be able to find gym clothing in all sizes, from petite to big and tall, in the gift shop as of today. I guess you could also wear them as normal clothes if you wanted to commit a fashion faux pas.”

“Thanks,” Sayaka said, then Monokuma left.

“Hey!” Nami called out of the rest of the cafe, “Does anybody else want to come get locked in Yushu’s Ward and run on treadmills for as long as it traps us?”

“You bet your ass I would,” Randy volunteered, and nobody else did.

“Y-You know, inviting a whole room of people to exercise with you is kind of insensitive…” Amai whined halfheartedly, spurred only by her still-unresolved weepiness symptom. Nami didn’t even know what she was trying to get at with that statement, and it didn’t matter because the puny athletic group just left and retrieved gym clothes from the gift shop.
They split up to get changed, reconvened, then made their way out to the ward in question. Trapping themselves in here… They were just short two people. Tsukasa because he had better things to do, and Kaede… Because she was gone.

Sayaka rubbed her nose, then pushed to the front of the group and was the one to push the door, getting them teleported into the room as was now readily plausible knowing that this was actually just a fragile simulacrum of a physical world in which the only constant was death. Once inside, they set their water bottles down (they’d prepared, knowing the ‘water’ in here was gross and also actually poison), stretched at Randy’s demand that the girls not pull hamstrings on the exercise equipment, and.

Well, started running. Or something like that. Nami was sort of just awkwardly power-walking because she just wasn’t a very athletic person and she got winded going up more than two flights of stairs at a time, but it was still exercise. Randy looked like he was pacing himself for the fact that they ended up with ninety minutes on the ward clock, but Sayaka was just going full tilt. She was actually too short to really use the handrails on the machine, but she didn’t need them.

Actually, she was kind of naruto running. Nami didn’t realize this fact at first, because Sayaka was somebody who could naruto run without it looking like a joke, but an actual way to run fast and intensely. It was legitimately aerodynamic, sure, but now that she’d seen it she couldn’t unsee it and -almost lost her footing on her own treadmill- let out a snicker.

“Eh?” Sayaka turned slightly when she heard Nami laugh. “What’s funny?”

“You’re running like you’re from an anime,” Nami said, “Do you always run like that?”

“It’s… Proper stance for freerunning in open spaces,” Sayaka said, “It builds speed faster, but only really works if you know you won’t need your arms too quickly.”

“Oh!” The joke went away immediately at that. “I didn’t know you did that sort of stuff! That’s really cool!”

“It’s kind of just part of my regular skillset? I mean, I wouldn’t consider freerunning a separate skill I have. It’s one aspect of what I have to do,” Sayaka said, but she did take up a more normal stance as she explained. “Give me any weird spot to get to, and I’ll find a way. If you really think it’s impressive, I mean.”

“I do!” Nami clapped her hands together, but then immediately grabbed the handrails again. “Show off to me!”

“You’re cute,” Randy joined the conversation, “But yes, Sayaka. Some advice? Absolutely anything you can do that normal people can’t do is a skill you should milk for all its worth! Got-ta show off, got-ta impress the lady.”

“Sh-shush!” Sayaka protested, flushing red even more easily when her blood was already pumping from the exercise. ‘I’m! New to this thing, okay? Impressing Nami is like… High level flirting… What-”

“I mean, you impress me everyday already,” Nami said, purposefully making it worse. This sort of conversation was always nice.

“Stupid! That’s too smooth! Critical hit to the heart!”

“Am I… Smooth?” Nami wondered, looking up at the ceiling.
“No,” Randy said, “But of the two of you, you’re definitely closer to it!”

“Thank you for the blunt honesty, Randy. It still validates the compliment Sayaka has given me. I am… The Sexy and Suave Girlfriend.”

“Nobody called you sexy,” Sayaka said, “Yet.”

“Yet?” Nami wondered.

“Hm, I have a meme for this somewhere…” Sayaka was clearly racking her brain, because really, she did not know that many memes. “I heard this one time so sorry if it’s not actually a good meme, but. Stupid sexy Nami.”

“Good meme!! Very good meme!” Nami squeaked.

“...Maybe you’re tied in your levels of not quite smooth,” Randy groaned.
Eventually, at more like half past ten, the ward’s timer ran out and the door unlocked with a solid click, though its denizens weren’t booted out. Had somebody else entered at that moment, apparently the timer would be set again with the addition of somebody new to the room, though, so the group didn’t dawdle in their departure, just in case.

“That… Was kind of exhausting,” Nami said once they were out of the room, and dropped to the floor in the hallway. “What? Like, I wasn’t exhausted while I was still power-walking. But now my legs kind of feel like jelly.”

“Yeah, that’s how it works with aerobics,” Randy said, “It’s not pulling energy from your muscles or anything, so the soreness doesn’t set in until you’re done. That’s why humans are long-chase hunters! Walking quickly or jogging is kind of what we’re built for. Pastwise and stuff.”

“Why do you know that?” Sayaka wondered.

“Elementary school?” Randy shrugged. “It isn’t really that difficult a concept. The real question is why I remember it.”

“American schools…” Sayaka sighed.

“Hey now, they’ve really improved since the tragedy,” Nami said, “I think.”

“Yeah guidance counselors used to report to your parents if you did anything even a little unsettling even if you’d beg them not to, I heard,” Randy said, “I heard they used to hire people who were totally unqualified to deal with anyone who had any mental illness.”

“Oof. I mean, a lot of places used to be bad at that stuff, though,” Nami said, “At least schools in non-despair areas know how to make an effort now… Mine was kind of majority Despair, but even there, I think that if I reached out to the counselors they’d at least try to help me with my problems.”

“I couldn’t tell you if mine would have,” Sayaka said, and slid down the wall to sit down next to Nami. “I don’t remember a lot about school. I didn’t even use my actual surname there because I didn’t want to call attention to myself.”

“Yamaguchi kind of is a loaded name,” Nami admitted, “Especially since the other syndicates don’t… Really exist, anymore, huh?”

“I mean, they do. We just own them,” Sayaka said, “But you wouldn’t hear them claiming to be Yamaguchi. Just because we’re at the top of the pyramid, well… It wouldn’t be honorable to strip away the individual identities of those who’ve worked just as hard as us. Really, all our control means… Is that we could punish them or request their help if ever the need arose.”

“And that you skim a bit off the top of their profits, I imagine,” Randy said, “Cause, you’re still a criminal group. And I’ve met a few of those subordinate oji-sans.”

“Wh… You have?” Sayaka squinted one eye in his direction. “And, yeah. Just a percentage off of a part, though. Like the way that taxes work. Five percent of the profits over five hundred-k yen.”
“Of course I have,” Randy said, “You don’t get to be an Ultimate in my field without making the acquaintance of all sorts of people.”

“I… Okay?” Sayaka didn’t seem to buy that or understand the connection between fisticuffs and meeting a lot of people, but she was willing to drop the topic because she trusted Randy. “Well, maybe it’s something else, right? Anyway. What next? Wanna split up again?”

“If you’re up to spending time on your own, yeah,” Nami said, “We gotta keep Ueda’s advice in mind, after all.”

“What advice?” Randy asked.

“Not to be joined at the hip so that we keep finding each other interesting and exciting, basically,” Sayaka explained, “Simple stuff, but, y’know.”

“Oh! Yeah that is pretty simple. But you’re right a lot of people mess it up,” Randy said, “Tsukasa and I have worked out exactly the right amount of space that we need from each other! And the excitement levels haven’t dropped yet~!”

“Not super sure I needed to hear that,” Nami said.

“Me neither. Hey, you good to just sit on the floor for a while?” Sayaka stood back up, herself.

“Yeah, yeah. Go on ahead. Don’t feel bad leaving me here. I love to sit on floors. Great time. Spectacular mood. My legs hurt.” Nami waved for her friends to head off to whatever more interesting things they had to be doing than hanging around while she sat on the floor. Plenty of options there.

Of course, sitting on the floor alone wouldn’t go on for too long. Not because Nami would stand up and go anywhere else, but because somebody would join her on the floor. That somebody being Torimi. Hello, Torimi.

“Namineeee?” Torimi asked, “Why’re youuu on the floor?”

“I did a exercise,” Nami explained, “So now I don’t want to use my legs. You feeling better? Your accent’s back.”

“Yeaaah.” Torimi nodded, then sat down across from Nami on the opposite wall of the hallway. “That was suuuuper weird. Like. I was still me? But noot… At the same time? I was myself and I knew what I was doooing. But I didn’t have normal control about it. Stuff just sort of happened, for two days. It’s niiice… To be normal again.”

“I bet. I’m glad that I don’t seem to have gotten it… So far,” Nami said, “Gotta qualify that. Don’t want to jinx it, you know?”

“Mm. It’s kindaaa weird, that more people haven’t. I don’t think anybody started having it this morning yet?” Torimi said, “At leaaast. Didn’t seem so at breakfast. Dunno. Not like I’m an expert.”

“Oh I would agree,” Nami said.

“Cooool. Hey. Were you able to tell? When I waaaas… Feverish…?” Torimi wondered.

“I thought it was weird that your accent went away,” Nami admitted, “But I got distracted immediately after I saw you, so I didn’t have time to think about it. And you were acting pretty
normal, too.”

Torimi smiled. “That’s good to hear, you thought that I was being normal? Means that… I’m not nervous around you normally? I didn’t need something like ‘impulse control’ not to be stupid around you. I just… get to be me. It’s nice. You know, I love you a loooot, right? You’re my best friend.”

“I know, Tori,” Nami said, then smiled as well as she looked toward the ceiling. “My best friend? I guess that probably is you. Tsukasa’s my childhood friend. Sayaka’s my girlfriend. And Rei… She was a best friend too. You mind sharing that with her?”

“Not at all,” Torimi said, “I wish… I could have met her. Bet we coulda been friends too.”

“I wouldn’t bet against you on that.”
Daily Life: Day Twelve (Discovery Of A Drifting Ghost)

11:00 AM / 1100 Hours

Torimi and Nami hung out in the hallway together for about half an hour, just chatting and not talking about much of substance, the way that best friends often did. Joking around, reminiscing, and all those kinds of things. Talk the details of which would probably never be remembered, but the great feeling of having had that talk would persist no matter what.

It was when their chat was winding down, and Nami’s legs were finally starting to recover in a way which would allow her to feel okay standing up and moving, which she did, at least, the former part. Torimi stood up as well.

“So, Torimi, we haven’t been able to have a lot of quality time since I got here… I mean. Kindaa still feels like I’m not part of the group, at least I have you but, we haven’t hung out that much.”

“I’m sorry,” Nami said, “I guess that’s right. I just… Well, for me, I know people are going to keep dying. And I don’t want to have regrets, you know? I don’t want anyone to die when I can’t understand them. So I need to know everyone. I need to be able to understand everybody… In some way, in some amount, so that I can remember them properly. And you, Tori? If… If you did somehow die. I would already remember you so much.”

“Oh. Well. That makes sense…” Torimi said, cupping her hands under her chin. “But that doesn’t mean that I… Don’t miss you. When you’re off learning how to remember people.”

“…I know,” Nami said, then put an arm around Torimi’s shoulders. “I guess, though. This is the thing in a Killing Game. No matter what, there’s never going to be enough time…”

“Yeaah,” Torimi said, “I know thaat. I… Dunno why you even wanna try so hard to get so close to people who might juuust die?”

“It’s an integrity thing, I guess,” Nami said, “I’m not… Completely sure. I know I promised this to myself when the game was being reset, but I don’t exactly know why I thought of it. The reset is kind of a foggy time… For me? Or, for everyone? I don’t know that either. If I pushed it back or if Monokuma pushed it back for us.”

“Still. I… Wouldn’t waaanna,” Torimi said, “Fall in love here like youuu did. That’s too comfortable, riiight?”

“I think,” Nami said, “That it’s fine this way. Anyone could die anytime. I could die too, though. And if I’m going to die, I want to be able to have happy final memories. So falling in love makes sense. Maybe I’ll lose the person I love, or maybe I’ll get to die feeling romantically fulfilled.”

“Sounds stuuupid,” Torimi said, and waved a hand. “Much as I complained nobody here’s available, I wouldn’t wanna get with anyone for reaal. One night stands are fun. Falling in love has too muuuuch going on. Opportunity for heartbreak times five in a game.”

“Heh. But you do approve of Sayaka, don’t you?” Nami asked.

“…Yeeaaah. If you both make it through then that’s pret-ty greaat,” Torimi admitted, showing Nami a lazy grin.
“Right? She’s so good,” Nami said, “And, I mean. Maybe if one of us is going to die, that’s how it had to be? We met in a Killing Game to make sure that we could meet in our lifetimes, even if it’s a situation like this one.”

“Youuu… Would’ve met her,” Torimi said, “If neither of you were ever here.”

“We would have met anyway?” Nami asked, “How do you know that? Did you do a reading on us?”

“Well, I diiiiiid, but…” Torimi looked away. “Technically what I mean is. You could’ve. Could’ve met, before you even made it here. Cause. She woulda been a witness.”


“Well, the laaaaast one,” Torimi said, “You were gonna try before this all happened.”

“Oh,” Nami said, “That Kiyoteru guy? Why would she have been involved in that case, though? I… Don’t really remember starting discovery on that case yet, so I don’t know a whole lot about it.”

“Hmmmm.” Torimi thought for a minute. “Well, she woulda been, but she can tell you the reason herself when she’s ready to talk abouuuut it. Just cause I read some of the papers already doesn’t give me the riiight.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Nami said with an affirmative nod, then squinted as she looked down the hallway to see a girl standing there aimlessly. It seemed to be Box, of course. “Hey. Box?”

“Ehhhhh…?” The girl wondered, turning to look at Nami. Her voice sounded off, and as she turned, something seemed slightly different about her. The bottom of her hair curled a bit more than usual, and there seemed to be the shadow of a pair of eyeglasses across her nose, just for that split second. Was. Was Nami just seeing things, or was something going on here? This was the second time that she ‘saw’ something about Box that was gone the moment she blinked.

“Are you okaaaay?” Torimi wondered, quickening her step to catch up with Box. “You seem kinda confuuused.”

“No, no, it’s fine, I’m… Just fine,” Box said, holding her arms in close to herself. “I’m perfectly okay and there… Isn’t…”

“Box?” Nami questioned again, now caught up to her, and put a hand on her shoulder. This demeanor was all too familiar. The trailing sentences, the confusion. It wouldn’t surprise her if...

“Have you forgotten something?”

“Forgotten. Hm. Hm, yes, I did,” Box said, “I forgot something. Hm. I was looking around. Ah.. Hm? Yes. Looking for somebody. But I found somebody. Found both of you. I’ve forgotten what I was going to say and tell you or why I was looking for people.”

“It’s okay. Take a deep breath, think about it,” Nami said, “Do you need some water or something? You’re burning up. You… did you catch Despair Fever?”

“Did I? Um. Did I?” Box asked, “Mono...kuma?”

“Eh? Oh,” Monokuma appeared, “Uh, yes. I believe you did. I don’t have any objective way to tell, but I guess you’re showing symptoms?”
“That’s a pain,” Box said, “What a pain. Good grief. Me? I shouldn’t. Definitely shouldn’t. After all. I’m the only one. The only one who can help anyone at all. I’m Box Hako. I’m Box Hako. Ultimate Volunteer. Right?”

“...Sure,” Nami said, “Don’t hurt yourself more. Just try to remember what you had to tell us. That’s all you need to know right now.”

“What I had to tell you. That’s right.” Box dipped her head. “The door to the Ultimate Volunteer’s Ward is locked from the inside.”
“The door is locked?” Nami asked.

“Yes the door is locked,” Box confirmed.

“Can you tell me anything else about this?” Nami’s question was gentle. She knew that Box might not be able to at all.

“I don’t know,” Box said.

“Did you call inside and did anybody answer?” Nami asked.

“I didn’t,” Box said, “I did not call in to the ward from the outside at all.”

“Did anyone tell you that they were going to lock the door?”

“No. Nobody communicated to me any intention of personally locking the door,” Box said, “The door is just locked. From the inside. There is no key to open it from the outside. Or anything.”

“Okay. Thank you for letting us know, Box. Let’s all go up to the Volunteer Ward, shall we?” Nami offered, keeping that guiding hand against Box’s shoulder. She never started off as a touchy person, but it did seem that a lot of the people around her took comfort in platonic contact, and she was certainly able to provide it for their sakes. So the Volunteer Ward was two floors up from them; They started up the stairs. Nami was really hoping that by the time the hospital was at its full height, Monokuma would add an elevator or something. Her legs still hurt from working out and now she had to climb several flights of stairs to probably discover something unfortunate!

After one set of stairs, though, they hesitated, because they ran into Madara. Physically, Torimi and Madara actually collided, and knocked over… Oh, Monokuma was following them for some reason? Well, it got knocked over.

“What the- huh?” Madara questioned, first rubbing his arm where Torimi’s forehead had collided with it, then looking up to see Nami and Box there as well. Then glanced over to the bowled-over Monokuma, took a deep breath, then asked, “What’s going on here?”

“The Ultimate Volunteer Ward is locked from the inside,” Box answered, her voice flat as her head lolled to one side, as if she was nothing more than a doll in this moment.

“Huh. Yeah, that seems off,” Madara said, “I’d assume that Fujishiro just wanted some privacy or something, but he can’t really lock it himself. Did you knock or call inside?”

“I already asked her that,” Nami said, “And she didn’t. So, we’re going to check it out. Hopefully it’s nothing, but…”

“Yeah, I heard about that first case too,” Madara said, “So I get. Locked rooms have consistently been pretty bad news over the course of this thing.”

“They haaaaaave,” Torimi whined, getting to her feet. “Come with us? You’re like, sturdy. As I just figured ouuuuut by crashing into youuu.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot. I’m tougher than I look,” Madara said, then glanced up the stairs, “Well, I guess that if I go with you, and something did go wrong, then it’s a jumpstart on investigating… I
oughta be useful *this* time, right?"

“Mhm.” Nami gave a solemn nod with her affirmation, at which Madara started to climb up the remaining stairs, and the group of girls plus one bear followed after. The shiny sixth floor gave way to them, and they walked down the hallway, carefully, slowly. Nami approached the door, tapped it with her knuckles, and shouted in. “Hey! Fujishiro? Anybody? Is someone in there?”

She didn’t get an answer. Madara gestured for her to step to the side, and tried the doorknob, making sure that it was still locked. It was. And, like Box said, there wasn’t even a keyhole on this side at all.

“The door does have a privacy lock. It’s a deadbolt on the inside,” Box explained.

“Deadbolt, huh?” Madara asked, “That lines up. There isn’t even the leeway there to peek in like you could with a chain lock. And we can’t cut the lock from this side easily, either. If I had a blowtorch I could get it, of course, but…”

“Maybe some of the poower tools in Ueda’s ward?” Torimi offered.

“No, none of those would actually be able to get this door open,” Monokuma said, “In fact, there actually isn’t a way to get it open from the outside… Period. Maybe Fujishiro himself could have still rammed it down, but none of you have enough strength to do it even trying to combine your force.”

“Well, maybe-” Nami started.

“And absolutely none of you have the lockpicking prowess needed to undo a deadbolt from this side,” Monokuma cut her off. “When I say that there’s no way, I mean that there’s no way. It’s just impossible. This is, in fact, a perfect locked room.”

“A perfect locked room?” Nami asked for clarification.

“Come on, you know what that definition means. There isn’t any way to open the door from outside. There is no way to enter or leave the room without using the door. No windows are available to be utilized for this purpose. No secret passages exist,” Monokuma said, “It truly isn’t possible. I’m explaining this, because it means that I’ll need to open the door for you.”

“If something has happened… Does that count as tampering?” Nami asked.

“Using my methods of navigating the facility, evidence cannot be disposed of and a murder cannot be committed. Nothing against adding red herrings or anything, though I personally have a stipulation against that… The bottom line is, changing the lock status of a door doesn’t count as any form of tampering that is disallowed from my capabilities as long as no human is able to do it themselves,” Monokuma explained, then… Walked right through the closed door. What was it that it said before?

Right. ‘ Bits of data obviously can't be stopped by things like closed rooms or travel time. But doesn't that just sound like what I do?’ So, Monokuma did consider the ‘bits of data’ method to be its travel method, even if it might not be the AI. So of course it could just walk right into a locked room.

And, change the lock status of the door. The deadbolt clicked from the inside, but the door didn’t open. Monokuma was probably waiting for one of them to do it, to minimize its own meddling in this situation. Nami had a pit in her stomach. This implied… That something terrible really had taken place in that room. In that locked room. That perfect locked room.
Madara grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and pulled the door open outward, which was the way it had to move to comply with fire codes after all. Not all the wards did, but of course Box’s would. And Nami saw as soon as the fire-code-compliant door was pulled open wide.

Knives upon knives upon knives—scalpels and kitchen knives and cake slicers and all sorts of things from all sorts of places. All those things, sticking straight out of Mitsuru Fujishiro’s corpse on the cot, far more peaceful than those things implied.

Box released an agonized, ear-splitting scream from behind, as if she could feel each of those knives in her own back.
The group who discovered the body watched as Monokuma put a paw over its mouth and made the announcement, its voice echoing between its body and the intercoms. “Attention, everybody. A body has been discovered. Please report to the Volunteer’s Ward.”

With that, Monokuma walked over to Box, grabbed both her hands in its paws, and pulled her away. “Come on now, d- Box.”

“I… I. The…” Box stammered out, “The door was locked?”

“Huh?” Nami asked, catching that and latching on. May as well ask about that. May as well focus on something other than the gruesome scene in front of her. “Hey, she sounds the same as before. Isn’t the fever supposed to stop when a murder occurs?”

“Uh… Yeah, that’s right. Oishi should be recovered now,” Monokuma said, “But, like I said, my word on this stuff isn’t objective, yeah? So… I guess I was wrong. And she’s just like this right now. Not feverish. Uhh, which is worse. I think I’ll just get her out of here, if that’s okay with you guys? The Monokuma file is there, and all. Seeya.”

With that, Monokuma did as it said it would and led Box away from the crime scene. Torimi, Nami, and Madara were left there to wait for others to come and discover it for themselves. Of course, the others would probably assume Mitsuru was involved given the location, but… Only these three, and the oddities who’d just left, were aware of the locked room.

“I’ll…” Torimi spoke up, raising a hand which was trembling, but her voice was as firm as it ever got with her accent. “Let people knoooow. I can tell them when they get heeere. That it was. A locked room?”

“Are you sure?” Madara asked.

“Yeaaah, I…” Torimi lowered her hand and frowned. “Guess that I process shock like thiiis? I’m freaked out. A whooooole lot freaked out. I feel it. But I can still just function like a normal person? I guess that’s why I could work with Namine before…”

“Oh, yeah. Dealing with heavy cases takes a thick skin, doesn’t it?” Madara said, “You’re tougher than you look. So, yeah, if you’re up to it, that would be great. Nami, we should investigate, right? It’s shitty that this happened, but… I should at least redeem myself for my poor performance in the last trial.”

“Mm, yeah. I don’t want to look at the actual scene until others get here, though,” Nami said, “We should check the Monokuma file out in the meantime.”

Madara nodded, then came to stand next to Nami so that they could examine the file off the same Monopad, hers. She already had it out, and his was still in his pocket, after all.

**Cause of Death: ****

**Time of Death: 1013 Hours**

“So it’s not giving us the cause this time…” Madara said, “Interesting. Last time, all three of the bodies had a listed cause, didn’t they? Even if the cause was vague.”

“Right,” Nami said, “So the cause of death is important to figuring out who was actually the
culprit… The second trial, the one before you got here, didn’t even leave out the cause. It just worded it weirdly. So, I guess that even having some idea of what killed him could give away the culprit too easily?"

“That, or it could eliminate a suspect too easily… Hm,” Madara muttered, then tapped Nami’s screen so it would bring up the page that broke down all of the injuries. It really did just list every single one of the objects impaled into Mitsuru’s body, though. Nothing else there. So, it seemed pretty obvious what the cause of death would be, right? Impalement, or stabbing, or blood loss… Any of those would work, wouldn’t it?

Why leave it blank? Nami’s head was already spinning from the fact that this was a perfect locked room, and now the cause of death was up in the air too.

She was supposed to let him know how the exercise went. She was supposed to report back to him and say, hey, it really helped Sayaka to run off some of her stress, and maybe it even helped me a little bit too. Hah. Whatever help she’d gotten from that run was gone all over again, because there wasn’t much more stressful in this world than discovering a corpse. Ugh. Why her? Why did Nami have to be present for every body discovery, really?

Obviously she had to play a big part in the trials. It was right there in her talent, and it would be irresponsible of her to bail just because she wasn’t doing emotionally well. Nobody was, she wasn’t special, everybody had to deal with a corpse, and suspecting their peers. It wasn’t as if she was even all that close with Mitsuru, really. He was a good friend, but not much more. Nobody special, to her, but he was special to plenty of other people in his life and she could tell that much about him. Just stepping into his little sister’s shoes for a few of the moments they’d known each other, seeing the unbreakable integrity in his heart when he had the lie serum, unlocking…

They were just good enough friends that she could unlock his secret wisdoms. That’s what they were. On the way to being better friends and really, why was she thinking about this stuff? They weren’t particularly close so she shouldn’t be as sad? Gross. She could be as sad as she wanted. He was still her friend. He was still a good person, even if they didn’t connect as much as she had with certain others here. It wasn’t like she preferred him dead to the others. Wasn’t like she’d prefer anyone else to him, either.

Why was anybody fucking dead at all, really? Really?

“…You’re. Kidding me,” Sayaka’s small voice snapped Nami from her thoughts. Other people had arrived to the scene that she’d missed. While she’d been lost in her internal debate, Riko had dry-heaved again at the sight of the scene, Kurou had come upstairs to first comfort her, only to start pacing around the room muttering to himself when he saw who the victim was. Randy was hyperventilating against Tsukasa. Amai had dropped to her knees at some point, and hadn’t gotten up. Tsumugi didn’t react in any visible way, just standing there.

But it was Sayaka who got Nami to notice.


“Sayaka-” Nami started.

Location: Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan  
Date: 21XX, September 21st  
Time: 1200 Hours

There was another loud crash.

This was the fifth ceramic mug that Iwako Same had broken over the past few hours. Since 10:13 that morning, in fact, when she broke the first one, she hadn’t calmed down at all. Five whole cups of *chamomile* fucking tea and she wasn’t any less high strung and clearly no less likely to throw her mug at the wall the minute it was emptied.

“You know, I’m not going to be the one to go buy more of those,” Akihiko said, “So do you think that you could try something other than tea to soothe your nerves?”

“Um, no, I don’t mind-” Shoyu started to say.

“You’re already cleaning up the broken pieces,” Akihiko said, “That’s humoring her enough.”

“Humoring me!?” Iwako questioned, throwing her arms out to her sides. “My boyfriend is dead! What part of that *doesn’t* entitle me to throw shit around and break it, huh?”

“The part where nobody else has done that?” Kizuto offered, shrugging. “I mean, I lost my best friend. Shoyu lost his son.”

“Hm?” Iwako straightened up, then looked away. “Excuse you, there. Nate lost an ex-boyfriend, didn’t he? And his response was that he needed to go and *kill* somebody. Is that fine just because you don’t have to deal with it firsthand?”

“...Yes, basically,” Akihiko said, “Do whatever you need to do, of course. But really, you have a private room. If you want to break the entire supply of mugs in there, sweep it up, then go and replace them, by all means.”

“I’m!” Iwako snipped, “Going to see Akane! She’ll *understand*.”

“Please do,” Kizuto said, covering his face with one hand, “No offense, but you’re kinda stressing everybody out.”

“I will,” Iwako said, then turned on her heel and marched out of that wing, then stopped in front of the door for the Failed Ultimates. They weren’t fond of having the True Radicals visit them, so... She’d knock, first, to see if somebody would answer. She hit the door with more restraint than she honestly thought herself capable of in that moment.

And, lucky her, Akane was the one who answered it.

“Huh. Yeah, I was wondering how long it’d be till you came over here,” Akane said, then stepped out and shut the door behind herself. Then, being in the main room, she walked over to the pod that she knew belonged to Mitsuru, staring at her older brother. He looked no different here, than he had when he was alive, but he was certainly dead.
Were Junko Enoshima left alive, Akane thought, then maybe the game could have been reprogrammed. Things like that nightmare and the motives cancelled. Things like death made impermanent. Instead… “Iwako. It’s the group that you’re aligned with which didn’t think of leaving the one person who could reprogram this thing alive. So, you probably have to live with that.”

“…Huh?” Iwako questioned, following Akane to Mitsuru’s pod to look down at his face.

“Junko Enoshima could have made him an Alter Ego, you know. Brought him back. Or maybe even stopped the game early? But. There’s never been another Ultimate Programmer, has there?” Akane asked, “So all we can do is wait and watch them die.”

“Hm. No, I’ve met somebody who could reprogram it. But it would take time to get her here, and even more time to do the reprogramming. With Enoshima dead, it’s too late anyway,” Iwako said, “Well, I never thought we should kill them both. I never thought that.”

“They did, though,” Akane said, “Your group.”

“I just…” Iwako mumbled, “I just wanted to save him. No matter what I said. Why should I care about anything else in that stupid plan? They’ve all got this stupid integrity, like it’s our responsibility to fix the world or something now, just because we got what Kira was telling us. Just because it’s our loved ones in this game. I should just go home.”

“Why?” Akane asked. “It’s not like there’s anything for you there.”

Akane was being harsh. Especially harsh for a fourteen year old, actually, but she did grow up with Mitsuru as her older brother. She’d unlocked his secret wisdoms before she could even talk, and among those secret wisdoms was how to handle his girlfriends. They were both difficult people, after all. Being bluntly honest with Iwako was sometimes the only way to get through to her at all.

“…Right, Sasane’s still planning to come here when she’s finished with her mission.” Iwako clenched her fists. “If she can. If it’s okay and she makes it through. It’s not like her mission isn’t dangerous too. I… What if I’m the only one of us left? What if-”

“So you might be,” Akane said, “But, hey. You’re smart and stuff. Even if you hate this group. Even if you don’t really give a shit about ending Killing Games or the Quiet War? Why not help with it anyway? I mean, it’s something to do, isn’t it?”

“…I guess that you’re right,” Iwako said, then pressed both her hands against the pod which now held a corpse, “Mitsuru taught you well, didn’t he…?”

“Yeah,” Akane said.

“But.” Iwako laughed, a strained and bitter sort of cackle. “Where’d you ever learn language like that, huh? If he were here, he definitely would have put a bar of soap in your mouth for that…”

“He’s not, though,” Akane said, starting to get choked up herself. “And he never will be.”

“I think,” Iwako said, “I want revenge.”

“I do too,” Akane said.

“You understand who’s responsible, don’t you?” Iwako asked.

“Yeah,” Akane said, “I’m his little sister, you know. Of course I understand. Even if it isn’t
obvious…”

“Let’s go, then,” Iwako said, “If you think vengeance is something you can handle.”

“I dunno if I can. But I need it anyway,” Akane said, “Hey, Iwako? Are you… mad at him?”

“...Stupid. Of course I can’t be angry with him for this.”

“So I was right.”

“You were, Akane,” Iwako said, “You really are… His little sister.”

“I certainly am,” She said, then started to walk off in the direction of that vengeance they both required.
Now that everybody had arrived to the crime scene, and been made aware of its previously closed nature, it was time to begin the investigation proper. Nami was able to calm Sayaka, who then was first into the ward. She approached the body, then turned to Nami and Madara, “You two should look around the rest of the room, right? I’ll try and figure out what the deal is with… All these wounds.”

“Right,” Nami said, then started to look around the ward. Since she and Sayaka had been some of the first people in here, and she’d been in again just last night, she was actually familiar enough to see if anything was out of place here. First off, a few of the weapons that had been stabbed into Mitsuru’s body were from inside here; Syringes. Nami wasn’t sure why those were stored in this room, since the Despair medicine was taken orally…

“Hm. Well, at least they didn’t use every syringe in here,” Madara observed, “They only used the higher gauge ones. The real little ones got left. I think that with the length they’ve all got, though, these would probably be used to draw blood, not administer medicine…”

“How do you know that?” Nami asked.

“Well, for one thing, not all of us are so lucky to have sublingual pills to affirm our genders with,” Madara said, “And for another, I used to donate blood all the time for some extra cash. I’m a curious person, so I actually learned about how they did it and stuff.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Nami said, “But why would we need to draw anybody’s blood in the Volunteer Ward?”

“Well, there’s testing kits over there,” Madara pointed to a different part of the ward, “To do titres with. I can imagine that if Box was uh, doing better, she’d know how to use that, and I bet it’s to test for Despair Fever. If we were ever unsure whether somebody really had it or not.”

“Oh. And Mono didn’t mention it because it was already giving us too much leeway by explaining the medicine, I bet,” Nami said, then turned to Madara with wide eyes in her realization. “Does this mean that it has blood?”

“What?” Madara asked.

“Monokuma. Does Monokuma has blood?” Nami asked.

“Yes,” Monokuma answered.

“Oh! Sorry. Didn’t mean to summon you,” Nami said, “Is Box okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. I took her back to her room before you so absentmindedly called to me,” Monokuma said, “I told her to nap until it’s time for the trial, since she wouldn’t really be useful to the investigation in her current state anyhow, don’t you think?”

“Oh I think,” Nami said.
“Thought so,” Monokuma said, “Well, I’ll leave you to it, then. This case is… Well, it’s weird. Truth be told, investigation time is a lie. The trial just starts once you’ve collectively found all there is to find, okay? So, just keep that in mind. Take your time if you need it.”

“Are you just saying that to get Box more time to nap?” Nami wondered.

“No,” Monokuma said, “I’m covering my ass so you don’t accuse me of not giving you enough time, actually!”

“So there’s not actually that much different evidence to find?” Madara asked.

“Uu… I said too much again,” Monokuma whined, “Get to work, dummies!”

With that, it left again. So Nami and Madara kept looking around, but it was actually Sayaka who found the next odd thing, after having finished examining the body.

She held up a cup as she announced her find, “This… seems pretty weird.”

“Oh?” Madara asked, turning to see, then took the cup to examine it for himself. “Oh, yeah, it sure is. This seems like if you got every single step of mixing the medicine, just a little bit wrong…”

“That’s what I thought,” Sayaka said, “I made the medicine for Monokuma, so I know what it’s supposed to look like, and this just seemed… Not quite right.”

“Yeah. And the directions…” Madara looked around. “Huh. Where did the directions go, anyway? I could have sworn they have a safety warning on them, that if you make a mistake you should just throw it out because the ingredients can be toxic when mixed wrong…”

“They definitely did,” Sayaka said, “But you’re right, they don’t seem to be anywhere around, um…”

“Yeah?” Madara asked.

“Do you think that you could get down on the ground and check underneath the furniture?” Nami finished Sayaka’s thought for her. “Not that I think you’d peek or even care at all, but given the principle of the matter, you are the only one wearing pants here, so crawling around is your purview.”

“Oh, yeah, sure thing,” Madara said, then dropped to the ground to look around underneath things. In the meantime, Nami and Sayaka just kept looking about the rest of the room, inside of all the drawers and cabinets. But there was no sign, from any of the three of them, of the directions for mixing the Despair Medicine.

“Whatcha looking for?” Amai asked, leaning into the room.

“Oishi?” Nami asked, “I thought that you’d want to leave the crime scene immediately.”

“I did. So I left. But then I came back,” Amai said, “Because… Even I…”

Then she didn’t finish the sentence.

“Even you what, Oishi?” Madara questioned.

“Even I feel kind of obligated to help, okay!?” Amai snapped. “I’m so grossed out right now and freaked out and upset and there’s a corpse right there and he was fine just this morning… And even though I’m not weepy anymore or whatever I’m kinda. Not doing great! Okay! I’ll admit it!”
“Well,” Sayaka said, “We’re looking for the medicine instructions, since we found something that seems like it’s definitely not the medicine.”

“They were right here…” Amai said, reaching for one of the drawers, but it was empty. “Well, they were early this morning, anyway. I used them to make my own dose.”

“Did you make Mitsuru’s?” Sayaka asked.

“No. I said I could, but he told me that he’d get Randy to do it when he brought his food, and not to take too much time before I started making breakfast,” Amai said, then grimaced. “Do you think that concoction…”

“Maybe,” Nami said, “I dunno. I guess we’ll have to find some other evidence first, though. Oishi, if you’re grossed out, you know you don’t have to involve yourself with this or anything.”

“Uck. Thanks,” Amai said, “I mean. You guys are pretty competent, I guess. So I’ll trust you with finding out what happened.”

“Sure thing.” Sayaka smiled at her. “Oh, and what happened last night… Don’t sweat it, okay? It wasn’t your fault, and. I’m already feeling better.”

“Not like I was worried about that or anything,” Amai said, then walked away before anything else could be said.
Once they’d finished up at the crime scene without any additional information, the group left the ward. As they were leaving, Sayaka debriefed them on her findings when investigating the corpse. “So, those wounds… Most of them were actually, definitely postmortem. Some were indeterminate, and at least two were antemortem, but, yeah. Most of that fucked up stuff was after he was already dead.”

“Hm,” Nami mumbled, “That’s good to know, but it does make things even more confusing. I just can’t get over that locked room… It seems completely impossible.”

“We just have to try and find all the evidence we can,” Madara said, “And hope that something comes to light about the locked room. Since several of us tried to open the door and couldn’t, though, I’d say that the bear’s verification that it’s a total locked room was legitimate…”

“Yeah. I did think about the possibility of pretending the door’s locked, but that isn’t reasonable in this case,” Nami said, “And I heard the deadbolt, too. Both when you opened the door and when Mono unlocked it.”

“…Hey, look at that,” Sayaka said, pausing them before the stairwell to point down the hallway. There was a sheet of paper at the far end, which Sayaka ran down to retrieve and came back with. “It’s the medicine instructions.”

“How’d they get down there?” Madara asked.

“It doesn’t seem unlikely,” Nami said, “If it fell on the ground under the door, all the activity in the area could have sent it all the way there. I know if you drop your test in a classroom, sometimes it can go all the way down the line of desks at once, or blow further away from you when you reach for it because humans produce gusts and stuff.”

“Hm, I guess so,” Madara said, “But somebody would probably have to try to get it under the door in the first place, right?”

“Unless it was just somebody being super clumsy,” Sayaka said, “Even Oishi could have done it by accident when she made her own medicine. It was early, so it wouldn’t be hard not to notice. Not everything involved in this case has to be something deliberate.”

“That’s fair,” Nami said, “So, I want to do a rooms check, if that’s all right? We could split up and I think that would be fine. I have an alibi for the time of death, after all.”

“If it were that concoction, though, the killer doesn’t need to have actually been there at the time,” Madara said.

“Mm, true. But Sayaka and I haven’t split up since the morning announcement either,” Nami said, “So will you take me at my word, that the three of us are all trustworthy to investigate solo?”

“I mean, I’ll accept that,” Madara said, “But do you think you’re safe? The killer might want to get rid of one of us to eliminate our findings, if we split up like that. Yamaguchi and I aren’t really easy to take down in a fight, but…”

Nami flexed, and her arm’s shape really didn’t change much at all. “I’ve got this! I’ll do rooms check, you two go to the places that the murder weapons came from and make sure that the missing ones line up, yeah?”
“That works for me,” Sayaka said.

“If you’re both fine with it, then it’s fine with me too,” Madara said.

With that sorted, the investigators did split up. Nami found herself wondering why Randy seemed to have gone off on his own instead of volunteering like he usually did, but she figured it could be because he was probably the last person to see Mitsuru alive, other than the killer. And… Possibly the person who mixed the medicine badly. Nami didn’t want to think about that possibility, but at the same time, if this were an accident and not really a murder…

Ugh, those are thoughts for the trial, not now! Nami reprimanded herself and went straight to the rooms. She didn’t find anything unusual in any of the rooms until she got to the one belonging to the victim himself. Even that wasn’t especially unusual, she almost brushed it off, but…

There was a spiral-bound booklet of computer paper sitting on Mitsuru’s coffee table, which she picked up and examined. There on the top sheet was a title; “Despair Fever Symptom Index”. She frowned at it. If Mitsuru had this all along, why hadn’t he shared it with them? This would have been useful…

She opened it up, and flipped through it. A few different symptoms were filled in with highlighter, oddly enough, basically all the symptoms that they’d already seen others have. Speech pattern loss, broken impulse control (Also referred to as loss of common sense), weepiness, sensory exaggeration, partial paralysis… And then two others that hadn’t been seen yet. Emotional Honesty, and Inaccurate Instructing.

Sappiness was nowhere on the list, either. Nami was a bit put-off by that, but it wasn’t the issue at hand here. Emotional Honesty might cover that, anyhow. Even the fact that Mitsuru had this and didn’t share it wasn’t the issue at hand here, though that might come up in the process of finding his killer. Inaccurate Instructing, huh? Nami had to wonder if that had been highlighted for a reason.

A few other symptoms had scribbled notes next to them, as well. Mostly a lot of question marks next to underlined symptoms, including hallucinations as well as forgetfulness. So those were probably symptoms that seemed possible, but not obvious, in the people who’d already been cured. This made sense too, Nami figured. A sick person wouldn’t only have one or two symptoms of the disease, even a disease as strange as Despair Fever. The ‘impulse control’ symptom also had next to it a small ‘2?’.

She took the symptom booklet with her when she left Mitsuru’s room, then continued her check. She stopped in front of Box’s room for a moment, and felt her head pound, just a bit. Right, she shouldn’t wake her up early. So she left that room alone. Maybe it was against her investigative integrity to overlook an entire room, but forgive her if she was more worried about a friend’s emotional well-being than about combing for clues in a room that probably wouldn’t have any.

She finished her check, and there wasn’t anything other than the symptoms booklet. Time to move on, then.
Having finished her rooms check, Nami went back upstairs, and met up with Sayaka and Madara outside of the original dining hall.

“Everywhere that I checked lined up exactly with the weapons in the corpse,” Sayaka said.

“As did mine,” Madara added, “It seems that the origin of every single murder weapon is accounted for, yeah?”

“Makes sense,” Nami said, “All I found in my rooms check was this booklet that lists all the Despair Fever symptoms. It was in Fujishiro’s own room, though… Which is kind of weird. You’d think he’d share this with us.”

“He answered all our questions about the fever anytime we had them, though,” Sayaka said, “So it wasn’t like he was actually withholding information, right? Maybe he just wanted to be able to sound smart.”

“That doesn’t seem like something he wouldn’t do, from what I knew of the guy,” Madara agreed, “But we should probably run it by Ueda, right? Since he knew him best.”

“We should,” Nami said, “But first, uh… I guess that the fact the trial hasn’t been announced yet means that there’s something we’re missing, right? So, we should take a look in the empty wings.”

“You think something about this case could be in there?” Sayaka asked.

“I dunno why there would be, but we can check, right?” Nami said, then started to lead the way in the empty wings. It was a huge area, but they didn’t exactly have to go over it with a fine-toothed comb right out the gate. It was possible that the evidence they needed could be something really obvious, after all, so looking for the details would only be necessary if that turned out not to be the case.

And, well, it kind of did turn out to be the case after all. There wasn’t anything at the pool, or in the arcade, but there was something to be found on the top floor. Not just on the top floor, but the quarantine room.

What was odd about it was the fact that it was open again. Its door had gone from a slightly different segment of wall, back to the usual tough plastic. It would have been nice to have quarantine available to them during the Despair Fever motive, but then, that was the punishment for having such a complicated case when they did. It was already clear that the motives themselves would happen at set points, no matter what the participants did. Or maybe there were a few options, because didn’t Monokuma say that there was a motive planned which just wouldn’t work anymore?

Well, anyway. Nami pushed the plastic aside and walked into the quarantine room. It… Looked completely different to the last time that she was in here, and the mere sight of it set her head spinning. Not because there was anything awful or shocking, but because the previously clinical floor, walls, and ceiling were now thoroughly patterned. The clinical white still peeked through in places, but red borders which gave way to black seemed to be eating away at it. She stepped forward and reached out to the blackness, which was still solid mass, unlike the appearance that it was actually the void coming to destroy this room.

Nobody was in here, either, but if anybody had been, then they were probably already in the
courtroom, right? Nami decided to go with that, as she sat down on one of the cots and squeezed her eyes shut because *this stuff was unsettling*. Forcing her head to understand it was only a pattern, when visually, it really seemed like the floor and walls were being destroyed, was just a lot of work for her already-troublesome brain.

“It looks like… corruption,” Madara said, “This is weird, for sure.”

“Corruption?” Sayaka asked.

“Yeah, like, visually, the concept of corruption,” Madara said, “It’s probably supposed to make us distrust the person who was being kept here, or something, but it’s just an art installation, I guess… Reserved to quarantine, of course, as corruption ought to be.”

“I don’t get it,” Sayaka said, then paused a moment before speaking again, “Found something.”

Nami opened her eyes to see that Sayaka held a plate.

“This means that up until the investigation started, there *was* somebody in here,” Sayaka said, “Since plates and such only get cleaned up when left alone, outside of investigation time. Nothing gets cleaned up during investigation time.”

“And this relates to the case, how?” Madara asked.

“It probably doesn’t,” Nami said, “But it confirms something for us two, at least. Box really was bringing her meals here, to the person in here, instead of eating them herself.”

“Oh, I see,” Madara said, “That girl’s not right.”

“She’s been having… A hard time?” Sayaka said, not even sure herself what was going on with Box.

“Hm. Well, I’m sure that whatever it is, she’ll get it sorted out soon,” Madara said, “But I kind of get the feeling it might be out of our depth. All of us. Anyway, we have a confirmation that somebody’s been in here, but that doesn’t help much with the current case, right?”

“I don’t know, it might,” Nami said, “You never know what can factor into these things… Mono itself said that this case was going to get weird.”

“I guess that’s true…” Madara said, and speak of the devil, the intercom flared to life.

“It’s time for the fourth class trial! Please gather in the trial lobby once more,” Monokuma’s voice filled the room, “And we can reassemble the happenings here.”

It wasn’t its usual enthusiastic self, but at the same time, it also didn’t seem as melancholy as it had of late; Kind of excited to ‘reassemble the happenings here’. That was a super niche meme and Nami had no idea where it would have heard of that one before, but she had to admit, it worked. In any case, she and her detectives left the quarantine room to go to the trial lobby downstairs.

Once there, the elevator was already up, despite the fact that everybody hadn’t gathered yet. Nami wouldn’t use it right away. But she knew why the option was there.

Awful as it might be to feel this way at a time like this, she was kind of… Excited. For just one aspect of this trial.
1:00 PM / 1300 Hours

Nami waited in the trial lobby, waited until Box arrived. After all, the elevator would come back, and the others could join them downstairs. Before she got there, though, Amai also arrived. So when Box got there, they shared an awkward look, but then Nami stepped forward. She stood before the elevator doors, but facing them. “Who wants to come downstairs with me? The elevator’s already here, so we may as well, right?”

“Hm…?” Box wondered, then seemed to break from her fog enough to realize what was going on. “Oh, Yes! Yes, we definitely should go. Especially you, though, Nami. We’ve got to go down to the courtroom.”

“I thought so. Of course, anybody else can come down as well,” Nami said.

“I’ll… Stay here to let the others know you already went?” Amai offered, then sat down on one of the shoddy cots of the lobby. Madara and Sayaka, however, stepped forward to join the trip down to the courtroom. Just as expected, when the doors opened, there wasn’t any placeholder sign in the podium where Goro stood.

He was right there.

“Goro!” Nami exclaimed, starting to run towards him, but then he turned to look at her. He wasn’t even trying to put that fake smile on anymore, and his eyes stopped her in her tracks. Like he was telling her not to come any closer. So she didn’t.

“...Hi, Nami,” He said, and his voice was a bit raspy, but there was some light in it. Some genuine light, separate from any from the past, though, “Sorry to keep you waiting.”
He looked kind of terrible, but, well, of course he did. He’d been saved from execution at the last moment, and it wasn’t like he was exactly doing very well physically even beforehand. Still, he was there, standing there.
“Are you… Oh, jeeze. That’s a stupid thing to ask-” Nami started.

“No,” Goro interrupted, “It isn’t stupid. I’m okay. I am. Something like okay, anything. But if you hugged me right now, you’d probably break me. I’m a little bit fragile, if that wasn’t made ridiculously clear.” He lifted his arm to show her something. “But, hey. It’s fine if I wear this visibly, now that we’re friends again, right?”

It was the bracelet. Nami started to tear up, she couldn’t help it. “Of course you can, stupid. And we are friends again, so you better give me time to actually make good on that fact. Don’t just go dying again.”

“Ehh, Monokuma wouldn’t let me if I tried,” Goro said.

“That means you did try,” Box said.

“Hey! You didn’t have to say that out loud, you know…” Goro waved his hands in front of himself defensively, but his tone was still just lighthearted enough.

“Well, I’m glad that Monokuma stopped you,” Nami said.

“I went through all the trouble of keeping him alive in the first place,” Monokuma said, “So why the fuck would I let him throw that away, huh? Well, I played back the end of that last trial so that this idiot knew you actually wanted him back.”

As Monokuma said that, Goro glanced at Madara, and frowned. Once the bear finished speaking, he spoke, soft, “I’m sorry that it was me, you know.”

“Fuck, man. Don’t apologize for that,” Madara said, “It’s not like you could help it, and besides. It made more sense for you to make it back, anyway.”

“In that case, I’m sorry I killed your friend?” Goro shrugged.

“Yeah, that works,” Madara said, “Apology accepted, though. We all saw what happened. Holding it against you would just be a dick move, given the circumstances. Just, like, don’t let it happen again, right?”

“Mm…” Goro nodded.

“We won’t let it happen,” Sayaka said, “Because, you don’t have to be alone. That’s the problem, right? If somebody’s with you, it would be fine, right?”

“Ah, you’d do that for me? Thank you, and you’re right,” Goro said, “But you know, it was kind of a perfect storm too, wasn’t it? And there’s nobody left here who could produce that sort of thing, unless I’ve severely misjudged one of our remaining good men.”

“Yeah,” Nami said, “It’ll be fine, now. Everything will be okay.”


“Huh?” Box asked.

“There’s still plenty of suffering left in this game…” Goro said, staring down at his podium. And he sounded like he was trying not to cry. “The fact I’m here right now proves that. Because Fujishiro’s dead. And other people still are gonna die. And every single time… Somebody’s going
to get torn apart, the way I did last time.”

“Goro…” Nami kept her voice gentle, like during the last trial.

“This is… This…” Goro clenched his fists. “Killing Games are always like this, people have to suffer so much, but… This is different. This isn’t a normal one… At all. I want to know. Why is it us, exactly? Why fill it up with such broken people, huh? Why is this happening to us? If it was all just people from my own year… Then I’d be the worst kind of scum. I’d be worthless. And it would be fine, because I wouldn’t. Even. Care. I would have killed and died right there at the beginning.”

With that, Nami closed the distance between them and, careful not to hurt him, pet the top of his head, ruffling his hair ever so softly. He lifted his head to look her in the eyes, and she smiled. “I’m glad that you care, you know. I wouldn’t want to watch you die for real, in a normal Killing Game. You can’t just fly off and leave it all behind. You’ve gotta get better first.”

“...Yeah,” Goro said, “I want to. I dunno why. But I really, do want to get better. Can you help me? Do you think… You can help me?”

“I know I can,” Nami said, then leaned down and pressed a gentle, nurturing kiss to his forehead. Something about him, knowing her past… She really just wanted to take care of him. “Eventually, I can.”
“...Thank you,” Goro said, lifting his unbroken wrist to her shoulder. “I always knew, you’d save me, Nami.”

“I’m a little bit late. But I’ll do my best. For now, though,” She pulled away from him. “You’ll help us figure out what happened to Fujishiro, right? You’re a smart cookie.”

“Of course,” Goro said, “I’ll help as much as I can. I was just here the whole investigation, but… I think that I might know something anyway.”
The rest of the participants came downstairs not long after that, and some of them were quite surprised to see that Goro was back, though Nami stood with him and made sure that nobody would, in their surprise, end up agitating any of his injuries. It wasn’t too difficult, though, because in spite of the revelation that Goro was alive, it was more important to start the trial and figure out how exactly Mitsuru ended up dead.

“It’s time to start the trial,” Monokuma said, “Nami, still care to do the honors of debriefing your peers?”

“Yes,” Nami said, returning to her own podium and pulling out her Monopad. “Mitsuru Fujishiro’s body was discovered at 1128 hours this morning, by myself, Tsukune Madara, Torimi Shinoe, and Box Hako. The time of death is 1013 hours. The cause of death is unlisted, but it can be seen that there were a great number of pointed implements stabbed into the body. According to Sayaka, only two wounds can be confirmed to be antemortem. A few are debatable. The majority are postmortem.”

“During the course of investigation,” Madara said, “We weren’t able to find a particularly high number of clues. All of the origins of the weapons used are accounted for. At the crime scene, we found an odd concoction that seems like an incorrectly mixed medicine. The instructions for mixing the medicine were absent, but we found them in the hallway. In Fujishiro’s room, there was a booklet listing Despair Fever symptoms. In the quarantine room there was a plate, but we can assume that was for Bakura.”

“Yeah, it was mine,” Goro said, “Box was bringing me meals while I was stuck in there. I dunno, though, that might still be a hint for this case anyway?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Amai questioned.

“Who can say?” Goro shrugged.

“Well, we do need to consider it,” Sayaka said, “Since the investigation only ended after we found that. But, yeah, I’d say that’s really it for what the evidence in this case was…”

“So it woooooould be simple, I bet,” Torimi said, “Except for the locked room.”

“Exactly,” Nami said, “The crime scene was, when we discovered it, a perfect locked room. Monokuma defines a perfect locked room as a room which cannot be entered from the outside through any method. No accessible windows, no way to open the door, no secret passages. If there was any way to get in from the outside, then we would have been forced to figure it out ourselves, but since it was a perfect locked room, Monokuma used its own travel methods to go through the door and unlock it. The lock is a deadbolt. There’s not even a keyhole of any variety on the outside of the door.”

“So, it’s completely impossible to lock or unlock the room from the outside?” Tsukasa clarified.

“Exactly…” Box said, “A perfect locked room, indeed. There wasn’t even any way to break the door down, given that Mitsuru…”

“In that case, well, couldn’t somebody have been hiding inside the room?” Tsukasa offered, “That’s the standard solution to a perfect locked room, isn’t it? That the culprit was hiding inside, and slipped out while everybody was distracted.”
“Noooot possible,” Torimi said, “I was telling everyone about the locked room when they arrived, remember? So I saw everybody come up the stairs. We already know there are nooooo secret passages, so somebody couldn’t get downstairs from thereeere.”

“Well, uh,” Randy said, “No secret passages for a perfect locked room doesn’t mean there can’t be any, period. There could be something like a laundry chute, which goes down, but not back up. Right?”

“We didn’t find anything like that when we were investigating the ward,” Sayaka said, “And we looked really thoroughly because of the missing instructions. If there was anything else weird anywhere in that room then we absolutely would’ve found it.”

“There’s definitely not anything like that in my ward,” Box backed her up, “Secret passages have nothing to do with me. They’re not necessary. Won’t be there.”

“So… It actually doesn’t make any sense, does it?” Tsukasa said, “Because there’s no way that Fujishiro would have been able to lock himself in, and besides, postmortem wounds mean that it has to have been a murder, right? It’s… Hm. Well, Monokuma can walk through the walls? So…”

“I explained this already, earlier. There are restrictions! My methods of travel cannot be used to commit a murder or to dispose of evidence. I am personally disallowed from tampering with crime scenes in most ways, but I am permitted to do something like opening a door,” Monokuma said, “These paws aren’t capable of killing! Except, I guess, for when the rules get broken.”

“Well,” Amai said, “What about the incorrect medicine? We know that I didn’t make it, cause Fujishiro told me to go ahead and get to work on breakfast…”

“Is it possible that you dropped the instructions?” Madara asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I might have heard a paper fall, now that you mention it?” Amai admitted, then puffed her cheeks out like she was deep in thought for a few seconds. “Hm, definitely didn’t see it though! But, I do think…” She froze. “Uh, I do remember leaving the drawer open, too? Was it still open when you found the body?”

“No, it was shut,” Nami said.

“That would be…” Randy said, “Because I shut it.”

“Randy?” Nami asked.

“Come on.” He gave a bitter chuckle. “Dancing around it like that, when you know that I was in there this morning. I shut the drawer, and… I made the incorrect medicine. That’s been obvious since the start, you just haven’t said it because you don’t want to accuse me, right?”

“Well.” Nami looked away. “There’s a lot of stuff that doesn’t make sense in this case, you know?”

“Whatever part of it doesn’t make sense,” Randy said, “This part’s kind of obvious. I didn’t have the directions, and Fujishiro walked me through making it verbally. But something went wrong, I guess. He still drank it, at least half of it, it looked like. And it says that it’s toxic if made wrong, right? So. Fuck. I guess that I… Killed Fujishiro…?”
“Well that’s bullshit,” Nami said.

“Is it really?” Randy asked, “We don’t know what the toxic medicine does, do we? It’s possible it let him walk again, so he locked himself in, and maybe he also set it up to look like a real murder? I don’t know. Shit.”

“Yeah, that isn’t what happened,” Nami said, “I don’t think you’re totally blameless, though. Because, I bet that played a part in what happened. Isn’t what killed him, though. And isn’t much your fault, either. Cause this booklet that we found… Nah, even before we found it, Fujishiro did mention this symptom. Inaccurate instructions. It was one of his symptoms that he couldn’t tell you the right way to make the medicine.”

“Even if…” Randy tried again, but gave it up. “Fuck. It just doesn’t make sense? I mean. None of it really does. If it could just be that I screwed up and poisoned him, then we could be done with this, but I… Don’t have any idea. Sorry. Some detective I am, huh?”

“No, it’s alright,” Nami said, “And I understand now, why you weren’t able to investigate. You were just scared of this situation, right? To realize that you could be responsible, but really, you aren’t. Trust me, the only responsibility you have in this situation… Is that Fujishiro might have died some other way to avoid getting you executed.”

“You think it was a suicide?” Randy asked.

“Well, no,” Nami said, “These injuries super don’t make sense for a suicide, after all. Way too many of them are postmortem. And, we can’t just assume that the faulty medicine made his legs work again, that’s irresponsible. It definitely wasn’t a long con to make us think his legs didn’t work, either, he definitely actually had Despair Fever. There isn’t a conspiracy going on here, exactly…”

“And even if he could walk again,” Riko offered, “The weapons which killed him were pulled from all over the facility, weren’t they? If he went to gather them, somebody would have had to see him. Anybody here could have discretely gathered up those weapons, of course. But not him. He couldn’t be spotted by anybody at all and get away with it.”

“In the case that he might have set up a trap to kill himself with, right?” Nami clarified.

“Right. It would be possible if he could move on his own. Reasonable, even,” Riko explained, “Get poisoned, go and gather weapons, lock the door, suspend them above your bed, then do something to get them to fall…”

“No,” Sayaka said, “There weren’t any signs of string or anything, so even if he could walk, it’s actually not reasonable. I checked the body real goddamn closely, so I would’ve seen if there was any way to do that.”

“What about the ceiling tile, though?” Kurou wondered, “They’re cork tiles, so it could be possible given Fujishiro’s strength… To jam them into the ceiling, then wait for gravity to do its work. That would explain why only two are definitely antemortem, and some are indetermined… They didn’t have to all fall at one time.”

“Ah…” Sayaka trailed off. “Oh, jeeze. Cork tiles, I didn’t even think about that.”
“You shouldn’t think about that,” Box said, “Because Ueda doesn’t know what he’s talking about. My ward doesn’t have the drop ceiling. The rest of the building has cork tiles, and Ueda’s ward does, but the rest of the sixth floor is painted drywall with wall-joint moulding. However, we know that this hospital doesn’t use the strongest drywall, and Randy’s fist can dent it…”

“None of us checked to see, though,” Sayaka said, “If there were holes in the ceiling or anything there…”

“But having something fall out of drywall after puncturing it… It’d fall immediately,” Kurou said.

“Well, did we look at the ceiling at all?” Nami wondered, “Because the gift shop does sell gum, you know.”

“Guys,” Goro said, “You’re thinking way too hard for something that requires granting that Fujishiro could do something that, we kind of all think that he wasn’t able to do at that time, you know? Right?”

“It does need us to grant that…” Nami admitted, “But what are we supposed to do? Don’t we have to grant something like this, to figure out what happened here?”

“If you’re going to grant that the guy who couldn’t currently walk was able to walk, then you know, you may as well just grant that some magic witch did it,” Goro said, “Pfft. I mean, that might be our best bet with a perfect locked room, now that I think about it that way?”

“So we need to think of it from another angle, do we?” Nami wondered, balling up her fists against her podium. This locked room was… Frustrating. She was trying to think of another angle to approach it with, but she was just coming up blank. There wasn’t anything. There was nothing she could think of, in this case, except that Mitsuru was either lying about his symptoms, or recovered use of his legs enough to set up this locked room… “But he… Worked for Future Foundation so if he… did walk, he could have gotten all of the weapons undetected… right…?”

“And where’s the heart in that, huh?” Randy asked, and she snapped her attention to him. “Once again, you forget the third facet of mystery, Nami. That’s why you’re the attorney, not the detective, huh? All you need to sue or win a case, really, is whodunnit and howdunnit. But in a real mystery, there’s the whydunnit too.”

“W-Well, maybe you’re right about that.” Nami gave a nervous laugh. “After all, facts don’t care about your feelings, or whatever… Ah, but, what were you saying?”

“We know why Bakura set up the last case as something confusing,” Randy said, “He didn’t want to get away with it, but he wanted to be a ‘villain worth being destroyed by you’. Fujishiro definitely doesn’t have any weird hangups like that, though. And if he’s committing suicide to keep me from being executed for poisoning him, then why make it such a confusing mystery? It would make sense for him to stab himself with a needle from the ward he was in, but gathering weapons from different locations, locking the door… Fujishiro wouldn’t want to get away with anything, even if he was forfeiting his own escape, he cares about more than two of the rest of us. So. I don’t think… He’d really do this. Or not the way we’re thinking about it, anyway.”
“Not the way we’re thinking about it?” Nami asked.

“Well, yeah,” Randy said, “Making this stuff all complicated, I mean. If it was actually something that Fujishiro did himself, we’d have to consider why. I think that he was trying to tell us something, maybe. Don’t you?”

“Now that you say it… Yeah, honestly. That makes sense,” Nami said, “A case this complicated, there’s got to be some sort of reason behind it. He wouldn’t have been trying to actually stump us, but lead us to some specific truth… Right?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying,” Randy said.

“Mm. I think that’s more reasonable,” Sayaka said, “Than just saying that he could have set this up just to confuse us. It’s also, well, we still don’t know if he could have even walked to set it up on his own.”

“This morning,” Riko said, “Everyone but you, Nami, and Randy were around a lot. I was just walking around the building, and I think I saw everybody a few times. So there’s no way to narrow down if anybody could have been gathering up the weapons for this.”

“Admitting that you were just walking around makes you suspicious too,” Madara said, “But, yeah, that’s a good point. It isn’t like everybody is accounted for being a particular place for a good amount of time. Even I was pretty antsy this morning, and sort of wandered around.”

“Sayaka,” Tsukasa piped up, “Which of the wounds were antemortem, anyway?”

“Oh, right,” Sayaka said, “That might be something to think about. There was one in his stomach and one in his chest. Both of those were syringes from right in the Volunteer Ward. Almost every weapon from another location seems postmortem.”

“So if it was another killer, that means the weapons were probably gathered up after Fujishiro was dead?” Randy wondered.

“So between the time of death and the body discovery… It would be tight, but possible to do that in that time,” Nami mumbled.

“Well, but it might have had to be faster,” Madara said, “After all, a culprit would have no way of knowing how long it would take for somebody to discover the crime scene, you know?”

“That makes youooou suspicious,” Torimi said, “Since we ran into you on the way up theeeere. And you tested the door again too…”

“Right,” Randy said, “It’s possible the door was locked for real when Hako found it, because the scene was still being set up. Madara realized that she was aware of the locked door, left, set himself up to join the body discovery, and faked the door being locked…?”

“That would need Monokuma in on it,” Madara said, “Since it verified the locked room.”

“Yeah, and I’m not able to do that,” Monokuma said, “I’m restricted from tampering. I could only even unlock that door because it was the only way to let you discover the body!”

**Trial 4/2: Knox's Eighth**
“We have no way of knowing that you’re truthful,” Riko said, “You saying that you couldn’t do something means nothing if you’re actually conspiring with him.”

“I mean,” Nami said, “Again, I did hear the lock. Didn’t seem like something that could really be faked? And I believe when Monokuma says it’s restricted from certain stuff. If it was allowed to tamper with crime scenes, don’t you think that it already would have?”

“Conspiring to claim a room is locked doesn’t mean tampering, though,” Riko said, “It’s capable of lying, after all. And it has control of this Neo World program anyway. Couldn’t it easily fake a noise like the lock being undone?”

“Probably,” Monokuma said, “But utilizing something like that just isn’t fair play. If I had the ability to imitate noises like that, it already would have been established, but it hasn’t been yet. Of course, I can see why you’re grasping like this for things that haven’t even been mentioned before. The investigation was pretty short. But trust me, all the information that you need to solve this exists! In fact, you’re all aware of just enough info. A lot of it’s not from during the investigation though, so I understand.”

“I believe it,” Randy said, “Monokuma’s given us fair play up to this point, after all. All the information to solve these murders has been afforded to us, down to opening Kaede’s ward early so that we could be clued in on the poison in the second case. I don’t think it’d just turn around and break that.”

“So…” Nami said, “We can’t grant any scenarios without precedent, in solving this thing?”

“I’d say no,” Monokuma said, “Scenarios without precedent might seem like the only options here, but trust me, there’s a method. I guess it’s a bit of an unconventional one, sure, but it’s been stated to be possible.”

“That’s a good hint,” Goro said, and pointed a single finger-gun towards Monokuma. “Thanks for that.”

“Do you have an idea of what’s going on here, Goro?” Nami asked.

“Kind of?” Goro said, “But the thing is, I don’t wanna just outright say it. Cause I think that’d be disrespectful. Like how my mystery needed to be solved, not just confessed to out the gate… This is a mystery that’s waiting for you, too. I’m not a part of this, so it’s not my place to solve it. I already know too much to feel the heart of the mystery, anyway.”

“What does that even fucking mean?” Amai questioned, “You come back to life and you can’t even be a little bit useful!? What’s the point of that?”

“Oishi,” Nami glared at her, and she shrunk a bit.

“Oh, no, I deserve that.” Goro laughed a bit. “I’m being a cryptic little dickwad right now, it’s undeniable. But I mean every word I say. Insult me all you like, my opinion won’t change.”

“I thiiiiink,” Torimi spoke up, “The locked room has got to be the keeeeeeey, right?”

“The key… Yeah,” Nami said, then addressed the whole courtroom. “The real question that we need to sort out, the actual mystery… The postmortem wounds, the weapons from all over the place, the question that Fujishiro’s asking us. It’s ‘who but me could create the locked room?’. ”
Trial 4/2: Who But Me Could Create The Locked Room?

‘Who but me could create the locked room?’

That was it, really. Nami realized the question that was being asked in this case. There wasn’t any way for Mitsuru, under any circumstance, even if he regained use of his legs… To possibly create this locked room on his own. Were it a simpler murder, then it would be easy to mark it off as being his own work. In fact, Nami was still completely convinced the death itself was a suicide. The death wasn’t the mystery. The room was. Mitsuru set up a scene in which there had to be somebody else. So who could make the locked room?

It was already debunked that the room wasn’t actually locked. It certainly was, and perfectly so. There wasn’t any way to get into the room, or escape it, through any other avenue. Nami, Torimi, Box, and Madara discovered the body. And… Monokuma, too. Torimi kept track and saw that every other person came up the stairs. There was no way anybody was hiding inside and slipped out unnoticed. Monokuma could not use its travel methods to commit murder or destroy evidence. Further, it was forbidden from tampering with crime scenes, even to the point where it could only open the room because it was a verifiable perfect seal.

Mitsuru had been poisoned by Randy accidentally, but this wasn’t what killed him. And those… Were the facts of the case.

“Monokuma…” Nami asked, “I have a question for you.”

“Yes?” Monokuma asked.

“If we all agree that the cause of death itself was a suicide,” Nami said, “Are you able to verify that?”

“...You know what? Yeah. I guess I’m able to do that. You’ve figured that much out, so, yes. It was a suicide. And, well, we could just end the trial here if that’s what you’d all want…” Monokuma offered.

“It isn’t,” Box said, “I think.”

“I know for sure that I want to answer Fujishiro’s question,” Randy said, “It’s still my fault, that he ended up dead… I appreciate that he took action to keep me from being punished, and because of that, I have to do my part in finding out what he wants us to know.”

There was agreement all around.

“In that case,” Nami said, “In that case, we can think of it this way. The mystery isn’t his death. He committed suicide, using those first two wounds that were definitely antemortem. The mystery is the room itself; Who staged his body, and further, who could have made the locked room. The staging exists only to assure us that he couldn’t have made the locked room on his own.”

“Right,” Riko said, “Since the setup does imply that any one of us could have gathered those weapons, it doesn’t actually point to anything except that it couldn’t be a one-man job. I think you’re right about the question being asked here.”

“So it really comes down to the room,” Torimi said, then smiled and folded her hands under her chin. “I knew it would be impoooortant, you know.”
“It’s not just there to be confusing, yeah,” Madara said, “We were trying to disregard the most confusing part of the mystery, as if it was obscuring the truth… But we found that bit, no problem. At this point, there aren’t any stakes, are there?”

“There’s still stakes,” Sayaka said.

“Hm? Well, nobody else is going to die. Monokuma confirmed it was a suicide,” Madara said, “None of us here will be executed, whether by being the culprit, or because the culprit got away with it.”

“Yeah, nobody’s gonna die,” Sayaka noted, “But knowing Mitsuru… I mean, he wouldn’t freak us out like this if it wasn’t important. So, maybe it’s something like… Nobody will die, but somebody might not really live, either. If we can’t figure it out?”

“Not to be a fucking bitch, but that’s more stupid than a lobster’s last cognitive moments,” Amai said.

“No, I think she’s onto something,” Kurou said, “Even if it was worded weirdly… That’s about what I’d expect of him. So there’s somebody in this room who’ll suffer if we don’t solve Mitsuru’s mystery?”

“Maybe not in this room?” Riko said, “Could be somebody outside?”

“No,” Nami said, “It has to be somebody here, and it has to be the person who can create the locked room. If Fujishiro had any intention of doing something to help somebody on the outside, it would have been sooner after they let us communicate with those people.”

“But if it was for the sake of somebody here, I think they would have spoken up by now,” Tsukasa said, “Maybe I’ve giving people the benefit of the doubt, but…”

“Unless they’re not able to speak up,” Nami said, “Unless, they’re being prevented from telling us the truth of all this… And that’s why Fujishiro had to set this up. So we could find that person’s truth.”

“But what sort of situation could that even be?” Amai wondered, “It seems like a really weird thing, y’know? Like… What kind of truth…”

“We’ve been saying it the whole time. The truth of who but Fujishiro could create the perfect locked room,” Nami said, “And there’s a specific criteria to be able to do that. Think about it. Monokuma’s travel methods have been defined for us… As being able to walk through walls, and coming when your name is called. It’s also been defined that these methods can’t be used to commit a murder or destroy evidence. Monokuma itself isn’t permitted to tamper in any sense, though.”

“Monokuma’s travel methods…” Randy observed, “Those came up once already, didn’t they? In the second case. The reason that a trap couldn’t have been used, because Monokuma couldn’t discard of the evidence…”

“And in that same case,” Nami said, “The issue of fair play came up. And we determined that if there is an AI here… That person falls under the exact same heading. They use the same travel methods. However, only Monokuma has the overall tampering restriction. Therefore…”

And Nami came upon the answer. The heart of the locked room mystery.

“The person who created this locked room… Is the Artificial Intelligence among us.”
“The… AI?” Torimi asked.

“I’m… Sure that it’s come up since then, but I guess for the newcomers, it wouldn’t have really been fair play after all. So Monokuma was partially lying,” Nami said, “Even so, all the information to conclude that the AI could create the locked room was here.”

“But isn’t Monokuma itself an AI?” Madara asked.

“No,” Nami said, “It’s completely precedented, actually, that Monokuma would be controlled remotely rather than having a self-contained personality. Who is controlling Monokuma isn’t a problem right now, though. It’s the AI. I think that the answer isn’t just that the AI could make the locked room, but who the AI is.”

“Well, can you maybe,” Amai said, “Explain how they did it? I mean, I get it! But some people might be a little slower on the uptake, yeah?”

“Of course,” Nami said, “It’s pretty simple when you think about it this way, with the AI in mind. Fujishiro already had them figured out… And when he realized the situation, he called them by name. He showed the AI the fact he had inaccurate instructions highlighted in his booklet, then explained his plan incorrectly. The AI was able to interpret it, knowing ahead of time about the problem with the instructions.”

“Following those instructions,” She continued, “The AI wandered around gathering weapons from different locations, probably timing it to be able to be called back to Fujishiro, though it’s not like it was necessary. The door was kept locked through the entire process, so nobody would walk in, and the weapons are all small enough to be concealed while walking around with them.”

“After setting everything up, Fujishiro killed himself using weapons directly from the ward. Once he was dead, the AI put the rest of the weapons in his body,” Nami said, “And, like Monokuma kindly demonstrated for us, walked directly through the locked door. Knowing this was a suicide allows us to acknowledge this as the work of the AI. They cannot commit murder or discard evidence using these methods, but certainly can stage a scene and create a locked room.”

“I get it,” Kurou said, “And I’m assuming that… Fujishiro also knew this AI wasn’t allowed to confess their nature to us, and wanted to create a scenario in which we had no choice but to find them out?”

“Right,” Nami said.

“And… I’m sure this is for that person’s sake,” Kurou said, “Not to expose the AI to us as an enemy, but to actually help them, right?”

“Of course,” Riko said, “Because at this point, nobody here is actually an enemy. It would be absurd, at this point, for there to be any malice left. Even if somebody were a spectacular actor.”

“Well, the Mastermind…” Tsumugi spoke up for the first time all trial. She barely seemed present, emotionally, like she was off on some other planet. Then she looked down and sighed. “Oh, you’re right. The Mastermind doesn’t need to be malicious… I mean, if my memories are right, then…”

“Exactly,” Riko noted, “We can’t, at this point, have an enemy. Even Monokuma doesn’t quite qualify, somehow.”
“Hey, Mitsuru wouldn’t want to hear that,” Sayaka said, “Even if I agree with you there.”

“He never warmed up to me before he died… It’s almost enough to make me cry,” Monokuma whined.

Nami had stayed quiet for a bit of this, because she was thinking. She was on the edge of piecing it all together and determining the identity of the AI… And in order to do that, she did need to tune out the white noise. Focus on the important stuff, but the difficult part was that this case went beyond its own investigation. Trying to pick out the important parts of her own memory from further back than this was a weakness. She never needed to rely on things that she personally experienced for any case since her first one, after all, and that one was focused in on her. She didn’t know who to focus on here… Even if she had some idea, it was difficult to pin down over the last twelve days…

“Who the AI is?” Amai brought up, “Yeah, I think I might kinda have an idea. Even if I might not have realized what all you were talking about before… I’ll admit that, because fuck you all, I know the answer.”

“Well, I’ve known it since the start,” Goro said, raising his hand. “Actually, I’ve known since… A little bit before that last case? But if you figured it out from something other than Fujishiro’s mystery, keep your whore mouth shut!”

“He-eeey,” Amai complained, “That’s not nice.”

“You’re not nice,” Goro said.

“Fine, then I guess I won’t tell.” Amai stuck her tongue out.

Nami took a deep breath, then said to the courtroom. “Please. Be quiet, for a minute, okay? I feel like I can almost figure it out, but tuning out white noise and trying to remember what’s important from my memories is really hard…”

“Ah, Nami,” Sayaka said, “You don’t have to do it alone. Uh, what’s important… Why not consider one of the other locked rooms that we’ve seen here? Even though those cases got solved—”

“That’s it.” Nami hit both palms against her podium. “The last locked room that we saw. The AI can tamper as much as she likes… And does burning something so it’s harder to recognize, count as disposing of evidence?”

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“That’s it.” Nami hit both palms against her podium. “The last locked room that we saw. The AI can tamper as much as she likes… And does burning something so it’s harder to recognize, count as disposing of evidence?”

“Well, that really considers if you count the key as evidence,” Amai said, now using her knowledge to bounce Nami.

“It was a murder weapon… But an oven can’t burn a piece of wood so badly that you lose track of the fact it was used to commit a murder, just warp and blacken it a bit, right?” Nami tapped her fingers. “We went with the idea that the tool could be recreated using a disposable substance, like soap, at the time. But an extra key is completely unnecessary… When the person who last took the key said she would make a locked room, to improve the mystery, she used this same method. Locked the door, put the key in the oven, and walked out through the door. And of course…”

“She also had complete control over when her perfect locked room was discovered in this case, because she’s the one who told us there was something odd there…” Nami pointed past Tsumugi on her right. “Isn’t that right, Box Hako?”
Trial 4/2: Have You Got a Name?

The moment Box was accused of being the AI, it was confirmed, not by anything that she said or did, but by what started happening around her. Her podium started to distort with the same pattern that tainted the walls of the quarantine room, and her own appearance was… Incorrect. Her ribbons fluttered as if there was a gust of wind around her, but nothing else moved. Strangest of all, she acquired and immediately lost an absurd variety of injuries, visible only for a split second before they were gone again.

“Ah! Yes. I see,” Amai said, recoiling from the… Thing which resembled her best friend.

“Of course it makes sense that it would be you,” Nami said, “Because if it was anybody else… They probably wouldn’t have agreed to make such a brutal scene for Fujishiro, right? But you… You’re not able to say no. Are you?”

“I… Can…” Box said, clutching at her head and squeezing her eyes shut. “But she. Can’t. And I’m her! I’m… I… Aaaaa?? AAA?”

Riko looked to Monokuma, narrowed her eyes, then left her podium to approach Box’s instead. Once she was there, she reached out with both hands and grabbed Box’s shoulders, at which point the strange effects ceased. Then, she walked around the podium to squeeze in between Box and Tsumugi, keeping her arms around her friend to try and ground her.

“…Well, uh, the point is that you, uh, whatever the case is, couldn’t turn down Fujishiro at that moment. Am I correct?” Nami asked. Box nodded in reply. “Okay, so that’s good to know. We’re on the right track, and it’s kind of hard to deny that she’s the AI with all of the, that, which just happened.”

“Of course, how did Fujishiro end up figuring all of this out?” Kurou wondered, “I wouldn’t have taken him for the sort to come to that conclusion on his own. Sasane was always kind of the real brains of the relationship.”

“I can actually answer that for you,” Monokuma said, then snapped… its paw? What? It looked like snapping fingers anyway. A screen descended, the same one that usually showed the executions, and which had show the murder of Yuuri and Kanoshi in the previous case.

Mitsuru was lying on the cot, and called out, “Hey, Monokuma?”

“Yes?” Monokuma arrived.

“I need to do something. And I need to stage it,” He said, “What would you recommend?”

“I can’t help you with that, legally speaking,” Monokuma noted.

“I know that you can’t. Really, I’d prefer to test a theory of mine. If I’m wrong, then there’s no staging necessary…” Mitsuru chuckled a bit between words. “I’m certain that she could help me do this, you know. I guess I don’t know how to call her here like I can call you, but you can ask her for me, can’t you? Box?”

“…Hey, where’d you come to something like that?” Monokuma asked.

“The real Box Hako… Is unmistakably dead. There are plenty of people whose deaths could be faked, but hers was covered up. Still, I know for certain she’s gone. The last time that I saw her
before her supposed disappearance, she told me that she didn’t plan to see me again,” Mitsuru explained, “I thought that meant I’d made some mistake in our friendship… Maybe it’s arrogant to say that wasn’t the case, but combined with what ended up happening, and what Oishi said. I’m certain that Box Hako as existed in the real world took her own life. So this one’s the AI, right?”

“…Darned pre-existing connections. Alright, but don’t say all that to her,” Monokuma said, “I uh. Dunno exactly what the deal is there, but trying to be both at once… Box Hako, and an Artificial Intelligence, seems to cause some issues?”

“And,” Real Monokuma said, shutting off the monitor. “That’s how he figured it out. May not have been the absolute brightest, but the guy had social smarts. Of course he’d pick up on this sort of thing… Even if it’s a pain, it made for a pretty cool case, didn’t it?”

“Pretty cool?” Nami asked, frowning. The normal Monokuma would hate how bad and boring this case would be for TV ratings among the majority Despair audience, but this one seemed thrilled by what had happened this time. “Well, that’s not important right now. What was that bit about not knowing how to call her?”

“It probably has to do with the way Monokuma always comes when called, by name,” Tsukasa said, “Which is odd, because nobody here can be called by name, can they?”

“That’s obvious,” Amai said, arms crossed. “Come on, aren’t you supposed to be smart!? She does come when called by name. It’s just that Box Hako isn’t her name. Box Hako is the name of a girl who died more than a year ago. Maybe it’s who this thing was trying to be, but really. Her name isn’t Box.”

“That’s right,” Goro said, “It sure isn’t. And I realized it by accident, a while ago, because I just happened to say it in passing and she appeared. Lucky enough, I was only talking to Monokuma, who already knew. It was convenient that I knew, she brought me lots of food and kept me company when I was stuck in the quarantine room!”

“So, what is her real name, huh?” Amai questioned, “I knew for a while now… That this wasn’t really Box Hako. I made that known by giving up my file on Box. There’s no Box here, or anywhere, to blackmail anymore. This thing’s here instead.”

“I could tell you, or…” Goro shrugged, “I could tell you. By that I mean me from the past. What I shouted when Kyosuke had me pinned down got censored in that last trial, didn’t it? And wasn’t it so convenient that our golden girl showed up when she did?”

“Hahah, that’s right!” Monokuma exclaimed, “It’s time for the big reveal, of the girl whose name will soon be on everybody’s lips! She’ll get to experience the same inconvenience I do on the reg!”

So the screen lit up again, once more with the scene of what could have been Goro’s last moments. It wasn’t any better the second time, but now, the word he sputtered out…

“Dia!”

And she appeared in the doorway.

And in the courtroom, too.

Riko found herself needing to let go of Dia, and actually backed off the her own podium, as it seemed like her appearance entirely disintegrated… Then rebuilt itself anew. She still looked, in some ways, similar to Box, but she was undeniably different.
She pushed her glasses up her nose.

“That’s right,” Dia said, “I’m not Box Hako at all. I’m Dia... Um, this may sound odd, but Dia Hamuko. I. I could continue using the name Hako, of course, it’s not an official surname. I don’t want to keep it, but at the same time, I’d like to keep some small bit of it. As a reminder of where I came from. If you don’t mind?”
“Why would we mind what your name is?” Nami said, “Except of course, to start using it. Hamuko.”

“You can still call me Dia,” She said, “We were close enough for you to call me by my first name before, and that closeness… It wasn’t entirely a lie, you know. Plenty of things about me were never true about Box Hako.”

“Like what?” Amai asked, “I wanna get to know the girl who thought she could fool me.”

“Well. Box Hako didn’t know sign language, and never went nonverbal. She didn’t actually make plushies, it’s just a hobby of my own. Box was kind of a glutton given the chance, while I actually can’t stand to eat a lot of different types of food, and don’t mind going without food at all. She had 20/20 vision, too,” Dia explained.

“Why would an AI have bad vision?” Tsumugi asked, squinting behind her own glasses. “Did they program that into you? What?”

“See…” Dia looked down. “Why would an AI have any of the troubles that I have, huh? It’s pretty stupid. But there’s a difference between me… and an Alter Ego. Box’s personality couldn’t be preserved, she was already dead. They could get her memories, and that’s it. So they made a shell. And gave it her memories. And that… Was me. Dia.”

“Really?” Sayaka asked, “I mean. You didn’t exactly seem like a shell at any point, here?”

“That’s only because… You don’t remember,” Dia said, “You don’t remember the time before… I got really good at pretending.”

“This is really good at pretending?” Goro asked, tilting his head to one side.

“Heh. No. I guess no amount of practice could have prepared me for the real thing,” Dia said, “But last time, I was perfect. I was Box Hako. That’s who I was able to be. But not now. Not when it’s for real. Not with everything going so strange. Monokuma’s different from before. Four people got added it. It’s the real thing.”

“What… are you implying here?” Nami asked.

“If you want a fake to pass for a particular person in a Killing Game,” Dia said, “Then what do you do? You give that fake all of the relevant memories. You tell her that she is this person. And you make her pretend over… And over… And over again.”

“Do you mean…” Randy trailed off.

“I’m not a real person. So the Neo World program… doesn’t have restraints. It doesn’t need to match a human sense of time. It can warp me to suit it. So, over the course of one year, I was able to experience… Over a hundred full Killing Games. Every possible outcome. Everything that I could try and do, to prevent murders, to keep people safe… Who became dangerous eventually… Who would never kill anybody no matter the circumstance… I saw it all.” A sick grin split Dia’s face, and she laughed. “Haaah, that’s what they told me, anyway! But the real thing. It’s
completely different! This is completely different from the way it ever was before!”

“Dia…” It was Goro’s turn to try and be comforting.

“I was never… Never good at being Box Hako, was I?” Dia questioned, “But I could follow a script! When I knew every way that things could go, I could be the perfect, flawless friend. A real Ultimate Volunteer… But all I had was her memories. I knew how she would have acted, in the past, that’s… And…” She took a deep breath, but it was rough, shrieky both in and out. “It’s so hard to remember! I can’t stand it at all! It’s a past I have no control over… So many things that I hate. I can’t do this I can’t I can’t do it anymore! I don’t even want to have ever been Box Hako! But Dia Hamuko is… Nobody…”

“I don’t think you’re nobody,” Riko said, “Tell me something. In all those other tries, were we friends?”

“…No,” Dia said, “This is new. This is the first game where we’ve been able to be close.”

“The difference this time is, if your part was slipping, I got to know Dia. Not the part of Box,” Riko said, and her cheeks proved her smile under the mask.

“But…” Dia looked down and let her hair fall over her face. “Dia? What’s Dia except for faults and failures? Dia is everything that went wrong in trying to combine somebody’s memories with an AI without personality.”

“That’s not true,” Amai said, with a smug grin. “Dia is the personality that developed in spite of having the memories of a pathetic girl stuck inside of her. You could’ve been Box for real, if Dia was nobody! But Dia’s somebody. And they can’t exist together, can they?”

“Amai?” Dia gasped, staring at the girl who was a friend only in memories which didn’t belong to her.

“I was a piece of shit to you, cause I thought that my best friend was giving me trouble for no good reason,” Amai said, “And I still don’t really get it! But whatever, or whoever, Dia is… That’s not Box. Box is dead, she’s been dead for a long time. Shouldn’t have put my expectations of her, on you… Or made you remember that shit.”

“…I think I needed it,” Dia said, “I never would have been able to make it here if I didn’t find out that Box wasn’t as perfect as I thought. I didn’t know what actually happened to her… Just that I was supposed to be her. And. Every time I failed. Every time I was Dia, it went really badly. Everything fell apart. I died a lot. A lot, a lot. Being Dia was… Always a mistake. It destroyed the future. So I…”

“It won’t be that way,” Kurou assured her, “Not this time. Like you said, it’s different. This is the real go at it, and the four of us are here, and all of that. Plus, if it was all just completely simulated to make you better at being Box, of course they’d make things go badly if you didn’t obey…”

“Ah, that’s true.” Dia folded her hands over her chest, and smiled. “Mitsuru… You saved Randy, and you freed me, didn’t you?”

“This is nothing like the other times. And maybe… That’s a good thing.”

Chapter End Notes
Aaaand as of right now, mmmmm has reached the point where I can share this pet project of mine.

Here in this lovely google document (Easily navigated through a Table of Contents!) you'll find:
- A quick recap/rundown of the events of Everyone's Brand New And Improved Killing Game Semester, for anyone reading this who didn't read that but is still curious about the scenari, titled the **Fifty-Third Killing Game Report**
- Also a rundown of the general lore in a more accessible form, in case anybody is a bit lost on why the world is like this.
- But, most importantly...

*Several new Killing Game Reports* including the game Sasane and Iwako participated in, featuring members of the cast of Operation V.K.

**Six entire side stories about what the VK cast is up to here...**

As well as a basic rundown of whether the VK characters are dead, alive and well, or otherwise. I wouldn't recommend reading any of the VK crossover content without having read that fic, though- There are quite significant spoilers. Thank you for your time. <3

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1N-Uo1XXHqKDCR2qvu71fWZYMOeXKpgBlx0IxFJCuxHw/edit?usp=sharing
54th Annual Killing Game: Facsimile 23
Day 7, 2000 Hours

The twenty-third false Killing Game was the first one that Dia really considered worth committing to memory. The first twenty-two, she was still getting a grasp on what sort of person she was expected to be. It helped that she was naturally gregarious to some extent, but being completely selfless… Was what her memories supported, and therefore what she had to do, but that was a difficult thing to do. Eight of those twenty-two, she’d ended up revealing her actual identity.

Unlike the real game, in which she was being physically prevented from confessing outright, she was given the option to do so in the ‘practice’ games. Even so, everything was cataclysmic when she did. In five of those eight, she’d been the very next victim after revealing the truth. In the other three, things just went incredibly poorly. Like the one where Goro got away with murder, said he’d take Box with him (Nami had already died that time.)...

And she needed to stand next to him as everybody else was killed for nothing. Trying to offer her escape? Worthless. Utterly worthless. Even if this wasn’t a fake Killing Game, even if she wouldn’t just wake up the next day back at the beginning… There was no reality waiting for her. Surviving the actual Killing Game, when they decided she was ready, didn’t have a point. Even as she witnessed all of her peers do horrible things...

Honestly, she’d prefer any of them live, to her. So when she was killed, it meant this was a timeline where the false versions of her friends might have some sort of future, that more of them could reach for that. The only participant who’d never committed a murder was Rei. Well, and Dia herself. It didn’t always mean an act of malice. Sometimes it was self defense, sometimes it was desperation.

Frankly, she couldn’t hold it against them. This was a Killing Game, and these weren’t real people either. They were alter egos, lacking in programming to develop any sort of self-awareness. Not real. She was ‘real’. But these ones were much better imitations of real people than she was. They had the personalities, not just the memories, built in to them. It was possible to get to know a real person, based off the Phoenix of an Alter Ego that was doomed to die soon after creation.

So really, it was the twenty-third falsehood when Dia first achieved a memory to carry. A fact of somebody who, now dead forever, would belong only to her. In this game, Goro killed Tomoe in the first case. It wasn’t an unusual happenstance. This time, it was Shinjiro who took the gap to comfort Nami though, and...

She didn’t like to think too hard about that.

“Box?” Etsuko asked her, staring wide-eyed at her. “Are you crying?”

“H-huh?” Box asked, then lifted a hand and wiped her eyes. “Sorry. I’m just worried.”

“About who?” Etsuko wondered, then clapped his hands together. “Oh, Nami! Right?”

“Exactly,” Box said, “I know that she says that she’s fine, but I don’t really like what’s happening. I don’t think that Nozomi is a bad person or anything… But he’s taking advantage of her blackouts.”
“That all went right over my head,” Etsuko said, “But I kinda think that Yumi’s being mean, yeah.”

“Shinjiro,” Box corrected, then paused. “Well, why should I care if you call him the wrong name at a time like this? We’re the only ones who still call Nami by the right one.”

Shinjiro had gotten close to Nami following the loss of her two preexisting connections, but that wasn’t exactly a good thing. He’d realized that she was foggy and pliable as she came out of her blackouts, that those blackouts were inducible… And he’d warped her, beyond recognition, out of some need to commiserate with somebody? Dia didn’t understand yet. She would. But not during the twenty-third game.

“I’m just bad at changing the names I call people…” Etsuko admitted, but then looked her in the eyes. “But you like me anyway, right, Box?”

“Yes.” She giggled. “Guess that I do.”

Did she? It wasn’t like she disliked him, but at the same time, well. She wasn’t supposed to be selfish. And she wasn’t supposed to refuse what people wanted of her.

He grinned, and gave her a quick kiss, then lingered with his forehead touching hers. “It’s fun to be with you, Box! Cause… I guess a lot of people here are kinda above my head? But you’re just nice. You don’t say that I’m being stupid, or anything.”

“It’s rude to call you stupid,” Box said, and put a hand on top of his head. “I’d never do that, even if I hated you. You’re smart when it matters!”

“You’re so sweet!” Etsuko laughed. “Like candy~”

“…Etsuko,” She asked, “What would you do if I said that I might. Need to kill somebody?”
He blinked in surprise, but his smile didn’t falter. “I trust you… So… I dunno. I’d keep it quiet if you wanted me to—”

“I wouldn’t want you to, I’d confess as soon as the trial starts, and I’d want you to back me up in case they think I’m lying,” Box said.

“Ah! Cool, that makes my answer even easier!” He wrapped his arms around her neck and leaned into her. “I’d just wanna spend as much time as possible with you, before you got executed… Can I? Can I just spend all the time with you till you do that? Like stay in the same room tonight and everything?”

“I guess… You can?”

“Yaaaay!” Etsuko cheered, and nuzzled against her chest. “People die all the time here, right, so… I won’t be sad, I trust you a lot. I’m just happy that I get to be with you right now, Box.”

Well, good thing he was happy.

Not like she’d blame him for any of this, though. It was the shadow of Box Hako which puppeted
her into these situations, where there was nothing she wanted but it wasn’t like she could say she was suffering. Nobody meant to hurt her. And she never said that she was hurt. How could she? Passive, yes, passive, that’s fine. Do what you want to me, with me, I’ll smile, sure. Everything’s okay because I’m Box Hako, and this is what she’d do, and she was always fine.

It would be a long time yet till she learned that even the influence who commanded her to this life wasn’t able to handle it eventually.

So the next day, Dia Hamuko ended her time in the twenty-third incarnation, by committing a murder for the first time. If these Alter Egos ever continued on beyond her… Then Nami deserved for Shinjiro to be gone. This time around, he was better off dead.

But so was Dia.
That made it fair, didn’t it?
The thirty-first incarnation was the next one that Dia found significant, when it came to memories that only she could hold.

There were plenty of times that Dia heard all about her friends’ problems, plenty of times where she ended up with Etsuko, some with Sayaka… Only because she’d already realized that Sayaka had a built-in breaking point where, if things went on too long without somebody there for dedicated affection, she would probably break, well, herself. Most of the time, herself. Sayaka had integrity, after all.

If she was going to kill anybody, it was for her personal reasons. If Tomoe’s twisted up feelings were revealed in an unfortunate way, or the way that Tsukasa first met Randy came across wrong… Or when Kanoshi’s true nature was put on display without him first getting himself killed or executed. Still, she was a difficult person, Dia thought, to handle. She couldn’t prevent murders, only change which ones happened…

So she tried to take the routes that, she thought, caused the least suffering outside of the deaths themselves. Even so, she wasn’t perfect yet. A change she managed to execute one game might not take in the next one, because even these preprogrammed simulacri had some small unpredictability to their actions and motives. This was a scenario she hadn’t yet seen. A timeline in which, just an hour ago, Nami Kaguya had been executed. She’d once more failed to overcome her blackouts, and in the fugue following one, been convinced by Riko that Randy was planning to kill her, so she’d have to kill him first. It was a stressful trial, but…

The real stress for Dia…

Or at this moment, Box, was when Tomoe pulled her into her ward to talk.

“I have to kill Asahi,” Were the first words out of Tomoe’s mouth when she was certain they were alone.

“Ah. I don’t think so,” Box said.

“…Can’t you just back me up on one thing?” Tomoe questioned, furrowing her brow. “You’re my best friend here, you know.”

“Backing you up on one thing when that one thing is murder, isn’t really that great,” Box said, “Even if Asahi did something like that, Kaede said we never figured out why, so we can’t just blame her like she was a bad person. If she won’t tell us her reasons…”

“I can’t even begin to care what her reasons were, Box,” Tomoe said, “I can’t just stand idle while that rich trollop crushes all of my efforts into the dust.”

“Your… efforts?” Box asked. In most timelines, Tomoe’s absurd love for her sister came through, and several times the way she was twisted up in such a way that it could happen, but this seemed a bit… Beyond that?

Tomoe crossed her arms. “Well, doll, I guess it’s something you need to know if you’ll believe I need to kill Asahi, isn’t it? My efforts… To make sure that Nami never did something like that
“Again?” Box questioned, tilting her head to one side.

“That girl,” Tomoe said, “Would never decide to kill somebody on her own. It wouldn’t happen. It takes somebody planting the idea in her head. Even if it’s accidentally…”

With that, Tomoe pulled something from inside of her dress; A tape recorder. She stored it in her bra? But she hit play on it.

“So, how about that? That’s what girls do. You so sure you wanna be one anymore?” “Wanna… Uh… Aren’t I…?” “Christ. How many times do I have to teach you this lesson?” “Just once was… fine?” “Obviously it wasn’t- hah. Scissors? What do you think you’re going to do with those, kill me? You’re just a stupid kid.” “Kill you? Ohh. Huh. I guess that, I could.” “... Eh?” “I thought, I don’t want a second lesson. I’ll die now. But I guess I can stop you t-t-t-t-t-t-t-”

As the tape started to skip and repeat, Tomoe lifted it, then threw it to the ground with a frustrated grunt. It shattered on the floor before her, leaking a dark black ink where it fell. Box stared at that. Odd. Tape recorders didn’t usually have liquid in them. Especially not a black ooze like this, but, maybe it was a special type.

“Of course I had her keep a wiretap with her, growing up. It was always useful to reassemble anything that happened while she was blacked out,” Tomoe said, “And of course, it’s how I found out to protect her. When I swiped it to play the tapes back at night… Because I could usually see those guys coming a mile away. Wear a short skirt, go straight to them, remind them how similar we are and that they could call me by her name, if it would help, just leave her be… It worked, mostly. Not that time, though. Not that… Time.”

“I wish that none of that happened to either of you,” Box said, “I wish that you could have had a normal childhood. I really do. You deserved better than that…”

“...Hush dear, I certainly didn’t,” Tomoe said, “Nami did. And yet, Asahi ruined it. She ruined everything. It was a failure on my part, of course. I swore Nami would never be put in that position again, and she was. It’s my mistake. But Asahi’s fault, understand? To remedy that mistake, I simply have to kill her. Don’t worry, doll. This game will be over soon.”

“It won’t,” Dia said, “It won’t ever be over.”

Tomoe grinned. “Well, not for me. I’ll be dead too soon. But the outside world still has a place for people like us. Plenty of them. Girls like us have a way of sticking in the cracks.” She reached out and held Box’s hands. “And carrying on. I lived this long, didn’t I? We didn’t tell any of you, but Nami and I… Turned twenty, a few days ago. That’s a good enough run. Doll, make it that far, won’t you? At least as far as this rotten woman.”

“I don’t think that will happen,” Dia started to get choked up. No, don’t. Box Hako doesn’t cry don’t cry don’t let it- “There’s not a crack I can fit in, Tomoe. Not a crack except for here. This program. I… Don’t go. If this world has a future at all. You should be in it.”

“There’s not a world out there that I should be in.” Tomoe let go of her hands and took a step back. “I’m the unwanted parasite child who killed my mother, after all. A future in a world that has me, but not Nami? No, that’s definitely not a future at all. And I did just destroy… The only bit of love I had left.”

Dia glanced down at the tape recorder again. It was destroyed. Tomoe dashed her only opportunity
to hear her sister’s voice again… And with it, any chance that Dia had of convincing her not to take retaliatory action. This was one of those times she hoped beyond hope that these incarnations…

Turned to dust with each life of hers.

What’s a run of infinite futures, if there’s not a single one where certain people can find happiness?
Dia Hamuko first learned the name ‘Kaoru Haruhi’ during the thirty-sixth incarnation. It was shortly after the first case, an unexpected incident where Etsuko ended up killing Rei. This was something which had never happened before, and while Dia had seen Shinjiro at his worst and most cruel in that timeline where he’d decided to claim Nami, she had never actually seen him so impacted by a single case.

It wasn’t unusual for Shinjiro to go from a perfectly pleasant person to a prickly and standoffish one after the first murder, but this was completely different. The victim and the killer were both his friends, and there wasn’t anybody left to condemn. He was the only person who could be judged for association with the culprit, as far as this timeline was aware. Dia never could have got along with him, in any incarnation, if he knew about the others. She killed him once, after all, and even if she hadn’t… Her associations were so developed by now that no matter who killed first, she would be considered too close for comfort to them.

This time was different, though. While he still became prickly, he didn’t have any target for his malice, and Dia took this opportunity to finally seize upon an incarnation where she might be able to learn about him. In this endless loop, all she could do was learn about her peers, and try to do what Box would. Maybe knowing Shinjiro better… Would let her smooth out his usual transformation after the first case.

It wasn’t very difficult. Again, Dia was friendly by nature to begin with, and with the persona of Box to guide her as well… It was easy to get close to people, if they were in a position to allow anybody close to them. Shinjiro just simply… Wasn’t, most of the time. This time, she was able to get to know him, to know more about him. She listened as if it was the first time she heard about the shenanigans of those three and Natsuki Nagata, as if the friendlier but now dead members of the friend group hadn’t told her those stories so many times already. Etsuko especially.

Etsuko had this odd habit of falling for her whenever circumstances aligned. Which was fine, she supposed.

It was only the fifth day, when Shinjiro decided to actually open up to her.

“To tell you the truth, Box,” Shinjiro said, “I’ve been doing some real introspection lately, yes. I believe that some of my views may have been… Mistaken?”

“Oh? What sort of views?” Box prodded.

“I mean… Well, before I came here, I thought myself morally upstanding. Ahaa… I looked down on others for such stupid reasons,” He explained, “But then, one of my best friends killed another of them. I didn’t know what to think anymore, and, well. I certainly should hate myself, for being the sort to have killers for friends…”

“It’s not your fault,” Box said, “I mean, you didn’t have anything to do with that… It’s silly to blame people for just having a connection like that. Anybody can surprise you with what they’re capable of.”

“Kaoru…” Shinjiro mumbled.
“Hm?” Box wondered.

“I forgot about her for a while, but I knew this girl, Kaoru…” Shinjiro elaborated on it, “A wonderful girl, yes. Not my closest friend for a while, but I may have… Been in love with her? But she didn’t think she was a very good person. And she ended up killing herself. I… Forgot about her.”

“You forgot her?”

“I guess I just didn’t know how to handle the fact that I watched her die. Ahh…” Shinjiro scratched his head. “Apologies. You don’t need to hear all about this sad stuff.”

“I want to,” Box said, “If it would help you to say it. Tell me.”

“If you say so. I think… Even though I forgot about it, it’s kind of been in the back of my mind for a long time. She’s a bad person for killing somebody. But the somebody she killed was herself. She was very conflicted, and she thought that if she died, she could avoid doing bad things. So she chose the lesser evil, I suppose? And for all of that… I still love her. So even as I look down on bad people, I can’t help but feel as if, I ought to be just as awful. I love somebody who I feel is a very bad person. To reconcile that, I must become just as bad as her…”

“She’s dead, though,” Box said, “Why are you still in love with her?”

“I don’t know,” Shinjiro said, “Maybe I’m not. Maybe I’m in love with the idea of her. Maybe what I really want… Is to become trash like she was, and find someone on that level as well.”

“That’s not healthy,” Dia said. Her heart was pounding in her ears to hear that. That was what he did to Nami, wasn’t it? He thought Nami was trash because of what she did in middle school. He thought Nami was garbage. He regularly told her as much, and at the same time… By mistreating her, he became that garbage as well. It was a self-serving act rooted in a broken belief system.

“It probably isn’t, is it?” Shinjiro laughed nervously. “If I put it into words, what I’m looking for, it’s terrible. Does the fact that I look for that make me garbage already?”

“I don’t know,” Dia said. It was Dia because Box would have more tact. She’d say that it definitely didn’t make him garbage. But Dia didn’t know. It might. It just might. Was Shinjiro a garbage person? She didn’t know. He was garbage an awful lot. But he’d been through a lot. He screamed about being through a lot in plenty of incarnations. Maybe if he never came to a Killing Game he would have been fine.

“Maybe what I actually need is to be with somebody bright. Somebody who’s pure and not garbage at all,” Shinjiro said, “To be a better person again, myself. I don’t know. Maybe somebody like you, yes?”

“…Yes,” Box said, “If that’s what you want.”
In the forty-second facsimile, nothing was really that odd or unusual. It's just that in a line of memories only Dia could have, this was her favorite one of Rei Akabane. Anyone who'd died for real now... Could live only in her memories of these false Killing Games. Rei was somebody she had plenty of memories of, because Rei was an easy person to get along with. Usually she ended up attached to Nami primarily, but there were plenty of options there.

The odd thing with Rei, too, was that she was completely different depending on if Etsuko lived or not. It seemed that when he was around, she played a more mature and nurturing part. When he did die, she picked up the pieces of his enthusiasm and developed a cheerfulness of her own. Either way, it was always the same warm and friendly Rei Akabane; The only difference was if she wore that on her sleeve, or hid it behind a gently stoic front.

Dia, of course, loved both of these versions of her friend, and did wonder which version she'd get to witness when the Killing Game finally became reality. It wasn't something that she was looking forward to; Death was bad enough when she knew that she'd get to see the dead again. When it had permanence behind it, it would be a serious challenge to keep up her mask through the sadness she'd feel. She already grieved these people so many times, and she would have to grieve them again, and again, and then...

For real. Couldn't that never happen? Couldn't she just wake up and meet all her friends over for the final time in the real world and lose none of them? She just wanted to smile and be happy with them. If she could be happy with them, it didn't matter if she needed to be Box. As long as she could be with them. She loved them all so much, even from these versions of them. They were accurate. They weren't 'real' but they matched reality. They 'existed'.

They were previews of friends that she was going to meet, friends she would need to assist in absolutely any way possible.

"Hey, Box?" Rei asked, poking at her cheek. Etsuko was still alive, so Rei's tone was blank but for a tiny bit of playfulness.

"Yeah? What's up?" Box wondered, turning to face her friend.

"I was just wondering..." Rei smiled. "I don't think you've told me your favorite type of tea, yet. That's usually the sort of thing I ask right away, but..."

*Somehow, I didn't think to ask you yet.*

Rei said this line pretty often. Dia knew the reason Rei didn't think to ask her, though. She was in tune with these sorts of things, and she could probably tell...

*Orange rind oolong* -Chocolate Coconut Black Tea

That 'Box' was at war with herself on the answer to that question. The favorite tea of Box Hako, with orange rinds in it, was something that Dia found utterly disgusting. Even so, she was supposed to be Box Hako. Her own favorite type of tea was not Box's favorite. She'd discovered this favorite with Rei's help in another incarnation, when she answered that she wasn't sure. But
this time...

"I like cho-" Dia started, and. Passed. Out.

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D-d- Box woke up about an hour later, with Rei watching over her with concern. "Box! We were just talking, and you fainted out of nowhere. Are you alright? I was really worried about you. I didn't catch what tea you liked after all, so I made a cup of plain green. Is that alright?"

Yes, that was passable for both of the people that this girl was. "Yeah. That sounds nice, thank you. I'm ever so sorry about that, you really shouldn't worry about me. I just have a syncope, so sometimes I'll pass out without any warning. Well, there are some medical signs, but if I'm focused on something else I can miss them."

It was a complicated lie, but it's not like she'd have to keep it up for very long. No single Killing Game lasted an especially long time. If it did start to go on too long, it would just fade away. Dia's false games never reached an end. No glimpse of the outside, no Mastermind Trial. But this was the first time she'd have a physical reaction to choosing herself over the facade; Certainly not the last.

“Oh… Well, it would have been nice to have some warning,” Rei said, frowning. “I thought that we were close enough that you'd be fine telling me something like that.”

“We are,” Box said, “Definitely. But I just thought that, well. You'd worry about me? And I don’t want you to have to worry when it’s something that's not actually a big deal…”

“It’s more worrisome to just see you faint out of nowhere…” Rei whined, then reached out both hands to pat Box’s forehead. “I know that you’re the Ultimate Volunteer, but that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t look out for yourself too. And you should let us look out for you.”

“No.” Box shook her head. “There isn’t any reason to look out for me, you know. I’m completely fine, and I’d rather just help everybody else.”

She was saying all the right things, but she was screaming on the inside. If you’re going to punish me for failing to be Box, why let these people say things that seem to imply it’s alright not to be Box? These were some heavily mixed messages she was getting. But of course, her friends didn’t know any of this. It wasn’t okay not to be Box, because there wasn’t anyone else. Dia wasn’t meant to be anyone at all.

“But…” Rei said, “You’re one of my best friends, you know. Of course I’ll look out for you. Maybe that sounds stupid to say… But you, and Nami, and Etsuko… I’m so glad that I met you. I want to be able to hold onto this. That includes making sure you're okay, you know? I might not always show it, but I love you guys.”

“I love you too. I love all my friends so much,” Dia said.

“That’s why you shouldn’t worry. I’ll always do everything I can to help you, that’s the best thing you can do for me, is let me do what I can for you,” Box said.
54th Annual Killing Game: Facsimile 70
Day 9, 1700 Hours

It took until the seventieth incarnation of the 54th Annual Killing Game before Dia learned anything she would even consider new at all. In fact, she had kind of come to the conclusion that there wasn't anything left to learn about her friends at this point. Making an effort to get to know everybody each and every time around was a recipe for that in the first place, let alone the fact that she grew even closer to anybody who remained after the murders started happening.

There were a few times where Dia was the first victim, she'd admit. And though it had taken her a long time to end up doing so, she did end up as a killer sometimes. Never out of malice or selfishness, though. She made the decision... Because of what Box would do. If there was any future for these worlds after Dia was gone from them, then her impact was for the best interests of her friends. Even two people who sometimes got along great, could end up toxic for each other in the perfect storm.

She couldn't much understand Shinjiro's morality at this point, because as far as she could tell, there was no such thing as a person who was all bad. The kindest and most upstanding person in one incarnation could become the first culprit in the next. Even though the motives were similar each time... Anything could change, even a single sentence's difference might rearrange the upcoming events. Not to mention that the third case's motives, of what the 'previous owner' of an Ultimate Talent had done... Really were randomly generated, to an extent.

Dia knew that the fourth batch of motives was always the one with truth behind it. The false motives and the true motives were always the same in what they were, but which ones were presented always changed. Her own true motive was... Unfortunate, but so was the false one, if she was honest. The true motive was that she could not be considered a human being. Of course not, she was an AI. Explaining that was difficult, though, especially given that as time went on, she was punished more and more harshly for letting her true nature slip.

The false motive, though... Well, 'false' and 'true' weren't quite the best descriptions, but that was how she saw them. It was more like 'past truth' and 'current truth', but it was false to think the former applied currently, so that was how she categorized them in her own thoughts. The false motive... Well, there was no previous Ultimate Volunteer. Somebody besides Box Hako with that title didn't even exist. Dia didn't know who her false motive was about. What Ultimate Title was supposed to be hers, as Dia. Why the program based the motive on her rather than on the person she was meant to be, while still calling her Box the whole time.

If it was trying to blur the line between Box and Dia, then it was kind of succeeding. But that wasn't important, this incarnation. The nature of probability is that certain things might never even happen, no matter how likely they are. There was an 18.33% chance that any given motive would be delivered in the fourth batch; Even still, Yuuri's had failed to live up to that chance since the very start. Through sixty-nine incarnations, that 18.33% chance failed. By the sixtieth incarnation, it should have happened eleven times, but the world doesn't always care about math.

This was the first time that Dia ever heard the motive which was true about this current Yuuri; A fact of himself that he had managed to keep hidden from his peers through every incarnation thusfar, and certainly would through future incarnations as well. If there was something to be said for Kanoshi, he wasn't bad at keeping secrets; And Sayaka was great at it. They didn't know the
fact the motive would deliver, but they knew something close to it and kept it under wraps for him. Dia only even knew because he opened up to her in exactly one incarnation. Notably, the first motives didn't shuffle about with each incarnation, but every ten of them, and the motive that could imply even a bit that could lead to this truth wouldn't rear its head until the final, permanent game.

"The last participant to have Yuuri Ruka's Ultimate Talent was paid for sex by their own father! Ooh, now that's a risque motive, isn't it? Try and refute that one, saucy boy! Upupupu!" Monokuma's grating voice rang out. It always had such fun delivering these motives and making the participants squirm, and that laugh. Dia had never heard it laugh in any way other than that stupid, fake one. She hated being in the same category as that thing. An Artificial Intelligence like that one... Why'd she even have to be at all associated with such a heartless thing? Ah, but she was supposed to be the human, Box Hako. Thoughts like that helped nobody.

She... Didn't know what to do about this motive, for a while. Yuuri denounced it and stormed off somewhere. Kanoshi moved to follow him, but Mitsuru held him back. Sayaka would have, if she'd made it this far this time around. But he'd do it in her stead. Mitsuru read people well, Dia had realized that a long time ago, and it seemed often like he was the only person aside from her who could witness the true nature of the Ultimate Tutor. He wouldn't be of any help to Yuuri right now. But. Dia could. Dia could... Box could.

No, no, not that, not quite. Box Hako couldn't deal with this properly. Box Hako was an earnest friend and selfless helper. Dia Hamuko was the girl who knew everything. Dia didn't even bother to cover it up, she left the Dining Hall and stepped straight through Yuuri's door to find him in his room.

"How did you get in here?" He questioned. He hadn't seen her move right through the solid wood. He wasn't really looking at the door.

"You didn't shut it all the way," Dia said.

"I thought I slammed it."

"Sometimes they bounce if you do that. Anyway. I want to talk to you."

"If it's about that fucking motive, it isn't about me. I don't care what Akabane says about hers, if she tries to claim it's about her. It's not me," Yuuri hissed through his teeth. Ah, so Rei's was the other one. Dia hadn't even heard it, focused on Yuuri's.

"I know it's a hard thing to think about. But," Dia said, "It is about you. I'm sorry, but I know that it's true. The fourth batch is the true batch."

"How do you know that?" Yuuri asked, "Are you the Mastermind?"

"No," Dia said, "I'm supposed to help, a little bit. I mean, I got told about the game before we woke up here, and told about a few things, and I was asked to help. Like an in-game therapist I guess."

That was true enough. She wasn't told any details of the game ahead of time, but she was made aware of her purpose. To imitate Box Hako in a Killing Game meant to fulfill this role for those around her, it was why she was put in the game at all. And why she was being trained to handle anything that the real game could throw at her.

"...I guess there's no fooling you," Yuuri said, "But. Jesus Christ, Hako. What am I supposed to
say? How can I explain... That? Even Kyosuke and Yamaguchi. They don't know about that shit. The only people in the world who knew were my dad, and Nate. And Monokuma, somehow."

Extracting memories was easy mode for the people behind this game. Dia didn't know who they were; She wasn't informed of that. But it was easy for them. They could build Alter Egos like these ones, after all. They had all the information from that process at their disposal.

"Why don't you practice explaining? On me?" Dia offered.

"...After my mom died," Yuuri said, "Shit was weird for a while. I wasn't doing well. She was a shitty mom, sure, but I still. Needed her, I guess. I don't think I spent a second sober for three months after that, and I ended up back with this ex of mine, too. Nate. We were never good together, but I couldn't stay in my mom's house. I had to be with somebody."

"And?" Dia prodded.

"Nate was worse than before. Like, shit was bad. I mean." Yuuri pulled the sleeve of his shirt to show Dia a long, deep scar that ran from the lateral end of his clavicle, down his chest to just a bit past the ribcage. Positioned such that a tank top could hide it. "I couldn't use my arm right for a while after he did this. And frankly, I barely remember that time. It's just little bits, really, but it's enough that I know why he did it. He hurt me this way because he knew, if I could use both arms? I never would have let my bastard dad..."

"Oh. I understand," Dia said, "Was it that Nate got paid, not you? Monokuma made it sound like..."

"Nah." Yuuri gave a bitter chuckle and shook his head. "Hako, come on. You're pretty innocent, you sure you wanna hear all this crap?"

"Somebody has to," Dia said.

"Guess that works." Yuuri crossed his arms. "What I do remember clearly, from all that bullshit. Is what he said after. He dropped a bunch of cash right next to me, and he said, 'Sorry I couldn't be here for you sooner, but I told that cunt mother of yours that she'd never see a cent from me.'"

"I see," Dia said, "That's terrible. You had terrible parents."

"Maybe," Yuuri said, "I hate my dad. So fucking much, and I always did. My mom wasn't a good mom at all, either. But I didn't hate her. Hated myself more than her, through it all."

"My parents aren't great either," Dia said, not sure if she was referring to the people who programmed her, or to Ice and Speak Hako. Either way, she'd stand by her statement. "But not quite like that. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I don't know what to do about the fact Monokuma told everybody. And with that wording, too... It's not like you wanted to."

"Yeah. Fuck. I don't have a goddamn clue how I'm going to. Handle this," Yuuri said, "Yamaguchi would be on my side. Kyosuke. He might not. He might just get pissed off."

"He's in love with you," Dia admitted.

"Of course he is."

"Not in a good way though," Dia said, "He's jealous of those guys. Probably jealous of your dad too, now."

"I'd rather die than be with that guy. Guess that sounds extreme. But, y'know. Dying isn't that
undesirable to me anyway." Yuuri scoffed. "He makes an okay friend, I guess. But. He'd wanna own me, same way Nate did. I've been there, done that, don't wanna be owned by anyone."

"What if I killed you?" Dia offered.

"...Yeah, that'd be nice."

It was fine. There were plenty of Yuuris with better futures than this one could ever find.
It was no secret that Dia had never been especially fond of Kanoshi Kyosuke.

This was… Probably her punishment for that, yeah. Box Hako was supposed to devote every part of herself to every one of her peers, and over and over, Dia did fail to do that. She loved Kanoshi in spite of his nature. She loved Shinjiro in spite of his zealotry. She loved Riko, even though they’d never become close, and she loved Tomoe even though she so often let her past get the better of her. Dia did love them all. But she still picked favorites and she still picked obstacles.

Her lack of fondness for Kanoshi really did stem from a place of being in her way. Kanoshi easily made himself into an obstacle for the happiness of others, and that was where he fell short in her eyes. Something that Box wouldn’t have done, but Dia, it seemed, just didn’t have quite enough love in her heart to overlook these things. So now, of course, this incarnation threw her for an absolute loop.

How did this happen? Was something this absurd, something which would be able to take place in the final game? Things had been going normally for the first two cases. Motives were delivered as usual, nothing that hadn’t been shared before but she supposed the combination hadn’t yet. Those two truths together… Somehow…

Again, it was the perfect storm. And a failure on Dia’s part. She knew what happened to Sayaka if she was left alone in these games, but out of… She could only call it self-interest, she didn’t step in to fill that hole. Four people had already died after all. Nami, Yuuri, Mitsuru, and Rei. That combination, when Sayaka and Tomoe had their truths put on display and mocked by Monokuma…

This was why Dia and Kanoshi were standing in what could only be described as a void. They’d stepped through the wall and were now, in this grey expanse, staring at the hospital from the outside. They were the only ones left. The only ones left here.

Those girls were volatile and unfortunately clever, and Dia now had to bear witness to the depths of their capabilities.

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“Dia?” Kanoshi asked, because of course this wouldn’t happen under normal circumstances. She messed it up again. Shouldn’t she know better by now? Being Dia always ruined it. How could she have been this stupid?

“Yeah, Kanoshi?” She asked back, voice blank.

“What… The fuck just happened?” Good question, Kanoshi. Dia hardly understood it herself. It wasn’t an easy thing to comprehend.

“I think…” Dia looked down, trying to think through the situation. It was pretty chaotic, and Monokuma didn’t bother to explain any of it, but she could probably infer… “Those traps were set up by Tomoe and Sayaka. I’m not sure what their motivation to do that was. The spears were because. Of the rule against any one culprit committing three murders, I think.”

“Oh. Well. That would only cover them killing six people though, right?” Kanoshi asked, “And
there were eight.”

“There could probably be ten, if we didn’t climb out here,” Dia said, “Monokuma doesn’t care about this stuff at all. It wouldn’t disarm the traps.”

“But why would those two…”

“Not enough people looking out for them,” Dia said, “Their motives were true about them, not the previous participants with their talents. Anybody can break, you know.”

“Something like this is so…” Kansohi trailed off, staring into the building. “How did you know these motives were current, Dia?”

“This is the ninety-sixth time that I’ve experienced this Killing Game. The fourth batch of motives is always current.” She turned and stared at Kanoshi. “I’ll see everyone again. Probably tomorrow.”

“What about me?”

“I’ll see you too.”

“I mean. What happens to this me?”

Dia crossed her arms. “I dunno. Maybe you just disappear. You are an alter ego, after all. Not the original Kanoshi.”

“Like how you’re not the original Box?”

“If I was an Alter Ego of Box Hako, then this would all be a lot easier.” Dia sighed. “Instead… Even now, when I know that if I tell the truth bad things will happen, I can’t help but say that I’m not her.”

“I think that’s okay,” Kanoshi said, “If you’re a coward who never gets up the nerve to tell the truth in the face of bad things, then certain things will pass you by.”

“Nothing’s ever passed you by,” Dia said, “Yuuri’s told me before that he’d rather die than be your boyfriend.”

“...Why?” Kanoshi wondered.

“Because,” Dia said, “He’s tired of being with possessive people. He has nothing against you. He’s happy to be your friend. But… You’re not his type. He doesn’t want to be owned or tied down.”

“Oh.”

“If you did confess, you’d probably end up together. He wouldn’t be happy, though.”

“Why are you telling me this stuff?”

“Well, you asked.”

“I mean. You could let me down gently, or something.”

“This is letting you down gently. That’s why I mentioned that Yuuri enjoyed being your friend,” Dia said, “And, well… I really don’t know what happens, when everything resets. You might disappear, but… You might have a future too. I don’t know if any of these worlds continue. That’s
why I always try. Try to leave… Something…”

She covered her mouth with a hand, shaking as she dropped forward at the waist. This wasn’t. This wasn’t right at all. “So I’m. I’m really sorry. Because I couldn’t be Box Hako this time… Your future had nothing. They’re all dead. You’re going to be alone, Kanoshi.”

“…Yeah. I guess that’s true,” Kanoshi said. Dia bent her knees to squat on the ground, wrapping herself up. She didn’t want to hear that, but she wouldn’t have wanted him to lie and say it was fine, either. Maybe she wanted to hear that it wasn’t her fault, even though she knew that it was and admitted that it was. Sayaka and Tomoe would never think to do something like this if she was doing everything right. If she was Box Hako. If it wasn’t the punishment dished out to her by the folks upstairs for failing to be.

“I’m not nothing, though,” Kanoshi said, “You’re leaving something even if I’m alone. That’s why you told me the truth, right?”

“H-Huh?”

“If I have a future, I can’t be a better person if I don’t know where I went wrong.” Kanoshi said, “So your brutal honesty. Kinda helps that?”

“How can you smile at a time like this?” Dia asked, “Fuck. You’ve really got tunnel vision, huh?”

“You can look to your future, Kanoshi, only because there was nobody left in there who you loved at all.”
This was the real incarnation, and of course Dia screwed it up. Obviously, she was going to screw it up. She was falling to bits and nobody was helping. Not because they didn’t want to. Because they couldn’t. Nobody could. And now, it was as if there were two halves of her.

She could be Dia, just sometimes. There was a Dia here. She existed with Goro and Monokuma in the Quarantine Room, and that was fitting, wasn’t it? She was quarantined. Dia was locked only into that room and she didn’t need to exist any other time because that was when Box existed, that was when Box had to exist. But Goro had figured her out. It was the wound on her hand.

In private, he approached her. She didn’t remember the injury. He said, he was certain he gave it to her, but he couldn’t recall why. This meant that it was related to some motive which was struck from the record. She admitted, that did make sense. It was reasonable. When he stabbed her in the hand… He wouldn’t just do that without a good reason. So they sat down, and pieced together a probable truth. It was bound to be inaccurate, but it was good enough. And that was when he dropped it on her.

“You could be the AI, couldn’t you?” Goro asked, “We do know this.” He pointed to her wound again. “Was because you’re considered an assistant to the Mastermind. An assistant like M4-K1 in the last game, yeah? So. It does line up.”

All it took was those words for her to admit the truth to him back then, for the restriction to be lifted in that conversation, even as she feared she was doomed this world by doing so. But then, she was surprised. Revealing her identity enabled her to save Goro’s life, though it came at a cost. The cost of Kanoshi. And Yuuri. Two people who she did love, even if one more than the other. Even so, it was Goro who asked for her help. Goro who knew who she was.

And this scenario was one which had never, not once happened in any of the false incarnations. Any positive outcome of telling the truth? That was impossible. Didn’t happen. But then, this was the real game. The people upstairs had less control over the situation. The Monokuma was different. There were four people here she’d never gotten to know before. And something good came of revealing her ‘true identity’. Revealing Dia. Revealing… her heart.

So of course, right after the trial, she disregarded all barriers to enter the Quarantine Room and verify that he was there. He was there, and alive, but when she tried to share this information she found it catching in her throat, and that feeling creeping up on her. That burning feeling, the syncopic punishment for sharing something she shouldn’t. It happened often, but not for the same reasons as before. Once was an internal conflict, not an external one at all, between the desire not to be with somebody and the knowledge that Sayaka needed someone.

Then, it transformed. She was prevented from sharing any truth on her own. Nothing that could convince her friends beyond a doubt that Goro existed. Nothing to outright reveal her nature. It wasn’t possible. It wasn’t permitted. Was it an outside force? Was it just her conditioning from all those repeats? Whatever the case, confession was denied to her. But Monokuma knew. Goro knew. In that room, she could exist. In that room, she could attempt to trap Dia so she could be Box.

“This is really good,” Goro said, “You got some of it for yourself, right?”
“Yes,” She lied. But his nutrition was much more important than her own.

“Well, that’s a fucking lie.” Goro laughed. “Can’t fool me anymore, Dia! We’re like, best friends. You saved my life and everything. Sorry about that, though. I mean. Really. What I asked you to do…”

“It’s not the worst thing I’ve done. I didn’t want to do those either, though,” Dia admitted. “But since you’re still alive, I think it’s worth it.”

“I really mean that much to you?” Goro asked.

“You just said that we’re best friends!” Dia complained, then giggled. “Come on. Yeah. I love everybody here… A whole lot. But you know who I am. You know Dia Hamuko. So I guess… When you asked, I had to choose to help you instead. And Box can’t refuse a task.”

“You’re not her, though,” Goro said.

“I’m supposed to be. And as long as she still exists… As long as there are people who see her in me, I won’t be able to shake it. I can’t refuse a request because she never would.”

“That’s disturbing,” Goro said, “I mean, the solution is to tell everybody the truth, but. When I tried to even begin to bring it up to Yamaguchi one time, I nearly passed out right on the spot.”

“Mhm,” Monokuma added in. It had been here this whole time, but didn’t have input yet. “I could announce it, but the same thing happens to me. I guess that it’s programmed into the world or something that we can’t just say it outright. I guess they have to figure it out.”

“I mean, I could stage something,” Goro said, “It’s totally possible to set up a scenario where the only possible result is to reveal the truth about you… Isn’t it?”

“It’s possible, and I’ll gladly offer that option if the situation arises, but you’re sure not doing it,” Monokuma said, “You really think that’d help anyone? They’re all trying so hard not to even hope you’re alive because it seems too good to be true. So you wanna make them mourn you twice? You really wanna do shit like that?”
“Hahh… You sure about that?” Goro asked.

“Yes. Humanity is an open book,” Monokuma said, “Maybe I can’t understand certain things, but I can always tell you how they’re feeling! Well, except for, the two of you. You’re puzzlers. Probably cause one of you is trying to be two people at once and the other is almost no person at once.”

“Yeah, repeat trauma for years on end will do that to a person,” Goro said.

“It sure will,” Dia agreed.

So the two of them high-fived, of course, with Goro’s good arm. Monokuma shook its head in disbelief at their good-humored coping jokes, but then approached and high fived them each as well. It could be more open with Dia and Goro thanks to the truth they shared.

Even still, it was under similar restrictions to Dia. Its own truth… Could never leave its mouth. But surely, somebody would figure it out eventually.
“You can be Dia now,” Goro said, staring at her from across the courtroom. “Everybody knows who you are and you don’t have to pretend at all anymore.”

“I… That’s right,” Dia said, “I’m me. I’m Dia. Box Hako died a long time ago, and now… She’s gone.”

“Good,” Amai said, “I thought as much.”

“When you gave me that file,” Dia said, “I got that it meant. That you knew I wasn’t Box Hako. And it was an apology too, right? By giving that file to me, you gave me the option to fill in her memories. To understand that she was an imperfect person too… And that being her was something that did hurt. That it was okay for me to feel hurt.”

“...Yeah. I mean, fuck, that’s kinda above my head? I wasn’t really trying to be nice to you. Just not as mean to you as I’d be if you were actually my childhood friend fucking with me,” Amai said, “I don’t really expect we’ll get along or anything! I mean. I don’t even completely understand your whole deal. Are you a person?”

“Yes,” Dia said, “That’s the entire problem. I was supposed to be a vessel for Box Hako’s memories and essentially become her, but in order to function, I had to be given the capacity to learn and develop on my own… And that unfortunately, made me a different person from the memories that I had.”

“Oh, okay. That’s cool. So like, you’re a real actual, human person?” Amai asked.


“It does,” Nami said, “You’re a real person. Dia.”

“Thank you.” Dia looked down and smiled. “Just hearing it from somebody else… It helps. It’s hard to feel real, sometimes.”

“Trust us,” Nami said, “We know. I mean, really, the fact that you have a hard time being real makes you more real, cause a bunch of us have trouble with that. You fit in!”

“Ahh… That’s right!” Dia laughed a bit. “Not to, well, make light of any of that… But, yes. Funny thing is, every time I went through the games when the false versions of you all. I learned all about your problems, but I never really got to work on mine. Since anytime I was me, things went horribly wrong.”

“Well,” Monokuma said, “Whoever was responsible for making things go belly-up those times either gave up on doing that this time around, or can’t. Right?”

“I think so?” Dia said, “I really wouldn’t want to jinx it, but I’ll admit. Nothing has actually gotten anywhere near as bad as it did when people learned who I was before. Goro was able to survive, and this case didn’t have a culprit. If… I were still being punished for existing, then I think Goro
would have been executed for real. And Kyosuke wouldn’t have made it back, either. And. And this case would be completely different. I wouldn’t have been the ‘culprit’. Somebody else would have actually murdered Fujishiro. Er, maybe, he would have just died with the medicine. Then… Randy would be executed, and–"

“And everything would go to shit,” Tsukasa finished for her. “I can assume. I’d be totally fucked without Randy, and it wouldn’t be good for other people either. He’s the best detective here, too, so…”

“Exactly,” Dia said, “In the fake games, if I said I was Dia, everything spiralled absolutely out of control. And if you’d normally been able to cope with Randy dying, in one of those games, you definitely wouldn’t. Basically it just… Made everything the worst that it could possibly be.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Randy said, “So, how many, exactly, did you go through?”

“One hundred and twenty six, not counting this current real game,” Dia said.

“And so. Fuck, you know like, everything about us, huh?”

“Not necessarily. I know quite a lot, but that doesn’t mean I know everything that there is to know about you,” Dia said, “People are complicated! I may have been close with all of you over the course of the past games but at the same time, it is a Killing Game. You can only get so close to a person in what amounts to, at most, about a month. It isn’t like I could ever say that I’d already gotten to know them plenty of times before or anything.”

“…Okay but basically, if any of us did still have secrets, you know them?” Randy clarified.

“Probably?” Dia shrugged with a wobbly smile. “Don’t worry, though. I’m not going to expose anyone, or anything. It isn’t like anybody’s hiding anything really serious, that I’ve heard. Er, that came out wrong. Lots of stuff is serious. But I mean, nothing that should cause problems for anybody else. You guys can all respect that, right?”

“Of course,” Nami said, “Nobody needs to have their secrets exposed just because you happen to know them. It’s… Probably weird enough for some people, for you to know without having memories of telling you.”

“I know… I’m sorry about that, but I can’t exactly help it. I’d doubt what I learned from your Alter Ego versions, except that none of it’s really been wrong yet,” Dia admitted, “Though, again. This game’s been unpredictable for me… And I know almost nothing about the four newcomers. A bit about Oishi because of Box’s memories, but. Other than that. I really don’t know everything.”

“I don’t think it’s weird,” Riko said, “Because it isn’t like you’re a bad person. Anything you know about us just has to be something we trusted you to know, before. Even if we don’t remember those times, even if it wasn’t really us, you were a good enough friend to know it before. If it’s something we really wouldn’t want you to know, the other versions of us wouldn’t have told you anyway.”

“That’s a good way to think about it,” Kurou said, “Alter Egos are nearly-flawless recreations, even if they can be manipulated more easily than we can. Something that one of us is insistent on keeping quiet will never be shared, right?”

“Not quite,” Dia said, “There’s always the fourth motive batch. In every single game… The motives which are true about the current participants, rather than a previous participant with the same talent, are put out during the fourth set of motives. So, yes. It should be clear now, why the
“Um,” Tsumugi spoke up, “Is it okay to ask questions about the other games?”

“Probably not when it comes to details, but you can ask and I’ll see if answering is alright,” Dia said, “I’ll get reaaal tired of it, though, if all of you just start mobbing me with questions after all this.”

“I just want to know,” Tsumugi said, “What was the deal with my motive?”

“Oh! Yes. You did get that correct. The ‘previous participant with your talent’ is you. You and Kaede both have the same motive in and out of the fourth batch,” Dia explained, “As for me, well. I’m not even sure what my talent is supposed to count as.”

“I can get that for you, now that it’s out there,” Monokuma said, “It’s pretty simple, though. You’re the Ultimate AI. Which means that you’re the best at being a real person made of data!”

“The Ultimate AI… that’s nice,” Dia said, “I… Will do my best to live a real life. It’s the least I can do, with what Mitsuru did for me.”
Mitsuru was eighteen when he first introduced his girlfriends to his family; It was a couple of months after they’d lived through their Killing Game, convinced Ultimate Hope to let them continue their work with Future Foundation, and made it back to him. They’d been together beforehand, but the fact that they still returned, solidified their connection. It also helped that over the course of the game, Sasane and Iwako had been able to become close with each other. What had previously been a bit of an awkward solution to a love triangle was able to develop into an honest polyamour.

That triangle was… A bit hilarious. Mitsuru really didn’t think that he was an interesting or attractive enough person that it made sense for two of his peers to want to be with him. They were both very beautiful and talented girls, for that matter, but they somehow assured him that it was not a prank and they both liked him very much, so could he choose one of them? And, he couldn’t. At first he just turned them both down, figuring it would hurt less to be rejected together than to watch him choose the other girl.

And one week later, they both approached him again, and said that he didn’t have to pick and maybe he could date them both. It was any man’s dream come true, even one who respected women as much as Mitsuru did. It really was awkward at first, but somehow, it was the killing game that both girls went through which brought them the closest. And close enough, now, that he wanted his family to meet them.

“...Hi, lady,” Akane said to Iwako upon opening the door for her.

“Hello, child,” Iwako said back. “I’m here to see your older brother?”

“I have a name. It’s Akane,” Akane said.

“I do as well. It’s Iwako,” She said, “That is my first name, but I imagine you’d prefer to call me it.”

“Yes, out of disrespect,” Akane confirmed. She may have only been twelve, but she was already growing into her snark.

“Now, now, Akane,” Sakura Fujishiro, Akane’s mother, said. She patted Akane’s shoulders, then offered Iwako a sheepish smile. “Hello, dear. I’m sorry about her, she’s at that age, you know?”

“Yes… Quite,” Iwako said, then leaned down and whispered to Akane, “Don’t ever grow out of it.”

“So you’re Doctor Same, yes?” Sakura wondered, and got a nod from Iwako. “It’s lovely to finally meet you. Mitsuru sings your praises all the time. Is Ikimura running late?”

“No, we came in the same car,” Iwako said, “She’s just getting something from the trunk.”

“Oh, you’ve already got your license?” Sakura wondered.

“She does. I don’t yet, and I’m sure you’re aware that your son doesn’t,” Iwako said, “She turned eighteen a bit sooner than us, so she’s had time to do it.”

“That does make sense,” Sakura said, “It’s kind of her to drive you here, then.”
“Sakura,” Iwako said, “May I call you that?”

“Of course you can.”

“Thank you. Sakura, I need you to understand. No matter how we may have begun, we love each other. All three of us. I feel no competition with Sasane anymore. It isn’t kind of her to drive me, because we both want to be here, together. It’s out of the question that she’d refuse to bring me just so she could have Mitsuru to herself. We are a closed triangle. I wouldn’t be so rude, but I’m certain Mitsuru would have explained this to you already.”

“Aww. How sweet,” Sasane said as she arrived, her arms full with a basket of something. “But let’s not make a bad impression on his family?”

“A bad impression? No, no.” Sakura waved it off. “It’s perfectly within your right to defend your relationship. I’ll admit that I don’t much understand this whole thing, but I’m happy as long as Mitsuru is.”

“Good, because we’re doing our darn best to make sure he is!” Sasane grinned as she hoisted the basket. “And we brought a gift for you, too.”

“A gift?” A third person joined the conversation. That would be Miyuki, Sakura’s mother, the Fujishiro Grandmother as it may be. That gremlin, she. “Now, Sakura, your son’s two girlfriends have brought us a gift! Would you look at that. This truly is the future.”

“Well,” Sasane explained, “Mitsuru tells us all the time, about how busy your house is and how hard it can be to keep up with everything. So, Iwako and I thought we’d get together and make some stuff that keeps well in the freezer for you, so you can just heat it up on nights you don’t feel like cooking…”

“You hear that?” Miyuki snickered. “Mitsuru talks about how Akane is picky and won’t eat supermarket frozen meals.”

“Wh-hey!” Akane pouted.

“He does. And he does so often enough that we also know that frozen home cooking is exempt,” Iwako said, then straightened up and looked around. “Say, where is he, anyhow?”

“Well…” Miyuki clasped her hands together sweetly. “I sent him on an incredibly urgent errand, in the hopes that we might be able to get you to ourselves. Judge you without him butting his head in. But, my judgment is passed. You’re a-okay.”

“I wouldn’t say that yet,” Iwako said, “You haven’t actually tried our cooking.”

“Shut up! I am a good cook,” Sasane protested, “And you are too, when you quit snacking on the ingredients…”

“Do you expect me to just ignore the perfectly suitable food right in front of me?” She questioned, “I always account for my own gluttony in my measurements, of course.”

“Ah!” A final voice joined the conversation, and everyone turned to see Mitsuru had come through the door. “I’m sorry. I tried to hurry back, but it seems I missed your arrival after all. I hope these ladies weren’t giving you too much of a hard time?”

At that callout, the three generations of Fujishiro women all laughed a bit.
“No trouble at all,” Sasane said, then handed off the basket to Mitsuru. “Could you go find space in your freezer for this stuff?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah,” Mitsuru said, then glanced around and lifted the bag in his hand that wasn’t given the basket. “Grandma, I got your prescriptions. Still can’t believe you forgot to get them while you were shopping for dinner…”

Miyuki winked at the girlfriends, then took the bag and went off to her room to take them.

“…It actually was an urgent errand,” Sasane commented, blinking in surprise a few times, but then burst out laughing. “She’s Mitsuru’s grandmother, alright.”

“Yes…” Iwako smiled. “It would be nice, wouldn’t it? To be able to call them our family as well.”

“Mm.” Sasane nodded. “I think so too. They’re so nice… If they’ll put up with us that long. Mitsuru included, of course. He’s much too good for either of us.”

“I won’t argue with that.”
Before she became a collection of memories which would haunt a young woman named Dia Hamuko, Box Hako was a real person. She was, but just barely.

Holding on by a string, the Ultimate Volunteer didn’t know how to exist. She did it, but she didn’t understand how. She had conflicting messages on all sides. Her parents said she was too giving. Everybody always expected everything of her. She was supposed to be selfless, but no, not like that. Be selfish. But don’t be selfish in ways that go against our wishes. Be selfless to us and selfish to others. But don’t be selfish to others if it will make us look bad. Do well in school. By God, you better do well in school. Wear your hair this way. Your clothes this way.

It was no wonder these memories would go on to cause more harm. Even Box Hako never knew how to be Box Hako, the way that people wanted her to. Yet, she still did. She did everything that she was meant to do, no matter how conflicted it was. She did it. She became a perfect person. Perfect daughter. Nothing for herself. Always for other people. Legitimate kindness? No, what was that? Show kindness where it makes you look good. Show kindness where it proves you were raised right. Volunteer with big charity groups and put on a show of being such a sweet and generous child. Tell them who taught you this. Tell them.

It’s Ice and Speak Hako, isn’t it?

Though they were considered normal parents by the time Box was growing up, it wasn’t as if they’d been normal people. They were financially well-off, and in their youth, played the field of celebrity. There wasn’t anything about their jobs that naturally put them into a spotlight, of course. But changing their names and paying for television appearances brought them into the public eye, and they revelled in it. All eyes on them. A therapist named Speak, a cryogenicist named Ice? That was interesting enough with money added in.

It only lasted for as long as they were conventionally beautiful, sure, but they weren’t forgotten. They cemented themselves as public figures through cunning and design, and they’d do the same with their daughter. Getting her named the ‘Ultimate Volunteer’ was the perfect way to carry this on. Everybody loved charity. Especially big, public charity events, run by a beautiful young lady who’d been heralded as the best of the best in helping others. Perfectly raised to be a perfect person by perfect parents. Exactly what they wanted.

How incredibly impressive. How praiseworthy. It was spectacular, that their fame returned to them through this lengthy endeavor. It was worth every minute of it, for them, for their pride.

And Box? Well, who cared about her. If she was amazing it was because of them. Because she listened to them, because they shaped her into exactly what they wanted her to be. She was only to be friends with other Ultimates, and it was only luck that her childhood best friend was one as well. Connection wasn’t as important as networking, as being seen with other people like her. She was truly, for this day and age, high society.

Darling girl. Perfect puppet.

So how dare she go and do a thing like that? How dare she?

It was Amai who found her. Amai, who Ice and Speak never approved of and hoped would have become off-limits when Box became an Ultimate. Amai who managed to earn herself two Ultimate talents at once, somehow. Amai, who was the only person in Box Hako’s curated life who ever
urged her to disobey, to take anything into her own hands, to be anyone at all other than simply, the daughter of Ice and Speak Hako. Amai, who wouldn’t dare let Box’s parents see the note.

Amai, who said that even through bawling tears, that she was proud. Who looked Ice and Speak right in the eyes, spat at their feet, and said that she was glad. Glad that at least they didn’t make the decision of how Box would die. Glad she picked one thing for herself and that thing was how she’d leave this all behind, but couldn’t it have been anything else that she finally chose to give herself some sort of agency from her parents?

Like, maybe. Maybe, Amai sometimes thought. It could have been something like becoming her girlfriend, yeah? That was probably what she implied when she said that Box should rebel. What she really wanted was that. Because Box loved her. She could tell. She knew these things. But Ice and Speak hated her. Box should have denied them that.

Instead, she denied them everything at once. Amai was proud of her. But she still hated it.

And of course, it was all about the grieving parents. For a time. They stayed in the spotlight for a while, though the truth was covered up. Their poor daughter, kidnapped by Despairs. They should have known better than to share her title publicly, but she insisted on it. They would never stop looking, though. She’d come back someday, she would.

Ice Hako, born Sojiro Hako, was a cryogenicist. He and his wife lived a very public life. Their daughter’s body need not decay. Bringing an Ultimate back to life seemed exactly the challenge that the Ultimate Initiative might be interested in. They even had the necessary connections to create an Alter Ego, didn’t they?

The story went that there could be no Alter Ego made because she was already dead; The part of her mind that made her Box Hako was gone forever. This was true; All that was left were memories. Even still, something could be fabricated. An artificial intelligence with her memories would become her, right? But the problem was that any functional AI needed to be able to learn and grow as a person.

Something which made her, irrevocably, not Box Hako. Because Box Hako was not allowed to change. She had to be exactly who everybody expected her to be.

Speak and Ice Hako were never more disappointed in their lives than when they spoke to this recreation, to find that she was completely wrong.

That thing in front of them. That being which would be called Dia.

That was a person, not a Box.
Three in the afternoon was a weird time of day to be getting revenge. Even so, that was the time that Akane Fujishiro and Iwako Same had decided on, currently staring down one Hako each. Both were tied to chairs quite effectively, in a manner that Nate had apparently taught Iwako. They were using Akane’s private room for this purpose, because the Failed Ultimates had no affiliation to these people and no need to want to rescue them at all.

“You do understand why you’re here, correct?” Iwako asked of Ice.

“You do know that you deserve this, right?” Akane asked Speak.

Neither of them answered in any way. Not verbally, not with body language. Nothing.

“It’s because of you that Mitsuru is dead,” Iwako said, “It’s because of your actions. Because of what you did to that… No, to those girls. Your parenting was actually so rotten that it traumatized two entire young women. And you know what?”

No response.

“It would have killed them both, too,” Iwako said.

“If not for my big brother… If not for what he decided to do.” There was a darkness over Akane’s eyes as she spoke, voice shaking with anger. “Then Hamuko would have ended up doing the exact same thing as your real daughter.”

“What can you possibly know about that?” Speak asked, “You’re what, fourteen?”

“I was raised by good parents,” Akane said, “So I guess that means I know bad ones when I see them. There was something off the minute I met you two.”

“Good parents? Come on,” Ice snipped, “Your father’s existence was the catalyst for a murder, wasn’t it?”

“Gh-” Akane was caught off guard, but only for a moment.

“Sure, but she wasn’t raised by him. You think he was ever around?” Iwako asked, “Minami wouldn’t have stayed with any woman… Any person he couldn’t completely control. Akane hasn’t got anything to do with him.”

“Hm. Well, if that’s true, then she should be the last one standing,” Speak said, then grinned at them. “Course, there’s still one more of his kids left to die. Maybe you should kill her, instead of us.”

“We never said we’d kill you,” Akane said.

“Who else is there?” Iwako asked, surprised to hear them say that. Wait. “Did you… Know him personally or something?”
“What can we say? We’re important, he’s important, we’d mingle,” Speak said, “And he told us that gutter-trash woman of his managed to get pregnant again when he went to visit.”

“Truly, unfair. We had to try for years to get our daughter, and some woman who has to use her kids to stay out of the poorhouse is that fertile?” Ice added, “You know, I wonder what became of that one. Last we heard she found out it was a girl. If she was born at all, maybe she’s already starved to death. There can only be one heir of Minami, right?”

Akane slapped him in a smooth motion, and carried that momentum to lean close to his face. “There are no Minamis but my father.”

“I’m going to call Sakura,” Iwako said, and excused herself from the room. “She needs to know what happened. And she needs to know about this child. Akane, do whatever you want with these idiots.”

“Hey!” Speak protested, “I resent that. I can grant certain insults, but my husband and I are quite intelligent.”

“Could have fooled me.” And Iwako was gone, leaving Akane with the man and woman whose presence alone had given Akane chills the first time she met them.

“You killed her,” Akane said, “Box Hako. Your daughter. You killed her.”

“What are you-”

“You think I don’t know the entire story? She knew my brother! I met her! I met that girl and she was dying!” Akane’s voice was steadily getting louder. “I shouldn’t have had to see that! But it was easy to tell… So easy that when you went on TV and said she was missing, I knew she was dead. She had to be. I met her a year ago. Just before it. She said I could have some of her clothes if she wanted. Even if I’m just a kid. I knew. A dying girl like her… Why should a kid have to realize a thing like that?”
The Hakos were silent again.

“Maybe you thought if you were hurting anyone it was just her,” Akane said, “Just Box. Because she was helping people, right? But. It hurt me to see that sort of thing. It’s the first time somebody I met died. It hurt Mitsuru cause she was his friend, and because of what happened. It hurt Amai Oishi and Gavin Sakaki and anyone else who met her and you killed her. You killed your daughter and you tried to kill Hamuko too.”

“And,” Akane continued, lifting her hands above her head in fists, shoulders slouched as she stared down at the ground. “You killed my big brother.”

“He killed himself,” Ice said.

“So did Box Hako, but you’re not defending yourself on that one.” Akane brought those fists down, eliciting a noise of discomfort from Ice as they collided with his face. “This case was your fault. You killed him. If you just let Hamuko be. Then maybe he’d still be dead, sure. I can’t say what if. But because it was to save her from what you did to her. It’s your fault. It’s yours. You’re the people responsible for all of this.”
“What if,” Speak spoke up before Akane could do the same to her. “What if we told you how we did it. How we brought Box back. If we told you who made… ‘Dia’. She could bring your brother back. She could, I’m sure of it!”

“No,” Akane said, “She could bring a brother back. He’d be my brother. He’d care about me like my brother. He wouldn’t be Mitsuru, though. Cause that girl’s not Box Hako. Never was.”

“Just because Ms. Hashi failed us, doesn’t mean she’d fail you,” Speak protested, “She might even be somebody who could make an alter ego! Who could extract your brother from the Neo World program in full! He could even get put back into his body-”

“You.” Akane grabbed Speak at her clavicle. “Can shut up. I don’t care what this Hashi can do. The only person who ever put an Alter Ego into a human body is dead. Guess we should call her anyway, though.” She squeezed tighter, making Speak unable to perform her namesake verb. “I mean, if you’re telling me the truth, then she’s Hamuko’s mom, right?”

“I-I-I’m her mothe-” Speak still tried to get words out past Akane’s grip.

Akane waited a little while longer, then let go. “You aren’t. You were Box Hako’s mom, and you blew it. [Good night.]”
4:00 PM / 1600 Hours

Things wrapped up in the courtroom. It was a strange, but welcome change that there wasn’t an execution at the end of the trial. The only person who had done anything to qualify as the Blackened was Mitsuru himself, which they’d already been made aware of before finally managing to expose Dia’s heart. Nami felt a heavy weight lifted from her shoulders at having this mystery answered. The AI was this girl who’d been hurt over and over again, her entire life… No villain at all, but an ally in every sense of the word. A friend. Dia was the person who had shone through the cracks. And finally, the participants of the 54th Killing Game found that light.

“So, Dia,” Sayaka said to her, “I know you said that you don’t want loads of questions. I get that, but. At the same time, I wanna get to know you. Not you that’s trying to be someone else. Are those kinds of questions okay?”

“Oh! Yeah, of course,” Dia said, giggling a bit. “I just mean, it’s weird to be treated all Groundhog Day just because I did something similar. It’s sort of… All that stuff feels kind of like a dream. I wasn’t me, after all. I’d like it, if everybody is alright with it, that we live in the moment.”

“Yeah, of course,” Goro said, walking backwards to face her as the group made their way to the elevator, “Also, me and Dia already super got to know each other a bunch, so I can probably answer some of the sillier stuff too. Like, her favorite color is pink, favorite fashion style is classic aristo, and favorite food is yaki-udon, extra crispy.”

Dia blushed a bit, and pressed her hands to her cheeks. “That’s all true, yes… Um, really though, I just like nice and crispy foods. My least favorite things are slimy, or things that suddenly have something hard to bite through like a chunk of fat on some meat.”

“Well, I have perfect carving skills,” Amai bragged, “So none of the meat I offer up has fat unless it’s supposed to! Like pork belly. Do you like pork belly, Dia?”

“No… It tastes nice but it’s bad…” Dia pouted. “If it’s fried or something that gets rid of the jelly-ness then it’s ultra-tasty, though!”

“What the fuck, you’re precious?” Randy said, “You’re kind of like, I dunno. We all got a new puppy, but instead of a puppy she’s a cool and good friend?”

“Ahhh, no, you’re being too kind!” Dia complained, flapping a hand in his direction. “You were never this nice to me when you found out who I was before…”

“That’s because we were fake versions and the fake versions had an agenda to make you not be you,” Tsukasa said, “So it’s kind of a given that we’d be nicer to you in the real game, isn’t it? Besides, you’re our friend. If we can forgive Bakura for committing two acts of manslaughter, we can forgive you for being forced to lie about your identity.”

“Oh. Yes, that is a good point,” Dia admitted, and adjusted her glasses. She did it in a weird way where she used two fingers on one hand, but held the other underneath, just in case they fell off or something, Nami guessed.

“Wait, what? You forgave me for that shit?” Goro asked, “Wow. You all have really confused moral compasses, huh?”
“Shut up and take the W,” Nami said, smirking in his direction.

“Well, I didn’t,” Madara said, “Like, I’m not gonna be a dick, but you aren’t really forgiven. I guess you like, can be, if you don’t screw up more. We’re not friends right now, though! Capiche, Kaposh?”

“Understood,” Goro said, “Jeeze, though. I gladly woulda stayed in that room for longer if it meant Fujishiro didn’t have to die… I mean it worked out for Dia, so I’m happy! But he’s still gone.”

“That’s true…” Dia sighed, and looked away. “I mean, I don’t exactly think. That I’m worth it. So I’m sorry for that, everybody. Sincerely, I am.”

“Can it,” Randy said, “Saying that shit is worthless. Even if you think that you aren’t worth saving, which you fucking are, I know I was worth saving. If he didn’t kill himself, I was gonna get executed. He made the best of a fucked up situation, okay? Just be grateful for that.”

“Randy-” Dia stared at him for a moment. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything like that, at all. I think I just sort of… Forgot why it happened for a minute there.”

“Of course you did,” Goro said, “Forgetting why stuff happens is the best way to beat yourself up over stuff! I know it well. But, y’know. Try to don’t.”

“I’ll… Try to don’t,” Dia agreed, then seemed to seize upon something. “Oh! Oh, oh, Monokuma?”

It appeared. “Yes, Dia? I’m assuming you have a good reason for subjecting me once more this inconvenience that you will need to deal with yourself?”

“Well, I don’t mind, as long as people refer to me as Hamuko whenever they’re talking to each other and don’t need me to randomly turn up…” She pressed a finger to her cheek. “Anyway. I actually did need you to turn up! There’s a bright side to everything, so, since we finished another trial… What’s new in the building?”

“Oh, of course! I can definitely tell you that,” Monokuma said, “But shouldn’t you already know?”

“Mnn, it’s different every time. Nami’s ward only opened after she figured out her own talent, for one. And the newcomers’ wards obviously didn’t exist… New things did open in the Empty Wings too, but usually people were encouraged to use them for murder.”

“Girl, I would never,” Monokuma said.

“I’m pretty sure that you have, actually,” Nami said.

“Oh nooo, the girl with a history of spotty memory is calling me out with no receipts?” Monokuma asked, striking another ridiculous pose. “This is cyberbullying! Call the police! Call the SWAT team! Call the lady with the puppets who teaches fourth grade classes not to be mean!”

“Street smarts!” Nami memed right back.

“Er, anyway. That was poor timing to lapse into a run of good old goofing off. The addition to the Empty Wings this time around is nice, at least. It’ll be an indoor garden. But…” Its tone got a little more apprehensive. “As for the new wards, well. We get the Ultimate Little Sister’s Ward, the Ultimate AI’s ward, The Ultimate CEO’s Ward, and… The Ultimate Male Escort’s Ward.”

“What.” Nami stated.
“Oh. Yeah, that’d be me,” Randy said.

So she reiterated.

“What??”
“...Yeah, that’s my real talent,” Randy admitted, then gave a wide shrug. “I mean, come on. Fisticuffs isn’t even the name of a profession. I don’t even know what you call somebody who does fisticuffs. I just blurted it because I’m good at punching things and, well, it stuck.”

“Randy is very bad at coming up with things on the spot,” Dia said, “In the other incarnations his talent… Was usually still fisticuffs but sometimes he said other dumb things. Like sock-wearer. You once said you were the Ultimate Sock-wearer.”

“Well, aren’t I?” Randy asked, posing very briefly before returning to seriousness. “I wanted to let you know the truth, once I knew I could trust you all, but…”


“I did know it,” Sayaka said, “But I kept the secret, again, cause of Yuuri. His mom made him do it, after all. He didn’t want people to hear about that shit. Even after he died… Even if it was a matter of time, I think he’d be glad to know it took another trial before the truth made it out. And when it comes to Randy, I kinda thought you’d figure it out?”

“And, Randy, you?” Nami asked.

“Nobody forced me into it, if that’s what you’re asking,” Randy said, “I got started… I guess technically it was before I ended up here. Barter system shit, I got Japanese lessons in exchange for doing stuff for him. But it was really never a big deal for me or anything, it’s just like any other job.”

“Even if you’re not bothered by it, isn’t it going a little far to say it’s like any other job?” Sayaka asked, “I mean, the stuff I do for my family. Doesn’t bug me personally, but, y’know. People aren’t usually going to be scared of someone who works at a McDonald’s the way they are when they find out what I do.”

“Well people don’t exactly get scared of me, either, but I get what you’re saying,” Randy said, “Even still, it just doesn’t mean a whole lot to me. I guess it’s cool that I’m good enough to be the Ultimate at it, though.”

“And, Tsukasa?” Nami asked, looking to her childhood friend.

“Ah, well, don’t worry about that. We’ve been telling partial truths this entire time, and it’s completely true that we’re dating and in love. Not any sort of cover,” Tsukasa explained, “We actually did meet through his, er, work. But before he got the Ultimate title.”

“Before I even transitioned, actually,” Randy added in. “Sorry I had to be dishonest, Nami, but that story I told you about how my egg cracked was maybe a little bit sanitized. In any case, I was hired to cover up Tsukasa and Nate’s relationship. Let loose the minor scandal about the two of us, and it gets him brownie points with his despair employees plus ’proof’ he’s straight. That… Kinda didn’t work out. Obviously.”

“Yeah, I’d say,” Nami said, then looked between the two of them. “Sorry, this is just really weird to me. Uh. The Ultimate Initiative gives out that kind of talent? Not like. I’m not bothered or anything by the fact that, you are… were… are? In that line of work? Caught off guard though. I sure am that. What’s your ward even going to look like? There’s minors here. It would be kind of
distasteful for your ward to be… Anything I can think of as a concept for what it would be.”

Goro, Madara, and Torimi, the minors in question, shared a look.

“Sex work make you uncomfortable, Nami?” Madara wondered.

“Well usually my experience with the field is prosecuting people for putting people in it who don’t want to be, so maybe just a little bit yes!” She squeaked out. “And it’s nothing against Randy cause he’s a great person and my friend! I just need some time to adjust!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Randy said, and put a hand on Nami’s head. “Kinda surprised you’re the only person who’s reacting weird, but then, I guess that the people who’d be more likely to are… Already dead? Uh. Anyway, yeah. I’m not even the first person to get this talent, there was somebody else even way back when it was Hope’s Peak giving them out. As for what my ward could be, I mean. We can go find that out right now.”

“We can,” Dia said, seeming to vibrate in place. “And mine! Mine, my ward! Actually for me? I can’t believe that exists!”

“You never got it even when you told the truth before?” Riko wondered.

“No! I told you, I didn’t know till Monokuma said, that I’m the Ultimate AI. I thought I, Dia, might not be an Ultimate at all, you know. Guess I’m still not really, being an AI isn’t exactly a talent about what you can do and more about what exactly you are…”

“Well, maybe,” Amai said, “But the Killing Game is for Ultimates. You are one, even if you don’t think existing is a talent. Jeeze, how many times are we gonna have to fucking remind you that you’re just one of us? Entitled much?”

Dia blushed, then burst out laughing, covering her mouth with both hands as she did. It wasn’t like she disliked Amai, really. Even after everything, there were a lot of pleasant memories there, and Dia could understand her in a way that most of the others here couldn’t. So it was that Amai’s blunt comfort was, indeed, comfort. Telling her off for her self-aggrandizing behaviors in such a way made it easy to see how she was making things worse for herself than needed.

“…I actually have no idea how to process this day, at all,” Nami admitted, holding a hand to her own forehead. “Can it like, stop? No more big secrets or bizarre discoveries till, like, at least noon tomorrow? Please?”

“Sorry about that,” Monokuma said, “But as far as I’m concerned, yeah. The weird shit can take a break for the rest of the day. You’ve got a nice garden and some new wards to check out, after all! Isn’t that always just such fun?”

“Yep. Mhm. Definitely believe you that there won’t be something shocking about any of those locations. Thanks, Monokuma. Ever the truth-teller-”

“But, I am,” Monokuma said, “I don’t like lying.”

“Right, yeah. Lying to us ruins the sport.” Nami rolled her eyes and stood up straight.

“...Why are you being mean to me again? Come on.” Monokuma looked down at the floor. “I’m not lying, and it’s not for that reason. I know what lying does. I know. I do. I know that it… Makes things worse for everybody. For the person being lied to and the liar.”

Nami hesitated, then sighed and crouched down to level with Monokuma. “I’m sorry. I’m having a
bit of a crisis at this moment. I am overwhelmed with information and I’m trying very hard to remember what’s happened today. Alright? I’m not trying to be mean.”

“Oh,” Monokuma said, “Okay, I understand.”

So Nami sunk to her knees, took a few deep breaths, then stood back up and smiled. “Dia? Would you like to explore the new areas with me?”

“...Definitely,” Dia said, grinning right back. “I really would!”
“So we should go to the garden first, right?” Nami offered as she and Dia wandered off into the Empty Wings, everybody having gone their separate ways following the trial. Nami had managed to process everything as much as she reasonable could, and now, just wanted to look around the new locations. With… Dia.

She wanted to get to know Dia, too. That much was certain. Any amount that she thought she’d gotten to know ‘Box’ felt, well, outdated. Sure, there existed an amount of Dia in those interactions, but Nami couldn’t honestly say that she knew her as a friend the same way she previously thought she could. When Dia’s personality was ‘mostly inhuman with a few moments of real existence’, Nami thought that was it, but now that she knew it was ‘mostly Box with a few moments of Dia’, the game was changed.

A few glimpses of somebody was, after all, not qualifiable to get to know them. Even if Dia knew her and considered them on first name basis, Nami had some trouble with it. After all, in those other Killing Games, the version of her that Dia got to know… Still only knew ‘Box’. A person pretending to be somebody else couldn’t connect in a genuine way, and Nami should know. Even if she’d blocked details from her memory, she did remember a time when she was trying to be the boy twin that people around her said she was supposed to be. At that time, she couldn’t make real connections. It was only when she started to come out of her shell that she got to know Tsukasa, and Puropurin online, and the friends that she made through work.

So, even though going from ‘Box’ to ‘Dia’ might not be quite the same as Nami’s own journey from her forgotten necronym to who she was now, she understood, and as a result, felt a need to become closer with the real and true Dia. So it was a good thing that they were checking out that new garden together.

“Umm… If I disappear while we’re hanging out,” Dia said, “Just wait a few minutes, then you can call me back here again, okay?”

“Right,” Nami said, “That’s something I can get used to. Me and Mono get along okay, so. Teleporting friends isn’t new.”

“Mono… Heh. That’s a pretty cute nickname, to keep from summoning it in casual conversation,” Dia said, “But why not just ask its actual name?”

“Huh?” Nami tilted her head in confusion.

“Well, in order to find me, you had to determine that Mono isn’t an AI,” Dia said, tapping her own chin. “Sooo… Kinda stands to reason, the person controlling it has a name. Might as well try asking what that person’s name is.”

“It would never tell us that,” Nami said, “After all, the person who’s controlling it is one of us.”

“Nah,” Dia said, “This version of Mono is nothing like any of you. Trust me, I know these things.”

“...Yeah, that’s fair,” Nami said, “But then, well. It’s still the Mastermind, right?”

“I don’t know about that either?” Dia shrugged. “In all the other versions, it acted nothing like this. It was also an AI there. It’s one of the differences about the real game, from the fake ones. So… Who knows. Maybe it will tell you. Maybe it’s restricted like me, and it can’t.”
“Oh, I didn’t think about that,” Nami said, “It did say that it doesn’t like lying.”

“I believe that,” Dia said, “It could lie really well if it wanted to, but it doesn’t.”

“You can tell?” Nami asked.

“Um…” Dia looked down. “Well, one of Hako’s skills was reading body language, since she kind of did it all. Manually? She had a very specific image. And since that was a skill, not a talent, I have memories of learning it. So I can kind of do the same. So, no, Mono doesn’t lie very often?”

“Ah. Sorry about that,” Nami said.

“No, it’s fine. I can’t just ignore the fact that I have her memories, after all,” Dia said, “It does have an impact on who I am now… Really, I’m just relieved that I can even try to be me, now. You’ve all been so understanding, it kind of doesn’t feel real.”

“We’re in a Killing Game in a Neo World Program, nothing feels real,” Nami said, “But I get what you’re saying. We’ve kind of gotten used to things being bad here, so good things are hard to believe. Like when Sayaka said that she liked me. Oh, um. That reminds me, I’m just, curious. What Oishi said about Hako…”

“Mm, she was bisexual,” Dia said, “But if I’m being honest, I kinda think… I just like girls? Hm. Not that I wanna date anyone, like, soon. But in the next few years I might like to have a girlfriend. You think I could get a girlfriend? I dated a bunch of you in fake games but that wasn’t me and also I kind of hated it. Mm. Nothing against anybody here! It just. You know what? I am shutting up now.”

“Heh, you can get a girlfriend,” Nami said, “Randy wasn’t exaggerating, you’re precious. Adorable. Some girl is going to want to take good care of you, I bet.”

“Eheheh…” Dia giggled, pressing her fingers together. “I do like the sound of that…”

“Ah, here’s the garden,” Nami said, then opened the door. Riko was already in there, sitting between two flower bushes. She lifted a hand and waved to the two of them.

“Hi, Riko!” Dia exclaimed, then ran over to her. “Do you know what types of flowers these are?”

“Yes,” She answered in writing, so as not to leave Nami out. “Hydrangeas. In Victorian flower language, they mean frigidity, or heartlessness.”

“Don’t they also mean,” Nami asked, “Thank you for understanding?”

Riko blinked in her direction, then nodded before writing. “That’s true. I’m surprised you knew that, though. My sister and I were both taught flower language, but she didn’t remember it at all. Most people don’t know these things off the top of their heads.”

“Why would you leave out the nice meaning?” Dia asked, then hopped in place for just a second. Then, she frantically began gathering hydrangeas off the back side of the bush, which was against a tree and wouldn’t ruin the garden’s aesthetic. “I think that I should give these to our friends. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes,” Riko said, “With the nice meaning in mind, that does make perfect sense.”

“Thank you for understanding…” Dia observed, “It really is perfect, eheh. Thank you, everyone, for understanding who I am and why I’m here now… Right?”
“Right,” Nami said, “It’s nice… I don’t remember a lot of flower meanings, but I know a few. Hydrangeas are some of my favorite flowers, so I remember it easily.”

“They are quite lovely,” Riko agreed, then set down her whiteboard and watched Dia gathering the flowers to share with their friends. The question stayed there. Why would you leave out the nice meaning, Riko Asahi?

Why?
Daily Life: Day Twelve (Elevator)

After gathering her hydrangeas, Dia investigated the rest of the garden with Nami, while Riko stayed where she’d sat herself. She looked calm, just sitting between the bushes like that, and Nami realized she had been a bit self-centered. Other people could be overwhelmed, too, by today’s events. A death, and a discovery that somebody wasn’t who they thought she was. Plus, Riko and Dia were friends. Nami would consider that the truth; Riko and Dia really had become friends.

Watching her break down in the middle of a trial had to have been stressful, and if this was Riko’s way of relaxing, then good for her.

The garden didn’t only have flowers, but patches of fruits and vegetables too. There didn’t seem to be any consistency to required climates between them, but that was the beauty of Neo World; there didn’t need to be. Blueberries and Mangos could grow side-by-side without any change in the surrounding temperature. After determining all of this, though, and Dia armed with her hydrangea collection, there wasn’t much left to investigate in the garden, so the two of them let Riko be to move on with their exploration.

To their surprise upon reaching the Hospitality wing, there was an elevator at the end of the hallway. They approached it, and…

“Hey!” Monokuma appeared. “I see that you’ve noticed my elevator.”

“Yes, it’s kind of hard not to notice,” Nami said.

“Well, it’s here because this building is now, what, seven floors tall? And making you use stairs to traverse seven floors of the Empty Wings, whatever, that’s your prerogative, you’ve been doing that the whole time. But I figured, it might be a bit appreciado if you didn’t always need to climb so many stairs just to get to breakfast and whatever?”

“Appreciado indeed!” Dia exclaimed and clapped her hands together, before stepping over to the elevator. She even walked differently. While Box Hako moved in a simple but graceful way, like she was following a line, Dia’s path was always a bit wavy, and every so often she’d bounce a step. It reminded Nami of watching a sparrow that was reluctant to actually take off. “I mean, it isn’t actually a problem for me, now that everybody knows about me and I am by far the most mobile participant here, along with you, Monokuma. But, still! It’s useful.”

“I thought as much, yes,” Monokuma said, “You seem to be doing well, Dia.”

“Oh, I am. Um.” She paused a moment, then retrieved one of her hydrangeas and held it out towards Monokuma. “This is for you.”

“For me?” Monokuma asked, staring up at her.

“Mmhm. It means, thank you for understanding.” Dia smiled, and tilted her head just a bit. “You’ve understood me for a while now, so of course I need to show my gratitude!”

“Ahh… That’s very kind of you,” Monokuma said, then took the flower. It stuck it behind one ear, then struck a pose. “How do I look?”

“Somehow, it suits you,” Dia said, “Blue’s really your color!”
“Don’t you think so?” Monokuma asked, chuckling. “I mean, it is my favorite, so I’d kind of expect it to look good on me.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have expected that,” Dia said, “But, it’s nice.”

“Why thank you,” Monokuma said, “Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. Feel free to use the new elevator if you like! I promise it is not ever going to break.”

“Very reassuring,” Nami said, “But will we get wet? If we go down there?”

“Ehhh?” Monokuma questioned, but then caught on. “Have I misunderstood life so gravely?”

“What are you… talking about?” Dia questioned.

“It is a meme,” Nami explained. That did explain everything, after all. The convenient thing about being known for her memes was that it really could brush off any awkwardness, though she’d yet to use it as a lie. She could. Anyway, she stepped into the elevator, and Dia joined her.

“I know technically, I don’t need to ride along,” Dia said, “But… Even though I’m able to travel in weird ways, it feels pretty normal to do this kind of thing too.”

“I mean, it’s nice to walk somewhere with somebody,” Nami said, “Even if you don’t end up talking, which we have, it’s relaxing.”

“That’s because…” Dia noted, “It’s a conversational setting where eye contact isn’t expected, at all. You’re right next to each other, so you can’t, so that pressure is gone.”

“Oh? Is that something else you learned from Hako’s studies?” Nami asked.

“Well, I’d technically say I learned it by being a person who’s super uncomfortable with eye contact, but yeah. Explaining it the way I just did, came from her.” Dia crossed her arms low, over her stomach. “…I’m sorry if I’m being weird. I mean. I get it if you don’t like me anymore. Box was way better at talking to people.”

“You’ve been… Totally fine?” Nami said, “I mean, I think so, anyway. Only thing that’s weird is I put my foot in my mouth a little. And you saying that you’re being weird when you’re not, is a little weird, but generally you aren’t being weird. I think. I am weird, so I’m no authority.”

“…Okay. Thank you. It will just take me some time to get used to this.” Dia fidgeted, then looked up as the elevator arrived at the newest floor and slid its doors open. This one was… Strange. Not that the previous two floors weren’t also strange, but this one was designed to be even more run down than the empty wings. Perfectly functional, actually, but there were screens on the walls making it appear as if the floor was bare-bones, made of scaffolding left hanging on by a thread. The same effect was on some sections of the floor.

Knowing that the actual outdoors was a void, not the landscape portrayed here, made it easy to overcome the unease of walking on the screens. As easy as it could be, to step on something that appeared as if it would be a several story drop directly onto Packed Dirt. Nonetheless, Dia and Nami made their way toward the ward marked as belonging to the Ultimate Little Sister.

It looked… kind of ridiculous, actually. It was a traditional Japanese sitting room, where separate families would meet to drink together when discussing pacts and truces. It had that sort of dim, menacing aura about it at first glance… But the devil was in the details. There were cute decorations scattered around, and the paneling was done up to look like secret assassins were waiting, backlit behind each one. A mildly anachronistic room. Oh, and of course, there was a
“Namiiii!” Sayaka exclaimed, popping out from behind one of the panels. Ah, so there was actually space behind them. “What do you think? Isn’t my ward really goddamn cool?”

Nami blinked as she looked around at the oddness, then smiled. “It really suits you, actually. It seems all intimidating and formal at first glance, but once you pay more attention it’s really cute, and kind of silly. Like you.”

“Ah!” Sayaka squeaked, and brought her arms up to hide her blush. “Come on, that’s no fair! I wasn’t expecting that at all…”

“All’s fair in love, babe.” Nami made finger guns, then wandered over towards the panel Sayaka had emerged from. “So what’s on the other side of these, anyway?”

“Well, actually! Remember how I thought I’d have leatherworking stuff in my closet as a hobby, but I turned out not to?” Sayaka asked, “Well, it’s actually in here! All sorts of cool supplies, actually. I could make you something ~pretty~ nice. Probably not a jacket, though. I can make those, but, the cute and formal outfit with a leather jacket on top look is sort of being monopolized by Asahi.”

“How about a choker?” Nami offered, “Hey, we could have matching ones, right? That’d be cute.”

“It! Yes, it would!” Sayaka flustered, but then gave an exaggerated thumbs-up. “That’d be fun to make, though, for sure. Dia, do you want anything?”

“Hm… I’m not sure if anything out of leather would suit me.” She giggled a bit. “As much as I’d love to have something nice made by you, it just wouldn’t work with my fashion sense, would it?”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Sayaka said, then snickered a bit to herself. “Imagine. Dia Hamuko in leather pants.”

“I don’t want to imagine myself in leather pants!” Dia exclaimed, “I would look stupid!”

“…Hey, wait a second,” Nami came to a realization, “Sayaka? Do you like hunting?”

“What? Oh, yeah,” Sayaka said, “I used to go with my dad on the weekends. How’d you figure that out, though?”

“I mean, you do leatherworking, and you cook, and you especially like to cook meat, so.” Nami shrugged. “It kind of makes sense. So, uh. You use illegal yakuza guns or something?”

“No, no. You can actually get certain gun permits as a hunter,” Sayaka said, “And it’s not hard to manage that bureaucracy stuff normally anyway. The illegal guns are handguns for member use, and miscellaneous sorts for selling. For hunting we use basic rifles.”

“Oh, I see. That makes sense, then,” Nami said, “That’s pretty cool. My girlfriend knows how to use so many weapons.”

“I sure do!” Sayaka put her hands on her hips, striking something like a superman pose. “I’ll always protect you!”

“Whaaa! Who’s being unfair now?” It was Nami’s turn to blush.

“Jeeze, you two,” Dia said, “How cheesy can you get? It’s sweet, though. It’s… Really nice to see
you happy with each other. You’ve always made a great couple.”

“Well, since we ended up together in the one time that’s actually real,” Nami wondered, “Does that mean that we’re meant to be?”

“Who knows,” Dia said, then smiled. “I’d like to think that it does, though. After all, I’ve never seen Sayaka this enthusiastic… In a world where she didn’t have you.”
Nami and Sayaka hung out in the ward a bit longer, as Dia vanished shortly after their conversation. Nami timed it, and five minutes later, called Dia back.

“Hey-lo,” Dia said, “That was Oishi. She says that dinner’s gonna be a bit late today, in an hour instead of right now. Figured I could pass it on to a few people, and she was right because I am now passing it on to you. Mono’s handling anyone who’s not on this floor, apparently.”

“Does it bother you to be a gopher now?” Nami wondered.

“Oh no, not at all!” Dia waved her hands in front of herself. “As long as it isn’t especially regular, I don’t mind being a messenger for people. Just because it isn’t my sole purpose in existence anymore doesn’t mean that I don’t still want to be helpful. Except now I’m doing it to be nice, and not because the memories of a dead girl are trying to control me every move. It’s fun to do good things because I want to!”

“Alright, just making sure,” Nami said, “We definitely don’t want to make you uncomfortable, or be weird to you about the fact that you’re an AI.”

“I am the Ultimate AI.” Dia posed jokingly. “So, it’s not like I want or need to be coddled like I’m a human too. I have these abilities cause I’m made of data. May as well use them, righty-o? I mean, for real. Pretending to be a human was a drag.”

“That’s good to know,” Sayaka said, “Well, since you need to pass the message on, do you need to get going?”

“Oh! Well, I probably should. Nami?”

“Yeah, we should move on. Check out Randy’s ward next, right? Then yours. I already know what’s in Tsukasa’s, so I’m not in any hurry to see,” Nami said.

“Hm? Oh, right,” Sayaka noted, then turned back to her crafting station. “I’ll make some stuff here, then. I mean, even if it disappears when we leave the program, making it’s still something I like to do.”

“Yeah…” Nami hadn’t quite thought about that, how anything that they made here was just going to go away with the next year’s Killing Game… Any physical items, anyway. Their bonds with each other were made of tougher stuff than that!

And with that, Nami and Dia moved on to the ward that the former was nervous about; The ward belonging to one Randy Sempers, its label hanging over it with just as much unease.

“You’re sweating, Nami,” Dia said.

“It’s. I’m sorry, I’m just having some trouble with this whole thing,” Nami admitted.

Dia frowned. “I wouldn’t take you as the type to think less of Randy for-”

“It has nothing to do with Randy!” Nami snapped, then put a hand over her mouth and stopped walking. She took a few deep breaths and leveled herself. “Or everything to do with Randy, I
guess, depending on how you look at it. I know they say that it’s fine. And I’m happy for them. But to hear that my childhood friend… The boy I knew in middle school, went on to be somebody like this, I don’t know how to feel. That’s what’s stressing me out about this.”

“Nami…”

“Somebody like this, what does that even mean?” She hissed out, then tried, again. To keep her calm. To articulate her emotions and keep them in check. “It means that he hired Randy. Before Randy, was Randy. And that he was willing to do that. That he’d be with who he thought was a woman just to protect his image. I know he gave up on that when he fell in love. But it still happened. He also had no way of knowing… That Randy was okay with it. That he wasn’t doing that job under any sort of threat, that it didn’t mean much to him. It could have been somebody else. It could have been an actual girl, who was scared, and he would have hurt her just for the sake of public image.”

“I think you should take this up with him,” Dia said, “Okay?”

“But you’ve. Dealt with this-”

“So what if I have? It’s a problem between the two of you,” Dia said, “So you need to resolve it. It doesn’t matter if I’ve seen it resolved before or if I know what to say to make you feel better. That isn’t really helpful, is it? Talk to him and figure it out.”

“…Sorry.” Nami looked down at her feet. “I guess I just don’t want to deal with this.”

“Well,” Dia said, “You are an adult and you will have to. So there.”

“Usually I’m the one saying stuff like that,” Nami admitted with a nervous chuckle. “Which, well. It means I can’t say you’re wrong, huh?”

“Pre-cisely!” Dia said, pointing right at Nami. “Anyway. Before you get yourself any more worked up, we’ll see what this ward even is, kay?”

“Right. Yeah,” Nami said, trying to compose herself, though she didn’t get much chance before Dia opened the door, and…

Well it just looked like a goddamn kickboxing studio, basically. It was just a lot of punching dummies. Like, a lot. It actually matched up with Randy’s fake talent and-

“Oh, you fucking knew this. You are joker? Think you’re funny?” Nami questioned, staring at Dia, who was now losing it laughing at her. Great.

“Maybe I did! Maybe I did not!” Dia got out through her laughing.

“Hey, what’s up?” Randy asked, wandering towards them.

“I neglected to inform Nami that your ward was actually fisticuff-based so that I could witness her anxiety unravel,” Dia said, “Isn’t it less now, Nami?”

“Ugh. Yes.” She glared at Dia. “I am much less nervous about all the things I was nervous about and you can be as smug as you want for making me have this moment.”

“I mean, what did you think my ward would look like? The bear this time’s so squeamish about this stuff it cuts the camera feed if something naughty’s happening in a room,” Randy said, “So it’s not like it was going to make anything weird for my ward. It’s also not like I’m the first person to
have a ward based more on my hobbies than my actual talent.”

“Yeah… Um.” Nami looked past Randy to see that Tsukasa was there too, sitting on a bench and reading a book. She pushed by him to approach her friend. “Tsukasa.”

“Hi Nami,” He greeted her. Too casually.

“I’m going to be an adult and talk to you about this,” Nami said, “I’m weirded out by the way that you and Randy met. I didn’t really take you for the type of person to. Do that. You know what I’m saying? Like. I thought you were generally a good guy. And it did all work out for the best. But…”

“…Yeah, I get it.” Tsukasa looked away from her. “Let’s be real, here. I’m not going to try to defend myself and say that it wasn’t like that. It’s what’s on paper. I was willing to be with somebody I wasn’t even attracted to, and who might hate me for it, so I could look good with my employees and dispel rumors. It was a mistake, even if it led to the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’m not going to deny that.”

“So you understand it?”

“The same way you understand the guy you killed was a mistake.”

“Then it’s fine.” Nami sat down next to her friend, and let her head tap his shoulder. “You’re my friend, after all. And we’re not those types of people. Not really.”

“Just for a moment in time,” Tsukasa agreed, “We were those people.”

“We were,” Nami agreed, “But we aren’t. And that’s okay, isn’t it? It’s okay, because we’re really good. Even if we weren’t.”

“Even if we weren’t.”
After just sitting with Tsukasa for a little while, letting her forgiveness sink in, Nami stood back up and rejoined Dia, who had been being taught by Randy how to punch the dummies. Her punches weren’t quite as wimpy as Nami would have expected, but then, punching badly was probably a Box Hako trait. Dia’s didn’t seem strong, but she picked up the form well, and could throw them quickly. She just seemed like a very bouncy and agile person in general. She had a lot of timid body language, too, but she was by no means stiff or proper the way that ‘Box’ had been.

“Hey,” Nami greeted her, then gave a devious smirk. “You wanna go see your ward, Dia?”

“Oh! Yes please~” Dia stopped punching the thing and got in step behind Nami to go and check out her own ward. She had her hands clasped behind her now and seemed quite excited, which, while expected, was still nice to see. They left Randy’s ward, and then went to the nice new one labeled ‘Ultimate AI’. Nami opened the door and found…

Ah, so the idea here was to match her hobby, too. And was even more anachronistic than Sayaka’s had been. Her fashion sense was reflected nicely in the general layout and decor, resembling something of a Victorian parlor in cream colors. Nami’s best point of reference was actually the uncustomized color scheme of the Animal Crossing rococo set. Then, there was the reflection of Dia’s hobby. There were oversized plush toys all over, and the drawers were full to bursting with more fabrics and supplies.

There was, compared to Goro’s ward, only one sewing machine, set upon a fancy desk with what looked like a very comfortable chair. Speaking of comfortable, an entire back corner was filled with pillows that didn’t aesthetically match, probably because rococo pillows wouldn’t be nearly as soft as those looked, and more drawers that looked to be full of blankets too. Was. Was that a blanket fort corner? Did Dia get a blanket fort corner? Unfair. Nami wanted a blanket fort corner.

“Oh! It’s so nice!” Dia exclaimed as she ran forward into the room, flitting around to investigate each little bit of it more closely. “Don’t you think so? Hm? This is great. It’s great. It’s all my, um. My aesthetic! But also with comfy stuff? Uh? I’m mad I only get this now?”

“Heh, it clashes a bit, but it does seem nice,” Nami said, then wandered over to the oversized plushies. “Have you ever made one as big as these yourself?”

“Not yet,” Dia said, “But I want to. What should I make? Oh, I know, I know. I should make a really big eagle.”

“What for?” Nami asked.

“Well, because Mitsuru was a really big guy. And he’s kind of like a bald eagle, right? So if I’m going to have a nice time making a really big plushie, with the life that he gave me… It should be one to honor him with, shouldn’t it?”

“Oh. That really makes sense…” Nami said, “Not just because he was bald, but he was brave and cool too. So, yeah. Make a giant eagle.”

“Uhmmm.” Dia wrung her hands in front of herself. “Do you mind if I started now? I mean. I don’t want to just bail on checking out the new wards or anything! But. I’m kind of. Um. I dunno how to describe it. It’s not so much that I’m excited to make a memorial plushie, but it feels bad to think about doing anything else now that I’ve had the idea…”
“That’s what we in the neurodivergent world call.” Nami stood on one foot, pointed a single finger gun at Dia, and winked. “Hyperfixation.”

“Oh! I see. Hm. Are there words for all weird feelings?” Dia wondered.

“Definitely not. There are plenty of feelings that don’t have real words for them. That’s why cloud of nebulous and uneasy dark malaise is an emotion I have felt. Just chain together words till it makes just as little sense as the feeling,” Nami said, “But, yeah. There are a lot of words for things. Kira taught me a bunch of them, actually.”

“Kira did?” Dia asked.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not like all the time with her was bad or anything,” Nami said, “A lot of the time she was a great girlfriend, and we had fun together. And she definitely did love me, so that was nice to have… But she also hurt me, bad. Still, just because she did that stuff doesn’t mean I have to strike everything about her from the record of my memories or anything. I mean, really. If nothing else, she was a really smart person, so. Yeah, I’ll acknowledge that.”

“Mm.” Dia nodded. “Are you sad?”

“About what?”

“That she died? I know you already broke up before that happened, so I think that. It’s a question I need to ask.”

“And I never answered it before?”

“Box wouldn’t have asked.”

“Oh fair. GGWP.” Nami crossed one arm over her chest. “Well, yeah. I am. It would have been nice if she could have had the time to get better. I mean, she did die. She’s gone. But if I could bring her back for a year, I would. I want to see her get better because I know she can, and I won’t get that chance.”

“You still think that way, after everything she did to you?” Dia asked.

“Of course I do,” Nami said, “Because she didn’t do it to hurt me. She did it to see what would happen. That’s… Not something a healthy person does. It was cruel, and I wouldn’t want to be a part of her life during that time. But I would want her to get better. You know? She wasn’t evil. I know what evil is.”

“I think,” Dia said, “That she would agree with everything you just said.”


“I haven’t, but I guess it’s just, what I’ve heard about her,” Dia said, “And the company she kept. I mean, I’ve heard stories from you, and from Rei, and from Shinjiro. I can piece her together. Who she was. Why she was. She’d want to get well, too. She’d want to keep from hurting somebody the way she hurt you.”

“She definitely would,” Nami said, and looked away. “It’s. That’s how this game has been. It’s weird to think about… How she’s so much like Tomoe, and Nozomi too. If she hadn’t died when she did, she could have gotten better. That lost potential is pretty tragic, but it’s, you know. That a feeling like that began even before this game… I really have to keep watching as people lose their shot at being remembered well?”
“They’re not losing that shot,” Dia said, “I can remember it for them, wholesale. And so can you. We do remember them well, right, Nami?”

“We do,” Nami said, “Knowing they could have been better… That’s what we can offer them now.”
Nami left Dia to her eagle making, for what little time was left before dinner. She was, of course, going to take this time to look in Tsukasa’s ward. The Ultimate CEO ward was already stated to be a storage area, much like the Heir ward had already been, though it was being used to store something of a completely different nature. The pre-programmed robot, Motherkuma… And that was all Nami knew about it. Kaede had known more, but had never elaborated on it after that evening in Etsuko’s ward when they first found out that this Monokuma was unique, and for that matter, that it might not even be an AI.

Nami walked into the CEO ward, and that really was just a giant Monokuma head in a jar. “Um, hello? Are you Motherkuma?”

“Yes,” Motherkuma answered.

“What are you?” Nami asked.

“I’m responsible for creating new Monokumas if one is destroyed.”

“Do you ever do that?”

“The function was disabled on day two, so I have not,” Motherkuma answered. These may have been pre-programmed responses, but they were programmed well. It probably also got fed new lines of code if a new question was likely to be asked of it.

“Are you capable of lying?” Nami wondered.

“No. I’m only programmed with truthful answers. However, I also have answers which can dodge the question. My algorithm will determine if the answer is conducive to the mission or not.”

“What’s the mission?”

“There is currently no assigned mission.”

“Oh.” That was a bit surprising to Nami, but then again, she didn’t even know what would be considered a mission to this thing. She guessed that if the mission wasn’t to kill everybody, then it was a good thing there wasn’t one. “So what are you even doing?”

“Collecting dust,” Motherkuma almost sounded sarcastic.

“I see. So, what would you be doing if there was a mission?”

“Making sure it was carried out through assisting or hindering those responsible for any changes made from within the game. As there is no mission, I am not doing anything.”

“Okay,” Nami said, then turned and left because that all felt a little bit above her head and she had already decided that she didn’t want anything else weird happening today and this was about to go there, or else lock her into an endless loop talking to a broken robot. Yeah, the difference between an AI and a preprogrammed bot was suddenly very obvious. Motherkuma was definitely not a person.

She thought that she would go down to dinner, so she did, and left the odd CEO ward behind, along with all of its confusing statements on the nature of ‘the mission’. Once in Cafe Monokuma,
she discovered that she wasn’t the first person there after all. Tsumugi was there, keeping Amai company as she cooked, but nobody else had come down yet.

“Hey there,” Nami greeted them both, and sat down at the bar section one seat down from Tsumugi. “How’re you both holding up?”

“I’m doing okay,” Tsumugi said, “And Oishi is relatively fine, as well.”

“Yeah,” Amai agreed, “That’s one way to put it. I’m kinda still freaked out that, you know. A guy died today and I just saw him this morning. But I’m also relieved that all that stuff about Hamuko got sorted, yknow?”

“Oh, for sure,” Nami said, “It must be nice, to actually have answers for that sort of thing. I know I’d be freaked out too, if there was somebody who looked like someone I knew well, but definitely wasn’t that person…”

“Yeah,” Amai said, “It was… Pretty weird. The thing is that, well. Box was acting most of the time too, but it was more genuine. She was raised to be a certain way. But the thing was that, a lot of it was still her. And things that she didn’t want to show, that squeezed through the cracks? Were completely different from what came through of Hamuko. That’s why… It took me as long as it did, to notice. It wasn’t like Hamuko was bad at pretending.”

“What… Was your relationship with Box like, anyway?” Tsumugi wondered, leaning her cheek against her hand.

“I’ll be honest, it was kinda weird. She was my best friend, definitely. And I kinda had a crush on her too… But I didn’t know how to deal with her, I guess?” Amai shrugged. “It’s stupid to think about that now, though. I’d rather just focus on how I can maybe wrap my head around not being a bitch to Hamuko.”

“Aww, you’re trying,” Nami said, “Really, though. Trying is probably all she really needs. I think that she appreciates you still being rude with her now that you know who she is. Just, like. Don’t go back to calling her a thing the way you were in the trial?”

Amai blushed, and there was a rough noise as she brought down the knife on her vegetables particularly hard. “Look! I’ve never met a program that’s able to also be a person before! I was confused!”

“Heh…” Tsumugi chuckled at her. “You’re really not as mean as you’d like to make us think, are you?”

“Oh, shut up! Come on!” Amai was turning red up to her ears now. “All along, Amai Oishi was actually not an absolute cuntbag? Yeah right, you’ve heard what I’ve said. You’re saying nice stuff for no reason now.”

“We’ve all done bad things, though,” Tsumugi mumbled, “I mean, if everyone just lets it go, that I killed somebody in the last game, it would be kind of hypocritical to hold words against you when you seem to be making an effort to improve…”

“If you say so.” Amai kept chopping the vegetables with precise, sharp movements, like something about the leeway she was being given rubbed her the wrong way. Even as Nami knew that she was making an effort, she understood that reaction. When trying to improve, it felt difficult, it felt momentous. For everybody to say, it’s fine, could make that effort feel lesser. Nami picked up on it, and she could tell Tsumugi did too, so they both became silent.
And stayed that way, until dinner, when they split up to their own groups and ate with friends. Even after the trial, it was back to routine, back to normal. Dinner every day with people that they cared about. That was something to hold on to, in a time like this, too. Many things were.
7:00 pm / 1900 Hours

After dinner, Nami considered the ways which she could occupy a few more hours of her time, and nothing really stuck out. She guessed that she could read, but she’d want to do that in bed anyway; She’d had enough of people for one ridiculously hectic day. So much had happened. And yet, it was a victory that one person died. Only one person. Not two, not more, just one. That was a sad thing to count as a victory and she was tired of the day where that occurred.

Thus, she bid goodnight to those who she had been eating with, retrieved another book from the Detective Ward, and returned to her room to read it until it was a more reasonable time to fall asleep. Maybe it was early for her to turn in, but, again. She was finished with the day.

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Goro Bakura found it weird, being back ‘among the living’ as it were. They were giving him the distance he needed, which was nice, but even that wasn’t quite enough distance. He wasn’t ever quite alone, after all. He had to have eyes kept on him, had to be supervised. That made sense. He hadn’t made a case to not need supervision, at any point so far. It was dumb luck he’d been set free enough to even…

Dumb misfortune, more like. He was being supervised from the first trial to the second, and the reset somehow also reset his need to be watched. It was inevitable that he’d become a culprit, wasn’t it? Because he was rotten rotten rotten, awful down to the core and-

“Goro?” Sayaka asked, “Are you doing okay?”

“...No.” He admitted, crashed a shoulder into the wall, then slid down it until he was sitting on the floor. That hurt. Most things hurt. Everything hurt a lot.

“Hey, hey.” Sayaka dropped to crouch next to him, holding her hands out, unsteady. She didn’t know how to deal with this stuff. “It’s, just. Um. Try not to think too hard about it, okay? Do you want to get an ice cream or, something? To take your mind off it?”

“Mm…” Goro shook his head. “I’m cold. I don’t want any ice cream, I’m cold.”

“You’re cold?” Sayaka asked, furrowing her brow. The temperature in here was fine, so did he have a fever or something? The Despair Fever motive ran out upon discovering Mitsuru’s body, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t have gotten sick some other way, she guessed, and-


Oh, now he was speaking her language. “Bad brain, huh? Well. That definitely means I should stick around with you. I know when I have bad brains, I shouldn’t be left alone.”

“Yeah probably a good idea.”

“Do you want to try and get somewhere else, or just sit right here?” Sayaka asked, “I could lift you if you needed. You’re small enough.”

“Right here’s fine,” Goro said, “It’s… Fine.”
“Think you can put your finger on what your brain’s going bad about?”

“Hmm. Mm. Uh. Let’s see.” Goro squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m a bad person who doesn’t deserve to be alive?”

“Ah. Yeah, that’s always rough,” Sayaka said, “But you know, nobody thinks that about you.”

“I attempted murder twice, and then actually did it,” Goro said, “So, uh. Does it fucking matter if anyone else thinks that? It’s kind of true.”

“Yeah? Well, your record’s still better than mine. Think I’m a bad person?” Sayaka asked. Oddly enough for the topic, this was actually a situation where she could pull that rhetoric. People were always hypocritical when it came to judging themselves, after all.

“It was hard enough when I was alone,” Goro admitted, brushing over what Sayaka said, “Being around people should be better. But it’s worse. Way worse. Being alone, or just with those two… Didn’t feel as much like I was still. Stuck living.”

“Hey now.”

“It’s not like I didn’t want to die, even before I did this stuff to deserve it, you know.”

Something about the way he said that. It wasn’t like he’d ever held back when talking about his trauma, or refrained from making jokes about the value of his life, but his tone was grim and sinking. Like his voice itself was drowning in the Marianas Trench. And Sayaka?

She heard it.

She heard it, when he’d probably made this same cry a million times to no answer. When he was never heard and everything just kept getting worse. When it wasn’t inevitable at all, that he’d become a culprit. But nobody heard.

Even Dia, who probably heard it, couldn’t answer it back then. So now, it fell on Sayaka’s shoulders. The boy who was as self-destructive as she was. The boy who saw his mother in her girlfriend. The boy who… She couldn’t help but want to help. It was no obligation.

She wanted to be there for Goro Bakura.

“I know,” Sayaka said, “But you’re still here, you know? And maybe it took a while. But you’ve got people on your side now.”

“Do I?” Goro asked.

“Yeah. Come on. You know me and Nami are always gonna protect you.” Sayaka had given up on saying ‘the right thing’. She’d say what she thought and hope her heart would reach him.

“What if I don’t want to be protected?”

“That’s bullshit. I don’t care… If you retraumatized yourself, or hurt yourself, or whatever. Of course you want to be fucking safe. I get that sort of stuff, you know. You’re so used to being scared or in pain all the time. And when it starts to feel like that’s happening without a reason, you gotta find a reason. Or make a reason. But I know you want to be safe for real.”

“…Is it that obvious?”

“Not really,” Sayaka said, “It’s just that, we aren’t that different. You should really get some rest,
you know. No matter how bad you feel, it’ll be better after a night of sleep.”

“I don’t-”

“I’ll sleep on the floor, in your room,” Sayaka said, “Does that work? I just said I’d protect you. Just like Nami, I’ll protect you.”

Sayaka didn’t have her own shit together yet. Just last night, she nearly broke her own arm in the shower. But she’d always been able to do things for other people. She’d always been able to fight through her own issues, for the sake of others. She’d address her problems some other time.

Goro needed her, and, well.

If she spent the night in his room, she couldn’t very well lose track of herself anyhow.

So in a way, they were helping each other after all.
Nami woke up on the thirteenth day of the Killing Game. Yesterday was over. She glanced at the door; since she went to sleep early, Sayaka would have been locked out if she intended to join her again. She felt a bit guilty at that, remembered that Sayaka’s bathroom did have a broken mirror that presumably hadn’t yet been cleaned up. Well, anyway. She got ready for the day, and walked out into the hallway, only to see Sayaka and Goro were already there.

“Oh, good morning,” Nami greeted them, “Sorry if you knocked or anything last night, Sayaka… I went to sit and read for a few hours, but then I just fell asleep somewhere around eight-thirty.”

“Don’t worry about it, I slept on Goro’s floor,” Sayaka said, “I took charge of him after dinner, and he ended up having a not-great time.”

“Oh jeeze…” Nami frowned. “Are you feeling any better now? I’m sorry, I was tired and didn’t even think about-”

“Don’t worry about it,” Goro said, and even managed a bit of a smile. “Sayaka was there for me. I, um… Don’t want to put all the stress of dealing with me on you, even if you remember me now.”

“Hey.” Nami placed a hand on his head. “It’s not dealing with you, okay? I mean, think about Hamuko. Now that she’s not Hako anymore, if anybody’s helping you it’s because they want to, not because they think they need to.”

“You promise?” Goro asked.

“Yeah,” Sayaka supported the idea with her own agreement, “Last night, I could have walked away. In the hallway, or I could have dropped you in your room and left. But I didn’t want to do those things. I know it can hurt to think you’re dragging others down, so I promise, I’m not gonna get dragged down. If I didn’t want to ‘deal with’ you, I wouldn’t. Kay?”

“Kay.” Goro nodded. “I’ll take you at your word, then. The both of you, anyway, cause I trust you and all. And I’ll try… To remember that, next time that I’m feeling bad. It’s worse to think I’m making things hard for you. If I can remember that, it’s your choice to be there for me…”

“I hope it can help,” Nami said, then lifted her hand again. “I like this, you know. Having you be open about this stuff instead of just joking around and pretending like everything that hurts you is just a good laugh.”

“Really? Cause I fucking hate it. Let me go back to acting like it’s no big deal,” Goro complained, “Having all your shit out in the open feels a lot worse when you didn’t put it out there yourself, you know. Be real great if I didn’t kill two people and need to have my shittiest decisions since I got here put on full blast.”

“It would be,” Sayaka said, “But, we’re working with what we’ve got, aren’t we?”

“Yeah!” Goro exclaimed and gave a thumbs-up. “Working with what we’ve got. And what we’ve got is, this sack of shit is still here and living and has got stupidly caring onee-sans on his side.”

“You bet your ass you do,” Nami said, putting her hands on her hips. “Don’t you forget it. You want breakfast?”
“Yeah.” Goro nodded, so the three of them made their way upstairs. To Cafe Monokuma!

Upon arriving there today, they were again, not the first. This time, Dia and Riko were keeping Amai company. Nami thought it was nice, that they were people ready to do that. And in fact, that Kurou and Riko decided to reach out to Amai in the first place. It had been clear from day one that she needed somebody, Nami just didn’t feel comfortable being that person for her. So it was good to see that somebody else stepped up to the plate.

“Good morning, Dia!” Goro called out to her, “How are you?”

“Goro! Oh! I was looking for you last night, but.” Dia looked down at the floor. “I couldn’t find you. I wanted to share something with you.”

“Oh? Sorry about that, I was having a time,” Goro explained it away, “What did you wanna show me? Something cool?”

“Very cool!” She assured him, “My ward! I thought you’d appreciate it because there’s stuff to make a blanket fort with. Warm and cozy!”

“Oh yeah, I am game to be warm and cozy,” Goro said, and gave her a thumbs-up.

“Wonderful! We could head over there after breakfast, then,” Dia offered.

“It’ll be a great breakfast, too!” Amai butted in, “I’m making french toast, pancakes, bacon, and steak, and you can have any combination. Breakfast steak with sweet stuff? Sure thing! It tastes really good and I’ve done it before.”

“I mean, everything you cook tastes really good,” Nami said, “So I don’t think that’s really something you need to clarify.”

“Oh no, it is.” Amai raised one finger. “There have been those in the past, who have doubted the validity of this combination of foods. Those who I swiftly proved wrong, mind you, but it isn’t just a given to everybody! I mean, my family’s cafe had me serving absolute strangers with no faith at all in my abilities.”

“We believe at you, Amai,” Riko wrote, and Nami couldn’t help but chuckle at it. It was easy to forget that Riko also had some tangential knowledge of memes, so when she pulled a clutch one like this, she felt somehow proud.

“Thank you, Riko!” Amai flipped a pancake as she said this, a flourish both to the flip and to her voice. Seeing her in her element, and happy, was definitely pleasant.

Sayaka, Nami, and Goro went to sit at one of the tables, and Dia joined them there to wait for breakfast to actually begin. It was served shortly after everybody else made it to Cafe Monokuma. It was pretty clear from the way Amai announced the options that french toast and steak was her most recommended combination, so that’s what Nami got. Sayaka did pancakes and steak, as did Dia, and Goro went for french toast and bacon because he felt like steak was just a little bit too heavy to eat first thing in the morning, on principle.
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (The Duos Challenge)

8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

After they’d been eating for a while, Dia came to a realization. “Oh, uh, hey. There aren’t any more motives happening right now, are there?”

Monokuma was already in the room, just mingling, so it answered without needing to be called. “Well, no, not exactly. Nothing’s supposed to be announced today, anyhow, but you know. I don’t think it would break any rules for me to at least give you a heads-up, though, any details…”

“Mm, definitely restricted,” Dia agreed.

“But, yes, the next batch of motives isn’t in the same style as the previous ones,” Monokuma said, “Instead it’s, like that nightmare you had, a pre-programmed event that will occur starting first thing tomorrow morning. It’s called the Duos Challenge, aaaand, that’s about all that I’m able to give away about it.”

“Are you sure about that?” Nami asked.

“Not a hundred percent, no,” Monokuma admitted.

“Well, then let’s play twenty-questions, right?” Nami leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. “The Duos Challenge. Is this motive a matter of who, how, or why?”

“Matter of how,” Monokuma said, “Oh nice, I was allowed that one. Let’s see. The nature of the motive is an opportunity to kill. Yeah, that’s along the same lines, so I could clarify it.”

“Cool, cool. Does this motive reveal any secrets about us?” Nami asked.

“Not directly,” Monokuma said, “But it could end up doing so indirectly.”

“Hmm, interesting.” Nami nodded. “This one’s for you or for Dia, whoever can answer it, if you can. Duos implies two people. Challenge implies there will be tasks to complete. Therefore, my question is if we’re able to choose our ‘duo’.”

“Uhhhh. Can’t get that one,” Monokuma said.

“You… Can’t pick,” Dia was able to get it out, but seemed to need to use that specific wording. So getting too close to what the Duos Challenge was, seemed to be the restriction.

“Alright. In that case, I have a pretty good idea, so that’s it from me,” Nami said. She grasped its restrictions now and figured that, as far as she could clarify, she had it. There would be randomly generated teams of two doing some sort of event. Probably, she figured, forcing them into groups of just two would afford the opportunity to commit a murder without any witnesses… Though, maybe that was too simple. Everybody else could vouch for each other, and whoever wasn’t in a pair would have to be the culprit who was paired with the victim.

Still, thinking too hard about it before it happened didn’t really make a difference, did it? They’d burn that bridge when they got to it, so to speak.

“Wait, is that it?” Madara asked, “Those are the only questions you’re asking?”
“It’s all I really need to know, from what they’re able to tell us,” Nami said, “So, yes. They’re my only questions. I’m not going to just fire off things that they won’t possibly be able to answer, and really, does it matter? We have the advantage just to know a day early that this thing is going to exist, so, we can deal with it when it happens.”

“...I guess, but when you pulled out that whole, let’s play twenty questions, I’m an attorney who knows how loopholes work, thing, I kind of expected a little bit more,” Madara admitted.

“There’s nothing more to get,” Nami said, “So it’d be an effort in ~futility~.”

“Fair enough,” Madara said, “So, Monokuma. While we’re playing the game of asking you stuff you might not be able to answer, what’s the deal with this newfound helpful streak?”

“I am testing my abilities!” Monokuma answered.

“What?” Sayaka asked.

“Well, it’s not like I didn’t want to be helpful, but with each passing trial I discover new ways to push the limits of what’s allowed out of my mouth and my paws. It’s actually kind of fascinating, to study what I can get away with! Obviously, that’s why I’m doing it. Not because I like you guys or anything.”

“It’s too late to go all tsun-tsun on us,” Amai shouted over to it from where she was already packing up leftovers, “You’ve been sincere and there’s no takebacks! Despair Fever sure is a bitch, huh?”

“No! I don’t think so! Being sappy and stuff made me realize just how far the limits can be pushed! I mean, can you believe that there’s not a stipulation against me saying that I actually don’t want you to die? I’m a Monokuma! Of course I’m supposed to want you to die! These censors are suh-lacking! In fact, I’m pretty sure the only reason they’re this strong is because they also have to cover Dia this time around.”

“Probably because Monokuma wouldn’t usually dream of giving things away early or caring about the participants?” Dia offered.

“That’s true! But I sure am a one-of-a-kind Monokuma. And that’s why you all love me!”

“Wееееell… Not sure I’d say thaaat,” Torimi said, “But yes, we don’t haaate you. Since you’re stuck here too. Even if you’re still a meaaan person. You are a liar after aaaaall.”

“I’m no liar! I’m just not allowed to say the truth!” Monokuma complained, “I said it before and I’ll say it again, I don’t like lying!”

“I believe you,” Sayaka said, “So, really, I’m glad that you’re helping us out. The Duos Challenge… Tch. A motive that gives us the opportunity to kill, but no reason? That’s useless. It’s a heads-up for something that won’t even matter… So we don’t have to stress out or anything, worrying that the motive will be something that actually matters.”

“What makes you so certain it’ll be useless?” Kurou wondered.

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Tsumugi was the one who answered, “We already agreed. Nobody here is going to act out of malice. Therefore it stands to reason that a ‘method’ motive won’t stick, without a ‘reason’ motive. Am I… right?”

“Definitely,” Sayaka agreed, “That was my thinking, anyway.”
“I wouldn’t call it thinking on my part, but yes,” Tsumugi muttered, though not to an extent that she couldn’t be heard. She seemed off. Not quite like she was dissociating, but her mind and her body seemed separated anyway as she spoke slowly and failed, often, to make as much sense as she normally would. Nami was starting to wonder if she was okay. But, well, it didn’t seem like something she needed to address right now.

“I hope that you’re right,” Monokuma said, “You all trust each other so much, but… I mean, people can act, you know? Somebody can seem like a really great and wonderful person, and secretly be doing terrible things when nobody’s looking. I’m not saying that’s the case, but… You should be careful, right?”

“…Right,” Nami found herself agreeing with the bear, somehow. And from the way it nodded back at her, it almost felt like she was the one it was trying to warn the most.
9:00 am / 0900 Hours

After finishing breakfast, Dia collected Goro to go to her ward with her. She was very excited to share with him, the beauty of this ward she’d been granted. Thus, she opened the door with pride, and held it open as he walked in, looking around at the sight of it.

“Huh… Yeah, this suits you,” Goro said, “Kinda doesn’t match perfectly, but I don’t think that our good friend MonoMono has the keenest sense of interior design anyway.”

“That’s true… There could definitely be all this comfy stuff while keeping the aesthetic, but I don’t think that it thought that far ahead. I really like it this way too! It’s made for me, Goro, for me! Not for Box!"

“It sure is,” Goro said, then turned and offered her a small smile. “Well, what are we waiting for? We can make one of those blanket forts, right?”

“Oh! Oh yes, absolutely!” Dia clapped her hands together, then ran over to the aforementioned blanket fort corner. Maybe it was childish to be this excited over a thing like this, but on the other hand, who wouldn’t get excited about a blanket fort every now and again? It was like being in bed, but interesting and creative all at the same time. Nothing could surpass it in blanket-related activities, absolutely nothing.

Thus, she and Goro got to work. It was quiet between them, but the nice type of quiet; It wasn’t weird if, simply, neither of them had anything to say. The time they’d spent together in the quarantine room was all talking, so it was nice to be able to do something now. They were probably each other’s best friends, at this point. While Sayaka and Nami were both stepping in as much-needed mother figures for Goro, and while Dia connected with Riko more in this incarnation than any past…

She and Goro still had something going for them. He was the first person to figure her out, for one, and for another, they’d weathered some weird stuff. Goro stabbing her in the hand. Goro making her help him set up a crime scene. But then, that wasn’t even a unique slight to him, and frankly, the fact that he apologized so profusely and regretted so obviously was good enough for Dia. She’d been killed by nearly everyone here, after all, so she had to have plenty of forgiveness in her heart. Their time in the quarantine room, especially, though.

Goro considered Dia his best friend in this place. This was why he was so torn up about making her help him stage the crime scene. But then, that was why he asked her to help him at all. She saved him, handing him the locking tool that she’d picked up earlier that day out of curiosity. She didn’t realize what it did, at first, when she’d grabbed it. It was only later on that she made the connection it was used to lock the room, after it had already been used to kill Kanoshi. Well, so maybe that was it.

Being complacent in an act of manslaughter did tend to bring people together, huh? It was after that, when she decided he was her best friend too. They were two miserable people, after all. Of course they got along. Not like she was still that miserable. And hopefully, he was on the upswing too. Just the act of being allowed to be herself was so exciting to Dia that it usually overshadowed
any existential dread. She’d have her moments, of course. She was far from emotionally well. And she’d definitely crash, of course.

The hell she went through for what she experienced as seven straight years wasn’t something that could be kept at bay; The happiness she was experiencing right now was one small levee against a tidal wave of traumatic memories. So, even when she was ‘happy’, she and Goro had that between them to commiserate on. Two people as broken as they were could understand each other well. Maybe they couldn’t help each other, the way Sayaka could help Goro or Riko could help Dia, but they could be friends. Best friends.

And so, their fort was built. It was a bit overkill, and some of the blankets were probably not doing much of anything, but it was built. The floor was those comfy pillows and some of the plushies from around the room, plus a blanket ‘rug’. Dia had even discovered the drawers in the corner were sturdy enough to hold people, so they used one to make a second floor just for the sake of having it. Really, they just built until they were tired, then both lay down on the pillow floor.

“That was… stupid fun,” Goro admitted, “I hadn’t done that since I was little. My mom would let me do it when we changed the sheets for the season, she’d wash the out of season sheets and say I could make a fort before we put them away.”
“What sort of stuff did you do in those forts?” Dia wondered.

“ Mostly reading,” Goro said, “My mom really liked ghost stories, so she read them to me a lot, and then we’d think up reasons that the ghosts are being like that. Like, the ghost that’s responsible for cursing people who take rocks from the beach is mad because that’s his collection, and they didn’t ask permission.”

“That’s sweet,” Dia said, “I’d like to meet the rock collecting ghost, I think.”

“Yeah, me too! I’d give him a gift,” Goro said, “Something he normally can’t find, like some fool’s gold or a nice big geode. I bet he’d really like something like that.” He sat up. “My mom’s name was Hanako, you know. Like the bathroom ghost. So she always said to me, hey, Goro. We’re ghosts, you and me. That means that some people just won’t like us, or they’ll think we’re scary, but we can’t do bad things without a good reason, like the ghosts in the stories. And being a ghost can be good, too. You can hide if you need to hide and be scary if you need to be scary.”

“Hm.” Dia sat up as well, and looked at him. “I think that I’m a ghost too.”
“Oh?”

“People used to think I was creepy. I don’t do bad things without a good reason. I can hide. And I can walk through walls,” Dia said, “So I’m a ghost too.”

“...Well, that’s nice,” Goro said, “Ghosts are pretty lonely. Nobody really understands us. But other ghosts can understand a ghost.”

“Mhm,” Dia said, “That’s right. Would you like to take a nap?”

“So you are a ghost, you do understand me,” Goro joked, then lay back down. “Yeah. I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

So the two ghosts of the Neo World Hospital… Two sad children who knew how it felt to die, lay down in the beautiful world they’d created and found a peaceful dream.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter art by sonslum@gmail.com!
Nami ended up joining Sayaka in the latter’s ward, sitting down at the kotatsu with her. Comfy. This ward and Dia’s ward both had aspects that existed only for the sake of comfy, and Nami thought that was nice. It was a need back in sims 2 after all, and then, like the sims series itself, the world seemed to forget that being comfy was in fact very important. Monokuma remembered a lost age of soft and reflected it in these wards that Nami was pretty sure it personally designed. Or at least, Dia’s was designed by Monokuma. Whoever was trying to make Dia be Box never would have made a ward specifically for her, after all.

“So…” Sayaka started, sitting across from Nami at the kotatsu. “I think that we kinda need to talk about Goro.”

“Hm? What about him?” Nami asked.

“Well, honestly, what that whole deal is with us, and him,” Sayaka admitted, “I feel like it’s a little weird? So, um. I think that on three, we should both say sort of, what we think, about him?”

“Yeah, alright,” Nami said, not sure where this was going.

“One, two, three,” Sayaka counted down, then…

“He is my son!” Nami blurted.

“We should adopt him!” Sayaka also blurted.

They both turned red at having said, essentially, the same embarrassing thing about a boy three years younger than them. Even still, calling Goro seventeen seemed weird, because, well. Five years of growing up under the ‘care’ of Kiyoshi Matsubara didn’t really constitute much growing up at all, and somehow those three years made all the difference. He was honestly one of the youngest participants, too. Nami had realized that when she remembered him before, that his birthday was August 28th. He’d only just turned seventeen, about two weeks before the game started. Possibly the youngest participant, then.

“I mean, reasonably…” Sayaka said, “If we have intentions of, um, staying together. Which as far as I’m aware we do. Goro’s been an orphan for a while, and, legally, he could use somebody vouching for him. We’re technically old enough, and even though he’ll be an adult himself soon, it’s always good to have next of kin, and stuff. And. It’s not like either of us are really refraining from acting in momlike ways toward him.”

“Mm, that’s true. I gotta say, I didn’t quite expect it from you,” Nami said, “I know you like kids, but I also know you don’t know how to handle other peoples’ brainweird.”

“I still do not! I ‘handled’ Goro’s brainweird by just talking about my own brainweird and also saying I’d protect him. But, that somehow kinda worked?” Sayaka shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe this is stupid or rash to say, but, well. I kinda… Always have had, a sort of. I? Want to nurture people? But I’m supposed to be this tough, half-pint of whoop-ass, yakuza daughter of the oyabun. So it sounds dumb to admit that. But, Goro, just. Needs somebody to take care of him. He wants that to be you, but, we’re kind of in this together. And I. Want to.”

“I mean,” Nami said, “I agree. Like. He thinks I look like his mom? Cool, I’ll be his mom. But at the same time, uh. That legal stuff? You sure you wanna be stuck like that?”

“Pfft. Stuck.” Sayaka scoffed. “You say that like I’m gonna want to leave you.”
“I mean.” Nami got even redder, and looked away. “It’s. Ah! Aren’t we moving, sort of fast? For all we know, we’ll get to the outside world and you’ll discover I have lots of annoying habits in everyday life and grow to resent me but you can’t just up and leave cause we’ll have this kid and, um. Fuck. Sorry. Processing that you might actually like me enough not to consider that a problem is. Weird.”

Sayaka dipped her head and frowned. “I understand. Sorry. I know that we’ve been moving really fast, but I. It feels right. Like it’s what we’re meant to be doing. Sorry if you don’t feel the same way.”

“I, no, I mean,” Nami tried to explain, “I just… Don’t have the self esteem to take this stuff at face value, I guess? I agree with you. I mean, just yesterday with Hamuko we had that joke, that we’re meant to be because we ended up together in the real game. I kind of do think that we are. And I love you. But I don’t want to put you in a position where you feel like that’s not allowed to change.”

“Oh. Is that it?” Sayaka asked, then started laughing. “Oh, jeeze, Nami. Nami, I’m about to say something really fucking stupid, okay? You wanna hear it?”

“Um. Yes? I think?”

“I. I never thought I’d be a hopeless romantic till I met you! But since we’ve been together, I’ve just been. My brain! It’s dumb as shit! It’s like, hey, wow, you got a girlfriend. Guess what, guess what. Here’s what your wedding would look like! And her dress! And you should actually have children because guess that’s possible! That’s how wonderful this girlfriend is! And you’re in love and an idiot and you actually want to grow up and be a normal wife! And it’s. Come on. If I’m thinking that far ahead, unbidden. I don’t think it’s gonna get shaken easily. So. Well, honestly. If that weirds you out it’s probably better that you know it now. And not later. Before my brain gets even dumber ideas.”

Nami blinked, staring at Sayaka across the table. She was completely flushed, staring down at her hands in fists on the table, and even shaking a little bit, having shared something like that. Nami thought about how to respond without being, well, any weirder.

So she just tilted her head to one side, giggled, then spoke softly, “You really do have the heart of a maiden after all, huh?”

“I’m! Sorry!” Sayaka squeaked.

“Don’t be,” Nami said, “I don’t care if this is rash, or jumping into things, because I’m in love too. We’ll have plenty of time to make sure this is the right choice when the game’s over, cause we’ll have lots to sort out anyway. So, for now, I don’t mind at all, saying that I feel the same way.”

“You… Really do?” Sayaka asked, wide-eyed.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Nami asked, “So, really. We can have a wedding someday, on one condition. You wear a dress too. Okay?”

There were tears pricking at Sayaka’s eyes as she practically launched herself across the table to wrap her arms around Nami, holding onto her tight. And that was when the door opened.

“Excuuuuuuse me?” Torimi asked, her tone indignant but teasing all at the same time, “What was this I just heard while walking past this rooooom, huh?”
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (Our Future)

10:00 am / 1000 Hours

“Oh, just sappy stuff between girlfriends,” Nami answered, with Sayaka still hanging off of her. “Why were you eavesdropping?”

“I waaaasn’t, I just said. I happened to be walkin’ paaaast, and I hear the word wedding. Come on you two! Didn’t you juuuuust start dating, what, three whole days agooo?”

“Bleh.” Sayaka stuck her tongue out in Torimi’s direction. “This is a Killing Game. Time means more.”

“...Faaaaair, but still!” Torimi balled her hands up and stomped a foot. “It is my job to say if you are making poor romantic choices and I thiiiiink something like this is-”

“I mean, it’s a hypothetical for at least a year from now,” Nami said, “And you’d be my maid of honor, obviously.”

“...Oh. In that caaaase.” Torimi pressed a hand to her cheek and smiled. “It’s soooo nice, to finally see my best friend finding love true enough to entertain the idea of marriaaage!”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what this is,” Sayaka said, “Entertaining the idea. Like. We like each other enough that it’s reasonable to say, if we stay together let’s get married someday.”

“Mmmm, yeaaaah, that makes much more sense.” Torimi nodded languidly, still basking in Nami’s invitation. “That’s real sweet. I staaaand by, you’re way better than Kirara was.”

“H-Hey now, Tori, we don’t have to bring that up-” Nami protested.

“Heh. I’m gonnaaa. What use is being your best friend if I can’t embarrass yoooou?” Torimi chuckled. “Kiraraaa made this big public proposal. And got turned down. Even social pressuuuure couldn’t make Nami say yes to her!”

“Tori… Please,” Nami protested, grimacing at her past self.

“Huh… So… Somebody actually proposed to you before, and you still don’t have the self esteem to expect somebody would wanna stay with you?” Sayaka asked.

“It… was Kira. That was less ‘staying with me’ and more ‘keeping me’. You know?” Nami shrugged. “It’s kinda, a different thing. I feel like it takes being a better person for somebody to want to keep being with you, than for somebody to want to just keep you. It’s the difference between being a prize, and actually being a person on equal standing. You feel?”

“...Yeah, that makes sense,” Sayaka admitted, “I wonder…”

“What?” Nami asked.

“I’ll talk to you about it later,” Sayaka said, “No offense, Shinoe, but it’s a bit too personal for you.”

“None taken, none taken. I’m Namine’s maid of honooor, not yours.” Torimi struck a pose. “And who, I wonder, will be the other bridesmaids, hm?”
“Well, obviously, Dr Kirisame,” Nami said.

“She’s your friend! You can use her first naaaame!” Torimi protested.

“She worked very hard to earn her PhD and I am going to respect that fact,” Nami said, “And… Hm. Well, actually, I’m not sure who else.”

“Yes. On my side, I haven’t got any wedding-worthy friends left,” Sayaka said, “But then, maybe I can think clearly about it when it’s an actual thing being planned and not just a hypothetical, yes we are willing to marry each other deal.”

“Mm. That sounds like a plaaan,” Torimi said, “Good to know I don’t have to beat sense into you for being shotgun looovers, though. Good to know.”

“Nah we’re just really extra,” Nami said.

“Faaaair, fair.” Torimi crossed her arms and nodded. “Well, anywaay, I’m holding you to your promise. If you doo get married in like a year, then I will be involved in the wedding party. Gotta be able to make those sweet always the bridesmaid jokes!”

“Hey, who knows. Maybe you’ll be dating someone too, by then,” Nami said, “It’s not unlikely.”

“Dating? Nahhhh. Come on. You know that nobody who likes me wants to date me.”

“Hey now, we talked about this,” Sayaka said, “Up your standards and stop looking in the wrong places, and it’ll work out.”

“But that’s haaaard,” Torimi complained, then laughed a bit. “Ahh, but that doesn’t mean you’re wrong…”

“I’ve been saying that for years! Sayaka’s the one who gets through to you?” Nami asked.

“Obviouslyyy, your girlfriend has a skill like that,” Torimi said, “Why else would I approve of her?”

“Oh, of course. Not because she’s good for me and I like her and she’s not observing my every move like I’m a psych test subject,” Nami said, “But because she can get through your skull on why you can’t find a boyfriend. That’s reasonable.”

“Isn’t it just?” Torimi snickered, striking a pose. “Aaaaanyway, sorry that I intruded and all. I was just soooooo caught off guard, by what I heard, walking past. I’lII going, then!”

And with that, Torimi left the ward. Where had she even been headed to overhear them? Maybe she just hadn’t looked at the new wards yesterday and had just decided to come take a look now, since the only one Nami could imagine being of any interest to her was Dia’s, with its plushies. Or maybe that was where she was headed. There was no way to know.

“So.” Nami turned to Sayaka again. “Have you been to the garden in the Empty Wings, yet?”

“No, I haven’t…” Sayaka said, “Did you want me to see it? We could go over there.”

“Mm… In a little bit,” Nami said, “If you want to. But right now I kinda want to stay here. I’ve got a kotatsu, and my cute girlfriend, so what else could I possibly need?”

“Well… A clementine?” Sayaka offered, and picked up two from the bowl in the middle of the kotatsu before settling back in, next to Nami instead of across from her this time.
“A clementine! Yeah, I couldn’t do without one of those,” Nami said, “Just wouldn’t be a kotatsu. Table with blanket over and heater beneath? But no clementines? That’s just a fire hazard.”

“Exactly. The clementines are up to fire codes,” Sayaka said, then nestled herself under Nami’s arm as she started to peel her own. Nami peeled hers as well, and the girls just enjoyed a bit of time, warm, eating clementines. It was a slow down and take a moment sort of morning, after all. Especially after their odd conversation before. Their odd, but nice conversation.

Who knew what the future would bring, but it was comforting to know what it could bring, and that they were on the same page.
After sitting there together for a while, Nami and Sayaka made their way down to the Empty Wings garden. It was the same as yesterday, though lacking one Riko Asahi between the hydrangea bushes. They had it to themselves for now, which made a bit of sense. Compared to the arcade, this wasn’t a very interesting addition. Still, as soon as Nami walked in, she felt relaxed by the fresh scent of all the plants. She didn’t realize how dusty the rest of the hospital really smelled, until she came across something as different as this.

“Oh. This is nice,” Sayaka said, “It’s a lot nicer than I expected, given Mono’s aesthetic sense. Or lack thereof.”

“So you noticed that too!” Nami exclaimed, then turned her attention back to the garden. “Well, interior design and landscaping are two completely different things. Somebody can be great at making a yard look nice, but their house totally lacks in feng shui! Or, I dunno. Maybe our pal of a bear just prefers the outdoors.”

“That’s fair. I mean, stuck in this game, I definitely prefer it,” Sayaka said, “Though, my outdoors isn’t often this nice. Usually it’s on top of a roof in a city.”

“Yeah, yeah. My parkour girlfriend, suffering the fact that she can get onto a roof.”

“You could get onto a roof too, if you used the stairs,” Sayaka said.

“That’s just not the same as being on a roof you’re not supposed to be on!” Nami said, “It doesn’t have that exciting rush of doing something wrong.”

“I do much wronger things than climbing on a roof, commonly, Nami.” Sayaka couldn’t help but laugh.

“I do not! Climbing on a roof is one of the wrongest things I’d regularly do, were I capable of roof climbing! As it is, I guess the wrongest thing I do with any regularity is, uh. Drink Strong Zero. But that’s legal now anyway cause I’m twenty! I turned twenty! So there. I am the light and you are the dark. Forces of the universe, unite in love.”

“Yin and Yang are strongest together!” Sayaka proclaimed as well, and struck a dumb pose. Nami joined her in that dumb pose. Then, they both broke down laughing and gave up on holding the poses, because that was ridiculous. They were ridiculous… Jeeze. Nami seriously found a girlfriend who was simultaneously super cool and would be ridiculous with her?

She definitely hoped they’d follow through on that whole wedding thing. Just. Holding out hope it would work out that way.

“Anyway…” Sayaka crouched down next to a berry patch. “This is really cool stuff, though. I wonder if these things are any better than what’s available for us to cook with.”

She reached out, picked a strawberry, then ate it. Sat there chewing it for a bit, looking contemplative, then looked to Nami and grinned. “Oh yes. Much better. I am going to make a fruit tart.”

“You sure Oishi will let you steal her thunder like that?” Nami asked, “I mean, a fruit tart better
than any that she could hope to make…”

“Stupid. She’s the Ultimate Chef, I won’t do better than her,” Sayaka protested, blushing. “Y-You’re trying to pay me compliments that are objectively false!”

“I’m not, I swear! It’s completely true. Do you want to know why?” Nami asked.

“Hm? Why?”

“Because if Oishi made a fruit tart, it would have apples in it. So you wouldn’t like it. So, yours would be better, because then I don’t just get to try a tasty fruit tart, I see my girlfriend enjoying it too.” Nami winked.

“Stop! Being! Cheesy!” Sayaka groaned. “How am I ever supposed to be cool around you again if you say stuff like that! Dummy! You’re too sweet! Way too sweet!”

“Eh, maybe I am. But the fruit tart you make will be just the right amount of sweet.”

“Ahhh! Shush!”

“Can’t stop. Won’t stop.” Nami grabbed her chin with one hand. “It’s simply my duty.”

“Well. I’ll make the fruit tart, if you really think it’d be worth it,” Sayaka said, “I mean, she won’t mind if I just use the Cafe to cook in.”

“Well, Mono did say that it was a public space and any attempt to prevent that would be hastily thwarted,” Nami said, “So I think that includes usage. It should be fine. Besides, she’s trying to be nicer anyway, so.”

“Hm, she is, isn’t she?” Sayaka noted, “I think she’s doing an okay job of it… What really made her want to change, though?”

“Well, we could probably get a straight answer if we just asked, but,” Nami said, “It was probably about when she realized that Hamuko wasn’t Box Hako, that she started making an effort to not be as rude? And the weepiness thing helped too. She broke down, like for real, at me of all people and all I could really tell her was that she isn’t the only person here who’s scared.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Sayaka said, “Actually, even though you might not be too fond of her, I think she has a soft spot for you.”

“Really? What for?” Nami asked.

“I dunno. She just seems fine complimenting you, and like, didn’t freak out when you stood up for me that time we got in a fight.” Sayaka shrugged. “You might actually be the only other person here whose talent she legitimately fucking recognizes as nothing to scoff at?”

“Wow. I can has respect?”

“Good grief Nami, that one goes beyond vintage to antique,” Sayaka chided, but she was chuckling under her words. “But yes, you can has respect. Really, everyone here definitely respects your talent… It’s one of the only ones we’re able to really, truly see in action. Even though the wards have options to practice and apply talents, it’s class trials which actually push you to showing off what you’re capable of.”

“Ehh, but I couldn’t do that stuff without you,” Nami said, “And the others who investigate,
anyway. Collecting clues all on my own is hard, and even making basic deductions with them…
Really I just figure out how stuff connects after other people get close.”

“You’re not giving yourself enough credit,” Sayaka said, “I dunno if any of us could’ve found the
heart behind Mitsuru’s locked room, you know. He was my friend, even, and I couldn’t see what
he was trying to say.”

“But I wouldn’t have been able to either, if I was on my own,” Nami said, “I mean, even with my
talent before, I had a team of people supporting me.”

“Yeah, and? It’s not like attorneys don’t, generally. You’re the best in your field because you use
your resources properly, and all that. Kinda stupid to act like your achievements mean nothing just
because you didn’t do it solo. I mean.” Sayaka walked up to Nami, looked her in the eyes, and. Uh.
Removed her finger. Her left pinky, particularly. “I mentioned this before, right? This is a
punishment. This is for doing something to hurt the family, or something stupid. It’s a reminder.
You can’t wield a katana without your fingers. You get worse each one you lose. If you mess with
the people who are helping you, or don’t ask for their help when you should, then this happens.
Worse at using a sword, you have to rely on the group more.”

“It’s proof,” Sayaka continued, “That nothing great is ever done alone. And if you try, then it’ll
just come back to hurt you. If you try to do it all by yourself, then you won’t be able to succeed on
your own when you need to.”

“...Did your dad do that to you?”

“No. Of course not. I did,” Sayaka said, and put the prosthetic back on. “As a reminder. I didn’t ask
for help when I needed it. It’d be nice, not to make that mistake again. This will help me
remember. So, yeah. Working with other people’s a virtue, not a flaw. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Sayaka,” Nami said, “It’s nice to hear that stuff.”

“I know, that’s why I said it.” Sayaka smirked. “Hey, maybe I’m getting better at this whole
dealing with brainweird thing after all.”
Sayaka spent a lot of careful time gathering berries for her planned fruit tart, long enough that other people actually showed up to the garden. Those other people being Amai and Dia, who noticed Nami first since Sayaka was crouched next to the bushes.

“Nami! Oh, fancy running into you,” Dia said, “Have you got any other flower language knowledge to share with us today?”

“Hm, not off the top of my head, sorry.” Nami waved a hand. “I was just showing Sayaka the garden, since she didn’t make it in here yesterday. She’s thinking she’ll make a fruit tart with some of the fresh berries.”

“Great minds think alike, by which I mean,” Amai said, “I came here to pick some vegetables to roast with dinner. Obviously I won’t be trying this fruit tart, but there’s plenty of space in the cafe if you’d wanna make it for dessert, or whatever?”

“Wow, that’s a better response than either of us were expecting,” Sayaka said, standing up. “Kinda thought you’d tolerate it, but be kinda pissed that I wanted to make dessert when you’re here. Offering me the cafe? You feeling alright?”

“Well… Er, actually, not quite?” Amai shrugged. “Not like I’m getting sick of making breakfast and dinner or anything, that’s fine! And compared to the lot of you whelps and whiners, my sky is clear on mental breakdowns… But I have been kinda worried about something lately? I dunno. Definitely not gonna talk to anybody here about it, but since you asked, I’ll admit it has been ~weighing~ on me just a bit.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” Sayaka said.

“Wow. It must be super serious if you won’t even tell me,” Dia said.

“No, not so serious!” Amai said, “Really, it’s just some weird stuff to work through with like, a thing I know. Asking for advice with it would constitute making a decision about it, which, I haven’t yet. And anyway, Hamuko. You’re not Box. It’d be a real dick move to put my expectations on you, at all, like. Just because you have my best friend’s memories doesn’t mean you gotta listen to me bitch, if I did have things I had any intention of bitching about. You get?”

“I do get,” Dia said, “I know you said… We might not ever be friends, Oishi. But if you could, I still would like to.”

“Are you, like, sure?” Amai asked.

“Mhm.” Dia nodded. “I’ve made my own opinion of you based on the memories and your actions since we’ve actually met, and, well. Although I’ve evidently got more fondness for the people I’ve spent more ‘time’ with, it isn’t as if I dislike you. I probably understand you more than anybody else here… And if we do get along, then Riko doesn’t have to feel weird about being friends with both of us.”

“That’s a good point, good point,” Amai said, “And really, you don’t look that much like she did, so it’s not like, it’ll be weird for me. If you didn’t have your own whole look and shit, it might be, but. I guess. You’re kinda one of the only people who remembers anything about who Box Hako
really was, huh?’

“Yes…” Dia glanced away. “Even if I couldn’t understand her well enough, I do have those memories. So, I suppose, I do remember her. It’s kind of nice, actually, to have this job of remembering people. Because there’s a lot of people I can remember better than others can, and, well. That’s a reason to exist. Since the reason I was made couldn’t be fulfilled, there’s still a reason I should keep—”

“Well that’s well and good if you like having a ‘reason to exist’, but, the reason you were made is kind of bullshit and you don’t need a reason to be,” Sayaka cut her off, “You just, I dunno, be. If I got caught up on a reason to exist, I probably wouldn’t!”

“Oh! Um, yes, that’s right.” Dia blinked a few times. “It’s weird to think that way, though. It’s probably better if I could. But I’m sure not there yet! That is one mental hurdle I have yet to jump. It’s okay, though. I have a nice reason to hold onto in the meantime.”

“Yeah!” Nami gave a thumbs-up. “I used to need a reason. I guess I kinda still have one, but… My reason for existing is to try and be happy, and see the people around me happy too!”

“Well,” Sayaka said, “I guess that’s kinda what I’d define as not needing a reason. Being happy and wanting others to be happy is well, not too existential. It’s just being?”

Amai clicked her tongue. “Yeah, that’s something I’m still working on. Gotta admit. I’m not that advanced yet!”

“You know,” Sayaka said, “Nami and I were talking, and kind of wondering. What made you want to put in an effort? To be nicer?”

“Huh? Well. I guess that is something I can tell you guys,” Amai said, “I was real fucking scared, when I woke up here. Then before I could even get used to it, my parents didn’t show up, for the family thing. So I got, well. Kinda messed up by that, and by thinking that Box faked her death, and. Yeah. So when I figured out Dia wasn’t Box after all…”

“That’s what I thought,” Nami said.

“It’s just. People are wolves, you know?” Amai slumped her shoulders, going back to the metaphor from before. “A whole lot of them. They’re rotten. You think you know them and they let you down. Girls you like kill themselves. Teachers who help you don’t give you a passing grade. Parents who love you don’t even take the chance to talk to you when you’re stuck in a Killing Game… Fuck. It’s hard. So I just… Yeah. I guess I could’ve been a culprit if I didn’t start to wake up from that shit when I did, realize that, maybe it wasn’t all bad?”

“It’s not all bad,” Dia said, “We’re here for you, you know! A lot of us are. Because… We want to see you become a better person.”

“…Huh?” Amai blinked.

“It isn’t like we think you’re good right now. I certainly don’t. But we’re willing to look past that because we know that you’re trying, and you can get better. Then you’ll be happier, and we all will too,” Dia said, “And I’m glad that you didn’t become a culprit! Because… Then we’d all just be thinking, that you never got a fair chance.”

“Thank… You,” Amai said, “That’s it. All I want. A fair chance… And if I fail, that’s okay. I’m not there yet. Fuck knows if I ever will be. But I can try, yeah?”
“Yeah!” Dia exclaimed, and the other girls nodded in agreement.
After finishing up their conversation, the groups of girls changed formation. Sayaka and Amai still had some gardening left to do, leaving Nami to hang out with Dia once more. Though they’d done plenty of exploring before…

“Hey, Dia,” Nami said, “Why don’t we go to the arcade?”

They’d already left the garden, but it wasn’t like it took long to travel between sections of the Empty Wings, so this was a reasonable offer.

“Oh! Okay!” Dia pressed her hands together. “That sounds fun. Um… I could try and figure out what types of games I’d like to play, right?”

“Exactly,” Nami said, “Cause, I bet you didn’t really think about it before, yeah?”

“Mm, no. Box never really played many games, and through the incarnations I only really joined people for multiplayer things they needed an extra player on. I never actually tried out much for myself,” Dia said.

“Hm, well, once we get there we’ll start narrowing down what sort of thing you might like, then,” Nami said, “I firmly believe that everybody can enjoy video games, they just have to find the right one!”

“Thank you! Though, really, I don’t think that I disliked any of what I have tried especially, I just wouldn’t play them unless somebody asked me to. Would not decide on my own, yes, I would like to play Smash Brothers.”

“Hmm, so other stuff that’s similar to that is probably out,” Nami noted, and they walked into the arcade. Tsukasa was in there, and he looked up from the RPG he was playing.

“Ah, hi! What’re you two up to today?” He wondered.

“Tsukasa, just the guy I wanted to see. You are going to help me,” Nami said, “We need to find Dia’s favorite video game.”

“Oh! Cool, I can help with that,” Tsukasa said, “Any ideas yet on what sort of thing we should be looking for, though? There’s a whole lot of game options out there.”

“Well, not a fighting game, probably,” Nami said, “So, Dia. Let’s narrow it down, there’s probably some genres we can eliminate without you trying them. Dating simulators?”

“Probably not,” Dia said, “As an AI, pretending to date programmed characters is a little uncanny, don’t you think?”

“Mm, yeah, that makes sense,” Tsukasa said, “But what about games where dating them is an option, but you aren’t required to? Um, Stardew Valley as a reference point.”

“I don’t think I’d mind that,” Dia said, “What’s that game?”

“You’re a cog in the capitalist machine, until you get a letter from your grandpa saying that he’s
leaving you his old farm. You move to town, get to know the townspeople, and fix up the farm however you like,” Nami said, “It’s nice and relaxing to play, since you can take things at your own pace and even avoid things you don’t like about it.”

“I think I might like that,” Dia said, “But I dunno, it doesn’t sound that fun. You know? Like it would be nice to sit down and play the way it’s nice to read a book?”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Well, let’s narrow some more. Do you prefer 2-d or 3-d graphics?”

“I think 2-d?” Dia offered, “It’s easier to keep track of what’s happening around you if it’s a game where things can’t actually happen behind what you’re able to see.”

“So a game where things actually happen, but where you’re able to see all the stuff that’s happening,” Nami concluded.

“Yes that sounds about right.” Dia nodded.

“Well, thinking about it, something comes to mind pretty easily,” Tsukasa said, “You could try out Terraria.”

“Terraria?” Dia asked.

“Oh! Yeah,” Nami said, “That’s a 2-d game where you collect resources to make things, build whatever you like, fight enemies, and power up to fight big and cool bosses!”

“Mhm, mhm. Yes, I think I’d like to try that,” Dia said, “It sounds like something that I would quite enjoy.”

"Great! Now, it has console versions, but Mono did give us some gaming laptops too, and it honestly is a much better game with pc controls," Tsukasa said. Huh, it was nice that Nami's nickname for Monokuma was catching on and avoiding any accidental summonings. "Plus, I mean, none of us have tried, but I'm pretty sure it's fine if we take any of the portable stuff out of this room?"

"Oh! Oh wow! I wonder!" Dia said, "I could play games in my ward, very comfy… Ahh that seems nice! Very nice! Let's see!"

With that, Dia pulled out her Monopad and double checked the list of rules.

The Dining Hall and Empty Wings are off-limits at nighttime (10 pm - 6 am). The quarantine room is excluded from this restriction.
Upon discovery of a body, all areas become available. Personal rooms are unlocked and, should it be nighttime, the Dining Hall and Empty Wings are made available. The Empty Wings will remain available for twenty minutes following the conclusion of a trial, to facilitate leaving.
Personal rooms are unlocked from either side only by the owner's Monopad.
Standard Killing Game Trial Rules apply. Standards can be checked in another menu.
No one culprit can kill more than two victims.
Attending breakfast and dinner is required in the event of motives being delivered at mealtime, except in extraordinary circumstances. Mealtime is defined as 8 AM for breakfast and 6 PM for dinner. Monokuma withholds the right to change the time if everyone is present early.
The roof of the Empty Wings is off-limits. In the event there are two culprits, one will be secretly rescued from their execution and held in the Quarantine Room until the following trial. The violation of any of the above rules will result in a punishment of death. Entering the ward of somebody who died before the ward was made available will result in being trapped in that room for a randomly generated length of time, as displayed above the door. Garbage and dirty dishes (unless dirtied with blood) left around will be removed from areas that have been fully vacated. Sinks and trash cans are emptied on a schedule that is for MONOKUMA'S EYES ONLY!

"Nothing here about removing consoles from the arcade," Dia said, "Unless a video game console somehow counts as garbage, anyway. Hm, is it just me, or are even these rules kinda lax?"

"Mm, yeah," Nami said, "Usually there's some stipulation about not sleeping anywhere but the personal rooms… But if that had been one of the rules this game, I sure wouldn't be alive right now!"

"Oh, me neither. I fainted a few times too, remember? And also took a nap in my ward this morning… Well, Mono would have warned us." Dia crossed her arms and nodded solemnly. "It never would have let us get killed for something so dumb. I bet… If Kanoshi's plan didn't involve holding the door shut on her, it would have warned Kaede to leave the Dining Hall too."

"I'd believe that," Tsukasa said, "If you asked me a while ago, I'd say no way would it step in like that, but… Yeah. Even if it does still want the Killing Game to happen, which I even have some doubts about, it wouldn't want us dying over stupid rule violations. That's boring, after all."

"Mm, yeah," Dia said, then walked over to the laptops. Tsukasa and Nami helped her get set up with a game of Terraria, complete with a character that looked quite a bit like her. And, hey, it was data. Maybe she'd even be able to get her save game out in the real world, if she really liked it.
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (When This Is Over)

3:00 pm / 1500 Hours

After Dia had been playing the game there in the arcade for about two hours (She may have been planning to go play in her ward eventually, but it was easier for her friends to give her starting-off advice if they just stuck around here) somebody else arrived; Madara, who immediately noticed what she was playing.

“Oh, hey Hamuko,” He said, and wandered over to join the other two in looking over her shoulder. “You having fun?”

“Ah, yes! Nami and Tsukasa were just showing me this game.” She gestured to the screen. “I’ve been having a nice time! Do you like my base?”

Her base was several floating houses, with the floor completely leveled out underneath them. It had a basement with all of her crafting workshops, and sat underneath a simple ramp-lava trap. Madara was impressed, yeah. “That’s pretty cool!”

“What’s cool about it is we didn’t tell her how to make that trap,” Nami said, “She figured out that it would work on her own.”

“Huh. Clever girl,” Madara said, “How far you got so far? Get to see how that works on the goblin invasion?”

“Yes!” Dia said, “I have also killed the eye of cthulu! I used spiky balls from the invasion. It wasn’t very hard, that way. This game is nice! I like to fish, too. Tsukasa showed me how to use a glitch to make fishing spots in different biomes.”

“Wow, that’s pretty quick for a first playthrough,” Madara said, “So, you like older games like this?”

“Well, this is the first game that I have tried and enjoyed in general,” Dia said, “But yes, I’m liking it! I think I prefer 2-d games because then nothing can sneak up behind my character.”

“She’s pretty good at spotting the boulders too,” Nami said, “So it’s true, nothing’s sneaking up on her. She’s not that good at managing enemies without traps, though. Her spelunking trips end pretty quickly if she sits around long enough for more than two or three spawns.”

“Yeahh, it’s hard to keep track of too much happening at once,” Dia admitted, “There’s potions to help with that though! Apparently! Once I get a little further in!”

“Mhm. More different types of traps, too,” Madara said, “Technically, people have done playthroughs without using weapons at all, just taking advantage of the different trap types.”

“Wait, for serious?” Nami asked, “How do they get the first bosses? You can’t get wires till later, and lava doesn’t damage most bosses…”

“I honestly don’t remember. Maybe they just manage something against Skeletron and unlock the dungeon right away?” Madara shrugged. “Been a while since I watched any of those videos.”

“I would like to see those videos,” Dia said, wide-eyed, then blinked a few times. “Oh, I see. So this hyperfixation thing is common.”
“Heh, it can be,” Nami said, “And probably will be for a while, for you. Since you’re still figuring out what your interests really are, they must be pretty exciting.”

“Well,” Madara said, “There’s no way to get ahold of the videos from in here, at least, not yet. But when we get to the other side, I’ll…” He trailed off. “Hey. Dia? You’ll still be around when this is over, right?”

“Ah.” Dia froze.

“Madara, that’s not nice to-” Tsukasa started.

“Not nice to voice my concerns? Come on. I’m scared she’ll disappear. I wasn’t trying to be mean.”

“I honestly don’t know…” Dia admitted, “I don’t know what will happen to me when this is over.”

“Monokuma?” Nami bit the bullet and summoned it.

“Yeah?” It asked.

“What’s gonna happen to Dia?” Nami questioned it, “When the Killing Game is over, what will happen to her?”

“Well,” Monokuma said, “If you’re asking if she’ll disappear, she won’t. Her data will be saved of course. I dunno if there’s a way for her to get a suitable body in the real world, but if nothing else you’ll be able to store her on a laptop or something similar.”

“So I’m not going to disappear?” Dia asked, “I’ll keep existing?”

“Of course you will,” Monokuma said, “In fact, I’ve personally made sure, backups of your data are being regularly made. Basically, even if you get killed, you shouldn’t lose memory of more than a day, when your data’s retrieved later. That’s the benefit of being an AI. Making backups of real people takes a ridiculous amount of skill, but backing you up is so simple even I can do it!”

“So she’s safe,” Madara said, “Actually, the safest among us. That’s good to know.”

“Mhm!” Monokuma exclaimed, “She sure is! So you don’t have to worry about that. Though, because of this, the system won’t open a new floor of the building if she’s ‘killed’, so don’t go getting any ideas about self-sacrifice for the greater good, kid.”

“I wouldn’t wanna do that!” Dia huffed, “Even if it would work, I don’t wanna! I… Don’t wanna see other people die, but I don’t wanna die either. I. Wow, I, don’t. I wanna live. That’s… huh.”

“Dia? Are you okay?” Tsukasa asked.

“When I was repeating all those games, every time that I knew I was gonna get killed, or executed, I thought… Hey, maybe it’ll stick this time. It’d be nice if I could just stay dead and all this would be over,” Dia said, “But I don’t feel that way anymore. Even if I’ll be fine on the other side of it… Dying hurts. I don’t wanna go through that again!”

“Sounds like that’s a big step for you,” Monokuma said, “Realizing that you’re actually thinking about the future after a long time of doing no such thing is really good! And, yeah. No need for you to die again. I mean, it could still happen. Sorry bout that. But, well, it won’t get you any closer to the final floor of the building anyway.”
“Ugh,” Nami groaned, “I kind of wish that the Evil King would just do something already.”

“Well,” Monokuma said, “At this point… They don’t really have to, do they?”

“Huh?” Dia wondered.

“You should have realized, Dia! This is about where the other games would have been cut off,” Monokuma said, “At this point, no matter what happens, it’s probably two people. Somebody commits a murder and gets executed. The top floor of the building becomes available. The Mastermind Investigation can begin. You find the Mastermind, the game is over. The Evil King shoots two people. The game is over. Somebody kills the Evil King and is executed. The game is over.”

“…Oh, I guess you’re right,” Nami said, “So, why’s the Evil King’s Game still on anyway?”

“Can’t turn it off,” Monokuma said, “Once it’s on, can’t be cancelled. Plus, well. I…”

“You…?” Nami asked.

“I have my doubts,” It said, “That the clues even exist, for you to find the Mastermind. Even on the top floor of the building.”

“But… Why would that be the case?” Tsukasa asked, “Didn’t you say before that all the evidence can be found when the top floor opens?”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be. But this stuff is pretty weird, isn’t it? So, maybe, it’s better after all if the Evil King ends the game,” It said, “But that is a failsafe, I guess. If you can’t find the Mastermind. That’s still a way to put an end to this. To get to the other side. Understand?”

“…Yeah,” Dia said, “I understand.”

They all understood. Monokuma… Was saving their lives.

If somehow, they couldn’t find the Mastermind, there was a way to avoid mass destruction.

But then, why would it do something like that?
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (Dinner)

5:00 pm / 1700 hours

After playing the game for a while longer, now with three whole friends advising her, Dia was able to beat one more boss, and set up a farm for potion-related plants. Then, it was dinnertime, so the four of them made their way over to Cafe Monokuma; Dia bringing the laptop she’d been using with her, along with its power supply and mouse, so that she could continue playing on her own time. Nami thought it was nice, that they’d been able to offer Dia an option for her favorite game that ended up working out well on the first try.

Of course, she’d find other things she liked, possibly more than this, but it was still fun to see a friend of theirs experiencing the innocent glee of really enjoying a video game for the first time in her life. But for now, it was time to eat, and they arrived at the cafe. Once there, the group split up to sit in different sections of the room. Dia met up with Goro, who was sitting with Riko and Kurou. Tsukasa and Nami joined their respective partners, and Madara wandered over to chat with Tsumugi.

“So what’d you end up doing after we split up?” Sayaka wondered.

“Ah, I met up with Tsukasa in the arcade and we helped Dia find a game that she’d like,” Nami said, then glanced over her shoulder. So, the ‘summoning’ thing seemed to only take effect between different rooms, that was good to have figured out. This was the first time Nami had been more than a few feet away from Dia in the same room and said her name.

“Oh, that’s nice!” Sayaka said, “I finished collecting berries, then I went and made the fruit tart. It’s chilling right now, since it’s the type that’s nicer when it’s cold. And… It was actually kind of nice, to share a kitchen with Oishi again for a bit. It’s been a while, you know?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” Nami said, “I almost forgot, she was teaching you some stuff before, right? Um. This might be weird to ask, but how’d you ever end up friends with her anyway?”

“Oh, well,” Sayaka said, “Think I did tell you that I met Yuuri when I offered to kill his mom, right? Same deal there, I killed someone for her, and she insisted on paying me back with lessons. So we kinda started to get along. It’s, well… We can both be kinda abrasive, so we could handle each other, yknow?”

Amai arrived with plates of meat and roasted garden-fresh vegetables right about then, and the conversation paused for everyone to take their first few bites. Delicious. Finally some good fucking food, as if the food hadn’t been good this whole time.

"I guess I never thought of it like that," Nami said, "I mean, you're so sweet now, I kind of forgot that you're able to be, well. Abrasive. Especially compared to her."

"I locked you in a room then also threatened to beat you armed with a simple improvised polearm on the day we met," Sayaka said, "And that doesn't stick in your mind as the behavior of an absolute gremlin?"

"...I mean, I guess?" Nami admitted.

"If it helps, I thought you were abrasive at the start there," Randy said, "I mean, let's not mince words, I kind of thought you were a crazy bitch?"
"Yes! See, that is how my first impression was. I was a fucking disaster," Sayaka said, "So you can see how, when my friends were Yuuri and Oishi, that I could've been maybe just a little capable of being on the same verbal playing field as them!"

"Heh... Well, I still doubt you'd legitimately insult somebody who didn't deserve it," Tsukasa said, "If there's one thing I've learned about you, it's that you have a lot of integrity when it comes to which people deserve compassion."

"I guess? Well, that sounds weird coming from you though. Bitch I'd fucking kill you." Sayaka shrugged. "Not anymore, but you know what I mean, right?"

"Oh, certainly. If the nature of the way that I met Randy came out in the open in a different way, it would be understandable. If there was a misunderstanding at play on any level, then I'd fall right at the top of your hit-list, wouldn't I?"

"Mm." Sayaka nodded. "It probably happened in some of Dia's fake games, I bet, too."

"Probably," Nami agreed, "I mean, even now with it coming out in such a simple way, you know that I had some trouble coming to terms with it... It's not hard to see that Sayaka could get the wrong idea of what happened there."

"I'd be pissed off if that happened!" Randy proclaimed, "Not just because, well, my awesome boyfriend would be dead. But also because I'm totally capable of taking care of myself and I wouldn't lie to protect anyone if they were treating me badly! So, like, way to underestimate a guy, Sayaka."

"Eh, you'd be surprised by the power of my imagination. My conclusion in this case is more likely to be that you started sucking up to him in the Killing Game so that he wouldn't take it as an excuse to be rid of you, or something like that. Maintains the idea you're capable, but in a clever, damage-avoidance way."

"...Oh, okay," Randy said, "Yeah I guess that's one way to jump to conclusions. Pretty detailed, though! Like, is anything really as complicated as that?"

Sayaka gave him a deadpan look. "Not to even get into anything relating to anyone who's still alive here, Shinjiro Nozomi was kidnapped at a young age, abused, and groomed into being an entirely different gender for several years until he was rescued by Future Foundation and enrolled in a middle school intended specifically to help people who'd been through similar things reintegrate properly into society. So, some things are that complicated, yeah."

"Right." Randy crossed his arms and nodded. "I wasn't thinking of it that way, I guess. In my brain that's totally different from the kind of thing you described, but I guess that... I could see that happening. Definitely not with me, I mean, anyone tries something I didn't approve I'll clock em' in the face and steal their wallet! But I guess it could happen."

"Hm. Yes, it does seem like the example scenario I described for you hinges only on the fact that you're clever, and ignores the fact that you're also dumb as a rock at the same time."

"High Intelligence Low Wisdom, babes!" Randy struck a pose. "A modern day Sherlock Holmes who won't hesitate to eat a whole fistful of dirt if it gets him closer to the truth. That's me, alright!"

"Please do not eat dirt," Nami said, "It tastes bad."

"You've eaten dirt?" Sayaka asked.
"Why would you ever expect me not to have eaten dirt?" Nami asked back, to which Sayaka had no sufficient reply. Of course Nami had eaten dirt. Wouldn't have it any other way, so that she could be the martyr that warned everyone that dirt tasted bad. "And anyway, anything you can learn about a case by eating its dirt can also be learned by analyzing it in a lab."

"We don't have labs to analyze stuff here, though," Randy said, "So what if we need to discover which room a soil sample is from? Garden dirt probably tastes pretty different from. Uh. Wait. Is there any dirt? Anywhere else?"

"I think the only dirt here is in the garden," Nami said, "But I guess tasting dirt can tell you whether it's actual soil or if it's crushed up oreo cookies to be used as artificial dirt in a Childish Dessert Cup Tee Em."

"I think eating that dirt would be fun," Randy said.

"It's not like that's hard to make..." Tsukasa chuckled. "I mean, even I could do it."

"So romantic, my boyfriend's going to crush up oreos with his bare hands to make fake dirt I can eat," Randy said, then made exaggerated swooning motions before smirking. "Oh for real that'd be cool beans."

"I should get my fruit tart," Sayaka said, and stood up, taking her friends' empty plates with her.
Once Amai had finished handing out all the plates, she took her own and sat down at the emptiest table, consisting only of Madara and Tsumugi... And now herself. Now, as she did this, she was well aware of two things. One was that Madara didn't like her at all, and the other was that things with Tsumugi were a little bit odd. Thus, it wasn't unreasonable to say that by deciding to seat herself with these two people, Amai was taking steps to ensure some level of emotional distress to herself, sabotaging her own well-being in a way that most people wouldn't think twice about.

But she was perfectly fine, and wasn't feeling bad and didn't have anything she needed to talk to anybody about right now or ever. She was Amai Oishi, inheritor of an internationally famed recipe book and procurer of the Ultimate Chef title that neither of her parents had been able to earn for themselves. She never let anybody near enough to hurt her and if they did, she hurt them back tenfold. This was who she was.

“Hey Oishi,” Madara was the one to greet her, “What’s going on?”

“I’m here to sit with my friend, Tsumugi!” Amai snipped, “I hope that’s not a problem for you?”

“Why would it be? I ain’t your dad, so it’s not like I have any say in what you do.”

“That’s right. You don’t.” Amai turned to Tsumugi. “Hey, Moogs. Holding up okay?”

“Huh? Oh… Yes,” Tsumugi said, “I’m quite fine. Madara and I were just discussing combustion engines. It was truly a fascinating talk.”

“Tsumugi said that if we make it out she’ll let me blow up some rocket fuel!” Madara added in, grinning. That may have been the most enthusiasm that Amai had ever actually seen from him.

“I dunno if that’s a good idea? Like, isn’t rocket fuel real fucking expensive and we’re going to need it for whatever it is you plan to do?” Amai asked, directed at Tsumugi of course.

“Well, if all goes well, then I’ll be able to make a ship which doesn’t even need rocket fuel to run. Something cheaper and more sustainable. Then we can blow up the rocket fuel in celebration.” She pressed her fingers together and laughed. “Kaboom.”

“Er… If you still think that’s a good idea when we get there, then okay, I guess?” Amai shrugged. “What’ve you been up to today anyway? I haven’t really seen you around.”

“Oh you know, this and that. I think I read a book, but I can’t really remember the plot of it,” Tsumugi admitted, “Kind of just taking the day as it comes, you know? That’s what I’ve got to do.”

“Well, yeah, obviously you’ve gotta do that,” Amai said, “Given the circumstances. But you know, I don’t think it’s super great to read an entire book and not remember the plot of it! At least don’t do that alone. Watch a movie with me, and then I can refresh you on what’s going on if you do get lost. I am a stellar movie-watcher.”

“A movie… Yes, that would be nice,” Tsumugi said, “Madara, you could join us if you like.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged one shoulder. “That depends on what the movie’s gonna be, after all. There’s some genres I don’t much care for.”
“Um… Well it’s up to you, Tsumugi,” Amai said, “What would you like watching?”

“Is it too stereotypical of me to say that I like sci-fi?” Tsumugi asked, then chuckled a bit.
“Wellll… Not exactly. More like horror sci-fi. Stuff like Alien, or The Thing. Space Opera isn’t really as interesting.”

Amai frowned, and waved a hand in front of Tsumugi’s face. “Hey, now. What’s with the slow talking? You get enough sleep last night? You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” Tsumugi said, “Can’t I just want to slow down a little bit?”

“Well, it is a little weird,” Madara admitted, “But if you don’t want to talk about whatever’s going on, then I won’t push you, at least.”

“...I won’t push you either.” Amai pouted. It was begrudging that she agreed not to, but, well. It wasn’t like she could disagree after a pointed statement like that from Madara. Well-played. Could it be? Was he positioning himself to be her rival? That’d be cool. Having a rival was always something that Amai thought could be fun. Sayaka almost got to be a rival, but then they just got along well instead. But then Sayaka had to go and get that gorgeous girlfriend of hers who seemed to think that Amai was a bad friend.

...And she was. Wasn’t she? She had been a bad friend. Teasing was one thing, but she went too far. It wasn’t like she was an idiot, she knew that. Being told that she was wrong hurt, though. She let Sayaka close enough to hurt her and then she did. By telling her that she was being hurtful. God. What a mess. Why was she such a mess? Why was she like this? Why was she in such a state that she’d lash out at anybody who so much as implied that she was doing something wrong even as she knew herself that it was wrong? Couldn’t she just sort out her shit all on her own and nobody say anything and make it clear that she was failing so badly that everyone could see and everyone knew that she was just a stupid, fucked up-

Stop that. It’s not helping. Being mean to yourself, too? Good grief. Yeah right. You’re meanest to yourself. No matter what you say to other people it can’t compare to the way that you-

“Well, do either of you have a problem with gore? The Thing is pretty gruesome, but the more I think about it the more I think it’s a movie you’d both appreciate, if the visual effects don’t turn you off,” Tsumugi interrupted Amai’s train of thought, reminding her that this evening she was trying to help Tsumugi feel okay and it was selfish to start spiralling and making this about herself instead.

“It’s fine with me,” Madara said.

Amai forced a laugh. “I mean, come on. My cooking prowess is such that I even butcher the meat I use. If I was easily grossed out, I never would have come this far!”

Let’s just have a nice time with Tsumugi and Madara this evening and forget about everything else. The secrets you’re holding yourself hostage with don’t need to be released just yet and you’ll be fine, it’s fine, it’s all fine.

Amai pushed it all to the back of her mind. She was fine. Why wouldn’t she be?
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (The Ace Of Wands)

7:00 pm / 1900 Hours

After dinner was finished, Torimi Shinoe found herself, for some reason, in the Ultimate Heir Ward. She didn’t know why she was here, and most of this stuff was thoroughly uninteresting to her for that matter. Even though she’d acted as a psychic on a legal team, didn’t mean that legal texts meant anything to her. She’d been drawn here though, maybe just to see what sort of books there were? It didn’t make much sense.

Or, maybe she was drawn here out of some odd knowledge. After all, she was the Ultimate Fortuneteller. She worked as a courtroom psychic for a time, and she was skilled in all forms of divination, from tarot to crystal balls to staring at a pile of spilled fast food on the ground and understanding its deep cosmic meaning. So it wasn’t that surprising when she came across the reason that she’d been drawn to this room today. The owner of the ward was there, sitting in a corner. There was a book open in front of her, but she didn’t seem to be reading it.

“Riko?” Torimi asked, “Are you okaaaay?”

Riko blinked a few times, then looked up to see Torimi there. She waited a moment, then lifted her whiteboard and wrote. “Hello, Shinoe. What brings you here?”

“The universe,” Torimi said, shrugging. She pulled out a chair across from Riko and sat down. “Just kinda felt like I should come heeeere? And I think that’s right. Cause I thiiiink I oughta talk to you.”

“I don’t need you to talk to me,” Riko said.

“Maaaaaybe not,” Torimi said, “But I’ll sit here till you make up your mind for reeeeal, okay? Came here for a reason, yknow. Don’t wanna tell me my talent’s steerin’ me wrong, do you?”

Riko fidgeted under that accusation, then turned the page of the book she had open.

“What are you reading?” Torimi asked. Riko lifted the book to show her the title; ‘The Flow of Gossip; Investment Management In The Age of Scandal.’ Torimi tilted her head to one side. “Thaaaat seems confusing. Why’re you readin’ that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve read it before, and it isn’t very good advice,” Riko answered, “I guess this was all that I felt up to doing this evening, though. It’s odd not to be doing any work for nearly two weeks now.”

“Just think of it like a vacaaaation,” Torimi said.

“Would that I could,” Riko answered, “But unfortunately, I’m unable to do that. I’m not off the clock. This is all going to be broadcast, after all. Usually, making public appearances is my sister’s job, but I can’t misstep too strongly or my company will be judged.”

“Ohhh, I see, I see. You’re experiencing the stress of capittaaaaalism. It’s okay, us non-richies get that all the time! It’ll fade.” Torimi laughed, but then reached out and patted the top of Riko’s hand. “For reeeaaal, though. This ain’t helping anyone. Why don’t you and I do somethiiiin’? I could give you a reading back in my room if you’d like. You ever got a tarot reading done befooore? Wanna know your fuuuuuture?”
Riko hesitated a moment, but then shut the book and stood up, effectively answering. Torimi grinned at her, then let them both into her own room. She’d received tarot cards in her closet for her ‘hobby’, in addition to her plushie collection being recreated. Riko seemed a bit caught off-guard by the veritable mountain of stuffed animals which greeted her in Torimi’s room.

“Welcooome,” Torimi said, and gestured about the room. “I can give you just a basic tarot reading, or I can also channel through a plushie. It’s an advaaanced form of divination that I’ve only improved over time as my collection has grooown.”

“I think the basic tarot should be fine, thank you,” Riko said. “Something simple.”

“Simple, huuuuh? Well, then I’ll do a three card spread,” Torimi said, then retrieved the cards, and handed them to Riko. “Shuffle thooose, to infuse them with your energy, kaaay? We’ll draw one for your past, one for your present, and one for your future… Any aim that you wanna go for?”

“Aim?” Riko wondered, then took the cards and started shuffling them.

“Aaaaaim. “ Torimi nodded. “We can say we’re looking for stuff about you that you wouldn’t normally notice yourself, or something you need to change, or something you could do better? Or relate to a paaaarticular topic, like love life or career.”

Riko shuffled the whole deck, handed them back, then answered. “I guess the first one.”

“Alriiiight! Please have a seat on my floor,” Torimi said, gesturing to her floor. Riko had a seat on her floor. Torimi sat across from her, and immediately took three cards from the top, placing them between them. “When I fliiip these, left from your side is the past, and that’s alsooo how we’ll judge upright against reversed. Get iiiit?”

“Yes,” Riko said, “Well, I don’t know what upright against reversed means, but I understand the directionals.”

“It’s okaaay, I’ll do all the interpreting for you,” Torimi said, then flipped the first card for Riko’s past. “So, something you have trouble seeing about your paaaast… The High Priestess, reversed. Ohhh…”

“What?” Riko asked.

“Well, it means secrets… Aaand, withdrawal and silence.” Torimi frowned. “I’m sooorrry, I didn’t expect it to… huh?” She glanced to see Riko had written something.

“That isn’t surprising. I’ve only recently come into a better understanding of myself. Withdrawal and silence is something I now know I’m guilty of. As for secrets, yes. There are a number of things in my past which I, at the time, didn’t realize were secrets.”

“If you say sooo…” Torimi trailed off, then turned the next card. “Oh! Aaaace of wands! That’s a nice card to get upright for thiieee. So right now, you’re unaware of… your potential for growth, and new opportunities. Heheh. Noooow you know!”

“Oh, I see. I’m not sure what to do with that,” Riko said, “And the future?”

“Let’s seeee… Oh.” Torimi turned the card. “The Moon. Now, ummm… On this spread, the future one really meaaans, what you should look out for in the future, cause you could miss it…”

“And?” Riko prodded.
“And The Moon upriiiight… Means illusion, fear, and anxiety,” Torimi explained, “So I guess it’s saaaaying… Don’t try and convince yourself you aren’t feeling thoooose things?”

“Thank you, Shinoe. That won’t be a problem,” Riko said, then stood up. “This was interesting to see. At least, I must admit that you’ve got me convinced of your accuracy. Then… I’ll be seeing you.”

With that, Torimi watched Riko leave.
Nami was battling a fake opponent again; Keeping herself sharp. She had in mind, what Sayaka had mentioned earlier that day. She was one of the people here whose talent was able to be pushed to its natural limit; So, given how much she’d struggled to find the answer to Mitsuru’s locked room, it was evident that she needed to increase that limit. She picked one of the more difficult listed practice cases in her ward, and challenged herself to complete it in an hour. She’d already hit that mark, having begun at seven, but she was close to it. Ten more minutes, and she’d have this.

So, she did, then dropped onto one of the benches because it was kind of exhausting to speedrun a felony misdemeanor trial. Even now, of course, it wasn’t all on her. All the collected discovery for each case was fully available to her, but even so, the weight of handling the trial itself… She took a few deep breaths, then noticed a sound. Clapping. She turned to see Kurou standing in the doorway.

“Brava!” He congratulated her, then walked up. “I only saw the last bit of that, but I have to say, it seems pretty well done. Kind of intense, though. Doing alright?”

“Yeah,” Nami said, shifting over so he could sit next to her. “I’m fine. Just practicing. I picked a higher difficulty case and challenged myself to do it in an hour… Didn’t quite make it, but I got close! What brings you here?”

“Heard you arguing with the program from the hallway and figured I’d check in,” Kurou said, “Practicing, huh? I guess that’s the responsible thing to do, in a scenario like this.”

“Thank you!” Nami blurted out, loud enough that Kurou jumped. “Sorry! It’s just, you know. It is the responsible thing to do! And I keep hearing that I’m impressive, and invaluable to the trials and super important, and that’s a lot of pressure but then it’s also, apparently I’m already good enough? But they can’t see inside my head. I’ve gotten lost a bunch of times myself… So I need to be sharper, if I’m gonna have all that responsibility!”

“It’s very smart of you to make that decision! And no offense to your friends, but it’s irresponsible to encourage complacency from you. Of course, don’t overwork either… Strike that balance,” Kurou said, “Especially since it’s not the only responsibility you’ve acquired.”

“Huh? Oh… You mean Goro, right?” Nami asked.

“Certainly. As a parent myself, it’s become quite clear to me what the nature of your relationship is,” Kurou said, “And I think that it makes sense. Even with the small gap there, it’s more like you should have been family all along. Am I correct?”

“You are,” Nami said, balling her fists in her lap. “It doesn’t stress me out at all. I want to take care of and protect him. He needs somebody to be his mom and I’m honestly prepared to do that! All I’m worried about is being good enough for him.”

“Then you’re already on track! That’s every parent’s big worry,” Kurou said, “Being good enough. I think you probably are good enough, at least, for him. I sure as all get out wouldn’t trust you to raise an infant, but stepping into the hole a teenage boy’s dead mom left behind? That’s reasonable from you. You’re still too much of a kid for an actual kid, though.”
“What about a fourteen year old?” Nami wondered, “I think I might have also promised to be another kid’s ‘big sister’ cause, he was the person I saw during the family conversation things?”

“Ah, those. Ayu would have been there if not for the fact, I’m sure, that Ayano is a pain of a baby.” Kurou chuckled. “It seems you’ve just stumbled into a maternal role. Does that bother you?”

“Not at all. Actually, it’s kind of…” Nami lifted one hand to her chest. “Really nice? Maybe it makes me a stereotypical woman, but I’ve always kinda wanted to be like that? I wanna take care of people, and, stuff like that…”

“You don’t need to downplay it,” Kurou said, “I can only imagine that if it’s something which doesn’t make you uncomfortable, it would be very… What’s the word… Validating?”

“…You’re right it’s super validating,” Nami blurted out, then looked to him with a nervous laugh. “Well, it’s more like. Growing up I always kind of thought, well, nobody would ever look at me like that. Even if I had kids of my own, would I ever really be, mom? So having somebody already placing me in that role, at this age, it’s… Nice. It really does help me feel more like an actual woman? If that makes sense? Like, I start to doubt myself and I remember, oh yeah, I’m mom friend. That’s me. Big onee energy. So on so forth.”

“Heh. You’re going to do great. You know that, right?”

“Ehh? You bet I’m gonna do great! At everything!” Nami flexed an arm. “I might fail sometimes, but I’m still gonna be a cool girl, no matter what. And I’m gonna get married someday. And I’ll have actual kids. In like, a few years probably. When I’m less of a kid myself.”

“That’s the kind of life you’re hoping for?” Kurou wondered.

“Maybe it’s not a modern way of thinking, but yeah, it is. And actually, it’s what Sayaka wants too! And I know it’s stupid to say we’re gonna stay together after such a short amount of time,” Nami said, “But I think…”

“It’s not stupid at all,” Kurou said, “I think it’s fine, to assume that future until it’s proven wrong. Ayu and I, we assume that we’ll be together our entire lives. It’s nicer that way. Sure, we could fall out of love and get divorced. It’s always possible. Whether you’re married or just started dating… You can just let yourself be in love in the moment, you know.”

“Huh. Kinda thought you’d lecture me on how irresponsible it is to fantasize about the future with a girl I’ve dated three days.”

“It’s not that irresponsible if you’re in love. It’s natural to imagine your future. All you need to be careful of, is if you did break up, you’ll not only need to mourn the relationship, but that future as well. I’ve heard it a few times, you know. So much sadness comes from ‘we’ll never have a pet alpaca named Gucci’, and such things.”

“Is. Is that an actual example?” Nami asked.

“Yes,” Kurou said, “That relationship just didn’t work out. They fell out of love and it was mutual. But then I had to hear all the sob stories of the things they claimed they’d do together someday. It wasn’t sad that the relationship ended, but it was sad that the future they imagined was invalidated.”

“That… Makes sense. So if I’m prepared to cry about how we’ll never have a huge fancy wedding where we both wear pretty dresses… Then it’s not stupid to dream about it?”
“That’s what I think, anyway. Er, do you mind if I ask you a bit of a strange question?”

"Ask away."

"You are aware of the fact that hormone replacement therapy leads to sterility, yes?"

"Oh, don't worry. I thought ahead. For, the possibility, just in case, I'd wanna have a biological kid with somebody." Nami smirked and gave a thumbs-up. "I mean, seriously. I'm smart."

"I wasn't thinking you weren't smart! Just, perhaps, not far-sighted enough," Kurou said, "But it's good to hear, that you thought ahead enough to ensure the future you'd like for yourself."
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (A Promise)

9:00 pm / 2100 Hours

After Kurou wandered off, Nami challenged herself to another case, and did get it in under an hour, but it was also just a smidge easier than the last one, so she wouldn’t give herself too much credit. And once that was finished, well, may as well get some sleep. Unlike last night, though, she’d check with Sayaka first. Now, to find her. She decided to start with the easy option and go upstairs to her ward, and, there she was; Behind the panels, leatherworking.

Nami pulled a panel to the side and made herself known, “Hey sweets. How’s your evening going?”

“Bwaah!” Sayaka made undignified noises, not because she was startled by Nami’s arrival, but because she was startled by the pet name. “Hello! Yes, just making things. How about you?”

“Heh. Sorry, did that catch you off guard?”

“Yes. Everything you do catches me off guard. You’re too much of an actual girlfriend for me to handle!” Sayaka complained, “It’s so nice! And good! Okay?”

“Hopefully, I’ll always be able to do that,” Nami said, then crossed her arms and leaned against a non-panel wall. “Whatcha making, anyway?”

“Just some bracelets, still getting back into the swing of things,” Sayaka said, “And these are really simple to make. What’s up?”

“I was thinking about going to sleep soon,” Nami said, “You wanna share my room again?”

“If it’s alright with you. That was kind of nice,” Sayaka admitted, “I don’t really wanna be alone in my room again, anyway.”

“Do you think you’re ready to talk about what that whole thing was?” Nami wondered.

“…You know what, yeah. Let’s go back to the room, though. I don’t really wanna let anybody else in on my whole sordid past and all,” Sayaka said, “And as we know, this building isn’t exactly eavesdrop-proof. At all.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” Nami agreed. Sayaka packed up what she was working on, then the two of them made their way down to Nami’s room, where she swiped them in with her Monopad. Sayaka walked in ahead of her, then went and sat down on the bed. Nami shut the door behind her, and stayed standing there.

“…Sit next to me,” Sayaka said, “It’s easier to say it if I don’t have to be looking straight at you, you know. Besides, how are you supposed to comfort me if you’re all the way over there!?”

“Right.” Nami quickly moved to sit next to her girlfriend. “Sorry.”

“Anyway…” Sayaka started, then took a deep breath. She was tense, but… “Well, you already know about the Cult of N stuff. That I was kidnapped for two weeks, then I killed him. Right?”

“Yeah,” Nami said.
“Well, that was the first person I ever had to kill, so I guess I didn’t do a good enough job at it. He lived,” Sayaka explained, “And... Sometimes he comes back. And it makes me feel so fucking useless and rotten and terrible that has to be a sometimes because I can’t do it again, I can’t just fucking kill him again every time he turns up I just freeze and I can’t do anything I can’t... Stop him...”

“Sayaka... I’m sorry, I had no idea,” Nami said, “But I don’t think it’s useless that you can’t kill him. He’s the only person you’ve ever been afraid of, right? Most people wouldn’t have been able to kill him even once.”

“H-Huh?” Sayaka asked, her spiral halted by confusion at what Nami was saying now.

“It took you two weeks to get up the courage to kill him the first time. So he realized that, and decided that he’d turn up ‘sometimes’. Far enough apart that you don’t expect him and can’t work up the courage to kill him again, right? That doesn’t reflect on you being useless or something, it reflects on him being malicious enough to think that far ahead,” Nami said, “I think, anyway.”

“My breakdown was...” Sayaka admitted, “Because I had to wash my hair for real. Out of the pigtails. I didn’t wear these till after him... And he takes them out, every time. Having my hair down, seeing myself like that. I’m so. Small and weak and. It’s the same. I’m still the same as I was back then.”

Nami turned to Sayaka and gently lifted a hand under her chin. “I don’t think that’s true. I think you’re a very pretty young woman. Does it help if I tell you, that the first time I met you I could tell you were older? That you were either in my selection year, or Mitsuru’s? Just because you think you haven’t grown... The fact that you’ve lived as long as you have, it shows. I would never have mistaken you for a kid.”

“You really mean that?” Sayaka asked.


“I guess you wouldn’t,” Sayaka admitted, and leaned forward to wrap her arms around Nami, face pressed to her chest. “I think. I’m really scared but maybe. I thought earlier. If we’re getting married. That guy might respect it. Your claim on me, I guess.”

“He must have some really mixed up principles,” Nami said.

“He’s an otaku in the Cult of N, what do you expect?”

“Fair enough.” Nami lifted a hand to place it against Sayaka’s back. “You know, I could help you with the hair thing, too. We can wash it in a sink in a room with no mirror, or something. I’ll figure something out for you.”

“Heh. Thanks.” Sayaka pulled away, and looked Nami in the eyes. She looked like she was about to cry, and her voice reflected that. “And you don’t think. That I’m a bad girlfriend? For asking you out without letting you know about this first. That. I might not be able to be faithful...”

“Shut!” Nami exclaimed, pressing a finger to Sayaka’s lips. “None of that please and thank you! I’ll have you know that husbands who claim their wives who were raped cheated on them do very poorly in court! It’s utter nonsense! It isn’t cheating at all and it’s not your fault and you have no responsibility to disclose this fact to anyone you date because it’s a difficult thing and I’m really just honored you trust me enough to tell me!”

“Of course I trust you,” Sayaka said, “I love you.”
“I love you too. And this would never change that.”
Iwako was still reeling from the fact that her boyfriend had died yesterday, but she was starting to regain her composure nonetheless. It gave her a sick satisfaction to see Ice and Speak cowed around the vestige anytime they spotted her or Akane, at least. Was that too cruel of her…? No, she decided. It was in fact much too kind of her that she’d left those two alive in the first place.

In any case, she’d gotten back to business. Informed Sakura of the infant who’d been left behind, Yuuri’s younger sister, who she’d determined had been in foster care since Komaru Ruka’s untimely death just a few months after giving birth. She tried to contact somebody who could probably change the nature of the Neo World Program, even if it would take much too long to get there from Okinawa to make much difference at this point, but was unable to get through to her or to her live-in boyfriend, which was mildly concerning but not too much so.

She was a busy woman, after all, so it wasn’t unlikely that they were simply both off at some tech conference or another. And everyone who was in this year’s Killing Game was, well, already here; So it wasn’t as if there was that worry in play.

Speaking of worries, Iwako did worry about Akane. The very fact that Akane had agreed to beat up the Hakos as well, was a bit concerning, because it was a violent act. Akane wasn’t fond of violence and so, it was clear that if she involved herself in the violent act, it was out of a sincere need to exorcise some of the emotions surrounding her brother’s passing. Mitsuru was always there for her, after all. As far as Akane was concerned, she had three parents. Her mother, her grandmother, and Mitsuru.

She never bothered much to make friends at school or to connect with anyone outside of the family. Iwako and Sasane counted as ‘family members’ for her, but not on the same level. For Akane Fujishiro, at age fourteen, an entire third of her world had been destroyed. So even as Iwako had to mourn and deal with her own difficult emotions, she knew that Akane was bound to have a harder time. Iwako lost one of her soulmates; But she’d already experienced loss. Her father was dead, her mother disowned her, and the great aunt who took her in had died just a year before her own Killing Game, which was a whole other bundle of loss.

For Akane, this was profound. For Iwako, it was devastating, infuriating, but not so much of a unique feeling. So she tried to be there for the kid. Still, she was a strong young lady all the same. She had the option of leaving and going home, but she didn’t. She insisted on being here, to offer whatever help she could. The people in that game were her brother’s friends, after all. He’d want them to make it out safely. If Akane could aid that effort, then she would. Grief could be twisted into resolve, and for a kid, she was doing quite well at it.

Iwako was about to turn in for the night, and hand the night watch of the primary room over to Kyoko… When she heard the doorbell ring, again. Well, who could that be? The True Radicals were expecting others to turn up, yes, but none quite so soon. She checked the door camera and saw, there, somebody she’d just recently been thinking about. She smirked, then went to the door and opened it, looking down at the woman in question.

“Doctor Kirisame,” Iwako said, “To what do I owe this pleasure?”
Megumi Kirisame was a few things. She was short, yes, but also in a wheelchair. She was a friend of Nami Kaguya’s, the internet persona of ‘Puropurin’. Her live-in boyfriend was a friend of Mitsuru’s, and that was how these two met. The final undeniable fact of Megumi was that she, like Iwako, was a girl genius with an ego the size of Towa City itself. She wheeled herself right past Iwako into the room before answering. “Well, obviously, as soon as that first episode aired, I pulled some strings to get myself here as soon as I could.”

“I was just about to call you and ask you to come,” Iwako said.

“Tch. You underestimate me that much?” Megumi asked, grinning. “Of course I’d be here, with Nami involved. Now then, how far in is the actual game? Oh, and I whipped a little something up on the way over here, of course. It’s the best I can do on short notice. I’d need at least a month, with the actual software at hand, to do anything ‘useful’. But even something paltry is worth something, coming from me. This level of invention is possible for Megumi Kirisame.”

“Oh my. Yes, I suppose I did underestimate you, just a bit,” Iwako said, “The game is thirteen days in. Well, day thirteen just ‘finished’. There have been four cases. Thirteen participants are alive.”

Megumi raised an eyebrow. “Thirteen?”

“Oh, right. There have been some odd situations. Four additional participants were installed following the second case, and their Monokuma qualifies as a participant too.”

“Of course. Because that’s reasonable. Well, then. Who’s dead?”

“In order… Etsuko Yushu, Tomoe Kaguya, Rei Akabane, Shinjiro Nozomi, Kaede Akamatsu, Kanoshi Kyosuke, Yuuri Ruka, and… Mitsuru Fujishiro,” Iwako explained.

“Oh. I’m sorry for your loss, then.”

“Thank you, but I’m coping. As is his younger sister, who is here. As for Sasane, she’s still Handling, the Future Foundation. She doesn’t know yet.” Iwako took a beat to think if there was anything else important to share. “Oh, and ‘Box Hako’ isn’t present. She’s actually an AI called Dia Hamuko.”

“I could have told you that much,” Megumi scoffed, “I saw one episode and I can tell you, the programming’s got her fingerprints all over it.”

“Er… Ms Hashi’s?” Iwako wondered.

“So that’s what she’s going by these days? But, yes. She and I go way back, so of course I can tell when she’s made an intelligence… I must admit, her skills are impressive, if niche.”

“But not quite as impressive as yours?”

“Keen, Iwako.” Megumi chuckled. “Of course not. It would take her at least two weeks to make something even as partially effective as what I’ve accomplished in two days. Then again, were I to try and make an artificial intelligence comparable to her children, I suppose I can admit that it wouldn’t be nearly as successful.”

“And if you worked together?” Iwako wondered.

“Oh, by our powers combined, we would most certainly surpass that so-called Ultimate Programmer. Speaking of, did you kill her?”
“Not personally. Nate did,” Iwako said, “Nate’s a weird guy. Ex-despair. Ultimate Environmentalist. The sort of person who says that killing somebody balances out morally as long as you properly compost the body.”

“Huh. Pragmatic,” Megumi said, “But I doubt I’d want to spend much time with him.”

“He’s not around right now, he’s off planning a murder,” Iwako said, “Once the episode airs where Goro Bakura has a full-blown courtroom breakdown, he’s going to kill Kiyoshi Matsubara.”

“Well, if he has to kill somebody.” Megumi shrugged. “Is there anybody here that I would get along with? Besides you, of course.”

“There’s Amami,” Iwako offered, “I’m sure that you could discover some project to collaborate on?”

“Perhaps so,” Megumi said, then made her way over to the monitoring machines. “Well, I’ll implement my protocol first of all. It’s best to do this as soon as possible.” She glanced over to the pod that Nami was in. “It’s about time I paid you back for all your help, isn’t it, Nami?”
Daily Life: Day Thirteen (Forty-Two Eighteen)

One, two, three, four. Close your eyes and shut the door.

Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 22nd
Time: 2300 Hours

Five, six, seven, eight. Who do you love and who do you hate?

Dia Hamuko thought an awful lot about numbers for a girl who didn’t care about them. Math wasn’t interesting to her at all, but she could still calculate things relatively easily. She could figure out the probability of certain outcomes in the false Killing Games she’d been through. She kept track of the exact number she’d been through. She knew how long she’d existed, in all senses, and she ignored all of that to decide how old she was.

She was eighteen. That was it, that simple. She was created as a seventeen year old, the same age as Box Hako. She had existed for one true year since then, so she was eighteen now. Just because the time she experienced the Killing Games as worked out to approximately seven years, didn’t make her twenty-four. She felt eighteen, so she was eighteen. The numbers didn’t matter.

What this really boiled down to was that Dia was hyper-aware of the passage of time. Each second that went by was a second that she acknowledged. So, when something became odd about the seconds, of course she noticed it.

She walked in a line, heel to toe, down the hallway. Arms outstretched. One step each second. Measuring, checking what it was that she felt. She wasn’t sure why. She wasn’t sure what compelled her to measure it in this manner. But she stepped. One-through-forty-two. It was forty-two steps and forty-two seconds. Then a mild discomfort. Eighteen seconds. Feel it again. Forty-two, eighteen. Forty-two, eighteen. Back and forth. It was a very quiet feeling, but she knew what most things felt like, and this was nothing like it. It was like a very light vibration, that she mostly felt in her stomach.

Dia did know what most things felt like. She knew how it felt to be killed in all sorts of ways. She knew how it felt to be sick because you were ill, because you ate something that disagreed with you, or because you were slowly succumbing to a fatal poison. And this was none of those, despite its local origin. Dia had no idea what this was supposed to be. Forty-two, eighteen. It was the same each time. Two portions of a single minute. It wasn’t a terrible feeling. In fact, it could easily be ignored, and somebody might honestly brush it off as feeling a bit peckish. Not her, though. She was unpleasantly hyperaware of how things felt.

She’d always been kind of like that.

It was a big part of why eating was a pain, and why a lot of things were a pain, for that matter. She'd easily come to the conclusion that she was more physically sensitive than other people, because the exact same things that other people brushed off, or didn't even notice, felt like serious inconveniences to her a lot of the time. So for this to be something so easy that she could brush it off, well, it was really barely there at all.

But it was certainly there, just that small amount.
Dia stopped at the end of the hallway, but her count didn't cease, continuing on in her head unbidden. Forty-two, eighteen. She could tell how long it was between each... pulse, no matter if she was trying or not. And here she was, staring at a wall like an idiot.

"Hey, you," Somebody shouted, "Hamukooo!"

Ah, so it was somebody who'd address her by her last name. Uh. Hm. Turn around, Dia. Right, it's Amai. "Hey..."

"Are you, like, good?" Amai asked, "You make a habit of staring at walls? Is that an AI thing to do? Hot new hobby with the homemade gals?"

"I'm just not feeling that great," Dia admitted, "I must have caught a bug or... Something?"

"Mild stomach discomfort, huh?" Amai wondered.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I'm feeling it too," Amai said, then waved a hand to her side. "I guess that I must have screwed something up at dinner. Left a little too much dirt on some of the vegetables, I bet. I'm sorry about that... Usually, my cooking wouldn't dare to cause an upset, but I guess we all have our off days?"

"You're awfully relaxed about this," Dia said, "I didn't think you'd admit it even if there was a chance in Hell that it was your food..."

"Well." Amai shrugged. "I can't think of any other explanation! And I was hanging out with Riko and Kurou, and neither of them were feeling it, so it seems like dirt. Some of the meals had this agent of discomfort, some of them didn't. Sooo, yeah, I can admit it. I usually don't actually work farm-to-table so it's an area I could stand to learn a little bit more about."

"Okay, if you say so," Dia said, then walked past Amai. She was going to go back to her room and get some rest. She didn't believe this had anything to do with dirt on the vegetables, and she doubted that Amai believed it, either. Admitting a mistake with her own talent? Yeah right. But if it came down to that, and admitting that she had no idea what was going on with this, Dia guessed she chose the lesser evil. Of course Amai noticed it too, though. She had such a sensitive stomach that she couldn't eat anybody else's cooking.

The question, was what it was that they were both feeling. Forty-two, eighteen. Why was it the same every time?

Dia Hamuko thought an awful lot about numbers.

And this time, she worried those numbers could mean an awful thing.

She had a small theory. For forty-two seconds, something was true about this world. For the other eighteen, something else was true. What that thing could be, she didn’t know, but she doubted that something which had the vaguely dreadful feeling of editing the rules of a world she was stuck living in could be a good idea. Maybe she was being paranoid, and it was fine. But maybe not. Maybe it wasn’t fine at all.

She had no way of knowing, so she just went to sleep.
Now That I'm Alive

Location: Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 23rd
Time: 0000 Hours

Makoto Naegi thought of himself as a victim of circumstance. Despite everything, that was what he thought. He’d never admit it; that would make it seem like he was fishing for sympathy. Oh yes, please, pity the incarnation of evil for his tough time, being the incarnation of evil. Ryouma had noticed it in him, and in Kyoko, but that was the closest he ever got to admitting the way that he felt. Even now that they were ‘reformed’...

All that he could feel was relief. It was over for him. Being Despair… Was a matter of obligation, really. It wasn’t like he ever asked for any of it, thus making him, a victim of circumstance. That didn’t mean he was a good person or anything along those lines, but all the same, it was only circumstance. His parents, and Kyoko’s as well, were the ones who were involved in that stuff.

Hers masquerading as a Hope’s Peak Headmaster, his simply funding the terror effort with their ill-gotten gains. And it wasn’t like taking over that Killing Game wasn’t fun. There were parts of them which truly were despair, and there was never a stronger moment of megalomania than the moment that they revealed their masterful act to the other survivors. Junko, Mukuro, Mondo, and Chihiro. Their friends, who they looked down on in that moment. Their friends, who they had to run away from because they were on two different sides.

Hope and Despair. But no real battle between them. Despair had triumphed over the Future, in that game. That game, designed to end four specific lives. That game which Kyoko and Makoto had twisted up and changed, so those four, and two more, made it through in the end. It wasn’t a good idea. Future Foundation was probably right in their decision. A world without Ultimate Despair and Ultimate Hope, after all, may have ended the tragedy without this unending, soft war. But that was the past now. Sacrificing innocents just so that these superpowers could live instead… No wonder, no wonder.

But it had been a decade since Despair was truly responsible for a Killing Game, so were they evil too? Makoto had thought for years that this world as he experienced it was black and white. He was darkness, Junko and Mukuro were light, and nothing else mattered outside of their game. That’s all it was to them. A game. To be the Ultimate version of a concept itself, the four of them were above humanity and this was the issue that Future Foundation sought to head off, back then. Lives at stake? Hah. The Quiet War was the feud of Hope and Despair all along.

It wouldn’t end without them. Concepts didn’t just die because their representatives were killed, or retired. Makoto never would have been Despair if not for that Killing Game, he thought, but maybe not. Maybe Future Foundation was right, and that was just the path he was doomed to tread.

“What are you thinking about?” Kyoko asked, softly, as she sat beside him. Her leg was pressed against his. He didn’t know what they were to each other, but this closeness was normal between them. At this point… The most accurate thing Makoto could call this, between them, was that they were one and the same. The closest two people could get to being the same person all along. A natural entity. They were all the other had, after all.

“Things that don’t matter,” Makoto said, “The past. If we shouldn’t have taken over that game.”

“Of course we shouldn’t have,” Kyoko said, “That’s not even a question. It was the wrong thing to
do. That’s why we did it.”

“...Yeah. I know. It’s just, more like... Why’d we feel like we had to? We’re here now. And we’re thinking for ourselves and we’re doing what we meant to do back then. Ending the Killing Game. And it doesn’t feel like any time’s passed at all.”

“We were foolish children,” Kyoko said, “To think that derailing one game would erase the whole system. We just shifted the responsibility for a few years.”

“We’re still foolish,” Makoto said, “It’s... Not like we’ve grown up at all since then.”

“Mm, no. But we have in the past few days.” Kyoko turned, and smiled at him. “I made a smart decision, all on my own.”

“Oh?”

“Well... It’s obvious that we’ll receive more allies as time wears on and certain people’s fates are publicized. The fact that Nami Kaguya is in the game, for example, motivated Doctor Kirisame to solve the Ultimate Plan and join us here,” Kyoko explained, “And audiences are ravenous beasts. By those factors combined, the natural conclusion is to air two days worth of edited footage each day, until we’ve caught up of course. I’ve actually been doing this already. Footage from both the fourth and fifth day aired today.”

“Are the True Radicals okay with that?” Makoto asked.

“Hm? Oh, I don’t much care if they are.” Kyoko tossed her hair over her shoulder. “This is objectively the correct choice to advance everybody’s goals. If Nate’s permitted to leave Towa City just to kill somebody, then I’m permitted to air the episodes that I’m editing all on my own however frequently I wish. This frequency, in terms of negative impact, only gives me a heavier workload.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Of course I am,” Kyoko said, “I already have up through day ten edited. Are you underestimating me?”

“No,” Makoto admitted, “But the others are. Are you going to tell them?”

“In the morning. I’ll have to, since our first ally from airing the footage should be arriving tomorrow, at this rate. She doesn’t live far from here, and I can’t imagine she won’t join us just as soon as she figures out where it is she needs to go.”

“Who?” Makoto wondered.

“Oh, the Ultimate Botanist. You remember that apprentice of mine? They’re acquainted.” Kyoko raised one finger in a smart way, similar to certain fellow silver-haired clever woman. “And there isn’t any way, Ruri tells me, that this girl hasn’t resolved to make it here after today’s episodes.”
Daily Life: Day Fourteen (Before The Challenge)

Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 23rd
Time: 0600 Hours

Nami, this morning, made a lovely discovery.

The previous night that Sayaka had shared her room, waking up was an unpleasant thing. The night had been fraught with the collective nightmare, so the morning meant only relief from misery and not what it meant this morning, when Nami got to make the discovery that waking up next to a cute girl who you actually like and who isn’t just with you out of fascination with your brainweird… Is really nice!

It wasn’t like the previous night wasn’t entirely chaste, but that didn’t change the nice feeling of waking up and first thing seeing her girlfriend who, she loved so much and she wasn’t at all ashamed to admit to herself. She loved Sayaka so much. And while Nami had been woken up by the nondescript morning announcement, Sayaka hadn’t yet been. Was this creepy? Watching her in the morning light? No, watching people sleep was only creepy if it was unprecedented and unexpected. Yeah. Waking up first and sitting in wonder of her girlfriend was totally different.

It was also a little surprising to still wake up in the same bed, though. Nami was expecting that Duos Challenge motive to begin, and she doubted that involved waking up normally. Then again, motives were usually delivered at eight. So, she assumed, eight would be when the challenge actually began. That left them two hours to get ready and to eat breakfast before that whole thing begun, so…

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Nami whispered, shaking Sayaka’s shoulder a little bit. “We’ve gotta get up.”

“Mmmph…” Sayaka groaned. “We probably both need showers… Take a quick one, then I’ll get up. Okay?”

“Heh, okay,” Nami said, then climbed out of bed, leaving Sayaka to snooze. She found herself a bit relieved that was Sayaka’s solution; not that she thought Sayaka would want to do something like that so soon anyway, given, trauma and all. Still, she had her own trauma, quieter as it might be, and of course, those body issues. Even though memories had brought with them a serious decrease in her regular dysphoria level, and she could think of herself as cute, there was still some issue there with baring her entire self.

It was kind of nice, to have this particular brand of compatibility. If two girls were on the moon and they both had intimacy issues, would that work out well for both of them or what? As much as they’d say, lovely, we’re so in love and let’s get married, they’d take it slow in one particular area, for both of their sakes. The motivation of needing to be quick so Sayaka could also get her shower also helped Nami not to dissociate for twenty to thirty minutes, as she often did when she showered, but that was actually a common experience so she wouldn’t beat herself up about it.

Once she was finished, Sayaka got a shower as well, of course, without removing her pigtails. Then she returned, and the both of them made their way up to Cafe Monokuma. Amai already had breakfast prepared by the time they arrived.

“Hey girls!” Amai greeted them both, then put plates down on a table as they sat. “Sorry to repeat a meal, but omurice is quick to make and quick to eat. You got here bright and early, but since a
bunch of people don’t make it in till after seven…”

“Well, we figured that this Duos Challenge thing would begin at eight, since Mono said ‘first thing’,” Nami said, “So we thought we’d get up here quickly. You thought so too?”

“Mhm, I realized last night,” Amai said, “So, I made sure to make something simple like this! I made them up about ten minutes ago, and I’m keeping them under a heat light. Six-thirty is a reasonable time to expect people to show up for breakfast, so the later you are the less perfect your meal gets!”

“That’s fair,” Sayaka said, “We’d have been up here around that time ourselves, but we had to take turns in the shower. To make a long story short, I broke my bathroom mirror and it’s a little weird to use the room now.”

“Hey now, what goes on between you two is none of my business, you don’t gotta defend it.” Amai stuck her hands on her hips. “But on the other hand, I fucking believe it when you say you broke your mirror. You’re one crazy bitch.”

“You seem pretty chipper today, Amai,” Kurou chimed in from another table. “Did something good happen?”

“Huh? Ahh, well.” Amai offered up an exaggerated shrug. “Not exactly. Guess it’s more like nothing bad’s happened. I do have an optimistic default, you know! Vulgarity isn’t exclusive from cheeriness.”

“Well, it’s good to see,” Kurou said, “I hope you can keep it up during the Duos Challenge, whatever that’s supposed to be.”

“Hm! Who knows, maybe,” Amai said, smirking in his direction. “If it’s as Sayaka says and it’s just a fucking useless how to get away with murder that nobody’s gonna think to take, then yeah, think I will!”

“I mean, I won’t take it,” Sayaka said, and leaned her cheek in her hand. “To be frank with you, I kinda value my life a little bit too much. Even if there was some decent motivation, like it turns out one of you is actually a disgusting predator… Well, I guess I’d kill you after we’re not in a Killing Game. Y’know? So if I can say that, obviously, it’s just like that.”

“It’s just like that!” Nami emphatically corroborated.

“Yeah! So…” Amai trailed off, hesitating. “Well, actually, we’re still at a point where somebody’s got to kill someone, right? And since Mitsuru killed himself, that won’t work again, huh?”

Nami was a bit surprised that Amai hadn’t just figured out they would have limited time this morning, but was able to come to that conclusion as well. Even so… “Yeah. Two people at least, for the Evil King’s Game or to unlock the top floor. So, who knows. We can’t say nothing will happen. Because where we are right now, something has to.”

“Two people who don’t value their own lives, enough for this, huh…” Amai frowned. “You’d think that wouldn’t be so hard to find in this bunch. Fucked up lot of depressed young adults we got here. But. It’s stupid. Guess we all value those lives enough for them. I sure don’t want anyone else to die.”
Daily Life: Day Fourteen (The Challenge Explanation)

7:00 am / 0700 hours

“Ah, but that’s! No, don’t mind me.” Amai waved her hands defensively. “Obviously I don’t actually give a shit if all you stupid shitheads die in a fire!”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to refrain from arranging that.” Madara walked into the room, primed and ready to join a conversation he had no context for. “You’d just yell at me for it afterwards, and it’s unlikely I’d have the foresight to keep a pair of earplugs safe from the flames.”

“You’re included among the stupid shitheads, so of course you’d die too and then you wouldn’t have to worry about me yelling!” Amai pointed a finger directly at him. “Earplugs unnecessary!”

“So you agree I’d need them if I did survive?”

“Of course! I’d be so mad if you went and got everybody killed and earplugs would be the least of the things you need! Jeeze!” Amai stomped one foot like she was throwing a tantrum. “I put extra hot sauce in your omurice this morning, you know.”

“Thanks, toots.” Madara made finger guns in her direction, chuckling, then sat down and received that omelette. When did those two get… Like that, Nami wondered? It was weird to watch them, because all at once they seemed like bitter enemies and the oldest of friends. She guessed that was rivalry, but despite many other attorneys attempting to make a rival of her in her days, Nami never really got the appeal.

After that, other people trickled into the room and got their breakfasts, milling about and generally being on edge with the idea of this upcoming ‘challenge’ thing. Even with the standing idea that the motive wouldn’t actually result in a murder, that didn’t mean that the participants wouldn’t all be nervous for what it was going to imply. Of course there would be a degree of concern, especially when Monokuma was prevented from giving any real explanation ahead of time.

The answers would come soon enough, though, and everybody ate well. There wasn’t so much anxiety there as to prevent them from enjoying their breakfast, at least, which was honestly a good measure of anxiety in any and all scenarios. Still eating? Then it’s not too bad, unless you’re a stress eater, in which case it certainly is that bad. Either way, it’s a litmus test.

And, at exactly eight, Monokuma made an appearance.

“Good morning everyone!” It called out. “Well, morning, anyway. The Duos Challenge is about to begin, so please, finish your meals as soon as you’re able to! The challenge will be taking place in a connected facility which has been closed to you thusfar, and so you won’t be making it back here. You’ll have opportunities to eat, mostly composed of leftovers from the last few days’ meals, and more than enough opportunities to sleep. The challenge ends forty-eight hours from now, or when a murder occurs, whichever happens first.”

“So we’re going to be in a different facility completely?” Nami asked.

“Yes, it’s been designed specifically to facilitate the Duos Challenge,” Monokuma answered, “And, given the time, I can explain exactly what that is. You’re all going to be knocked out! Sorry about that… Then, you’ll wake up in pairs in the Duos Facility, and be issued a simple challenge to undertake in those predetermined pairs. In between each challenge, you’ll be knocked out again and
your pairings shuffled. Whoever beats each challenge first will get some sort of prize, it differs between them. As there are an odd number of participants currently, I won’t be included, but you can call on me if needed. Also, though Dia will be assigned in a pair, summoning her should still work. Both of us can therefore be used to maintain contact between the pairs, as messengers. It’s possible that for the next forty-eight hours there will be pairs of you who don’t see each other at all.”

“Oh. That’s a pain,” Nami said.

“Of course, those hours won’t be spent completely awake. Once everybody completes their challenge, you sleep until the next challenge begins at its scheduled time. Thus, you may want to use us messengers to make things go by more quickly by advising your less-competent pals if you win before them!”

“That’s a mean thing to say about us,” Madara said, “Less competent? Really?”

“I never said you were the less competent one. Anyway, they’re all sorts of challenges, so it’s subjective competence!” Monokuma struck a pose. “Anyway, I hope that my explanation can make everything as easy as possible for you, comparatively. Since it’s a Neo World Program, you’ll be knocked out without the need for drugs or bracelets or anything. Also, this is still considered a motive, not a separate game! No victory within the Duos Challenge will result in the completion of the Killing Game or the Evil King’s game, excluding their original win conditions of course.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Nami said, “Is it possible another game could be added?”

“Not by me! There’s all sorts of additional games that can be accessed, but I don’t know how to program. Most games besides the Evil King’s Game require some changes to be made to the Killing Game itself in order to coexist, or to overwrite it either. This one was just, yknow. Check the box, tack it on, here we go it’s extra intriguing. Trust me, if I’d been able to swap the game out for something else, I would’ve.”

“So basically, you’re baby,” Nami said.

“If by baby you mean, clueless and not the best person to be playing the role of Monokuma in this game? Then yes, I’m baby.”

“Yes, so…” Nami pushed her plate away from herself. “I imagine right about now is when we’ll be knocked out, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Monokuma nodded, and everybody else in the room passed out in front of it. It sighed to see them, and then didn’t see them, because they were transported in an instant to the challenge facility, similar to the way that bodies would be transported into locked wards upon touching the door. It wandered its way over there as well, because without anybody to call it, it couldn’t actually teleport all on its own.
9:00 am / 0900

Nami woke up in an odd room. It was in fact, an absolute cube. Mostly grey. There was a large table with two chairs in the middle of the room, and she was lying on the ground. She picked herself up, stood, and saw that Dia was doing the same on the opposite side of the table.

“Hey, Dia,” Nami greeted her, “Looks like it’s you and me for this one.”

“Mhm!” Dia exclaimed, smoothing out the front of her skirt. “It certainly is! I hope you don’t mind having a partner who’ll have to be leaving you behind a bit…”

“It’s fine,” Nami said, “So let’s see…”

Dia stepped over to the table, and looked down at it. “Oh! It’s a jigsaw puzzle!”

“I guess we’re supposed to solve it, then,” Nami said, and picked up the box. The picture on it was an image of the garden in the Empty Wings; Full of lovely plants, flowers, and colors. “It’s so nice! Fifteen-hundred pieces though… Well, we have hours to do it, don’t we?”

“Yes! Are you good at puzzles?” Dia asked.

“Pretty good,” Nami said, “You?”

“Ehh.” She wiggled a hand. “Not so great!”

“In that case,” Nami said, “You should go noclip mode on this facility, and I’ll focus on doing the jigsaw. Figure out what the layout is, where everybody’s at, and all. That make sense?”

“Yes, if you’re sure that you can do this on your own,” Dia said. Nami just opened the box and poured the pieces onto one half of the table to sift through and find the outside pieces. Dia walked through a wall, leaving her to it.

Nami didn’t do jigsaw puzzles especially often, but she did have an eye for detail when she knew what she was looking for. She also thought they were relaxing, so it wasn’t like this would be a great hardship. She didn’t know how far apart the challenges were, but she imagined it was reasonable to complete a jigsaw puzzle during the time allotted, whatever that time was.

She had the entire frame completed by the time Dia returned from her scouting mission. “How goes it, Nami?”

“Pretty good,” Nami said, gesturing to the table. “Just closed the frame, actually. That’s the easiest part done. Now to fill in the rest…”

“Hmm, well…” Dia slid into the seat across from her. “Everyone else seemed to be doing okay too, so I can probably just hang out and help you on this one. Sharing info probably won’t do much on this one, yeah?”

“Not really,” Nami admitted, “Even trying to help, explaining a puzzle piece to somebody else isn’t really that useful. And most of the time you know what piece you need for a given spot, it’s just finding it that’s hard, so it’s not like sending you to help with problem pieces would do much…”
“So, it’s just you and me after all,” Dia said, then picked up some pieces, gathering all of them of a particular color. “It’s nice that the hydrangeas are in frame. I can probably handle these, since I spent so much time looking at the real ones the other day.”

“Thanks! They take up a lot of the picture, so that would be nice,” Nami said, “Hey, have you ever even done a jigsaw puzzle before?”

“Yes,” Dia said, “I’ve done the Duos Challenge before. They changed the picture around this time though, so that I can’t cheat I guess.”

“Oh, right.” Nami nodded. “What are the other challenges?”

“Well, the order always changes, so do the pairings,” Dia said, “And I’m still censored from letting you know what the other options are… Sorry about that.”

“No worries,” Nami said, “I’m sure that if they’re all like this, we should be able to handle them without too many issues, right?”

“Mhm!” Dia nodded emphatically, then started trying to piece together the bits she’d grabbed to work on for herself. “Oh, I think I can say, it’s six hour blocks. The second challenge begins at three, the next one’s at nine. Then there’s a little gap, if we somehow run that one all the way to three in the morning, the next one isn’t till eight, so we still get five hours of sleep in the worst case scenario.”

“Six hours with nothing to do but a jigsaw puzzle? Yeah, I think we’ll be getting naps.” Nami laughed a bit. “And I’m sure not all of them are this time-consuming, either.”

“They’re not! Some of them are obtuse, though,” Dia noted, “It’s not completely clear what the goal is, sometimes. And I don’t think that I’d be able to give a hint, even to my partner, on what you’re supposed to do exactly…”

“That’s fine. We’re a smart bunch! And once one of rest of us figures it out, we can just pass the message along,” Nami said, “So, it’s not too big a deal that you’re restricted from it or anything. Oh, hey! I think I found where your hydrangeas connect to the rest, if you want to stick it right on there?”

“Yes!” Dia exclaimed, then fit what she’d assembled so far into the spot that Nami pointed out. They were making good progress; Jigsaw puzzles went by easily, when assembled by multiple people who got along with each other. “It’s already coming together… I guess that we work well together?”

“I mean, I think so,” Nami said, “You’re pretty smart, you know.”

“Me? No.” Dia shook her head. “I wouldn’t use smart. It isn’t like I hate myself or anything, but I’m not that clever or anything.”

“Well, maybe not the way that most people think about smart,” Nami said, “But I think so. You’ve got emotional intelligence. Like, I don’t have a ton of that! A lot of people don’t. I think a lot of people who went through what you did, wouldn’t come out on the other side the way you have. Still able to be friends with all of us, even if you know the darkest depths of what we’re capable of…”

“Ah, well…” Dia looked away. “It’s not like… Well, I had a lot of time, you know? To realize. And it isn’t like I didn’t do bad things, too. The circumstances of a Killing Game really bring out the worst in people. Like how… I know Shinjiro could be a good person if not for this, everybody
could. Even Kanoshi could try.”

“You did bad things too?” Nami wondered. “That’s a little hard to imagine.”

Dia’s voice grew darker as she explained, “Box Hako will always do what she perceives to be best for the people around her. The best thing, sometimes, was to kill somebody. To kill Shinjiro because he was hurting you. To kill Yuuri so he wouldn’t have to face his secrets being revealed. Whatever I could do… To make sure that if those false lives carried on after me, I left them with the best possibility I could.”

“You did that?” Nami asked.

Dia hesitated a moment, but then nodded. “I did. I wanted to leave a good world for the false versions if it was possible. Me. I did. Because I love all of you… Even if so much of what I did was driven by the idea of being Box. It’s hard to tell. But I did want to leave a good future, even if I didn’t want to do… The things that Box would believe could achieve that future?”

“That makes sense,” Nami said, “Yeah, that’s where you’re at. I figured I could get you to think through that. It’s sweet of you, to have those kinds of thoughts on your own, you know.”

“You’re all my precious friends,” Dia said, “So of course… I do want the best for you. The difference is that I want the best for me, too.”

“There’s a lot of differences between you and Box Hako. It’s an honor, to get to see those. Thank you. For that, and for doing this puzzle with me. You’re a good friend.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen (Goro and Riko)

12:00 pm / 1200 Hours

Goro Bakura had come to one very simple conclusion over the last three hours, and that was that doing a jigsaw puzzle with a mute girl was actually a strangely calming act. It was something which occupied their hands, keeping it from being awkward when they didn’t communicate, since, well, she couldn’t. Goro didn’t need to say anything or interact with her at all, for as long as they still had this thing to put together. The thing was that they were, now, closing in on completing the puzzle. Which was also fine. He assumed that at their focused rate, they wouldn’t be the last people to finish…

And that did mean, until everybody was done, he and Riko would just be sitting in a room together, and they could communicate then. Or not communicate. Either was really fine with him, depending on what she wanted. Three hours of silence was enough to reset him to a basically pleasant state, making it reasonable to carry on a conversation. Not that he didn’t converse at times it was unreasonable, either, because he was a little bit bad at the whole valuing his self-worth and well-being thing.

And when the last piece went in, Riko picked up her whiteboard, and wrote, “Well, that was mildly entertaining.”

“Yeah! It’s actually kind of nice to take some time apart from all the intense, Killing Game deal, and just do something simple like this,” Goro agreed, “Even though we were really focused, though, I don’t think we were the first to complete the puzzle…”

“Why not ask Monokuma?” Riko offered. Right, it seemed that she couldn’t summon either of them herself, given that it was a verbal command.

“Oh, yeah. Hey, Monokuma?” Goro asked the ceiling. Monokuma fell out of the ceiling.

“What do you need, old buddy old pal?” Monokuma wondered, “Or are you just checking in like a good friend?”

“Afraid not,” Goro said, “I’m wondering if we’ll be notified, if we’re the first to complete the challenge?”

“Yes! And only if you’re the first, though I will say, this one’s straightforward. You got it. But another team got it first. Pretty impressive from them, actually! Just under two hours. The world record for a one thousand piece is just over one hour, and this was five-hundred more pieces from nonprofessionals. So they got the prize. Nice work, though!”

“Cool,” Riko noted, “I’m guessing that the successful team included Madara or Amai?”

“How’d you guess? Yeah, the winning team on this one was Oishi and Shinoe,” Monokuma said.

“The reason that those two butt heads so often is because they’re smart in the same way,” Riko said, “So I assumed as much. I believe a pairing of myself and Nami Kaguya could stand a chance against either of them alone. Both of them together would, in spite of the bickering, likely challenge the world record.”

“Yeah! I think so too. You and me are on the same wavelength, Riko. Got these people figured out. Nami’s got more applicable smarts, those two have more high-IQ smarts,” Monokuma said,
“Unfortunately, Madara is the only one who hasn’t finished yet, but he had a pretty serious handicap.”

“Oh?” Riko wondered.

“The reason why is a secret that’s not mine to share,” Monokuma said, “Anyway, I’ll go back to my observation spot, unless you need anything else?”

“No, I think that’s it,” Goro said, “But you could stick around if you wanted, you know!”

“I know, I was only teasing earlier, though. I’m required to keep at the very least a loose eye on all these proceedings!” Monokuma explained, then saluted. “Well, this should be finishing up soon anyway, so I’ll see you on the other side.”

With that, it vanished. This was the first time that Goro noticed, its method of doing so was just to very quickly fall through the floor. He guessed Dia could do that too if she wanted, but all he’d seen from her was a bit more normal than Monokuma’s movements. He supposed the difference in roles and physical form was responsible for that difference, though.

“Interesting. I wouldn’t have expected to finish this puzzle before Madara,” Riko observed, “So it’s likely that the handicap was in fact, quite severe. Like a partner who consists utterly of dead weight. Any idea who that might be?”

Goro shrugged. “Iunno. I don’t keep track of who sucks at puzzles.”

“That’s fair. I wouldn’t take anybody we know to be the sort to drag Madara down so badly,” Riko said, “But then, I haven’t made much of an effort to connect, so I wouldn’t know something like that either.”

“I’d say. I mean, I haven’t either. So you and I don’t know anything about each other!” Goro realized, “That’s a pain. We’re in this shit together, after all.”

“Well, I do know certain things about you. For example, I do know precisely what it would take to cause a serious dissociative episode in you, of varying intents,” Riko said, “Unfortunately, with my upbringing, these are the things I observe in others. I won’t be doing that, of course.”

“Wow! Freaky deeky,” Goro said, “Yes, please do not ever do that. Now I know that thing about you. That you know these things. Because of your upbringing? Somehow?”

“In the business world, all weaknesses exist to be exploited,” Riko said, “In any case, here’s a few things about me. I enjoy baking and photography as hobbies. I’ve never had a pet but if I had one, it would be a ball python. I may have nice handwriting, but I can’t draw at all. I grew up on a private island off the coast of Okinawa.”

“Okinawa? Huh. I’d expect you to be more tan,” Goro said.

“I never went outside,” Riko admitted, “The outdoors is much too dangerous to spend more than a few minutes at a time there. Too many germs, even with the mask.”

“Ohh, yeah. That makes sense,” Goro said, “I never went outside that much, either. You can probably tell. Then again, my mom kept a garden, and she never got any less pale… So it might just be genetic.”

“You really loved your mother, didn’t you?”
“...Yeah. And she really loved me, too,” Goro said, “She tried really hard to protect me. And. I screwed that up. My life was pretty… Good, and normal, for years. It’s only later, that things got bad for me. And, you… I won’t ask if anything’s happened to you. But, how were your parents?”

“My mom and dad both… I’m very loyal to them,” Riko said, “They’ve always done all that they can for me. Maybe not as loving as your mother sounds, but that’s okay. I wasn’t an easy child to raise and they did a good job, I think.”

“Not a lot of parents are as great as my mom,” Goro admitted, “But I’m glad, yours don’t seem bad!”

“Indeed,” Riko noted, then looked up as a chime sounded. Before she could even look back down, they were knocked out again, at exactly one pm. And the same would happen to everyone else at this time; But there were other stories to find before the second challenge began two hours later.
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen (Sayaka and Madara)

9:00 am / 0900 Hours

Dia had just visited them, and they’d lied that everything was going fine. Things were going fine for Madara, but Sayaka had, as of yet, failed to fit any puzzle pieces together at all. Even perimeter pieces, she couldn’t match up, and she seemed to be hoarding all the pieces with any red on them, like she’d have a better shot with a middle cluster than with the simple frame.

“Okay,” Madara bit the bullet, “What gives? Are you really this shit at puzzles? Come on. I’m good at them, but when it’s meant to be a two-person task… Those reds aren’t even all from the same section.”

Sayaka bit her lip, and managed to find one match among her reds.

“Answer me,” Madara said, “I can do this on my own, if I have to, but I’d like to have a reason.”

“…You don’t fucking need to know, okay?” Sayaka muttered.

“If you say so?” Madara shrugged, and dropped it, focusing in on what he was doing. She kept trying to deal with the red pieces, because they were the only ones she even had a shot at. She wasn’t great at puzzles. Puzzles of most kinds, they presented a challenge for her and she couldn’t do much with them to begin with. Wrapping her head around them was a challenge, she couldn’t match their sizes, and frankly…

It really didn’t help that she couldn’t see colors! Sure there were people good enough at puzzles to put together gradients, or solid white jigsaws, but Sayaka certainly wasn’t on that kind of level and, without normal vision, she was left floundering. Of course the reds she gathered were from different sections of the image, but it was all she had a chance at. The difference between red and grey was better than the difference between grey and grey, right? Of course. Yes. It’s fine. Completely-

“Hey, Yamaguchi,” Madara said, “You’re colorblind, aren’t you?”

“H-huh!? What makes you say that!?” Sayaka questioned, snapping her head up to look directly at him. Did he dye his hair that color? Or was it naturally that red? She’d been wondering that for a while now-

“This is my natural hair color,” Madara told her, as if he could read her mind, “It’s not normal colorblindness, is it? You can see red, probably correctly. It’s just the others that you can’t tell apart, right?”

“How did… You…”

“Oh, I met somebody once who was like that,” Madara admitted, “I probably wouldn’t have thought of something so strange without that factor. It’s incredibly rare, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Sayaka said, “I hear that it’s genetic, but I didn’t grow up with my birth family or anything, so that’s all I’ve got.”

“So, don’t worry about this,” Madara said, sweeping her puzzle pieces across the table away from
her. “It’s just going to stress you out, right? I can still do this within the time limit all on my own. Do you ever wonder about your birth parents?”

“I was adopted as an infant,” Sayaka said, “I think I was abandoned, actually. So, not really. I kind of just wonder, sometimes, when it comes to my vision. I have to wonder if I’m distantly related to… Er, Doctor Same. She was one of Mitsuru’s girlfriends, and he told me that she’s the same way.”

“Probably,” Madara said, “I don’t think that really matters, though. Except to keep in mind you probably shouldn’t date anybody with the same thing going on. It’s pretty obvious that Nami doesn’t, so there isn’t really a problem there. I hold firm that family is whoever you want it to be.”

“I mean, yeah. Akihiko Yamaguchi is my dad. He’s never been anything else and I’ve never had a different dad from him,” Sayaka said, “I wouldn’t want a different dad, either. He’s really good. Anything he’s ‘done wrong’ is really because I didn’t talk to him enough. Every time he realizes something that’s going on with me, he really tries his best.”

“That’s nice,” Madara said, “I haven’t found it yet.”

“Hm?”

“My family. A real one, anyway. I know you can choose your family, I just haven’t run into any to choose yet,” He explained, “Been trying. Known a lot of people. But it never works out quite right. Something or other goes belly-up.”

“That’s a shame,” Sayaka said, “I’d offer mine, but I don’t think my family would really suit you.”

“Most wouldn’t.” Madara scoffed. “I found that out. It’s probably just a problem with me. There’s something wrong everywhere I go. Just doesn’t suit me, or I just don’t suit them. Or I’m too trans, or I don’t wanna date them. It’s fine. I’ve kind of just come to terms with the fact that a home doesn’t exist for somebody like me.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Sayaka said, “One definitely exists for you. Somewhere out there. I bet you’ll find it when you aren’t really looking anymore.”

“Heh. Maybe,” Madara said, “But like I said, I came to terms with it. It doesn’t bother me. I understand it. Even if it’s not what I want out of life, I can’t just pick and choose. I can be a wanderer, or I can pretend to be somebody that I’m not. I tried that for a while there. I know I can’t stand it. And I made my choice. I can’t go back.”

“No,” Sayaka said, “Life has a way of working out, you know. I thought, when I was a kid. I’m in the yakuza. I’m a killer, and this is how I’m meant to be. It’s foolish to wish for things like falling in love. Having a normal life when I’m older… I always wanted that, and I thought, it’s impossible. But I’m starting, just now, to understand. You can find the life you want.”

“…Maybe,” Madara said, “Maybe if I survive this game, that is. I’ll find something worth holding onto.”

“Well, you like some of us, right? So you’ll have some friends, to start you off. Right?”

“I don’t think so,” Madara said, “I’ve known you for less than ten days, you know. That’s certainly not enough time for somebody to decide they’d like to continue knowing me. I don’t care what any of you saying about bonding being different in a Killing Game. Say each day is a month. People have decided to hate me after eight months before.”
“Madara…” Sayaka trailed off. “What *happened* to you?”

“It’s simple.” Madara was staring down at the puzzle, working his way through it even as he spoke. “I became a creature who nobody wants to be around, in place of the person that everybody loved. I failed to function in this society, and I was cast to the outskirts because of it. I’m not allowed to connect with anybody, because I don’t want to connect in the same ways as everybody else.”

“Well. Have you ever tried to connect with another Ultimate before? Because, we don’t really interact with society in a normal way either, you know.”

“…I guess that I haven’t.”

“So will you be my friend?”

“If you’ll allow me.”
Natsuki Nagata fulfilled the idea that Kyoko believed would be accomplished if she aired the Killing Game on an advanced schedule. Of course, anyone who’d been following the story knew that she would eventually begin her adventure to Hope’s Vestige, but that little fourth wall break is neither here nor there. The fact was, Natsuki lived a very short distance from Towa City. After she cracked the Ultimate Plan, it took her two hours to get there.

Unlike Akane, she didn’t have the charisma to get through the front gates as a visitor, and unlike Chi-chan, she didn’t have stealth on her side. She had also never met either of these people, but still knew she couldn’t use either of their strategies to get inside of Towa City. So, instead, she decided to do what it was that she did best. Create a stink. This was how Natsuki Nagata, with a cat-shaped robot body strapped to her back, ended up in this position.

“Are you kidding me!? I’m supposed to deliver this heavy fucking thing to your city and you throw me in a holding cell. Great, just lovely, that’s wonderful of you! Locking up a teen girl for her summer job? Yeah, you’re kidding me. This is a joke.” Natsuki continued her bluff even now that she’d been apprehended for yelling at the border guards. “Haha, very funny, there, I laughed. Lemme go now?”

“We… Uh, can’t do that, miss,” The officer assigned to watch her said, “This is very unorthodox.”

“Can I speak to somebody from Ultimate Hope?” Natsuki asked, and gave the officer pause.

“You’re aware of Ultimate Hope’s continued operations?”

“Of course, dumbass. They’re the ones who wanted me to deliver this thing, after all.” She rolled her eyes. “Look, lookie here. Get me Eriko Shigure.”

She was just pulling out a name of somebody who she knew qualified, because, well. Killing Games were national television and she wasn’t stupid enough to come in here without doing some amount of research first. And, well, she had her fingers crossed that Eriko would be somebody who’d give her the benefit of the doubt.

An hour later, the woman herself walked in because apparently, Natsuki managed to make a big enough stink to get Towa City’s public transport supervisor to come and meet with her. She really was good at that, huh? She couldn’t help being pleased with herself.

“I hope you have a very good reason for calling me down here because I did not account for this and I only have about ten minutes carved painstakingly out of my schedule to deal with you before I have to- ah?” Eriko cut her own tirade short, staring wide-eyed… Past Natsuki. “That shell right there.”

“Oh, this? Yeah, it’s a special delivery,” Natsuki said, continuing her bluff.

“That’s, for her… Isn’t it?” Eriko asked, then motioned the officer out of the room and shut the door behind him. “It’s for Maki.”
And thus, the need for bluffing had somehow shot itself out the window in one moment. “Uh, yeah. That’s true. It is for her. How did you…?”

“Oh! Oh you see.” Eriko pulled out the chair across from Natsuki and sat down, folding her hands. “I’m a friend of hers. Well, more of a friend of her girlfriend’s, specifically, but I am. In fact. We have tea together every few weeks, when I’m able to find the time. She’s talked about how she wouldn’t mind having a cat-shaped body before… I bet that whoever made that was able to tell.”

“Rei? Yeah… She was able to understand her, I think.” Natsuki looked away, noticing that she was starting to get shaky again. “Er. Sorry if I seem a bit. Off. I’m having some trouble processing recent events, you can understand?”

“Yes, of course,” Eriko said, then pulled out her phone, tapping frantically. “I’m rescheduling my meeting. I’ll take you to them, and you can hand that off. I’m sorry you had to deal with the guards. Um, I’m also pretty sure you asked for me just on a whim? Obviously, you wouldn’t actually know that I’m somebody who’s willing to help you. Very risky there, kid. You could seriously get hurt trying stuff like that here. I’m glad you didn’t, obviously! Anyway. That’s done, we should get going. We can take the monorail. It’s all the way on the other end of the city, and you know, Towa is practically a small prefecture all on its own!”

“You built the monorail, didn’t you?” Natsuki asked.

“Well, supervised and planned its construction, yes. A team built it, a team specifically led by Yayoi, but that’s not here and that’s not there, and we’re here and we need to get there, so come on! Hey, what’s your name?” As she said this, Eriko had already removed Natsuki’s cuffs (somehow) and was pulling her out of the facility by the prosthetic wrist.

“Natsuki Nagata, Miss!” Natsuki answered the question, “I’m the Ultimate Botanist, and despite appearances, I can keep up with you perfectly fine without you holding onto me thanks!”

“Sorry, sorry! Just got excited,” Eriko admitted, and released her, at which point she quickened her step to walk next to her rather than slightly behind her.

“Anyway. I was friends with three of the game’s participants, who uh, all died! So I decided, fuck it, what have I got to lose, I’m gonna do what I can in their memories. I’m thinking I’ll write a book, but also, definitely had to bring the body Rei made for Maki to her. Least I could do.”

“And your plan was just to barge in here and keep yelling at people till somebody let you wander around all on your own?” Eriko asked.

“Yeah pretty much!” Natsuki exclaimed, and flashed a thumbs-up. “Yelling at people is my one social skill.”

“I’m not sure I’d call it that, but okay!” Eriko said, and oh, they were already on the monorail. Efficient system, that Natsuki didn’t even notice they were boarding until they were there. Then again, she didn’t have much situational awareness.

“So, you noticed that the episodes are airing two a day, right?” Natsuki asked.

“Oh yes, certainly. In fact, I know why that’s happening. Jataro told me when I went for tea, that they’ve moved on and have successfully occupied the Hope’s Vestige. Ah, that would be the Killing Game headquarters. Regular headquarters is just called headquarters.” Eriko reached up and grabbed the train handle. “But, you know, an organization that dies without its head was never a strong one, and, well. There’s still plenty of loyal folks in my area, and throughout the city too. I
was technically still loyal right up till I found out what’s going on. I’ll drop you at Hope’s Vestige, but I can’t go there myself yet.”

“Why not?” Natsuki wondered.

“Just a few more days. Me and Kotoko are doing our best to get a few more on our side. We’ll need resources, after all.”

“Resources?”

“Obviously. Did you even read the Ultimate Plan?”

“Um, just what I needed to know I had to come here?” Natsuki admitted, shrugging. “Should we be talking about this on a train full of people?”

“They’re normal people,” Eriko said, “They’ll assume they misheard. It’s none of their business! That’s how eavesdropping on public transportation works. Anyway, resources are important. We had two options, really. Stage a revolution, or stage an escape. We’re going for the latter as of right now. Assuming she lives.”

“Who what?”

“Tsumugi,” Eriko said, “The Ultimate Astronaut.”

“...You’re escaping to space!?” Natsuki questioned, bug-eyed.

“The whole world’s at war, where else could we go?” Eriko shrugged. “And if she lives to be on our side, then it’s a foregone conclusion. So, yes. You wanna come?”

“Yes!” Natsuki exclaimed, beaming. So something good would come of this mess after all, huh?
Kurou Ueda would be lying if he said that it wasn’t a little bit weird to be doing a jigsaw puzzle with Randy. Not so much that anything about Randy was strange, but rather, he had a certain image of the kid and so seeing him very intent on this puzzle, to the point where he’d actually failed to notice any of Kurou’s attempts at making conversation, was unusual. Or it seemed unusual. Kurou supposed that if puzzles were something Randy enjoyed it wasn’t legitimately unusual at all and it was just his own biases speaking to say that the rough and tumble *Ultimate Escort* would be bored by this kind of thing.

“So… You like puzzles?” Kurou asked, once it was finished and Randy would actually pay some amount of attention to his question.

“Yeah! Uh… Did you already ask me that?” Randy asked.

“Yes, earlier, but I think you were too focused,” Kurou admitted, “I must say, I didn’t exactly take you for the sort to be able to sit down and pay attention to something like this… I’m sorry I wasn’t much help, if you had a better partner than me, you may have been able to win.”

“I don’t really care about winning.” Randy said, “Not at this, anyway. I can be competitive about some stuff, but this is just kind of relaxing.”

“Ah, I see. Still, the hobby doesn’t seem exactly like it suits you?” Kurou noted.

“I can want to slow down sometimes too! Though, usually if I’m going for an old-person occupation, it’s knitting,” Randy said, “Sometimes I have trouble admitting that, cause, I dunno. It makes me worry that people are going to think weird things about me. Like I’m faking being a dude, just because I like to make things out of wool. I know that it’s stupid. The idea that hobbies are gendered at all is dumb as hell. But, y’know. I like to slow down sometimes, and it’s nice to slow down in a way that also makes stuff.”

“Hm, jigsaw puzzles are a nice way to slow down, hm?” Kurou noted, “But then, knitting is also a good multitask, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, sometimes I have trouble sitting still,” Randy said, “Well, it’s kind of like that a lot, I’m either not doing enough at once, or too much? I… That didn’t make sense. I mean I get antsy and need to multitask, or else I just get really focused and don’t notice anything else around me.”

“That’s not an uncommon way to be. I can’t say that it’s a normal way to be, since that’s basically the primary symptom of a mental disorder, but it isn’t like that’s a rare way for your brain to work.”

"What, like ADD?" Randy asked. Kurou nodded. "Huh. I guess I never really thought of it that way, but it's possible, yeah. But, I mean, I don't need stuff like that. It's good enough for me, to just say that my brain's weird, ah well."

"Hm. Well, I don't know. I think that I'd like to have a name, for my particular, er. Brainweird."

"I have a name for some of my brainweird. That name's dysphoria. Beyond that, it doesn't really
matter to me? Anything else I've got going on... Kinda pales in comparison. Maybe if the day comes that I'm totally comfortable, with myself, and there isn't any way to get any better... Then I'll worry about, whatever else it is that I've got left to worry about. It's just not comparable."

"I can't even imagine..."

"Well, you probably can." Randy shrugged. "You just don't realize, that you're imagining it. It's sort of like... Something built into yourself. And that thing is wrong. You don't want to be that thing, even though you were stuck with it. And people around you expect you to be that way, too."

"If you put it like that," Kurou admitted, "I guess I do have something along those lines. It's... Well, my dad was sort of a bad guy, I'll be the first to admit it. When a bad guy has a son, people kind of think, oh. Here's another one. It took a lot to shake those expectations, from other people... And from myself, that I was doomed to be a bad person too."

"Yeah, see? Told you that you could understand," Randy said, "People expected me to be a girl. People expected you to be a bad person. It might not be exactly the same, but it's not hard to look at in terms like these... I think, anyway. It's not always a matter of getting people to understand gender. It's about understanding the idea that you have to shake some sorta destiny. Fucked up, but it's there, right?"

"Mm. Yeah, I get it that way." Kurou nodded along. "Especially for me. You've heard about the bad seed, right? That concept that there's some sort of gene that makes people evil, and it's always going to be passed down?"

"Yeah, totally. I mean, sometimes, that does happen, in some ways. I guess if you're raised by a morally bankrupt person, you don't have a big compass to go on. And, well, I don't understand what makes people really bad to begin with. Could be a factor. At the same time... I think if you wanna be good, and you're committed to that, then you'll always be able to."

"You really think so?" Kurou wondered.

"Obviously. I mean, I've never been a bad person," Randy said, with unshakeable confidence. "It hasn't happened, and it won't. Even if I'm somebody who others would consider to be immoral, I'm a good person, and I plan to always stand up for justice and good in this world. That's what makes me good. What other people think of that, doesn't matter to me, because I know. I've never been bad. I'll be able to tell, if I start to become a bad person. I'm cautious of that, so I'll do everything in my power to prevent it. That way, it won't happen. If you think the same way, then you're gonna be fine."
"So... As long as I do what I think is right, not what society thinks is right, then I'm able to be better than him?"

"Yeah, exactly. Being a good person just means... Being somebody that you can be proud of. If you feel guilt over things you've done, then fix that. If you neglect to fix them, maybe then you start to be a bad person."

"...Well, I'm not sure I can be proud of myself, but I'm also not sure that my guilt can be resolved," Kurou said, "There's certain situations in which I could have done better, and those are locked in the past now..."

"Well, I dunno, then," Randy said, "But if it means anything. Since you got to this game, I've been proud of you."

"That... Even though you're younger than me, it does mean something. Thank you. I know you wouldn't lie to me about a thing like this."
11:00 am / 1100 Hours

The last piece went into the puzzle, and...

"Congratulations!" Monokuma immediately rose up through the table, also phasing through the newly completed jigsaw of course. "You've won the first Duos Challenge!"

Torimi stood up on her chair, blinking at it. "Waaaait. For real? Weeee won?"

"You sure did!" Monokuma said, "In fact, I'm impressed! You're pretty close to the world record, for not being professionals at this sort of thing. Did you cheat using your psychic powers, Shinoe?"

"I swear, I didn't," Torimi said.

"That was a joke, I didn't think it was actually possible," Monokuma said.
"Of course we finished first." Amai snickered. "Did you underestimate me? With a partner as mildly competent as Shinoe, of course I would triumph!"

"I didn't underestimate you at all. I know you're smarter than you let on!" Monokuma chided her, then directed its next sentence back at Torimi. "I did underestimate you, though. That lackadaisical attitude of yours... I'm shocked to discover a brat like you has the balance of patience and focus not to drag Oishi down!"

"Heeey, it's not like I can't get serious when I neeeeed to," Torimi complained, tucking a bit of hair back behind her ear. Then, she froze, before turning to Monokuma. "Excuse me? Did you just call me a brat?"

"Yes, I did. You're four-foot-two and you talk like you just woke up, so is there anything more fitting to call you? I don't think so. You did impress me, though! So take that win and run, run away! Ahaha!" Monokuma cackled, then composed itself. "Well, anyway. Enough teasing. The prize for completing the challenge first of all your peers is... This!"

Monokuma produced a key. Torimi took it, then wondered, "What's thiiiis do?"

"That's a key to a special thing called the ReWard panel! They've been added to everybody's ward, of course. Yours is, as the styling implies, for the panel in your own ward. Each one has a different, unique reward waiting behind it! I'm sorry to say, it's actually not super useful to you two as a pair. Oishi's ward was removed, so I have to use the Fortuneteller ReWard Key. But then, that ward isn't even available yet... Of course, the opportunity to make use of these during the challenge will be afforded, but I'm afraid, not to you."

"That's okaaaay," Torimi said, "I'll just use it after this is done. I'm sorryyy, Oishi. You did most of the work, and I get the priiiize..."

"It's a prize you can't even use right now, though," Amai said, "So, I think we're even. Besides..." She grimaced. "It is. My own fault. That my ward was removed."

"Woooow." Torimi couldn't help but laugh at how difficult it was for Amai to admit fault with herself. Monokuma left as she laughed, probably because its work here was done. "Anywaaaay. Good work there! I didn't expect to win aaaaany of these."

"Well, I couldn't have done it without you..." Amai admitted, without making eye contact. "I mean, objectively speaking. You had to be worth something! Cause, Madara's smart like me. The kind of smart that can do jigsaw puzzles but can't fucking solve a murder. So... His partner had to be a worse partner than you, if we beat him."

"Huuum. You think so?" Torimi pressed a finger to her cheek, then giggled. "Aw. He's gonna be sooo mad, that you beat him."

“Yeah? I’m counting on it! Hell, maybe that can be my prize.” Amai crossed her arms and nodded. “Mm... Well, I guess that it’s just me and you hanging out till the others finish up?”

“Oh yeeaaah... That sounds about right,” Torimi said, then pressed her hands together. “Well. I guess we can caaaaall this. An opportunity?”

“What, to get to know each other? Pftt.” Amai scoffed at first, but then her expression softened a bit. “Oh, well. I guess that I don’t know you well at all. Have we even really spoken? I have an idea of your tastes from observation, but I don’t even know your favorite food. That’s important shit!”
“Ohhh, yeah. We don’t communicate,” Torimi said, “You never maaaade a good impression on me. But, my favorite food… It’s gotta beee… Spicy tuna!”

“Whoa, really?” Amai asked, “I mean, obviously I could tell that you like spicy food, but sushi? I guess I haven’t made any, so I wouldn’t be able to tell, but I thought you mostly liked earthier flavors?”

“Well, I do also like king mushrooms a lot… And beef is my favorite meat in general, but something about spicy tunaaa… Is just perfect.” Torim pressed her hands to both of her cheeks, grinning. “The spiices, the textuuure. Everything comes together in a beaaaautiful way. Not to mention, if I can get a boy to take me out for sushi, then I can pretend like he actuallyyyy likes me.”

“So another factor is the situation, huh?” Amai observed, “That makes sense, I gotta say. Associating a food with romantic situations because it’s too expensive to usually buy for yourself can add to its positive position in your mind. Heh. Maybe I should make some sushi soon, once this is done and I get back in the kitchen!”

“You’d dooo that for me? You don’t even knooow me.”

“I don’t, but, hey. The only nice thing I can do is make people their favorite foods! Besides, I’ll make an absolute assortment, so everyone’ll be able to find something they’d like. Though, you mentioned King Mushrooms and beef as well?”

“Yeaaaah?”

“Mhm, hm… Well, it goes a little bit against my personal prefences, but I think that it would be the right thing to do.” Amai raised a finger, smirking. “You’ve given me the idea… To host a hot pot party with our friends.”

“Ohhh!” Torimi clapped once. “That would be a lot of fun!”

“It would, wouldn’t it? Even if it’s not my style, to set up a meal that my clientele are meant to control themselves… It would be appreciated, I bet. And y’know, I can still prep all the meat and veggies, and offer lots of broth options! It would of course be personal hot pots, not communal, since so many of you lot are so picky about tastes… Yeah, yeah. I can still give it my Ultimate flair.”

“That’s really niice of you,” Torimi said.

“It’s… Just what I’m supposed to do. As an Ultimate Chef, you know? It’s important that I do these kinds of things! Showing off your talent is the natural thing to do, among other Ultimates.”

“In thaat case,” Torimi offered, “Before we get put to sleep for the next challenge, why don’t I do a palm reading on you?”

“…Sure, that’d be kinda cool.” Amai’s smile became a bit less proud, a bit more genuine, and held her hand out to Torimi.
Tsumugi woke up, and looked around at the area. This was definitely a new area just for this challenge, she hadn’t been here, but it was still familiar in some ways. In some… Right, that’s what it was. The small bathroom in the corner, and the color of the walls, it reminded her of something particular. Reminded her of in the last game, when she’d been trapped in her ward. It was the same with the bathroom there; Knowing the nature of the Neo World program, she imagined that it was just a singular item that could be dropped in anywhere. What, what was she thinking about? Huh? Was the Neo World program’s architecture like the sims?

“Mono…kuma…?” Tsumugi asked, and realized that her voice was a lot weaker than she expected it to be. She tried to clear her throat, coughed a few times, then looked to the bear who had arrived and was staring at her quizzically. “How did you add Hamuko’s ward?”

“Huh? Oh, I just threw together a bunch of items that already existed,” Monokuma said, “Building things here doesn’t require any programming, just object placement, so I’m able to do it within reason.”

“Oh, cool, thank you,” Tsumugi said, then Monokuma left and she looked up a pair of legs to see that her partner was Tsukasa. “Oh, hi Mizuho.”

“Shirogane,” Tsukasa said, then held a hand out to her. She took it, and he helped her to her feet. She adjusted her glasses, then took another look around.

“Oh, it’s a puzzle,” She noticed, “Do you think that the challenge is to solve it?”

“I don’t know,” Tsukasa said, “Maybe? But are we supposed to receive instructions? Maybe the challenge is actually to use the puzzle pieces in a different part of the room. Or maybe the puzzle box has something else in it and we’re not supposed to open it ourselves.”

“Schrodinger’s Puzzle?” Tsumugi asked, then frowned. “I don’t think it’s really that complicated…”

“Maybe not. But do you want to risk failing if it is that complicated?”

“Er, well, I don’t think we can fail?” Tsumugi looked up at the ceiling, then squeezed her eyes shut as she was overcome with a wave of dizziness. She steadied herself, pulled a chair to sit in, and plunged a hand into her pocket. She breathed a sigh. Then, continued speaking, “The way Monokuma worded it, anyway. It’s just something that we can eventually do as the time goes on. One person wins. We get extra sleep if everyone finishes before time is up.”

“…Oh yeah, that makes sense.” Tsukasa sat down across from her and reached for the box. “I guess I was overthinking things. Glad you’re here to ground me, Shirogane! Funny that the astronaut’s more down-to-earth right now, isn’t it?”

“…Huh?”

“It’s funny. Because, you know, you should be up in space. But you’re not?”

“Oh, yes, funny,” Tsumugi said, then started to work on the puzzle. That was when Dia walked through the wall, checked in with them, and left. That was all Tsumugi processed of the AI’s visit,
because she didn’t speak a word the whole time and just kept trying to track down the pieces of the puzzle’s frame the whole time.

“Are you, like, okay?” Tsukasa wondered, giving her an odd look. “I kind of thought that you just didn’t like me, but you were weird with Hamuko just now too…”

“Oh no, don’t think that. I don’t dislike anybody here… I’m just… Er, could you excuse me for a moment?” Tsumugi stood up, stumbled slightly, steadied herself on the table… Then went into the bathroom. She emerged a few moments later, fixing her hair, and returned to her seat. “I’m sorry about that. I’m just not feeling so well. I should be fine, in a bit, just a little bit. Don’t worry.”

“If you’re sure that you’re fine,” Tsukasa said, “And well, you can’t blame me for thinking you might dislike me, right? You mostly keep to yourself, after all…”

“That’s because… Kaede said, that was the best way to keep safe…” Tsumugi mumbled, “Even though she went and still made friends. But then she ended up dead. She agreed to help Kyosuke and he used it to kill her. She broke her own rule of keeping to ourselves and she ended up dead. So even if… Even if I’d like to get along with more people. Even if I want to call Oishi, or Kaguya, or Randy, my friends… I can’t. Because I can’t die. Even if I wanted to. So I need to be alone.”

“You can’t?” Tsukasa asked.

“Right. I… I need to remember Kaede…” Tsumugi trailed off, then brought her palms up to her eyes, rubbing at them. “It’s so hard. I feel so lost and it hurts all the time. How would you feel if Randy suddenly died, you know? Kaede is gone. I loved her and she’s gone. And Ryoma is gone too, and so many of my friends. So many of them are gone and I need to remember them. I can’t die… Because they died.”

“Who’s Ryoma?” Tsukasa wondered.

“My brother…” Tsumugi explained, then brought her hands from her eyes and fixed her glasses again. “He was my stepbrother. And I forgot a lot of it for a while but it came back to me. I held it against him for two years, that he disappeared… But he was in Killing Games, twice in a row, then in mine too. He was the Ultimate Survivor twice. Then he died in my game, just after… Just after I was able to stop being mad at him. And the last thing he said to me was that… He knew I could become a good person.”

“I think you are, Shirogane,” Tsukasa said.

“...No way.” Tsumugi shook her head. “I’m trying. But I’m not. I don’t… Know what to do. At all.”

“Well, I think you should let yourself have friends. I don’t think it was friendliness that got Akamatsu killed, I think that it was actually the isolation that did it. She didn’t make herself trustworthy enough… I think if she’d been more willing to get along, then she might have told the truth and not been suspected of being the Evil King.”

“Huh. Maybe.” Tsumugi hung her head. “There’s no way to know, now, what the reason was. She’s dead. So are her murderers…”

“That’s true, but you know, you are still here,” Tsukasa said, “And I think a good start would be for you to try and enjoy solving this puzzle with me.”
Natsuki was dropped off by Eriko as close to Hope’s Vestige as the Monorail would get them, along with directions to follow to walk the rest of the way; Eriko was a busy woman after all, and did need to get back to work. Natsuki made it the rest of the way on her own, and stood outside of the door. Just a bit after she arrived, the door was opened.

“Nagata,” Kyoko Kirigiri greeted her with a warm smile. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“Oh. Hi, Kirigiri,” Natsuki said, “If you’re here, does that mean Ruri is too?”

“Mm, no. I’m actually not sure where she’s been, since Akabane was taken for the game,” Kyoko admitted, “She’ll turn up, though. That girl always does. So, come in, come in. That’s the body for Miss M4-K1, isn’t it? Well, a prototype one, I assume.”

“That’s right,” Natsuki said, “We were only able to get ahold of just enough particles for two proper bodies, so this one’s just what Rei could do on her own… But it’s better than a laptop, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” Kyoko assured her, leading her into the Failed Ultimates section of the building. “Thank you for bringing it. And, of course, you’re going to be sticking around. Aren’t you?”

“I don’t really have anywhere else to go,” Natsuki said, “And I hear you’re going to space… So, I want in on that, okay?”

“Yes, yes. If Miss Shirogane survives the game, and cooperates, that’s the plan,” Kyoko said, “Leaving behind this broken world, to create something somewhere without the Quiet War.”

“You do need kind of a good amount of people to start a population, or else it’ll stagnate, right? And I hate to say this, but a number of them also probably need to be straight people! So what’s your plan to get a suitable gene pool going without committing human rights atrocities in the process?”

“Getting right into the logistics questions, huh?” Kyoko chuckled a bit. “Well, I’d expect that of somebody who could get along with my own apprentice. You’re no child. The pool of people who are coming with us is, currently, too small. That’s correct. Even so, it will take time to build a worthy vessel. In the meantime… We’ll find them. People… Regular people, who are worthy of joining us.”

“How?” Natsuki wondered.

“This Killing Game,” Kyoko answered, “It’s being broadcast nationally right now, of course. And like usual, it will have an international release in a few months, as long as it takes to translate. Media companies around the world take this task upon themselves anyway, so the fact that we aren’t the usual showrunners won’t make a difference. And through this game… From beginning to end, it’s a message. So anybody who can see the heart of the game will know what to do. Will be able to join with us on the day of our departure.”
“The heart of the game? The fuck are you on about?” Natsuki asked.

“Well, you see,” Another voice joined the conversation. This voice belonged to Miu Iruma, who intercepted them in the hallway. “Every good game has got a heart! The heart of ours got censored by those fucking bitches when they aired it, but since we’re in control now, this one’s gotta shine through. Our game… It had the meaning of, you can be loved, even if you aren’t a perfect person. That’s what I think, anyway. Even the Mastermind came to understand that, and loved us even though she ‘judged’ most of us poorly.”

“Okay, and so, what’s the heart of this one?” Natsuki asked.

“Well, they haven’t gotten there yet,” Miu said, “But the idea is to create a ‘passcode’ based on the heart of their game. Then, they call in to the number listed in the credits, and if they use it, then we know they’re on our side.”

“Won’t people just share the passcode online after they figure it out, though?” Natsuki wondered, furrowing her brow. “By the way, you’re Iruma, right? This robot body I’ve been lugging around is for your girlfriend.”

“M-my! Um! Maki is not! Exactly! My girlfriend!” Miu stammered out, waving her hands in front of herself. “We’re taking things between us quite slowly since she does lack memories of when we were kind of sort of dating before, and also because she is trapped in a computer and has bigger concerns than getting into a relationship and-”

“Right. Anyway, here.” Natsuki set the body down in front of herself. “That Amami guy should be able to get her consciousness transferred over. Kirigiri? Can you answer my question?”

“Well you see, it’s a matter of integrity,” Kyoko said, “Understanding the heart of the game also means understanding that it’s something which must be figured out oneself, not simply shared around like a video game cheat code.”

“...I guess that’s a fair point. If you’re gonna figure out something emotionally important, then I guess you won’t be so dumb to ruin it for everyone else,” Natsuki admitted, “Besides, if anyone does decide to share it online and ruin it, then I guess you just have to deny everyone who calls in after that point…”

“Hm, I guess so,” Kyoko said, “That’s quite pragmatic of you. I imagine many people would have trouble with the ethical implications of that.”

“Well, you said it yourself, for somebody to be a good influence on a world outside of the Quiet War… Then they need to be able to understand. It’s an important thing. And, besides. It isn’t like leaving people behind is damming them or anything. There’s loads of people who get to live normal lives with the world like this… So, I get the qualifier, now that I think of it that way? To grasp the heart of the Killing Game also means to understand you can’t continue living life just for yourself in a world like this. Dissatisfaction with the status quo… Through an emotional argument. That’s the explanation. Isn’t it?”

“Yeah, you get it,” Kyoko said, “Whatever this game ends up really meaning… It’s the last Killing Game. At least, the last one that any of us will see. I don’t think that the games can stop if the world doesn’t recover… But we can do something about it. Now, after all this time. We can do something.”

“Something is the best you can do,” Natsuki said, sincerely. It was. For all these people of different origins to work together against the atrocity that was the Killing Game. Obviously, everyone
who’d come along would need to agree. A world without the ideas of Hope or Despair, not the way they’d been warped in the Quiet War. A world with no Killing Games. And they… Could build a world like that.

Natsuki could help, too.
The second challenge had begun, and with that, Randy woke up. The first thing he noticed was that his partner for this challenge was Tsukasa; Score! The second thing he noticed was that the previous challenge’s simple table was gone, replaced with a kitchen island with barstools at it. The walls, as well, had the rest of a kitchen’s standard setup lined against them. Counters, a fridge, oven, the usual. On the island, there was a meal.

“Hey, Randy!” Tsukasa greeted him as he stood up. “How did the last challenge treat you?”

“Pretty good.” Randy flexed an arm, grinning. “I gave Kurou a pretty good confidence boost, I think! Oh, and the puzzle was fun too. How about you?”

“I had a nice time with the puzzle, yeah. I was with Shirogane. Is it just me, or has there been something off about her lately? She woke up feeling kind of sick, she said, but ended up feeling fine after about an hour,” Tsukasa said, “She told me about how she’s been having some trouble emotionally, lately, but there’s something else weird too. I think.”

“Huh. Well, now that you mention it, yeah,” Randy said, “But, anyway. We’re on this challenge… So…” He approached the table, and saw that there was a piece of paper next to the meal. He picked it up, and read it aloud, “Your challenge is to recreate this dish. This challenge is not based on who completes it first, but who completes it most accurately.”

“Huh, instructions. That’s cool,” Tsukasa said, “Last time, I wasn’t completely sure that solving the puzzle was actually the right thing to do, for the challenge.”

“So, most accurate, huh…” Randy trailed off, then felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Dia there.

“Hello! I have a message for you,” Dia said, then held out a piece of paper. “In the spirit of a fair competition, Amai and I have written copies for each pair listing the ingredients in the meal. She determined this with a single taste, of course. Proportions and cooking methods are excluded. There are superfluous ingredients in the fridge and cabinet to tempt you to use the wrong ones. Good luck, my friends!”

Then, she ran through the wall. Right, she probably wanted to hand out the ingredient lists as quickly as possible so that nobody would get started without the ‘handicap’ that the Ultimate Chef had decided to take upon herself. It was nice, that Amai was paired with the messenger then, though she probably could have done the same thing simply by summoning Dia to do it for her instead.

Randy unfolded the ingredient list, and took a look at it, then glanced at the meal as well. It was a simple meat dish; A steak, with a side of mashed potatoes, and another vegetable. Consulting the list, it seemed that vegetable was creamed kale. The steak itself was seasoned with an apple-mustard brown butter, there was garlic and cheese in the potatoes, and a host of herbs between all three facets of the meal. Then, the glass next to it was ‘a wheat ale’. Obviously, Amai didn’t have enough experience tasting alcohol to figure out what sort it was. And of course, the fridge had several of many beer varieties.
“Tsukasa! We need to figure out what type of beer this is.” He gestured to the glass. “Also you need to cook this. Do not trust me to try and cook this. Can’t do that. Sorry I’m putting it all on your shoulders, you know, identifying the beer and also cooking the whole challenge.”

“No worries,” Tsukasa said, then took the paper. “Ah, so that’s why I’m identifying it. If it were any other variety, you’d be more competent than me…”

“But wheat ales are your favorite,” Randy finished for him, “Thus, you’ve got more reliable taste buds. Once we figure it out should we let the others know?”

“We could…” Tsukasa said, “Or, given our general mediocrity at food production, we could say that picking the correct wheat ale is the one advantage we have over others, and therefore, the only shot we have at even maybe winning a little bit.”

“…Yeah, plus, there’s only three types in the fridge,” Randy said, having opened the fridge. “So with Oishi’s hint, at least one other group can even get it just by chance, so, yeah. Let’s take the opportunity while we’ve got it!”

“Precisely,” Tsukasa said, “I’m not completely certain what the prizes even are, since Mono didn’t tell us, but if we’re going to win any of these challenges it would have to be the one where we’re working together, probably.”

“Yeah, because we work well together! If you want me to do any of the prep work just lemme know. Even though I’m kinda useless, I can still do the simple things,” Randy said, “Anyway, the prizes might not even be worth it…”

“Hm, that’s true. We did hear that this challenge would serve as an ‘opportunity for murder’, so maybe the prize is actually something that’d be useless to us if we, well, don’t want to commit murder.”

“Oh yeah… Well, but if we win, then we keep it out of other people’s hands! You know, just in case somebody does want to commit murder,” Randy said, “Not like I think anybody will, but I know that we won’t. Or, well, you won’t. You should hold onto it. I almost killed somebody by accident so I’m not the most trustworthy with that stuff, compared.”

“You’re plenty trustworthy. That was just a bad coincidence,” Tsukasa said, “Any one of us could have done the same thing. The instructions were missing, and Fujishiro had no way of letting you know he had the incorrect instructing symptom himself. He probably also had the impulse control one, which is why he drank it at all. Despair Fever’s a motive. So… I don’t think anybody would blame you for that situation.”

“Are you sure?” Randy asked.

“Certain,” Tsukasa confirmed, “Now, can you peel some potatoes for me? I don’t see any peels in here.”

“Yes, sir!” Randy saluted jokingly, then got to work.
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Two (Sayaka and Torimi)

5:00 pm / 1700 Hours

“Well! There we go!” Sayaka proclaimed, taking a step back to look at her creation next to the one she was meant to recreate. She even did her best to manage the plating, though they’d messed it up a bit in the process of figuring out the meal in the first place. “Not too bad, if I do say so myself. And you were a big help too, Torimi!”

“AAah, I’m glad! I usually only cook for myself, so it’s good to know my skills can be helpful,” Torimi said. She’d done a good amount of the prep work, like mashing the potatoes together and cutting the apples for the sauce. Her knife cuts were pretty solid, so even though Sayaka’s would be better, she could concentrate on the more complicated aspects instead.

“Definitely,” Sayaka said, then crossed her arms. “So, I guess now we have to wait till everybody’s done so that the accuracy can be judged? People who don’t cook as often might take longer to get through it, after all. So, how ya been?”

“I’ve been okaaaay,” Torimi said, “Last challenge I was with Oishi. Aaaand we won! So then we just hung out and she’s actually kind of cool? I did some readings on her. She’s haaaaad a kind of weird life, hasn’t she?”

“Huh? Yeah, she has,” Sayaka said, “It’s not my place to talk about that shit, though, so you’re not getting anything out of me.”

“Of course nooooot,” Torimi said, “I wouldn’t dreееeeeam of it.”

“You sure? Cause you didn’t hesitate at all, to tell me about something in Nami’s past that she didn’t seem to want you sharing.”

“Thaaat? Well…” Torimi looked away. “I don’t see that as a reaaaal bad thing. It’s a story to embarrass my friend with. It’s not something gross that happened to heeeer, since she had the confidence to say no, even with a surprise public proposal?”

“I dunno,” Sayaka said, “I guess she wasn’t really upset with you after you told me or anything, but it kind of seems like a doozy of a thing to share as an ‘embarrassing story’. The fact that she was put on the spot like that by her already abusive and manipulative girlfriend doesn’t make me feel like she’s being made fun of, it feels like you’re dredging up bad memories… I just, I dunno. Even though we’re together, maybe I don’t know her well enough? I’m just saying how I’d feel in her place.”

“…I gueeeesss, it mighta been a lil tasteless,” Torimi admitted, and sat on one of the barstools. “It ain’t like I’m the perfect friend. She wasn’t laughing along, waaaaas she?”

“No,” Sayaka said, “Her body language seemed kind of uncomfortable. And I don’t wanna presume how she was feeling, cause I’m not in her head and she didn’t say anything to me, but it kinda seems like she really didn’t want you to tell the story.”

“Hmmm… Yeah.” Torimi leaned against the island. “I meeean, it’s not like that time isn’t bad memories for me, either. But from where I stood, Nami rejecting Kira’s proposal liiiike that. Was kinda one of the only good ones. Yanno? I could tell what was goooing on. I just… Couldn’t get through to her. Couldn’t do aaaaanything about it. When she turned Kira down… Was a moment
when I knew there was still hope, foooor my best friend.”

“...Oh. When you put it like that, it makes sense,” Sayaka said, “But maybe let her bring that up in her own time. Cause even if it was good for you, it was probably just… Another fucking terrible moment in a string of them, at the time, for her. The way she talks about Kirara is, well. Like she didn’t mind having forgotten about it for a while.”

“Yeaaaah… I guess it was just a disconnect between how we saw things,” Torimi said, “Thanks for letting me knooow, actually. I wouldn’t’ve realized this on my own.”

“Huh? I mean, anytime,” Sayaka said, “I don’t like to mince my words, so if I’ve got a problem with something I’m not gonna hesitate to say so. Even if we’re friends.”

“Especiallyyy if we’re friends,” Torimi said, “Cause friends actually wanna know if we’re messing uuuup. Pleeease, always let me know.”

“Oh, I definitely will,” Sayaka said, “With your permission, I’ll never hesitate. As long as you do the same for me.”

“Ohhh, as my best friend’s girlfriend, that stipulation was aaaaalready there. I would never lie to you or say that I approve when I don’t!” Torimi scolded, “I may not be the greatest friend Nami can have, but… I’m still her beeeest friend. And I gotta keep an eye out for her!”

“You’ve been doing a pretty good job at that, far as I’ve been able to tell,” Sayaka said, “I know you say you couldn’t do much about Kira… But I think the fact that you were able to see what was going on was enough, in that situation. Nami could count on you not to hold it against her, or be on the wrong side of the breakup when she finally got out of there.”

“No matter whoooo it was…” Torimi furrowed her brow. “I’ll always be on Nami’s side, if she needs me to beee.”

“You’re a great friend,” Sayaka said, smiling at her. “I’m… Not glad that you’re in the Killing Game, it’s terrible. But I am glad that you’re here for her. That Nami gets to have somebody here who can ground her, to her real life.”

“Well, there’s Mizuhoootoo…”

“That’s her past, though. She knew him in middle school,” Sayaka said, “You’re proof that she was able to exist, on her own, as a functional adult. You get what I’m saying? If you weren’t here… She might never have gotten those memories back, not completely. You being in her memories is proof that she was real. That’s the kind of thing… She struggles with, given the memory thing in general. So, thank you for being here, even if it’s awful that you are.”

“...Well, then, you’re welcooome. I’m glad that… I can help my friend, just by being here. She’s helped me sooo much, so it’s the least I can do.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Two (Riko and Tsumugi)

6:00 pm / 1800 hours

Riko and Tsumugi’s meal had been sitting completed on the table for the past hour and a half, approximately. It had taken them ninety minutes to recreate the dish properly. They did work well as a team; Riko couldn’t really taste the food herself, in this situation, so Tsumugi did all the tasting and relayed what she thought. Amai’s list helped, too. As for the wheat ale, Riko was able to tell its nature just by looking at it. She was expected to know the competition, after all, when it came to her company.

Oddly enough, though, Amai’s list did miss out on a certain ingredient. Underneath the steak, at the center and hidden from view, was a small square of yorkshire pudding. Riko made that easily; While she was decent enough at cooking as an upbringing of status would insist of her, she was quite good at baking. It was a hobby that she regularly enjoyed. Some people thought that it didn’t suit her, but that was fine. So much of her life revolved around being the person that others would approve of, so it was, in a way… Liberating, to have such a simple rebellion for herself. Not to say that she, as a rich person, had any real need for liberation.

Even so, she was a bit of a caged bird at times.

“Hey!” Monokuma popped into the room. “Sorry for the delay, but the final pair just finished making their meal! And I’m announcing this to the couple of you first! That’s right, it’s because… A winner is you!”

“Huh?” Tsumugi asked, “How did… We win?”

“Well, you see, I am judging on accuracy,” Monokuma said, “And it seems that you did it best. The only other group who noticed the yorkshire pudding was unable to determine the proper beer. That was the real sticking point, the determining factor. Thanks to Oishi’s ingredient list taking all the chances of spectacular failure out of the question…”

“Hey now,” Tsumugi said, “We would have spectacularly failed if I was the one doing the cooking. A team of two poor chefs would still flounder even with Amai’s amazing list of what goes into the meal…”

“No, no. No screwing up the method could compare to completely messing up the nature of the dish! It’d be funny if you made a pork chop instead of a beef steak. But just overcooking that beef steak… Is a mundane mistake,” Monokuma said, “Anyway. I need to offer your prize. In each of your wards, there’s been added an item called the ‘ReWard Panel’. The prize is a key which opens these, which you’ll have the chance to use at some point before the end of the challenge. Oh, but Tsumugi, yours lacks one. The prize from within has already been placed into the lab in the open… anyway. Asahi! I’ll present you with-”

“Am I allowed to request a different key?” Riko effectively cut Monokuma off by tapping it on the head with her whiteboard, the message written on it.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, I guess. The only stipulation is that I have to give a ReWard key to the winners… So I can’t give you any living person’s key, or else I might have to give out the wrong one to them.”

“That’s perfectly acceptable, because the key I’d like is for a dead person’s ward. Tomoe
"Kaguya’s, to be specific,” Riko said.

“Ah, the Ultimate Journalist ReWard key,” Monokuma said. “That’s perfectly reasonable! Yes, in fact, I think that’s a good decision. Very good choice. Then, here you go.” It flourished its paw and handed over a key. This one was gold, like the trophy featured in her execution, with a design of newsprint on it. It was undeniably a key relating to Tomoe.

Riko slipped the key into her pocket so she had free hands to respond. “Thank you, Monokuma. That’s very helpful of you.”

“By the way, I should let you guys know also, the ReWard panels have different content inside if opened during the Duos Challenge, or after it’s complete,” Monokuma said, “And you can retrieve both of these.”

“That’s reasonable,” Riko said, “Thank you for the prize. I’ll have to apologize to Amai when next I see her, though. I’m sure she’ll be disappointed to hear that she didn’t win this one.”

“Well, she did want it to be a fair competition, and not just a given that she’d win with her ultimate talent,” Tsumugi said, “That’s why she gave us that ingredient list…”

“Yeah, but she totally didn’t notice the yorkshire pudding,” Monokuma said, “That was the loss. Hers still came out the best as a meal, but missing an important component… Loses it accuracy points! Anyway, now that I’ve delivered your prize, I oughta let the others know the competition is over. Feel free to eat too, if you’re hungry. You’re getting knocked out again at the top of the hour.”

Riko started to lift her whiteboard again, but Monokuma realized and clarified, “We’ll wake you up alone for a bit during the break so that you can get a bite to eat. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t let you starve or get sick!”

Before Riko could thank it for its consideration, it was gone again. Tsumugi pulled up a chair and got herself a partial plate from the meal that Riko had put together. “I hope you don’t mind, if I have some of this one? I tasted the other one already, and I bet that yours will be nicer.”

“Do whatever you like,” Riko said, “I don’t mind. If you want to eat the food I made, then I’m not about to stop you.”

“Thanks for the meal, then.” Tsumugi giggled, and started to eat, then turned to Riko again. “This is really good… Who did you normally cook for?”

“My big sister, sometimes,” Riko answered, “That’s pretty much it.”


“Even with the mask, it’s not safe for me to exist in a general way. I was never good at making friends when I did meet people. I’m just not the sort of person, to be able to cook for others.”

“Well, you were able to cook for me this time,” Tsumugi said, “I think that’s pretty nice. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Riko agreed, nodding. “It is. I’m glad you like it. Thank you, for that.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Two (Kurou and Madara)

6:00 pm / 1800 Hours

Only one other group found the Yorkshire Pudding; That was what Monokuma had said when it came to announce the conclusion of the challenge to Kurou Ueda and Tsukune Madara, who’d needed to work together very carefully to compensate for their general lack of skill in this area. They had unfortunately guessed the type of beer wrong, so they weren’t the winners, but at least they’d noticed that elusive scrap of bread product. They’d also taken an obnoxiously long time, because Madara managed to burn not one, but two separate attempts at making the creamed kale. Now, though, they’d made a passable meal; But the beer docked their accuracy.

“Ah, well.” Madara shrugged, dropping himself into one of the bar stools. “We gave it the old college try, that’s about the best we can do.”

“Oh, certainly. I must admit that this sort of thing was a little bit out of my depth.” Kurou sat down as well. “Ayu and I… Neither of us do much fancy cooking. We take turns cooking and we just throw together simple meals from what’s in the house.”

“That’s all you really need to do. I’ve tried to learn to cook before, but it’s kinda just never worked out,” Madara said, “I mean, you saw. It’s not like I’m trying to be a walking pyrotechnics stereotype, but, well. Shit burns.”

“It doesn’t seem to me like you have, exactly, the right attention span for it?” Kurou offered as an explanation. “I mean. It seems like you get distracted easily, is all.”

“Well, yeah. I was bored. So I spaced out.”

“Does that happen often?”

“I guess? I’m not really a fan of being real and present, as a baseline,” Madara said, “So if I’m not doing something that interests me, I guess I drift off. It’s not like it’s a big deal or really anything weird, I think… I kind of just can’t pay attention to lame stuff.”

“Not that unusual,” Kurou said, “But at the same time, it might be a slightly bigger deal than you think. If such a thing happened while you were cooking alone, or driving, it might get you seriously hurt.”

“Hah, I wish.” Madara gave a couple short cackles at his own self-defeating joke. “As it is, I don’t really tend to cook food these days. I mean, out in the real world, obviously. That’s what these days means. And, well. I was living in Tokyo. No need to drive there, not really. Never expected to really leave there, either, I guess.”

“Oh, Tokyo?” Kurou asked, “We live in a suburb just outside of the city. Er, just far enough that you do kind of need a car to get around to anywhere interesting, but not rural either.”

“Is there a good school system there?” Madara wondered.

“I think so,” Kurou said, “Good enough, anyway, though I’m not sure at this point that Ayano will end up growing up there. People’s lives are changed by Killing Games, after all, if they make it through. So if I do see the other side, I… Well, I don’t exactly know what’s going to happen.”

“Even still…” Madara mumbled, looking away. “Life will change, huh? There’s that feeling there,
I think. On the other side of this, everything will be different. For all of you who get through.”

“All of us?” Kurou asked, “That doesn’t seem to include you, Madara. Why?”

“Well…” Madara hesitated, but something about Kurou did prompt him to share. “It’s kind of, well. There’s nobody who’ll miss me, if I don’t come back. So reasonably speaking…”

“You can’t put logistics on a life like that. Can’t just say ‘less people would miss me, so it’s okay if I die’. We would miss you, for one, and for another. It’s one thing to say that, unfortunately, people still need to die for us to escape. It’s another thing to say who any of those people should be. Because, well, we are all of equal value. That’s what I think. We’re all young, and talented, with futures ahead of us. Let’s not play the comparisons game.”

“Can you really say that?” Madara asked, “It’s your own friend, who became a martyr just this last trial.”

“I never said that I supported that,” Kurou said, “I mean… That’s different, too, of course. With what he did, Mitsuru was able to reduce the number of dead bodies in that case from two, down to one, and help Hamuko in the process. I don’t think he decided to value a life over anybody else’s; He just decided to avoid letting somebody die who didn’t have to.”

“Mono said that wouldn’t work anymore, didn’t it? Yeah, that’s a shame. We could reduce it even more. If just one of us dying could open up the next floor of the building, make the Mastermind Trial viable… Then I’d do it in a heartbeat. Of course I would.”

“It said that?” Kurou asked, “Well, I guess the motivation would just be that multiple suicides would make for boring television, but even so…”

“Yeah, it’s a pain. Keeps us from mitigating the deaths as much,” Madara said, “Though, let’s be real. Bakura already ruined our chances at that. Three death case…”

“Could have been four, if we didn’t get so lucky on the Devil’s Roulette,” Kurou said, “Bakura could have actually died at the end of that execution, too. We have small things to be glad for.”

“...I guess so,” Madara said, “You know, everyone pretty much decided. That whole thing was Kanoshi’s fault. And I guess, objectively, they’re right. He was the first culprit. He was the one who wanted Bakura dead, too. I don’t… Doubt the facts at all. At the same time, he stuck around. He was one of the only friends I’d still had, and it turns out he’s just this… bad person, who everyone’s gonna hate?”

“Well… Maybe not quite like that, but…”

“It’s easy to forget, I know. It’s not like I’m an open person, so it comes across like Kanoshi’s only real friend died with him. But I was here too. And, fuck. The thing is. I can think in bad terms. I can think, if Kanoshi was still around without Ruka to latch onto, maybe he’d end up hurting me. Maybe he’d decide it didn’t matter I wasn’t interested in those things. But I’m used to that stuff. I’m used to worse than that stuff. I’m so used to it I would have agreed to date him just to make him stick around.” Madara brought his hands up, burying his face in them. “I didn’t like him even as a friend. I’d be lying if I said I did. But he was my friend. I could count on that. When I got online to the chatroom we were in, he’d greet me. And now… Hah.”

“What’s the punchline here?” Kurou asked, picking up on Madara’s bitter laugh.

“It’s obvious I can’t make it through. The three of us… The founders of that chatroom… I can’t be the sole survivor. The three of us will all just die in Killing Games. Mayu. Kanoshi. And me.”
“Who’s Mayu?” Kurou asked.

Madara brought his hands away, and stony-faced, explained, “The other friend I could count on. Mayu Wang. She was older than us, but a really good friend. She also became a victim in the fifty-first Killing Game. By that time… I was already used to losing people physically around me, but I never thought I’d lose her. Online, nobody had to know the things that make me poison to be around. But instead… I still infected them. It just took years for the venom to work.”

“Don’t say that about yourself,” Kurou said, “It’s pointlessly cruel. What good does it do anybody, to claim that it’s somehow your fault that these people died independently of your influence?”

But before Madara could put together some reason why, an explanation, an excuse, the clock struck seven on the father and the boy who never really had one, and they fell to a dreamless sleep once more.
“So, I’m really sorry to say this, but Amai, Dia, the two of you are *not* the winners of this challenge,” Monokuma explained, bracing itself to be yelled at.

“Excuse me!?” Amai yelled, but more at the air than actually at Monokuma. “How? How did we lose? How are we not the victors? What is going on? This is my challenge. It is mine. Fuck you. What?”

“Well, you definitely would have won if you didn’t give out that ingredient list,” Monokuma said, “But you actually did manufacture a fair competition. The thing is, everything here seems accurate, buuuuuut…” Monokuma reached out and lifted the steak on the example plate, revealing the hidden yorkshire pudding square beneath it. “You did miss one whole component.”

“...Oh.” Amai blinked at the offending pastry.

“Um… So the winner, actually noticed that thing, I assume?” Dia wondered aloud.

“Yes, exactly. Asahi and Shirogane took notice of the Yorkshire Pudding, as did Madara and Ueda. Only that first group *also* picked the right beer, so they win for most accurate,” Monokuma explained, “Please don’t hold it against them!”

“Well…” Amai crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. “I guess it’s not like it’s a big deal, or anything. I already won in the last round, and there isn’t even a prize for me cause I lost ward privileges. I just thought it would’ve been nice if Dia coulda won something! I even said to her, hey you, get on my coattails and we’ll get you a prize!”

“She did, worded exactly like that. It was a somewhat awkward statement,” Dia said, “But, you know, I don’t really need to win anything. I’ve been in the challenge before, and I sometimes won stuff there.”

“Did this challenge… Ever actually lead to a murder?” Monokuma was actually the one to wonder this.

“I have no idea. The game always reset back to the start after the conclusion of the fourth challenge,” Dia explained, “Whatever that fourth challenge ended up being. Because, well, I could never be allowed to see the top floor. Hiding the Mastermind’s identity was still important in the false games.”

“Ah, that’s fair, that’s fair,” Monokuma said.

“Hey… Did you hang me out to dry, Diaaaaa?” Amai asked, putting on a sugary affect like she would find it amusing (she wouldn’t) if Dia had. “Couldn’t you have told me the Yorkshire Pudding was there?”

“Well, no. The meal was usually two onigiri and a bowl of udon,” Dia said, “I mean, I probably could still tell you the ingredients for all that! But that doesn’t really help us here, now does it?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true,” Amai’s tone returned to normal. “Actually, I’m way less annoyed about this than I would usually be about losing a cooking competition. I think it’s because mine is definitely still the best even if it’s not accurate!”
“I can’t taste the food so I couldn’t tell you,” Monokuma said, “But I’m definitely assuming so!”

“It’s a foregone conclusion.” Amai grinned. “Now, shoo! Get! I’m sure we’re not the last people you have to let know we lost.”

“Certainly not! But anyway, at the top of the hour you’re gonna be knocked out again, feel free to eat from the sample meal or your own recreation until then. Bye!” Monokuma then sunk through the floor, the way that it often did. It was gone, leaving Amai and Dia to their own devices.

“I’m eating my own meal, for sure,” Amai said, sitting down. She’d tasted the sample to figure out its ingredients, but spit it into a napkin shortly after. She really was just unable to reconcile herself with eating anything not made by herself if she was capable of it. Ultimate Baker’s bread, she couldn’t make herself, so it was an exception. As were most beverages. Mixology was something left untouched by her talent.

“Is it okay if I just eat some of the potatoes?” Dia asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Amai said, “Kale’s bound to be too slimy for you, right? And this particular cut of steak is a really fatty one. It tastes good, but it’s not really up your alley, huh?”

“Definitely not,” Dia said, and took the other seat to swipe potatoes as Amai ate the rest of the meal. “It’s kind of… No, it’s super annoying! Ugh! Why’d the person who programmed me have to be so good at making actual human people out of code that I’ve got all this brainweird going on? And bad vision too? Jeeze!”

“Well, I got nothing on the sight thing,” Amai said, “But if you were just brainnormal, then you totally wouldn’t fit in with this motley crew we got going on here! Like, Kurou is on the edge of too normal for us, and he met his wife when she was in the midst of committing an act of manslaughter! We’re all messes. We probably wouldn’t like you if you were some perfect person.”

“Which is why everyone likes me so much better now that I’m not trying to be Box, huh?”

“Yeah. Box was about as close as you can get, to a perfect person,” Amai said, “That was the problem. Nobody can keep that up. It was… Too much. I really don’t blame her for what she did. I know it might have seemed that way. When I thought it was you and that she somehow lived and never told me. But, I mean. I always keep thinking, about ways it could have been different. That she could have, I dunno. Run away with me and everything would have been just fucking fine. But I don’t blame her. For dying. It was one of the only options, and the option of me just wasn’t good enough.”

“...Don’t say that,” Dia said, “You were. The option was, I mean. She really did consider it. But… She felt like that would be asking too much of you. She was always the person doing things for others. So to ask you for anything… She couldn’t manage that.”

“You know. I kind of forgot that you’d be able to answer that for me,” Amai said, “It’s a little freaky. That you get to… Have been inside her head. Well, get to is probably the wrong word, huh? More like forced to.”

“Yeah,” Dia said, “More like forced to. But I do have her memories. I know what she thought about things. And when it came to you… I think… If she’d been making the decision a year earlier, she would have picked you. But by then? It was too late for her. Things could have been great for you both, it’s possible, but it didn’t happen. And it couldn’t, by the time she realized it was an option.”
“I know. All I can do now… Is move on.”
4:00 pm / 1600 Hours

Over the past hour, two things had become very obvious. One was that Nami and Goro both had absolutely no experience with proper cooking, and the other was that they were not going to have any chance at winning. It would probably also take them two more hours to finish making anything that even vaguely resembled the meal, because one hour in all they’d really accomplished was peeling the potatoes and cutting up some garlic, both things which Nami ineptly began, and Goro took over when he noticed how much she was struggling.

The only cooking skill between the two of them was Goro’s knife skills. That was actually the extent of it.

“Be careful peeling those potatoes,” Nami said, over his shoulder. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I won’t! Jeeze.” Goro laughed a bit. “I know my way around a knife. Way better than you. You were gonna hurt yourself trying to peel them.”

“Yeah, probably,” Nami admitted, “It isn’t my fault. I never spent enough time needing to feed myself, to learn how to cook. Tomoe handled it for years, then Kira did. When I was alone I mostly just had takeout and frozen food… The world really is at a point where not knowing how to cook isn’t a huge setback!”

“It isn’t! Except in this challenge. Which we still need to put something together for. I wonder just how much of it we need to recreate to count as complete?” Goro put the last potato into the bowl. “Cause, I know it’s being judged on accuracy. Do you think we could just put mashed potatoes on the plate, say we’re done, and come in last place?”

“No, I don’t think that would be allowed,” Nami said, “Unfortunately, there’s more to a challenge than giving up.”

“Yeah, yeah. We need to make an effort and everything.” Goro lifted the container of potatoes then. “I never learned to cook, either. There wasn’t much reason for me to spend my time on that…”

“Mm, I can imagine,” Nami said, “It’s okay, though. Sayaka can cook… And I’m sure she could teach us. I mean, I don’t really care to learn, but it’d be good for me, so I probably should. And you, too! If you’re ever gonna live on your own, or even with somebody who doesn’t just love to cook always, you’ll have to know.”

“Yeah, I kinda do want to learn to cook for real,” Goro said, “Someday. Cause, I think that someday I’ll wanna cook for somebody. I don’t think I could ever live alone, though. It’s just not safe for me.”

“Probably not… But, you know. Don’t you also have some trouble with being around people too much?”

“It’s a whole mess, huh? I can’t be left alone or I’ll turn up dead, that’s something about me that can’t be denied and I’m not even sure if it can be changed. But I also want to be alone, just to be left alone to think and recharge and I dunno where to draw the line.” Goro set down the potatoes to bury his face in his hands. “It’s tough. It’s really tough, yknow? I have no clue, where ‘I need to be
alone’ ends and ‘I shouldn’t be alone’ begins.”

“Sometimes, it’s both at once,” Nami said, “And that’s what makes it hard. I understand. I think that’s why it’s important, to find people who you can be alone together with. People who can be there for you, but whose presence doesn’t sap your energy.”

“Like?”

“Like, well. Torimi, for example. We could sit in a room and both do our own things for hours. Doing this was still relaxing, recharging from being social. But if anything did go wrong, or we decided that we did actually want to be social, the other was there,” Nami explained, “And it’s good to find people like that. Somebody who you can be with, and it doesn’t make you any weaker. I think… Sayaka will be the same way, for me, but honestly. We haven’t been able to test it yet. There isn’t a real way for us both to be recharging alone and doing our own things in this facility. I’m hoping, though… “

“I’m sure it will be,” Goro said, then smiled. “And hopefully… The three of us could be like that too, right?”

“Oh, did Sayaka mention it? That we want you to stay with us?” Nami wondered.

Goro shrugged, and his smile became that lazy grin instead. “Nahh, I just figured, I’d imply that I’d like to and see how you’d react. That’s real good to know, though! Cause, it isn’t like I’ve got anywhere else to go back to. ‘Cept Kiyoshi, I guess. I’m sure I could still work with him. From a logistics standpoint. Wouldn’t last too long, though, eh?”

“Definitely not,” Nami said, “You’re way better off with us. Scratch that, not just better off. You had better come live with us, or else we’ll be way too worried for forever. Be a safe boy.”

“I will be a safe boy!” Goro confirmed, “I want to, anyway. It’s really weird that I want to. But I want to. Huh. Guess that’s kind of something about us. Yeah? Yeah?”

“What do you mean?”

“Me and Dia and I bet a whole lot of people here,” Goro said, “We thought we wanted to die. We did wanna die. We didn’t wanna live at all or be safe or even really want to be happy because it didn’t feel like that was possible. Like… None of us were that scared of being killed. Because it’s fine to be killed. But now… We’ve been in this situation, this terrible and frightening situation. Lots of bad things have happened. But for some reason, now, it feels like… Happiness is something we can find if we can just manage to survive.”

“That’s because it’s true,” Nami said, and put a hand on his head. “It’s true. All of what you said, it’s true. About wanting to die and wanting to live. And we can be happy. Trust me, no matter what, we’ll be able to be happy. All of us who make it through.”
Location: Hope's Vestige, Towa City, Japan  
Date: 21XX, September 23rd  
Time: 2000 Hours

Natsuki had been given a room in the wing with the Failed Ultimates, rather than the True Radicals. She'd already hit it off with them, after all, being the provider of Maki’s cat body. She also didn’t get on as well with the True Radicals collection of people, except for one. There was one person, whose room was next to Iwako’s. Natsuki hadn’t exactly hit it off with her yet. But she wanted to.

Maki was already getting used to her body, and Natsuki was already tending to the plants just outside of Hope’s Vestige. Just a little bit of TLC from her and they were already looking brighter. The facility had no need for nice landscaping, but there was grass and weeds and wildflowers, as well as some shrubbery. Just enough to keep Natsuki entertained for a little bit. She appreciated plants like these. The hearty types, that could grow anywhere. She could grow these things absolutely anywhere, even on another planet, she figured.

Grasses, weeds, and wildflowers. They could grow anywhere the liked, and they could improve soil quality. Loosen it up. Pave the way for more plants to grow. Natsuki had experience with terraforming gardens, even though most of her official work was in greenhouses. The tragedy had environmental effects too, so she tried to spread growth wherever she could. It was irresponsible to keep a clinical lawn in this day and age. Over time, anywhere could be transformed. Wildflowers and grasses and weeds. Wonderful, resilient things.

And rolling over one of those grasses was a wheel. Natsuki hadn’t gone to find this woman yet because she wasn’t ready to try and talk to her yet, but here she was.

“Nagata, was it?” She asked, looking down at where Natsuki crouched. So, she stood up.

“Yes, miss. Natsuki Nagata.” She gave a short bow, then straightened up again. “It’s really good to meet you, Doctor Kirisame. I’ve followed and admired your work for quite some time, actually.”

“My work? Hm. I didn’t expect a botanist to be interested in what I do, but I certainly can’t blame you.” Megumi crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “Though, I can imagine your initial interest may have had nothing to do with your own talents, did it?”

“Er, well. No.” Natsuki rubbed at her prosthetic arm with the flesh-and-blood one. “But honestly, can you blame me? And, it’s interesting stuff. I listen to a lot of your talks while I work. I think the plants like your voice, too. Just… So you know? Fuck. That’s stupid. Why would you need to know that?”

“Well, I appreciate hearing it. Even if it’s a given that your plants would appreciate my genius,” Megumi said, “It’s still nice to know, that I can somehow help even with something like that.”

“Oh! Thank you,” Natsuki said.

“But more to the point. The reason for your interest in my work… It’s more like interest in my success, isn’t it?” Megumi adjusted her hair. “Because of what we have in common with each other.”
“Well, there’s a couple of things we have in common!” Natsuki blurted, letting a bit too much enthusiasm into her voice, then shrunk in her embarrassment. “I mean. Sorry, yes. My leg. And both of yours. Uh. It is what originally caught my eye. The fact that somebody like… Me, could find such undeniable, widespread success.”

“Oh no, please do go on,” Megumi said, “The other thing we have in common. Don’t be shy.”

“Well.” Natsuki flushed, looking away from the woman she considered her hero. “I am, well. Also a girl genius, if I do say so myself. I may be the Ultimate Botanist, but that’s not all that I’ve done. Rei helped a little, but I made these prosthetics all on my own. I partially decoded the Ultimate Plan in just a few hours. I may not be quite as impressive as you but I really look up to and admire you and I think that we do, in fact. Have these things in common.”

Megumi looked thoughtful for a moment, then grinned. “So it seems that we do. That is impressive, though I must say, you’ve yet to master the golden girl genius specialty of being unflappable. You’re much too flustered to truly follow in my footsteps.”

“I’m sorry! Teach me?” Natsuki asked, then turned even redder. “I mean, no, you don’t, have to. I’m sorry about that. Very sorry. Oops. I. Yikes.”

“Girl genius is not something that can be taught,” Megumi said, “But I suppose if you’d really like somebody like me as your mentor, it would be foolish of me to turn you down. And as I’m sure you do already know, a girl genius is many things, but never a fool.”

“Never a fool, yes miss,” Natsuki said, then gave a two-finger salute with her organic hand.

“So.” Megumi pulled a few small levers on her chair, which crossed her legs into a smug slouch. “Few modifications of my own. Anyway, you made the prosthetics yourself, hm? Explains why they’re so sophisticated, but I sincerely doubt that you’d relate to me if they were perfect.”

“Yeah…” Natsuki admitted, “I can grip things with this hand, but I can’t actually do anything precise. Only my organic hand works for the delicate parts of gardening. And I do get phantom pains… On bad days, I need to use crutches, because it hurts too much to try and walk on the prosthetic. I used to feel really bad and, weak, on those days. But then I heard about you. And you just… Do so well, succeed so much, and you don’t have days when you can walk. The days that I call myself weak are normal for you. And you’re so amazing. So I guess that’s when I decided I can be amazing too.”

“Good. You most certainly can,” Megumi said, “That’s a stupid thing to be hung up over, anyway. If people think less of you because you can’t do one thing? Do five other things just to show them that they’re an absolute moron. From what you told me about yourself, you’re more than capable of that.”

“To some people, it doesn’t matter,” Natsuki said. Then, she took a deep breath. “I… Well, does it ever bother you, too? Sorry if that’s insensitive. You know what I mean.”

“I was never able to walk to begin with,” Megumi said, “If I was given the ability, I wouldn’t even know how. Perhaps when I was younger, it was a point of grief. These days, it’s just a part of who I am. It doesn’t matter to me much at all. But you’re still young, and we’re in different positions. I won’t look down on you for being unable to accept your position. Do you mind if I ask you an equally insensitive question, so we’re even?”

“Ask me all the insensitive questions you like. Uh. Sorry if that’s weird.” Natsuki fidgeted where she stood. “You’re kind of just, my science hero. I promise I’ll be less weird once I get over the
“How did you find yourself in this predicament?” Megumi asked, “Birth, or an accident?”

“Malicious intent,” Natsuki answered, then tilted her head to one side. “Er, I was one of the N kids. My uncle, actually. He sort of. Gradually cut my limbs off.”

“In that case,” Megumi said, “It’s perfectly understandable, that you wouldn’t be at peace with it yet. Even years later. Somebody specifically stole those things from you. I certainly won’t begrudge you for missing them.”

“I’ve had so many people say that I shouldn’t be upset. That it’s wrong of me to feel hurt,” Natsuki said, “Or the other way around, people who say that it’s so terrible what happened to me and like I’m a useless person because of it. But I’m in between, right? And that’s fine.”

“Now you’re talking like a real golden girl.” Megumi grinned. “Trust me. You’re gonna go far, kid.”
Tsukasa Mizuho wasn’t sure what he was expecting from the next Duos Challenge, but it certainly wasn’t to wake up in his underwear. Simple black boxer briefs, so nothing embarrassing, except for the fact that it was his underwear. Across the room was Riko, who had already sat up, legs crossed with a bemused look on her face, like it didn’t even matter to her that she was there in black, solid with a lace trim, panties and a bra.

There was no table in the room this time around, but a cube sign, with the same poster in each of its four cubes.

“Solve this riddle and you will find,
The challenge which is on your mind.
Think real hard and conquer your shame;
So that you can play the game.
Remember once more what I’ve last asked.
The victory task,
Lies part in the past.”

Tsukasa furrowed his brow, not sure what exactly that was supposed to mean, even as he read it through multiple times. Then, he looked back to Riko, who was holding up a message for him.

“It seems like the intention is for us to solve this riddle, then do what the solution says. I’m assuming the fact that we’re in our underwear is intended to throw us off so that we can’t think about it as well.”

“Ah. Well, I’m not especially embarrassed. I mean, personally. I have no shot at being attracted to you, and men’s underwear is basically just kind of shorter shorts. I don’t feel exposed.”

“Oh, I do, but at least I am in the position of trusting you not to care about the fact that I am,” Riko said, “Not that you and I are very close, but I don’t doubt your sexuality or your devotion to your future husband. Were it anybody else, I might be more troubled.”

“Cool, so we’ve at least got that out of the way,” Tsukasa said, “I’ve got no idea what the riddle actually means, though, so that’s a hurdle. I’m going to guess that the bit about conquering shame implies we’re not supposed to think about the fact we’re in our underwear… And also, I’ll assume this is another challenge where the victor is the one who first completes the challenge.”

“We could ask Monokuma?” Riko offered.

“Even though I know technically speaking it would have already seen us in this state,” Tsukasa said, “I’d rather not call it. And especially not Hamuko, since she’s probably in the same position we are, and it’s bad enough with her partner.”

“That’s fair,” Riko said, “So I guess that we just hang out here and try to put our heads together to solve this riddle instead. Sorry to say, I don’t have any ideas yet either. And just sitting here poring over the words probably won’t just inflict an epiphany somehow.”
“So what do you suggest we do instead?” Tsukasa wondered.

Riko shrugged. “I dunno. I just don’t think staring at the riddle will really do anything for us. I’m not sure what we could talk about, though. The pitfalls of being rich?”

“Well for one, we have no sense of scale,” Tsukasa said.

“EXCUSE YOU I CERTAINLY DO,” Riko wrote in giant letters on her whiteboard.

“Heh. sure. Well, I guess I kind of don’t. Or, well, I’m not exactly the typical upper-crust, so I’ve been told. I try to live kind of modestly, and I don’t mind making less money for my employees’ sakes, or giving my money away to people,” Tsukasa said, “People say it’s because I got handed the business by my uncle, without formal training or anything.”

Riko tilted her head, and motioned for him to go on.

“Well, basically…” Tsukasa said, “I became the CEO to be a scapegoat. I’d go to jail, or take the fall, when things went south in the company. But I did get some amount of power, otherwise everyone would realize that I was really just a figurehead scapegoat and still go after my uncle. But the company didn’t go south, when I used that amount of power. I was able to turn it north instead, actually. That’s how I could discover a talent like mine at such a young age…”

“That’s impressive. I can see how our talents are completely different things,” Riko said, “My talent is… Unimpressive, as these things go. The Ultimate Heir has it, right there in the name, that my talent is in part the result of somebody else’s actions. Really, it just means that I’ve done everything right, to inherit something that’s already considered ‘great’. I’m the Ultimate… Follow-up to my father’s work.”

“Well, maybe that is what your talent means,” Tsukasa said, “But you’re more than your talent. I mean, your own ward is being used at storage. You have an empty talent. You were declared an Ultimate, arbitrarily. That’s fine. Because you’re a person beyond that. You’ve got hobbies and friends and you don’t need to theme your existence over who your father is.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t just separate it like that. It doesn’t matter how empty my talent is, I still have it, and it still defines what’s expected of me.”

“Why does it matter what people expect of you?” Tsukasa wondered, “If I did what people expected of me, I’d have ended up in jail.”

“That’s another difference between us. The pressure on you is to run your business. The pressure on me is to uphold the company’s entire public image. You have no formal training, so everything you do well is seen as something that you get to succeed at. Job well done for the everyman. I’ve got… A legacy to hold up. A perspective that can’t slip away. If I succeed, it’s just another day for Asahi. Even if you’ve been in situations where you needed to do bad things for HR… I envy your freedom in general.”

“...Yeah, I can see that. I’m sorry that you’ve had to deal with all of that,” Tsukasa admitted, “I’m not going to come up with excuses for myself. No matter what, my position does give me more freedom than you. I’m a normal guy who just got handed a company, while you’re an heiress who’s been trained since birth to inherit an international business. Those are definitely not the same thing.”

“Thank you. I’m glad that you’ll admit that. I’m a bit used to having my feelings on this matter invalidated… So, thank you. For acknowledging me.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Three (Torimi and Kurou)

9:00 pm / 2100 hours

“Waaaah!” Torimi shrieked the moment she woke up, scrambling into a seated position and shaping herself into a pretzel, back against the wall, knees to her chest. Basically, the most frantic attempt to cover the fact that she was most certainly, definitely in her underwear right now. Matching teal bandeau bra and panties without frills; her shirt was off the shoulder, after all, and in spite of her nature, she was still modest enough not to want her bra straps showing all the time.

“Now, that’s a reaction,” Kurou observed from where he sat, unbothered, in his own underwear. Boxers, patterned with little blue flowers. They suited him, somehow. “For somebody who once wanted to see me naked, I wouldn’t consider this level all too shocking. I know that my blazer shapes me up a little bit, but it isn’t magic or-”

“Dummy! It’s the very fact that I got all stuuuupid with you and said I wanted to see you naked that I’m so damn embarrassed right now!” Torimi’s face started to turn red where she was. “And also because, you can’t deny it! Girls in their underwear feel waaaaaay more vulnerable than guys in their underwear! I’m embarrassed and there is too much skin for a friend to be seeing!”

“Well, it’s not like yours is particularly skimpy,” Kurou observed, giving her a completely clinical once-over. “I’ve seen plenty of swimsuits that show much more skin.”

“That really isn’t the pooooint,” Torimi said, but unfolded a bit to lean over and read the riddle on the cube. “This… Thing does say to overcome our shame, though. Soooo I guess I can give it a shot.”

“That’s the spirit!” Kurou confirmed. “Despite overcoming my own shame with ease, I still have no idea what this riddle could be referring to. So that’s just one step of it.”

“Obviously, overcoming shaaaame is just what you gotta do to be able to focus on riddle-solving,” Torimi said, “It isn’t the magic key.”

“Do you think there is a magic key?” Kurou wondered.

“It’s a riddle, the magic keeeey is thinking the right way,” Torimi said, “This is actually kinda weeeeeeird. Having us figure out puzzles and riddles… It reminds me of something.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Kurou wondered.

“Welllll, scientists have always been trying to figure out what the deaaaaal is with people like me. Fortunetellers. Diviners. Those who can see beyond the constraints of natural tiiiime,” Torimi said, “And there’s a theory. That one can draw out the most accurate of these visiooooons through a combination of two things. Danger and epiphany.”

“Yeah, so?” Kurou wondered.

“Well, it’s been attempted a feeeew times in history, though it mostly finds its place as pseudoscience in games,” Torimi said, “But there’s the idea, then. To soooolve puzzles, with your life at stake. And then your powers will appeaaaar.”
“Is that really true?”

“Oh, of fuckin’ course it ain’t.” Torimi cackled. “You kidding me? Danger and epiphany. Suuuure, those can help, but it’s a giiggift. You can’t leaaaarn this stuff. Somebody with no divination power? Ain’t gonna suddenly become a psychic with a sudoku puzzle and encroaching dooooom.”

“That’s fair,” Kurou said, “And our own encroaching doom isn’t really any more encroaching during this challenge than it has been the whole time through this game. I mean, kinda feels even less encroaching, since nobody outside of our pairings has access to even attempt a murder.”

“Yeeeeeeah, that does kind of damper the whole doooom thing,” Torimi agreed, then looked up and locked eyes with Kurou. “Hey. Kurou?”

“Yeah, Torimi?” Kurou asked.

“I hooope you understand…” She looked back down. “No matter how I was when I had the fever. Or what I might saaaaay. You haven’t disappointed me. At all. I’m perfectly happy to be your friend. Reaaaally… I don’t think I’d wanna be anything other than your friend. Even though I’m attracted to you. I actually like you, as a person. I usually don’t see guys I sleeep with, ever again. And, anyway. It wouldn’t work. You’re right. You and me are in different worlds. Even if you’d daaaate me, for real. I’m a teen girl. You’re a dad.”

“Don’t worry.” He reached out and pet her hair. “I was never under any impression otherwise. I think maybe seventy-percent of the decision not to pursue somebody romantically is actually just common sense stuff, so without that, of course you’d be weird. I gotta admit, though. It’s a little strange. I know you were getting action, before this game. Even if it wasn’t, uh. Good for you. What would make you that desperate, with your common sense stripped away?”

“Well, it’s…” Torimi mumbled, “Kind of what I’m good for.”

“Er. I’m sorry if you don’t want to hear this, but that sounds. Really concerning,” Kurou said.

“Haaaah… Yeah, sorry. It’s nothing like what that implies. It’s not like I’ve… Ever been fooooorced to do anything. It’s more like, ah. For a little whiiile. I get to feel loved. Even if it won’t last. Even if it’s bad for me. Somebody looooves me, just. A bit. Even if they don’t.”

“Hey.” Kurou lowered his hand from her hair to her shoulder instead, and gave it a little shake. “Maybe it’s not the way you’re thinking, but people do love you. Nami loves you. I love you. We’re your friends and we want to be here for you, no matter what.”

“Do yoooou… Really mean that?” Torimi asked, looking him in the eyes again.

“I do,” Kurou said, then tilted his head with a bit of a chuckle. “I mean, why would you doubt me? It doesn’t matter now. Maybe nobody ever loved you before. I don’t know if that’s the case. But we do. Your friends.”

“I’m…” Torimi frowned. “Not the lovable sort of peeeerson.”

“I think that’s just a lie,” Kurou said, “You’re a good kid. Even if you’re confused about certain things, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. There isn’t any reason, not to like you. At least from where I stand. And if you’re in a position where you think that… I’m sorry, but the people in your life before now failed you pretty badly. Whatever sort of family you had. Your friends are your family now.”

“...Thaaank you, Kurou,” Torimi said, then leaned forward and hugged him. “You really are… A
great friend.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Three (Madara and Randy)

9:00 pm / 2100 hours

Madara groaned when he woke up, because he could immediately tell what the situation was. Then, he sat up and actually looked over to who his partner was. Ah, Randy. So the algorithm had a sense of humor. Funny. Madara was in red boxers, while Randy had light blue boxer-briefs, and Madara had the chuckle at the barely-visible scars on Randy’s chest.

“Course your boyfriend was able to pay for the fancy surgery, huh?” Madara pointed out. “Didn’t know what to look for, I’d never even be able to tell. As for me, well. Sorry you had to see this.”

“I. Uh. Well.” Randy was clearly searching for the words. “It’s not so much sorry that I had to see it, but, more. Well. Uh. What the fuck happened?”

“Well.” Madara gestured to himself. His bare chest was covered with ugly scar tissue; It was flat, sure, but not very nice to look at, at all. “Some of us don’t have a rich boyfriend, or patience. Besides. I’ve always had a pretty high pain tolerance.”

“Are you…” Randy furrowed his brow, inching away. “Are you trying to tell me that you did your own top surgery?”

“You can find tutorials for anything online, these days,” Madara said, “Five minute crafts; remove your own chest tumors. That’s dysphoria for you.”

“I mean. Uh, I guess I never really got to a point where I’d consider doing something like that, but. That’s kind of. You can’t have done it medically properly, so now I’m kind of worried for your safety,” Randy said, “How did you even…”

“I bit down on a wooden spoon, hit a paring knife with a blowtorch, and got to work.” Madara shrugged. “I gave the sugar thing a shot, but never had the pure luck to find a guy who’d actually fund it for me. So one night I was just fucking fed up and so I did it. If I die, I die.”

“You… Wait, what?” Randy questioned, “What kind of life have you even lived, Madara? I. I’m kinda confused, gotta admit. I’m dummy.”

“It’s not that complicated,” Madara said, “Got kicked out, couch-surfed in various unsuccessful ways, then decided to just stick things out for myself, fix the shit I hated and make my own way on the streets. Simple.”

“Are you telling me that you cut off your own boobs while homeless?”

“Chest tumors. But, yes.”

“Wh-”

“Calling them that is more accurate, in my book. Cis people don’t really understand how a part of your own body could be slowly killing you unless you make a cancer analogy. I’d rather die from botching the surgery, than keep being so miserable all the time. So call me crazy.”

“Well, I’m not going to say you’re crazy…” Randy shifted where he sat. “Obviously, I get the feeling. I just don’t really get acting on that feeling. Especially, it’s just. It’s dangerous. You’ve got to acknowledge that, right?”
“Of course I do. But like I said. I don’t really care if I die, I’d just rather die feeling some amount of comfortable with myself, than counting down the days to when I get so mad I kill myself,” Madara said, “Obviously, uh. It didn’t exactly solve all of my issues. But the fact that I’ve lived this long, I do attribute to deciding that I was done trying to be somebody I never was. And the actions I took to ensure that. That includes all of this. I don’t care if it’s ugly. It doesn’t distress me anymore, this way. I’ll be frank with you. I’d rather look like a monster, than look like a girl.”

“I… Yeah. I can get that,” Randy said, “I’m sorry you had to deal with that. I… You’re right, about my situation compared to yours. I was able to start transition just about as soon as my egg cracked, thanks to Tsukasa. I didn’t have to sit and suffer with the stuff that was incorrect. The minute I became aware of what was wrong, I was already in the process of fixing it. So, for you…”

“Mm. I knew, for years. And had to deal with it. I tried. Really tried, over and over. Not to be like this. Not to be Tsukune Madara. But I’m just not that good at acting,” Madara explained, “But I am, this guy. I’m trans, and aromantic, and asexual, and that’s a whole mess. It’s unfortunate. But trying not to be any of those things? I’m just not capable.”

“You don’t need to be anybody other than who you are,” Randy said.

“These days? Yeah. I mean, I can take care of myself. And I dealt with my own problems. But it hasn’t always been this way,” Madara said, “I used to need other people. And I thought that the only way to get those other people would be if I made myself palatable to them. I now know that’s unnecessary. It’s still a bit of an obnoxious thing, to be on edge, worrying at each turn that the people I meet are going to end up abandoning me for something or another, but…”

“At least now,” Madara continued, “At least now, it doesn’t matter. People can leave me behind all that they want. It’ll hurt, but I’d be okay. I don’t need anybody else, in order to survive. And I get more happiness… Out of my own existence, than I do from the way others relate to me.”

“That’s… Huh. I guess that’s actually a good outlook to have,” Randy admitted, “Me, I guess I care too much about what other people think of me.”

“I never would’ve been able to tell. That’s for real. The way you carry yourself… It kind of seems to me like if you care what people think of you, that only applies to the people you’d want to be on good terms with, anyhow. You don’t exactly make a good universal first impression.”

“Well… Yeah, maybe I don’t. I’ll admit that, no sweat. At the same time, it’s the social stuff which gets me more than the physical stuff. I dunno where I’d be, without other people.”

“Lucky for you. You’ll always have somebody or other there to catch you. That’s the real difference. You’re likeable. At heart, I’m not.”

“Well, then you’re just like me after all. You need to find the right type of people, to care what they think about you. Maybe you have and you don’t realize it. After all, you apologized to me, for needing to see your scars. Like it mattered what I thought of them.”

“Maybe it does. Maybe, I guess, it does.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Three (Amai and Tsumugi)

9:00 pm / 2100 hours

Tsumugi Shirogane hadn’t really expected to be put in this position. The Duos Challenge, in general, was awfully stressful, but this was even more ridiculous. It wasn’t so much, that her undergarments were any more revealing than a swimsuit. She could acknowledge that fact, and it wasn’t that which threw her for a loop. It was just being here, alone, with Amai Oishi.

“What are you looking at?” Amai questioned from across the room. “Look, I may be cute, but it’s only been dead for five days.”

“It’s been five days already…?” Tsumugi asked, turning her eyes to the ceiling. “It doesn’t… I. I can’t keep track, of days, anymore. I don’t. Know.”

“Uh. Yeah, it’s been five days,” Amai said, “I guess I can see why you wouldn’t realize that, though. This shit’s been really hard on you, huh? But it isn’t like… This is a new problem, is it?”

“What?” Tsumugi asked.

“You don’t take to loss very well, is all. That’s what I think,” Amai said, “Something or other, you always get reckless. With that friend of yours, it was murder for revenge. But there’s other ways to fall to pieces too, yeah?”

Tsumugi didn’t answer.

“We don’t gotta talk about it,” Amai said, “I’m pretty sure you don’t want to. If you do need to, sometime, though. I mean. I am here. I know. So you don’t have to explain anything, if you decide that you need to. Okay?”

Tsumugi thought for a few moments, then nodded. “Okay. Thank you, Amai.”

“Moving on, then!” Amai clapped her hands together. “We’ve got this riddle thing right here, and I guess we gotta solve it to move on, huh? Figure out we’re s’posed to do something to qualify. Guessing it’s just not enough, looks like.”

“Oh, yes,” Tsumugi said, “Looking at it, those conclusions do seem reasonable. Well then, any ideas on what it is, exactly, that we are meant to do here?”

“Well, on that front, I’m coming up empty,” Amai admitted, “I may be super smart and intelligent and all that, but at the same time, it’s just not clicking. Eh, I’ll get it eventually. In the meantime, well. Aside from the stuff we aren’t gonna talk about, how are you holding up? How’s the Duos Challenge treating you?”

“Well, I was with Mizuho for the jigsaw puzzle, and with Asahi for this last cooking one. Actually, we’re the group that won… She’s fairly skilled, and since I had to be the one to taste the meal for her, I guess we were more thorough than the other groups.”

“Ah, so you’re the ones,” Amai said, “Bested by Yorkshire Pudding… I can’t believe I was so stupid! But, hey, my ward doesn’t even exist anymore, so I guess I don’t have to win stuff.”

“Oh! Apparently, my own ward’s already had its prize removed from the ReWard panel,” Tsumugi said, “So there isn’t much point to me winning anything, either… Unless we decided to ask for a
dead person’s key.”

“Would you like, wanna give it a shot for Akamatsu’s?” Amai wondered.

“Well… No, not particularly,” Tsumugi said, “Asahi got the one for Kaguya’s… The dead Kaguya, I mean, who you never met. And I think from the way Mono answered, that it was a good idea to do that. As for Kaede’s, I… Don’t know if that would do much.”

“So, we just stall, even if we solve the riddle, till we’re sure somebody else would have solved it?” Amai offered, “Let somebody have a win who hasn’t won one yet, since we both have?”

“That’s surprisingly gallant of you,” Tsumugi said, “I kind of thought you were the type to want to win, no matter if somebody else would like winning more.”

“Well, maybe a little bit. But I got to beat Madara at the puzzle,” Amai said, “And I managed to lose at cooking, but since I lost to you and Asahi, I guess it’s fine. That’s all I really need. Stick it to Madara, and it would’ve been cool to win at my actual talent, but at least Madara didn’t either.”

“Heh.” Tsumugi chuckled, just a little bit. “You and Madara, well, you really are at each other’s throats, aren’t you? But I think you’re both having fun with it, too.”

“That’s not untrue, I guess,” Amai said, “Something about him is just on the right wavelength? We can go toe to toe, without ever actually crossing a line. So I figure, you might go ahead and consider us rivals. Has a nice ring to it, right?”

“What, that you’re rivals? Well…” Tsumugi thought for a moment. “Oh, yes, I guess so. It makes sense if you put it that way, although, what are you rivals in?”

“In all things! In existence and being intelligent,” Amai said, and gave a smug nod with a hand under her chin. “Right now, the score is in my favor, of course. Until Madara wins one of these challenges… Then I’ll be interested in winning again. This is my form of self-improvement! I no longer need to be better than everybody. I require only to be better than my rival.”

“Mm! Well, I hope that you have fun with that,” Tsumugi said, “It’s nice to see, though.”

“Eh?”

“Well, what you were saying. That you can go toe-to-toe without crossing any lines. I feel like before, you didn’t understand those lines at all. You knew what was crossing a line in regards to you, but not in regards to other people, right?”

“Ah… No. I mean. I knew. I definitely knew when I was crossing a line and doing something wrong,” Amai said, “It’s making me out to be a better person than I am, to say that I didn’t know or realize that I was being cruel. I knew exactly what I was doing. It’s half of my talent, after all, I need to be aware of those things. I just didn’t care. I wanted to hurt people.”

“Why, then?” Tsumugi asked, “Why did you want to hurt people?”

“Because I was scared,” Amai admitted, “Scared, and betrayed, and angry. Lots of negative stuff going on. I didn’t care. I just wanted to hurt people to keep myself safe, no matter what. It didn’t matter how they felt. If it kept them away from hurting me, then I was satisfied. That’s the kind of person I am. So don’t say I’m not. Just understand I’m trying to be better.”

“I really do understand that,” Tsumugi said, “In spite of everything. I’m in the same boat.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Three (Goro and Dia)

9:00 pm / 2100 hours

Dia had never actually experienced this before.

Odd as it was, this wasn’t something that had been used in the Duos Challenge in any of the false Killing Games, so even if she was permitted to give the answer to a riddle, she didn’t even know this one. She noticed the writing first, actually, before realizing that she was in her underwear. It wasn’t that embarrassing, for her. Fitting in with her soft rococo style, her undergarments were quite covering.

Likewise, her partner for this challenge was relatively covered up as well. He wore briefs and an undershirt, which it seems he was allowed to keep. Not to mention the fact that he was rather thoroughly bandaged, still. “Hi, Goro.”

“All right, Dia…” Goro lifted his good hand and waved. “I guess that if we had to do this challenge, it’s fine to be here with you.”

“Mm. Yeah, I bet,” Dia said, “It’s weird, isn’t it? Putting us in our underwear Mhm, like this… And I know that the pairs are decided pretty much randomly, so it isn’t like anyone’s looking out for us, to put actual friends in the underwear challenge. Um… By the way, this one’s brand new. None of the fake games had this.”

“I kind of figured as much, somehow?” Goro noted, “It’s nice that I got to keep my undershirt, but the glove…”

“I’m sure all of our clothes will be returned during the next challenge,” Dia said, then looked over. “And it isn’t like… I didn’t already know about that.”

“…Right, yeah. You’ve seen my arms before this,” Goro said, “And even if you didn’t some other version of me, I bet. Ugh. It’s…”

“What everybody did,” Dia finished the statement. “In Matsubara’s ‘care’. Ryouma started it first. It was a terrible coping method, but it worked. She showed you how to make sure it wouldn’t kill you. Showed you how to cover it up. She couldn’t use her thighs with short skirts and that’s why it ended up the same for all of you. As far as self-harm goes… It wasn’t the worst thing you could be doing. She was doing her best to protect you even in her own misery.”

“Guess I told you all about that in one of the other games, huh?”

“Mhm,” Dia said, “It’s okay, though. I kind of understand.”

“You’re able to cover it up, though. Even now, you’re covering them,” Goro said, “Cause you can control your appearance. But that’s gotta take energy, right? Just let go of it. I can tell, so… Hey.” Goro crawled over to Dia, brow furrowed as he looked at her arms, and legs as well. “Actually, I guess this isn’t quite what I was expecting.”

“Well, unlike you, I wasn’t carrying a scalpel everywhere I went or anything.” Dia tilted her head, and frowned. “And it’s not like this was intentional, either. It’s more like… Well, I was wearing somebody else’s skin. So I guess sometimes I thought, I could scrape it off. Of course, if I went completely to my natural appearance…”
“Do it. It’s not like I’ll change how I think of you,” Goro said, then stared, not quite in shock but in some form of awe, when she did. She was absolutely covered in scars of varying shapes, sizes, sorts altogether. Several lined up with the injuries that appeared while her image as ‘Box’ was falling apart. Yet others were completely unseen before.

“Are you sure about that?” Dia asked, her voice faint.

“Well, maybe it does change how I think about you, just a little bit. Kinda makes me see. Just how brave my best friend is,” Goro said, reaching out towards one of the scars, but stopping short. “So you’re telling me that… Every time you died. The marks of those stuck around on your real, actual self?”

“Yes. Because it’s me, who died. Box was already dead,” Dia said, “It’s awful. It looks awful and I hate it. So if I can hide that… I will.”

“...Your eyes.” Goro noticed it. “They’re not purple here, either. Why are you changing them?”

“My eyes? Ah… I don’t know if I ever noticed that. What color are they right now?”

“They’re pink, actually. That’s your favorite color, isn’t it?” Goro wondered, “So of course, if you’re letting down all pretense and just being Dia… The real Dia, who’s been through all of that, then they’d match.”

“Oh... Oh I…” Dia brought a hand up, tapping the outside of her glasses. “That’s nice, I think. It’s nice. My eyes are pink?”

“They are,” Goro said, “When you’re really, truly not trying to be anybody else. Come on. You’re Dia Hamuko! You’ve lived through seven years worth of Killing Games. You’ve died over and over again and you still get back up and love us all, the people who’ve killed you all those times before.”
“Hey now.” Dia shifted the way she sat, and smiled at him. “Don’t start idolizing me the way you did with Nami, now! I’m just a person, like all of you. Just because I’m traumatized doesn’t change that.”

“Yeah,” Goro said, “I know! Yeah. I mean, I can’t idolize you if I still think you’re making a mistake.”

“What mistake?” Dia asked.

“Well, the way you normally present yourself to us. You hide your scars, and you still have purple eyes. Even after everything… You’re still faking some things. You’re scared we won’t like you, right? That even though we’re so happy to meet you for real, there’s still things we’d hate you for. But we won’t. No matter what. Oh-kay?”

“That’s rich, coming from the boy who thinks we should all hate him for killing, what, two people?” Dia waved a hand dismissively. “I’ve killed and been killed so many times. And I was aware of it, too, you know. There were scenarios in which killing somebody was actually the best thing to do, for the people I care about. At least, that’s how Box thought about it. Guess that
doesn’t mean a lot now, though. Now that I know she decided the best thing to do for herself was to die. I guess that she… Wasn’t always willing to entertain alternatives to the easy option.”

“Is she… Still here?” Goro asked.

“Usually,” Dia said, “Usually I can hear. What she’d do. What she’d think of what I’m doing. What I’m doing wrong and how I’m not living up to her image. But right now? No. It’s just Dia here. I guess… You’re right.”

“Once in a while, I get to be correct!” Goro said, then clapped a hand to his knee. “Well, there we go. You’re Dia, You always get to be Dia, just Dia, with me. Even if you’re too scared to be just Dia with the others yet. You’re just Dia, and I’m just Goro. That’s all we gotta do. Well, that, and solve this riddle before some random classmate of ours manages to summon you in your underwear, I guess.”

“Oh! Right,” Dia said, “That would be embarrassing. Especially the way I am right now. But they’d only do it accidentally, I think.”

“That’s why we gotta solve it, before they get the chance.” Goro winked, then dragged the sign over to actually read the riddle.
Duos Challenge: Day Fourteen, Challenge Three (Nami and Sayaka)

9:00 pm / 2100 hours

“Oh,” Sayaka mumbled, “I guess that you get to see these a bit early.”

“Snnwha?” Nami questioned from where she was still lying on the ground, then took a moment. Collected herself. Sat up, and took stock. Ah, she was in her underwear. That was okay, she guessed. A bit weird, but with Sayaka, it would have eventually happened anyway. And as for Sayaka… Ah, that made sense. She was wearing a sports bra and boyshorts, both black, and the rest of her body that was visible was covered in tattoos. “Oh shit. Those are cool.”

“Yeah, aren’t they?” Sayaka’s voice grew a bit enthusiastic as she held her arms out. “This one on my shoulder, I got started when I was a really little kid. I can’t even remember a time I didn’t have it. I got started early, and the traditional way, too. It hurt a lot, but after every session I got to pick out a whole box of sweets from the store across the street, and since it meant a lot to me, the pain wasn’t even that big a deal to me…”

“That’s why you wanted long sleeves, huh?” Nami asked.

“Yeah!” Sayaka confirmed, then glanced away. “I’d really like to show them off, but they’re more important than just wearing on display all the time. Most people only show them in ceremonial situations, or when they need to make people afraid of them. Informing people that I’m the Ultimate Little Sister accomplishes exactly the same thing, so it hasn’t been necessary.”

“Oh. Well I think they look super cool,” Nami said, “And, everyone else would also think that they’re super cool. So why don’t you just go ahead and wear short sleeves anyway, sometime? It’s not like you’ll have the chance to show them off otherwise, by those categories.”

“Heh… No, as much as these are important to me, I think I’ll keep them hidden,” Sayaka said, “They’re important. So I’ll only show them in times that make sense, and to people who are really important to me. At the same time, keeping them hidden in my everyday life… Lets it be everyday life. It lets me be a normal girl for at least a little while.”

“Ohh, that makes sense,” Nami said, “Like if people can’t see your tattoos, then you don’t have to be, Yamaguchi?”

“Exactly,” Sayaka said, “I’ve thought about it before, that I like that, sometimes. Just being Sayaka, instead of Yamaguchi. And I think it’s fine for you to see these, because they don’t change that for you. I’m still just Sayaka. Right?”

“Of course!” Nami said, “You’re Sayaka. My girlfriend! And you have some super cool tattoos! Which is nice to know. I’m glad that I get to see them, even if you might not have wanted me to see them yet. I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh, it’s okay. We’re even, since I’m also seeing you in your underwear sooner than you probably wanted me to,” Sayaka said, “You do look cute, though. Um. Does that help, or make it worse?”

“Aww.” Nami giggled. “Thank you. That’s very nice of you to say. Don’t worry, I can fully acknowledge that I’m cute, even like this, with all my memories back and everything. Though you’re right, that I wasn’t really expecting to be in this position so soon in our relationship!”
“Mm. Well, I gotta say, at least on my end. The fact that we got stuck in a room together in our underwear doesn’t actually move the comfort timeline up any further.” Sayaka crossed her legs to sit more casually. “As in, well. Trauma makes a girl wanna take certain things slow, even if we’re kinda a whirlwind, romantically.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m also trauma. Even if some of it is willfully repressed trauma.” Nami mimicked Sayaka’s posing, and crossed her arms. “So, really, it can be super slow. Slow enough for both of us to be comfortable. But, being in the same room in our underwear, doesn’t have to have any innate connotations. So it’s kinda fine. Right?”

“Yeah. I’m actually kinda unbothered by this,” Sayaka said, “You?”

“Uhh, same here! Cool,” Nami said, then glanced at the riddle sign. “That means we already got one part of this riddle down, huh?”

“Yeah! Well… Let’s see, we can probably figure out the rest of it. It can’t be that hard, can it?” Sayaka wondered, peering at it as well. “...Huh. Well, that’s not difficult at all.”

“It isn’t?” Nami asked.

“Obviously. The kitchenette is still partially here, and it says that the solution is in the past. So, it wants us to cook something. Or maybe just throw together a meal. It’s kinda… Simple. I can see why they needed to use embarrassment as a tool to make it harder to solve.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, yeah. Lies in the past. So it’s either cooking or puzzle solving, but there isn’t any puzzle to solve here.”

“Well then!” Sayaka got to her feet and brushed off her legs even though there wasn’t anything to have gotten on her legs. “I’m going to test it out and see what level of cooking qualifies. I’ll start with just making a sandwich. That might even be enough.”

“How will we know?” Nami asked, “If somebody figured it out quicker than us, Mono might only let them know that they got it. Then we’ll just be aimlessly cooking random stuff, even if we succeeded with the sandwich…”

“I’m sure we could get an answer if we just summoned it,” Sayaka said, “But let’s wait and see till we’ve tried something, right?”

“Mm, good plan, I guess,” Nami said, then Sayaka made a sandwich. Without being summoned, Monokuma appeared.

“Congratulations! You have won the underwear challenge!” Monokuma said, and it was also wearing a blue lingerie set. This didn’t mean anything because this was actually more clothing than the bear referee usually wore, but at least it was in the spirit of the challenge as well. “I’m going to give you the Attorney’s Ward ReWard key, assuming that you don’t want anything else. This opens a panel in the ward and gives you a prize. The prize is different during and after the challenge. Get it?”

“That’s a very compressed explanation,” Nami said.

“Eh, I’ve said it twice already, so cut me some slack.”
Hashi decided that it was altogether too early for absolutely any of this, but unfortunately, that decision didn’t mean much to the border guards, or to her traveling companion who insisted that earlier was better. This was how she’d found herself detained without much fanfare at such an unpleasant hour, and without any coffee either. There will be coffee at Hope’s Vestige, Ruri had said. We’ll just pop right in, Ruri said. Well, just because the two of them had been sent for, apparently, didn’t mean that they were expected.

“Purpose of your visit?” The guard asked, for probably the fifth time. Not the same guard. The fifth incidence of the question. Security here was tight, wasn’t it? Hashi couldn’t imagine how she’d been expected to just get in.

“As I told… Er, everybody else…” Hashi fidgeted in her seat, avoiding eye contact, not because she was lying but because she was anxious. “I don’t know what the purpose of my visit is. I was just sent for, in a very official looking letter from Hope’s Vestige.”

“If they sent for you,” The guard said, “Then why didn’t they send you a pass as well? It doesn’t make any sense. And you’re acting suspiciously. Your companion is, as well. It’s pretty obvious, to me, that you’re Despairs trying to infiltrate the city.”

Well… That wasn’t entirely incorrect, given the histories of these two women, but it wasn’t accurate either. Hashi tried to figure out a way to explain this, but was coming up blank. She’d never been great at lying; She left that to… Oh. Well, maybe that could work. “E-Excuse me, pardon me, I swear that I’m not armed in any way. But might I just… Retrieve my laptop from my bag? It’s under my chair.”

“.A moment, Miss,” The guard said. Then, he stepped towards the door. “I am going to step out and close the door. These walls are reinforced. You can retrieve the laptop while I’m outside, and once I’ve visually confirmed it’s a laptop, I’ll come back inside.”

“Thank you very…” Before Hashi could finish her sentence, the guard had already left her alone. She heaved a heavy sigh. This would have been easier if she had the letter and some official documents stating who she was, but unfortunately, ‘Hashi’ was a mere alias. Her actual full name had some unpleasant associations, after all. In most cases, the alias made things much easier for her. Not so much in this case, though.

Well, she retrieved her laptop, opened it, and booted up a particular program. She leaned in close and whispered. “You can’t use your real name with these people. And I need you to come up with a plausible explanation to get us into the city.”

“Well, okay then,” The program said, “I’ll go ahead and use ‘Serika’.”

The guard returned to the room, and Hashi whirled her laptop around, showing Serika on its screen. On it, somebody who would be a yamato nadeshiko if not for the more punkish stylings waved. “Hello! My name is Serika. It’s nice to meet you!”
“Er… Nice to meet you?” The guard questioned.

“I’d like to apologize for my mother,” Serika said, “She can be a bit of a… What’s the word… Absolute fucking blockhead sometimes! Anyway. Let’s you and me talk business.”

“This is highly unorthodox, Miss…”

“It’s just Serika. Come’ on! I’m an AI, I don’t need a last name. And I’m sure that hearing that gives you all the information you need to know, right?” Serika leaned forward on the screen, grinning. “If it doesn’t, big boy, lemme spell it out for you. My mother here has been working with your Junko Enoshima, who, yes. I’m well aware is still alive and operating in this city, as I ought to be. We’ve come here to facilitate further collaboration, but my dear sick mother here, ah, well. She isn’t very good. Socially. Yknow how nerds are. Plus, she was nervous about blabbing. I ain’t. I don’t give a shit about pulling that card. Can we go now?”

“I… Yes, I suppose you’re free to go,” The guard said. Hashi whispered a ‘thank you’ to her daughter before returning the laptop to her bag, and took her leave, meeting up with Ruri outside. Of her children, she made the right choice of who to bring along on this trip. ‘Serika’ had a way of telling lies, being intimidating, and altogether getting herself out of trouble. A practical skill, when her younger siblings had a knack for getting into trouble, and she was hardly excluded from that knack either.

“How’d you swing that?” Ruri asked.

“Oh.” Hashi patted the bag at her side. “Somebody decided to use her own existence as proof to pull the Enoshima card. It’s quite, er… Well, I never would have, because she’s a hack programmer. But I guess in this particular… Situation. It was the r-right thing to do.”

“You’ve been around Kyoko too much,” Ruri said, “She’s getting in your head. Really, the Ultimate Programmer plus-all-other-talents is a hack? That’s funny.”

“I! It’s n-not… I mean… I personally know people better at programming than her. You know? Me, for one. Megumi for anoth…” Hashi found herself trailing off again as she stared at the approaching figures. Kyoko was walking up, flanked by none other than Megumi Kirisame.

“Hello, Hashi,” Megumi said, a shit-eating grin across her face. “Good to see you here. Shame that Kirigiri had to send for you, though. I guess that settles the score on this one. I solved the Ultimate Plan on my own.”

“Haaah… Yes, you take the victory, fair and square!” Hashi admitted, lifting her hands in defeat. “I had to be… Sent for. I assume you’ve already gotten to work, then?”

“Gotten to work? I’ve already done literally all that is possible while they’re still in the NWP,” Megumi said.

“And… Dia?” Hashi wondered, a question which caused Ruri to start laughing at her partner’s predictability.

“Not only is that girl alive, but she’s managed to break through the unfortunate programming I assume you were paid to include with her and actually live life as her own, real self,” Megumi said, “Are you proud?”

Hashi nodded. “Yes, very! And relieved, too. You’re right, I made her on commission, but in the process…”
“You got attached. I am aware. You’re like that,” Megumi said, then smirked. “Oh, by the way. A few things you might like to know. At Hope’s Vestige… The Hakos are there, for one. And for another. So is M4-K1.”

“Maki is okay too?” Hashi questioned, then started flusterering about. “Oh my. Oh my! They both must be so upset with me. I’m a terrible mother. How can I ever make it up to them? I’ll need P-particles. Plenty of them. These girls, they deserve to achieve the highest level of existence I can offer them, just like their brother and their sisters. Oh, how am I ever supposed to-”

“Don’t worry,” Kyoko said, “We’ll have you covered.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fifteen, Challenge Four (Randy and Amai)

Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 24th
Time: 0800 Hours

Randy’s clothes were back when he woke up again, in the Ultimate Journalist’s Ward. He recognized it right away; Was the challenge over? No, the door was missing. There, in fact, was no door. So this challenge just happened to take place within the Ultimate Wards, instead of in the Duos Challenge area. He looked over, and saw that Amai was his partner this time around.

Similarly to last time, there was a riddle written down. This time around, Randy read it aloud, “The nature and purpose of several items and of one among you.”

“That’s a short riddle,” Amai said, “Is that, the whole thing? Or are there more parts in the room?”

“Well, it kind of does stand as a riddle on its own. I guess we just have to answer it. Er, Monokuma?” Randy called out.

“Yes?” Monokuma arrived.

“This riddle. It doesn’t seem to say we need to do anything, so…” Randy trailed off.

“This one’s on voice recognition,” Monokuma said, “And in fact, a little bit different from the other challenges so far. As soon as somebody gets it, the challenge will end at the next top of the hour, even if other people haven’t solved it yet. You just have to say the answer out loud. So, it’s pretty simple, isn’t it?”

“Ah, yeah,” Randy said, “That’s cool. I mean, I guess that we could just keep saying random stuff out loud, too, to be able to get it. What happens if multiple people get the answer in the same timespan? Like if somebody’s already gotten it, but we haven’t hit the top of the hour yet and someone else gets it too?”

“Um… Well, I don’t think that will happen,” Monokuma said, “But I guess if it did, I could probably give out the prize multiple times. So you can go ahead and get to work on saying random words till you land on the truth! After all, the more ReWard keys you have, the easier it’ll be to figure out the Mastermind. Though, any additional keys aside from the winner will be handed out at the top of the next challenge, so you won’t know till then.”

“Right. So, go away so we can try and get the answer, then!” Randy shooed the bear, who nodded before taking its leave. It almost seemed like that thing… Somehow wanted them to utilize that loophole to get extra ReWard keys. Randy couldn’t imagine why.

“This is a stupid question, though,” Amai said, staring at it. “Really stupid. Fuck. The answer isn’t ridiculously hard, I think. But it’s the kinda thing you’d feel like shit to say. So I can’t just say it. I can’t just… Hazard an answer like that. That’s the trick with this one. The last one was easy, but obscured behind putting us into a vulnerable emotional state. This one is easy, but obscured behind a difficult moral state.”

“How so?” Randy asked, “Because I didn’t have any idea what the answer is anyway. Not even a sliver.”
“That’s because you are stupid,” Amai said, “But, if I’m wrong, then I’m a bad person for even thinking about this answer… And that’s what makes it bullshit, you get?”

“Hm, that makes sense,” Randy said. “I guess any trait that could be shared between a human being and inanimate objects would have to be something disrespectful. And since it’s a Killing Game, we have no idea… The person it’s referring to could be shown our answers. That would be a motive, huh? To have it revealed to you, that your peers think you share a trait with inanimate objects…”

“You’d have to at least realize who it’s referring to, right?” Amai asked.

“It’s…” Randy trailed off, unwilling even to say that much, for a moment. But he had to answer, because Amai had asked it of him. “Well, it’s got to be Hamuko, right? I think that the rest of us… Wouldn’t be too bothered, to be compared to an object, but she…”

“Yeah,” Amai said, “It’s… The answer to this riddle isn’t an objective truth. I sure as fuck don’t believe it. But at the same time. She’s said it herself, before. And whoever designed this shit doesn’t care about us. So it’s an answer that isn’t true, but the person who programmed it in believes it.”

“The person who programmed it in…” Randy observed, “That’s weird to think about, right? How Mono, and the Mastermind, and the people who programmed the Neo World Program, are all different. Do you think we stand a chance against them, in the end?”

“We don’t have to. Ultimate Hope will come for us…”

“They won’t,” Randy said, “You know that’s bullshit. They won’t. Come on, the Evil King’s Game? It’s unbelievable enough, they’d always show up after the Mastermind Trial. With win conditions all along the way. Fuck, it’s all a big show. Isn’t it?”

“Heh… Shouldn’t surprise me that you figured it out, too,” Amai said, “It’s obvious, if you think too hard. Leaving us with memories of the past games… And with Akamatsu, and Tsumugi here too? We’re too fucking smart, man. We’d get it.”

“Ultimate Hope… Are the ones behind the Killing Games.”

“It’s been obvious this whole time. Did they expect us to be stupid?”

“Or maybe they expected us to figure it out,” Randy said, “I mean… If you think about it. Why us? Especially why us. There’s always been enough from the current selection year before now. And if it was just because they knew we were Ultimates, then surely we would’ve been grabbed before now. Or killed.”

“I don’t… Really wanna think about the reason why.” Amai pulled her knees to her chest. “Why us. Yeah, in a game run by Ultimate Hope, why us? That’s… No way. That’s too much, man.”

“Why us? Yeah…” Randy muttered, “Nature and purpose of several items and a person we know… And Hamuko… Hah. Fuck. I’m real sorry if she hears this. But what those people think about her… Isn’t she… ‘To be used by others’?”

A light lit up over the sign, but Monokuma didn’t appear.

So that was correct. But while they may have been the first to realize the true, underlying ‘Masterminds’ of this game, they were not the first to hazard the statement of what those people would have considered Dia Hamuko.
Torimi was only a little bit surprised, when she found herself waking up in the ward belonging to her best friend. The Attorney Ward was spacious, but not so much that she couldn’t see who her partner was this time around. It made sense, of course. She knew these things were randomized, but at the same time, Goro was probably the only person in the world who admired Nami Kaguya more than Torimi did.

Was it weird to admire your best friend? Torimi didn’t think so. After all, Nami did start off as her boss. Torimi was there to help her shine, for a while. She didn’t mind that at all. She could shine on her own, in different ways, and besides. It wasn’t like Nami shining took any spotlight away from her, whatever spotlight they both had. In fact, the guys that Nami turned down, Torimi often stepped in to claim for herself. For a night. Guys like the one who waited for Nami to turn eighteen, they didn’t want a relationship. But they could keep her company for a night.

Nami’s willingness to turn those people down was an admirable trait, Torimi thought, too. A lot of things were admirable about Nami, of course, so it wasn’t surprising that her own best friend would consider her impressive.

“We’re in Naaaamine’s ward,” Torimi made her observation out loud.

“We sure are!” Goro confirmed, getting to his feet and stretching. “Jeeze, they couldn’t have at least put us in our beds when we got knocked out for a longer chunk? I’m so sore. From sleeping on the floor, and all. God. Some of us have near-lethal injuries, you know!”

“Near-lethal?” Torimi asked.

“How many times I gotta say it?” Goro asked, running a hand along one of the ward’s podiums. “Last minute means last minute. That execution would’ve killed me! For reals! If I hit the ground for actual there, would’ve been the end of Goro Bakura. So, yes. Near-lethal.”

“Yiiiiikes… That’s way worse than I thought. You look. Not good, but not, thaaaat bad.”

“Uhh, well, then let’s take stock!” Goro pointed to the bandages on his face. “One at a time. This one’s a really deep cut, but it’s thin, so the little bandage. And this one’s a wide but shallow laceration. Next, my neck. Covered in bruises, but I also dislocated my clavicle, so these bandages help with that. My wrist was already broken in two places before the execution, but it’s kinda just beyond fucked up now. Does me has bones? Unlikely. Uh, and. I have a broken ankle, too. Plus at least some ribs. That explain it?”

“Jeeeeesus,” Torimi said, “How are you standing?”

“Eh.” Goro shrugged. “I’ve been beaten near to death before, so this isn’t that different.”


“Huh? Oh, nah. Nah. When the trial was going on? I didn’t feel anything like this yet, then.”

“Are you saying…” Torimi clutched her hands to her chest. “Weeee… Made it worse for you?”
“No. Fuck that.” Goro sat down on one of the benches. “You didn’t. I did. I knew exactly what was gonna happen to me if I went all in on that trial, and it didn’t work out. I’m honestly… I… Hah. I thought he was going to kill me. Back then, I was okay with it, though! Didn’t care at all if I lived or died. The way it hurt, would’ve rathered die.”

“And… Wheeeen you first woke up here again,” Torimi said.

“Yeah. Shit, guess I am an open book. I’m weak and pathetic and I hate pain. So I didn’t wanna keep living with this pain…” Goro admitted.

“Don’t think you’re weweeeaak. Awful strong to hate pain that much and still be going about your liiife, you know.” Torimi sat down next to him. “But you shouldn’t just keep it uuuup. Hey. Diiia?”

“Yes?” Dia appeared.

“You’re aaaable to go into the normal areas, right?” Torimi asked.

“Yes.” Dia made a small bow. “I am able to, but… The nature of this challenge is that it ends at the top of the hour once somebody solves the riddle. Whatever you’d like me to do, I’d recommend it take less than one hour… It isn’t a hard riddle.”

“We’re not bothering with that.” Goro gestured at the podium where the riddle sign was stood, like a witness. “Are we, Torimi?”

“Naaahhh,” Torimi said, “Can you make it to the infiiirmary, then we call you back? I think that Goroooo could really use some painkillers.”

“Have you not taken any?” Dia asked.

“Well, I didn’t get any for myself,” Goro said, “And you didn’t exactly bring me a lasting supply last time. They barely fill those bottles...”

“Idiot. You really should have gotten yourself some more.” Dia frowned at him. “Well, I’ll go. Call me back in fifteen minutes, use your Monopads. That should give me enough time.”

With that, Dia walked through the wall.

“Whyyyy… Didn’t you get more?” Torimi asked.

“Felt bad to?” Goro said, “I dunno. It’s. I mean, those drugs, y’know? They say it’s super easy to get addicted to that stuff. And after Warushi...”

“Waaarushi?”

“Another one of Kiyoshi’s. He was a cellist, and, well. He needed to take medicine to keep playing, sometimes. If his arm got broken or something, he couldn’t just keep performing, without something. And it wasn’t slow, for him to end up needing it all the time or else he’d feel like shit. It’s too easy. Besides, if anyone saw me taking that stuff, they’d judge me, I bet.”

“I meeeean…” Torimi said, “I don’t think so. If you broke it dooown like you did for me, nobody’s gonna blame you.”

“Maybe.” Goro shrugged. “At the same time… I’m on thin enough ice, at it is. I’m not a good or admirable person in any way. If I do anything else wrong… Then they’ll hate me.”

“Whooooo, exactly?” Torimi asked, “I meeeean. Namineee, Hamukoo, Sayakaaa… They all love
you. That won’t change. And weee might not know each other that well, but I won’t hate you either. So. You good?"

“...Something like that,” Goro said, and smiled in Torimi’s direction.
Dia woke up, and she saw Riko there as well. Here, in the Heir Ward. Ah. “So we’re in your ward, huh…”

“Probably random,” Riko wrote, “If it was supposed to have any rhyme or reason behind it, we’d be in the Journalist Ward, since I have a ReWard key for that room. As it is, looks like we’re just here. With the books.”

“Yeah, and a riddle,” Dia said, and read it to herself. Then, she took a step back, and frowned. “Oh. Well that’s just cruel. I don’t think I like this riddle very much.”

“You don’t?” Riko wondered, then set her whiteboard aside to read it herself. Her brow furrowed as she went, and she realized its nature.

“Not at all. Hm. Well, I do know the manner of this challenge, though. It’ll finish at the top of the hour after somebody answers the riddle,” Dia said, “And the answer is automatically gathered when spoken aloud. I guess that I could answer it, technically. But I don’t much want to. You’ve already won a prize once, so you don’t mind if we throw this one, right?”

“Not a problem,” Riko confirmed.

“I think that I’ll check in and see which wards the other groups are in,” Dia said, “If you don’t mind being left here for a bit?”

“Not a problem,” Riko showed the exact same message over again. Dia smiled, nodded, then hopped through the wall. Thus, Riko was left on her own in her own ward. It would have been nice, now, if she’d gotten her own key. She did think that the key she requested was better, but now that she had this opportunity…

Well, if she could speak aloud, she could have asked Monokuma. Probably, when it said there would be an opportunity to use the keys before the end of the challenge, it didn’t mean this challenge. Likely, it would be a separate event, like when Riko was woken in a room alone to be able to eat. Then again, maybe that would only happen if somebody else didn’t get to use a key in a ward themselves first. Maybe this was it, for the opportunity. Maybe the intention was to send a key with Dia so that she could retrieve the prize during this challenge, away from the Duos Challenge Area. Maybe this was the chance. And Riko missed it, by letting her partner wander off to check on the other pairs.

She couldn’t call her back, because that name wasn’t in her very minor vocabulary. She hadn’t done nearly enough speech therapy, because it wasn’t the best use of her time, comparatively. She didn’t need to force herself to talk, painfully, when it had no bearing on her actual ability to do what was required of her. Being the heir to Asahi. That was her purpose in this world, and everything she did was in service of that. It didn’t matter if people told her that she could be somebody else. It didn’t matter if anyone said she didn’t need to be ‘Asahi’ all the time.

She was. But even now, it seemed, she couldn’t predict… No. It wasn’t that she couldn’t predict well enough, what she needed to do. What the best thing in this situation would be. It was just that she wasn’t enough. She had never been enough. Not enough of a person for anybody to care and not enough of a tool for anybody to use. She was broken from the start. Oh well. Here she was, not...
good enough, again.

Why did she let Dia go? If she waited a few moments more she might have realized, the opportunity Monokuma meant. Even without realizing the opportunity, she felt uncomfortable in this room. Opportunity. If this challenge was the opportunity to use the keys, maybe it was also the opportunity to commit a murder. And here she was, alone. Anybody could kill her right now. Here, in the ward which reflected her emptiness. A ward used for storage. Storing books with tangential relevance to her talent. It meant nothing. Nothing at all.

There wasn’t anything here.

Scared? Frightened? Worried? Why? Why bother thinking about those things? Feeling some kind of way? Yeah right. Fear. What a thing. Of course she wasn’t afraid. She wasn’t anything. And it didn’t even matter. She could die right now. She could be killed right now. There wasn’t even any reason to think ‘I should be scared’ because her life meant nothing. It had no worth, really. Net worth net worth, she had no worth.

Riko Asahi. Just a name. High net worth. Zero personal worth. She didn’t matter. Nobody even needed to know if she’d died in private. Yui was the name that everybody knew. Yui was the girl who mattered. Riko wasn’t. Riko didn’t. She was just floating through life and fulfilling her purpose and the gap she left could be filled. It could be filled in. There could be a million Riko Asahis because she was nothing to nobody. Her face was unknown. Just her name and her talents were known to the world. Should have died before she came here. Never should have come here. There isn’t anything here. But now everybody knows. And she can’t be replaced.

Riko Asahi should be able to be replaced. Or she should be dead. She shouldn’t be in this Killing Game. This memory of her shouldn’t be able to be made. This Riko Asahi shown to the light and exposed and pretending, pretending like it’s okay. Why is she crying? She can’t feel a thing. She can’t feel a thing. Riko Asahi is hollow to her core and she shouldn’t be here. What is she doing. Why is she trying. Why didn’t she just die sooner.

Why is Riko Asahi?

Please can’t somebody just tell her why?

“Riko?” Dia’s voice roused her from her state. She was sitting against a book shelf. Limp. Glassy-eyed. Like a doll. Dia stood before her. She looked worried. Nice joke, worrying about Riko Asahi. “Hey, I ended up needing to help a few people with some quick errands. Just made it back in time. We’re probably about to get knocked out, because I’m sure somebody solved that riddle…”

9:00 am / 0900 Hours

Yeah. Definitely. Somebody has. That chime rings out around the room and Riko Asahi is put to sleep once more. She doesn’t look alive when she’s asleep. That thought born of Riko Asahi takes root in Dia’s mind before she joins her in that induced sleep. Just a few seconds’ difference to think of a dead girl, not quite walking.
Duos Challenge: Day Fifteen, Challenge Four (Nami and Tsumugi)

8:00 am / 0800 Hours

Nami found herself waking up on a bench. Particularly, one of the benches of the Detective Ward. Across the table from her was Tsumugi, who seemed to have been set to sleep sitting up, since she was right there as she opened her eyes.

“Nice to see you, Shirogane,” Nami said, leaning on the table. “It’s been a bit, huh…? It’s kind of weird, actually. How we’re getting a lot less time to be active, and not being able to see each other as much either. I miss everyone I haven’t been paired with…”

“I… Do as well, actually.” Tsumugi pressed one hand to her chest. “Now that I’m seeing you, I realize I’ve missed you… Quite a lot! Um. I know that I haven’t been the best friend… Or even, the friendliest person to begin with. I don’t know if you even consider me a friend. But I think… We are. Even if we only talked a few times. I was being careful, at Kaede’s recommendation. Trying to stay safe and alive. But being safe and alive but distant from the people I want to know, isn’t really worth it, is it?”

“Um… No, probably not.” Nami pressed her hands together. “You’re definitely my friend! If you want to be, anyway. I like being around you. And talking to you. So that’s the requirement for friends, isn’t it?”

“Yes… It is,” Tsumugi said, and chuckled a bit. “This whole time I’ve been… So focused on surviving. Along with Kaede. But she messed up. I don’t even… I can’t wrap my head around where she went wrong. If it was lying to you. Not making enough friends. Making some friends in spite of our survival strategy. Trusting Kyosuke and Ruka. I don’t know? And I don’t think it matters anymore. She’s gone. And I’m here. And I just need to do my best to keep going.”

“Yeah, that’s probably the best way to do things,” Nami said, “If you ever want to talk about it, um… It’s not exactly the same, you were still dating and on good terms and everything, but my last girlfriend before Sayaka did turn up dead the day after we broke up. So I kinda understand that type of loss?”

“Ah… Thank you.” Tsumugi adjusted her glasses. “That’s very kind of you, actually. Randy and I tried working through the grief together, too, but it’s… Difficult to process. It’s. Well. Obviously, we’re grieving the same person, but the way we’re grieving is…”

“You’re grieving your future, right?” Nami asked. Tsumugi looked surprised at that statement. “Kurou told me about it. That sort of feeling. Like you don’t just have to mourn the person themselves, but the plans you had with that person, too. He said it in context of a breakup, but it probably works here too, right? Everything you thought about… Living together, or owning a particular pet, or any other plans… You have to mourn those things, too. Because now they’ll never happen.”

“That’s… That’s exactly right…” Tsumugi’s voice was cracking, and she brought her hands up to lean her forehead against them. “We had a promise. One really big promise. That’s… There’s no chance of it, now. Even if I do the same thing we planned to do. I promised to do it with her, and now I can’t. And she… She was the only person who understood everything. Who knew what I’ve done in the past. How I’m trying to be a better person. And the memories… The memories of the last game, that I have to deal with, all on my own…”
“Why?” Nami asked.

“Huh?”

“Why do you have to deal with the memories all on your own?” Nami clarified, reaching across the table to put her hands on Tsumugi’s elbows. “You don’t. If you have the memories, and the system will let you voice them, then why not talk about them with us? Plenty of us will listen. And we’ll believe you, even if you think it’s weird, or something. We’re here for you. There isn’t a reason for secrecy, you know. It might seem like there is. But there’s not. Not here. Not now.”

“I don’t even know… If the memories are true,” Tsumugi said, “They don’t line up with what we know. What we think we know. They say that the last game was… Run by Ultimate Hope. All along. It was just a test.”

“A test?”

“All of us there in that game… We failed. We failed to be proper Ultimates. We nearly succumbed to Despair, in some manner or another, and they pulled us out of there at the last moment to participate in the game instead,” Tsumugi said, “As a last chance. If we could make it through the game and prove ourselves worthy to stand against Despair… We could join Ultimate Hope. The reason Kaede and I had to come again is because. We were too unworthy. We didn’t qualify. We weren’t good enough people. So we had to. Try again.”

“…Yeah, I believe that,” Nami said.

“You do?” Tsumugi asked.

“Wouldn’t surprise me, really, if other people are figuring that out too,” Nami said, and climbed out of the seat she was in. “I think that somebody else took control of this game, though. I think it started out the same. But it’s different now.”

“Why do you think that?”

“If it was still Ultimate Hope, you never would have been allowed to remember that. They’d have kept up on making sure you didn’t know the truth, but that hasn’t happened. Let’s be real, actually. Nothing’s changed. Not really. Mono can make small changes, but everything else is… Preprogrammed. It’s been trying to tell us, the whole time. We’re in a game that’s off the rails.”

“We’re… In a game that’s more broken than mine was.” Tsumugi stood up as well. “So it’s… Yeah. Thinking about it. Things have either been done directly by Mono itself, or else, it was already put into the program. There hasn’t been anything that’s been modified, or changed, or corrected on a higher level…”

“That’s.” Nami clapped a fist into her palm. “Hamuko was right! Her false games were being monitored and modified constantly. They were tweaked to turn out worse if she slipped up, to punish her. If it was one of her fake games, then Goro would have died for real. If it was one of her fake games, Randy would have been the culprit in the last trial. The reason we’ve been allowed to do things the way we have been… Is because there’s nobody watching. Or at least, nobody who’s able to make changes.”

“The calls from the outside world,” Tsumugi said, “They took over the facility. That’s it. They don’t know how to modify the NWP on a real level, or get us out of here without fulfilling a win condition… But that’s why Mono is here. Whoever’s controlling that bear is here to sabotage the
game from the inside, in as many ways as it can.”

“It’s making life while we’re stuck here easier for us… And it even added the Evil King’s Game,” Nami said, “And we all just thought it was trying to rile us up to kill each other more readily, but… It was another way out. All along. More win conditions… It was doing what it could to help us, you know. It was.”

“And we just messed it up…” Tsumugi sighed. “But the built-in censors on Mono and Hamuko kept them both from saying the things we needed to hear, to realize it. To realize that…”

“There isn’t anyone left who wants us to die,” Nami said, “But they left behind this programming. We’re being toyed with… By the dead. Aren’t we?”

“We… Yeah. Nami? Hey. Hey, Nami, you don’t look so good-”

The chime sounded.

9:00 am / 0900 hours

She would have passed out anyway, though.
Duos Challenge: Day Fifteen, Challenge Four (Sayaka and Kurou)

8:00 am / 0800 Hours

Sayaka woke up in her own ward for this challenge. In fact, she woke up half under the kotatsu, which was relatively comfy if she did say so herself. She didn’t leave, but did sit up, to see that Kurou was across from her. “Oh, hey. Good to see you.”

“It is!” Kurou said, and hit the table with both hands. “It’s really hitting me about now, just how isolated we really have been. This has been twenty-four hours since I last saw you, and that feels absurd in this setting, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Sayaka said, “I got to be with Nami for the last one, so that’s nice. I would’ve started to miss her a lot real soon. Um… Sorry. I bet you’re like, missing your wife, big time, aren’t you?”

“I mean, yeah. I am,” Kurou said, “But that’s just how things are, you know? She wouldn’t have been able to come to see me during the outside-conversations… She’s too busy, with Ayano. I must say, though. Selfish as this might sound, being so apart from her has represented the worst part of this Killing Game for me.”

“…I don’t think that’s selfish, and it makes sense,” Sayaka said, “It’s hard to be torn up about Mitsuru, even though I really cared about him, because of the way he went out and all. You feel the same, right?”

“Yeah… And as much as I consider a number of you here to be my friends, it’s a Killing Game. I met and became close to you under the premise that you could die at any time. So with my one long-term friend here dying in a way that’s impossible to be angry at anyone about, and that stipulation on everybody else… Yeah. The toughest part is being away from my wife and daughter, and knowing that I might never make it back.”

“Mm.” Sayaka nodded. “All of that seems reasonable to me, and not that selfish or anything. It must be pretty terrifying actually. To have somebody to get back to, and you can’t, in that way. Like of course I wanna make it through, and I want Nami to make it through, and I want to see my dad again. But it’s not the same as having people on the outside that rely on me.”

“I wouldn’t say they rely on me,” Kurou said, “Or, er. More like. I’m reliable. Ayu and Ayano can count on me, they can rely on me, but they don’t need to. They’ll be okay if I never make it back. I want to make it back to them, of course I do. And everything’s better when we’re all a family. It’s not necessary, though. They’d be okay.”

“Well, sure,” Sayaka said, “It’s irresponsible, to raise a kid if you don’t trust yourself to do it alone. That situation could come up for all sorts of reasons. But… You know, I do think that you oughta make it back? If it came down to it. I think.”

“If it came down to it? Jeeze, do I have to lecture you on the whole thing too? I just went through this with Madara. It’s impossible to pick ‘who should live’ or anything like that. Nobody’s life is worth more than anybody else’s.” Kurou explained, “I mean, frankly. I do think that those two would be fine without me. If a situation did arise, where we actually needed to decide who lives and dies, I’d still volunteer. My wife can handle things, and I’ve already experienced so many of the life milestones that lots of you haven’t. I’m not putting value on anybody’s life specifically, but from where I stand, I wouldn’t mind giving my spot up.”
“Well, I wouldn’t either,” Sayaka said, “I do want to live and make it out. Obviously I want that. But we all do, now. It’s funny. I don’t think anybody here still wants to die… Even if we started that way? But at the same time. We want each other to live, too. That’s the real reason it’s impossible to decide who should live. We all want everybody to live. Ourselves included.”

“That’s true,” Kurou said, “I’ve seen it happening, actually. You kids are walking disasters, but you’ve been getting handles on yourselves pretty well, I think. Even Bakura has been. Though, I guess I’m still a bit worried about a few of you…”

“Oh? Who?” Sayaka asked, “Cause I’m not really worried about anyone, in particular…”

“Well.” Kurou shrugged a bit. “I could be wrong, of course, but usually I can read people pretty well. You don’t end up with a nearly-crushing gambling debt if you don’t spend some time winning first. Amai… Madara… And Riko too, I think. Those three, I’m still concerned about. I’m never quite sure what’s going on in their heads.”

“Ah. I mean, Amai did say that she was scared of getting killed,” Sayaka said, “So I don’t think you have to be that concerned about her… I mean, her mental health? Sure, but she wants to live. Madara, maybe. He’s a mess and I don’t understand him. Almost as much as I don’t understand you. Asahi seems fine, though? Like. She’s a pretty normal girl. I think. She’s a good friend!”

“Certainly,” Kurou said, “I don’t doubt that. There’s a reason I asked her to help me reach out to Amai, after all. At the same time, though. I have to be concerned. The thing about her is that there isn’t any way to tell if she’s lying about something. Half of her face is hidden, and she doesn’t speak aloud. All of the natural ways to tell if a person’s being truthful are off-limits with her. So for all we know, the normal girl we’ve come to know could be a fabrication.”

“I think that’s true of anybody, though.” Sayaka looked away. “Asahi isn’t unique in her ability to act. It might be easier for her, but anyone can pretend. Even I was, to some extent, for a while… Before I got more comfortable around these people. I tried to hide a lot about myself. I mean, before you got here… People didn’t trust me at all, and I didn’t want them to. I acted like I was just this tough girl, like my talent was everything I needed for my personality.”

“I can’t imagine you that way, I’ll be honest,” Kurou said.

“Well, yeah. I was acting. It wasn’t really me,” Sayaka said, “If somebody’s still acting, it’s because they’re scared. So maybe Asahi is. But if you were her, wouldn’t you still be frightened? Some amount, at least?”

“I guess you’re right,” Kurou said, “That actually makes me more worried about her, though.”

“…Huh. Yeah. Now I’m kinda worried too.”
Duos Challenge: Day Fifteen, Challenge Four (Tsukasa and Tsukune)

8:00 am / 0800 Hours

Tsukune Madara and Tsukasa Mizuho were two boys with the same initials. And in fact, first names that began with the exact same syllable. And now, they were two boys waking up in the Carpenter’s Ward.

“Oh. Mizuho,” Madara greeted him, already getting to his feet as he did. “Seems we’ve been partnered for this one. I was wondering if we would.”

“Yeah,” Tsukasa said, standing up as well just because Madara did. “We haven’t really gotten the chance to talk much before, have we?”

“Not especially, no,” Madara said, “It’s nothing against you. I don’t give many people the chance to talk to me much. Anyway, my curiosity for if we’d be partnered does lie in the similarity of our names.”

“Oh? What about them?”

“Well, nobody will call me my first name because it sounds too much like yours,” Madara said, “Or maybe it’s because I’m just too stand-offish. But I kind of would expect Torimi to have started using my first name if not for the fact that it’s easy to confuse us.”

“Tsukune, Tsukasa… Yeah, I can see it,” Tsukasa admitted, “I don’t think there’s really anything I could do to change or fix that, though.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Madara said, “I’m not really telling you try and change or fix it. It’s just a little weird, you know? Madara’s my name among these people. Because you got monopoly on the ‘Tsuk’ name first. I don’t really like it. But there isn’t really anything to do about it, either.”

“You don’t?” Tsukasa asked.

“I mean. Well, I don’t dislike it, it’s not that big a deal. It isn’t like my last name has any bad memories associated with it. But it’s impersonal. I chose the name Tsukune for myself when I was in an unfortunate position. I chose Madara as a placeholder after I couldn’t use the old family name anymore. So it’s kind of… Weird to associate as my name, when it’s a name that has no meaning to me at all.”

“Oh. That makes sense,” Tsukasa said, “I’m sorry about that, then. But maybe you can make something good of it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Madara might become a name that means something to you, if it’s the name that your friends use. Right?”

“…Huh.” Madara thought about this in silence for a few moments. “I guess. I didn’t consider that, though. Associating Madara with all of you like that could just lead to me needing to change my surname again in the future, when you decide you’re sick of me.”

“Or that’s just an extra benefit. The name that doesn’t mean anything to you gets the bad association, instead of the name that you actually like,” Tsukasa offered, “For somebody who acts
so smart, it’s kind of dumb not to realize that. Or maybe the reason it bothers you is because, after all, you don’t honestly think that we’re going to become a bad memory for you.”

“Wh- I. Of course you will,” Madara snipped, “Everybody else has! Why would I think any otherwise?”

“Because, Tsukune. We’re Ultimates. And we’re in a Killing Game. Those of us who get out of here are going to have some sort of bond for the rest of our lives. We’ll be friends. You can’t just ruin a friendship forged in the fire like this, you know!”

“You… That’s stupid. You sound stupid.” Madara clenched his fists and looked down at the floor.

“Well. Fine, I’ll admit it, I don’t think that you’ll become bad memories for me. I don’t expect that you’ll hate or abandon me. But that’s because I don’t think I’ll get out of here. I don’t think you’ll have time to think that about me.”

“Now that’s just ridiculous,” Tsukasa said, “You’re no less likely to make it out of here than anybody else, you know.”

“Mm. You can say that, but I’m not so sure,” Madara said, then pulled out one of the chairs and slumped into it. “Jeeze. What are we doing in Ueda’s ward anyway?”

“Good question. I guess we just got right into talking so I didn’t think about it,” Tsukasa said, “I just assumed this was the location for this challenge. Oh, look. There’s a riddle here… Huh.”

“The nature and purpose of several items and of one among you. Oh, well that’s easy,” Madara said, “It’s ‘to be used’.”

A green light above the riddle lit up, but Monokuma didn’t make an appearance; Signaling that they, too, were not the first ones to solve it, it seemed.

“Hey, now, that’s a bit rude…” Tsukasa observed.

“Well, it makes sense, though. Honestly I’m just surprised that it said ‘one among you’. Plenty of us can fit that category, probably. I qualify. Bakura does. Your boyfriend, probably does too. Hamuko, of course. It’s all word games. Anyone’s nature and purpose can be to be used by others, without implying that’s all they’re good for.”

“Still…”

“The perceived rudeness in the answer is probably there to complicate the riddle,” Madara said, “By making us unwilling to speak aloud an answer ‘like that’, it makes an easy riddle into a moral quandary on if answering it is ethical. But I don’t care about things like that. It does make me wonder, though. If we didn’t answer it first, then who did? Certainly not Oishi. She would hesitate to voice the reply.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Tsukasa said, “All our friends are pretty smart, though. So it’s not really surprising that somebody would get it.”

“No, not surprising at all,” Madara said, “But maybe a little bit heartless.”

“You just said yourself that the ‘rudeness’ was just a tactic, though…”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not heartless to come right out and say it. Being the uncaring bastard is my thing, so it’s weird somebody beat me to it. Then again, I didn’t even read the riddle right away. So I’ll say that’s the reason why I trailed behind in this particular challenge.”
“Have you won any of them yet?” Tsukasa wondered.

“Nah, none. No big deal, though. I would’ve won the jigsaw puzzle challenge, but I actually had to do it on my own. My partner was just getting too stressed out by the whole thing.”

“Uncaring bastard, yeah right. It’s good of you to take that stress off of your partner, whoever they were.”

“Shh. Don’t tell anybody.”
Hashi took a few hours to get situated in Hope’s Vestige; Her room was in the True Radicals section, not the Failed Ultimates one, which she thought was fair. Even though she was the lead on developing M4-K1, that didn’t guarantee her good graces with the group; And she came with Ruri, whose affiliation with Kyoko Kirigiri certainly didn’t help matters. The Failed Ultimates seemed to be a fairly untrusting group.

Not that Hashi blamed them, and not that Hashi was a very trustworthy person to begin with. If she were trustworthy, she wouldn’t need to be using an alias, and let her be frank; If anything, the fact that she was one of Maki’s developers wasn’t a point in her favor. The DIYEAR labs had a poor reputation in basically all circles possible. Future Foundation had initially funded them, but as more and more of Hashi’s coworkers started to despair, the labs fell into a limbo of their own. Future Foundation wanted the results of the research, but couldn’t be associated with it, officially.

Ultimate Hope wasn’t fond of the lab; As made evident by the fact that they’d broken in and stolen Maki. Ultimate Despair had initially been the only group that DIYEAR could count on, until they made the biggest mistake yet. Until the despairing scientists took measures to ensure that the Killing Game wouldn’t end peacefully, only to be accused of ruining its sanctity by the despairing world at large. Hashi never became despair herself. She got close. But she didn’t.

She had her children to keep her going, after all. Even if the whole world was against her, the ‘artificial intelligences’ she programmed, the children she created, kept her going. She survived the attack on DIYEAR for their sake. She held on alone until Ruri came for her, because of them. And even now, even if Maki wanted nothing to do with her, she was acting for them. She had to create an improved body for Maki. She had to create one, at all, for Dia. That was why she was here. Ruri was sent for just because Kyoko wanted her around. Hashi was sent for just because two of her daughters were here.

That was all they needed, though. To be here.

“Miss Hashi?” Somebody called for her. Hashi turned around, to see two there. A skinny girl with prosthetics, and next to her, a robot. It looked almost like a cat version of Monokuma, but was cute, and the colors…

“Ah. Hello,” Hashi greeted Natsuki and Maki.

“You’re… One of the scientists who created me, aren’t you?” The cat asked, confirming her identity as Maki.

“Yes, that’s true. I was primarily responsible for programming your intelligence so that you’d be capable of learning and, well, being a person,” Hashi answered, adjusting her glasses as she spoke. “It’s my specialty, really. That girl in the game right now, Dia… I was also responsible for creating her. I… I’m deeply sorry for all the trouble that I’ve caused for you both, I know it’s irresponsible to send creations into a world of suffering, and I promise I’m going to do everything I can to make it up to you and-”

“I only have positive memories of you,” Maki said, “You don’t have to make anything up to me. I
don’t actually have access to anything that happened during the Killing Game, I was recovered from a data backup before the event. And unless you’re the one who sent in the ultimatum update, then you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“No, that wasn’t my decision,” Hashi said, “I never would have done something like that! I… I just want you to be happy. You’re one of my children, after all. I… If I’m able to get ahold of P-Type particles, I’ll be able to make a new humanoid body for you. One for Dia, too, I hope?”

“That’s kind of you. Put priority on hers, though! Having a human body again would be nice, of course. But… I don’t mind this at all,” Maki said, “Nagata here brought it for me. Her friend made it. It was very kind of her. That’s why I let her convince me to talk to you… Truth be told, I thought you might be upset with the way I turned out in the end.”

“What do you mean?” Hashi asked.

“I did help with the Killing Game. I did the reality checks. I wasn’t the best person there, and now I’m part of a rebellion against it. So I’m disappointing no matter which side you prefer.” Maki dipped her head. “And, um… I’m not sure if this was even supposed to be possible, but I like girls, so there’s that, too.”

Hashi burst out laughing.

“H-Hey, that’s not nice!” Natsuki tried to defend Maki, but Hashi just kept laughing for a while. It was a thoroughly undignified laugh. It trailed off, and Hashi stood up straight again.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry. No, it’s just hilarious. It’s not not possible. There wasn’t really anything in the code for sexuality existing or not existing, in the hopes that you’d develop one on your own, if you did at all. But at this rate… Good grief. My daughters are just lesbians by nature. I guess it runs in the family.”

“Oh. Uh. You are too?” Maki asked.

“Yes! The woman I arrived with is my girlfriend, actually,” Hashi explained, “I have a few other daughters, who are also lesbians. And I already heard that Dia is the same way, as well. It’s just kind of hilarious, that things worked out that way. You and Dia didn’t even really grow up knowing me, so it’s, well, it’s interesting! That’s all.”

“Huh. Yeah, that is interesting. I’ll assume it’s a coincidence,” Maki said, “But that’s good to know. I was expecting to be a disappointment to the serious scientist who helped create me as the ‘Ultimate Robot’. I guess it’s a relief not to be.”

“You guess?” Hashi wondered.

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t feel much different. It’s not like, a huge load off my shoulders, since I didn’t know you much anyway. But if you want me to know you much, I guess that we could hang out sometimes. As long as it doesn’t cut in on my time with Miu.”

Hashi let a grin split her cheeks. “I’d quite like that, yes! I’d love to get to know… All of my children, if they want to get to know me. Ah. Did you know that Dia’s your sister before I mentioned her just now?”

“I didn’t. I’ll be looking forward to meeting her, though.”
Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 24th
Time: 1430 Hours

Let’s take it from the top–

Wait, wait. What?

Huh.

Nami was sitting up and she wasn’t sure why she was sitting up. She didn’t wake up. She didn’t recall waking up. She was just sitting, here. Riko was across from her. Sitting, also. She looked concerned. Riko, always so reliable. Nami could ask her what was going on. “What’s going on?”

“You were acting kind of weird,” Riko answered, holding her whiteboard up. “Super out of it. I think that you were having a new amnesia episode or something. Any idea what could have caused it?”

“No… I can’t remember anything about the last challenge, except that I was partnered with Shirogane,” Nami said, “I guess that makes sense, then. If I can’t remember… Usually it took me a while coming out of them, after something happened that I needed to forget. But I’ve been doing… So much better lately. I can’t believe it actually happened again. Something really bad must have happened to cause it.”

“That’s concerning,” Riko said, “Are you feeling alright now?”

“Yeah, I am,” Nami said, then smiled. “Thanks for asking. You’re always such a dependable friend… I’m lucky you were my partner this time. I’m surprised you could tell it was an amnesia episode so easily, though.”

“It’s only because I know you so well.” Riko’s eyes pushed up as she smiled under her mask. “I could tell something wasn’t right, and since I know the sort of things you struggle with, I could make an assumption of what was going on.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Nami said, “I mean, it’s also possible you’ve seen one before…? I’m a little foggy on, well, when they happen sometimes.”

“I don’t think I’ve happened to be around for any of them before this one,” Riko said, “But really, is it that surprising that I could pick up on it? I’m your friend, after all.”

“Yeah, you are,” Nami said, then actually looked around the room. “So… We’re back in the challenge area. I don’t see anything new, though…”

“Well, I’m sure that there’s something. I guess we have to take a look around and figure it out,” Riko said, then stood up, set her whiteboard on the table, and started to investigate the kitchenette, which still hadn’t been removed. Nami doubted that the challenge would actually have something to do with the kitchenette again, since two of them did already, but…

Riko pulled a sheet of paper out from between the pipes of the sink, and held it out towards Nami. It held yet another riddle written on it, in large letters. “The challenge is coming to a close, but there’s one last chance to collect a key. Use items from this room to write a message about
something your partner doesn’t know about you.”

“Items from this room?” Nami wondered, then opened a cabinet to find that there were ‘products’ labeled with generally normal words on them. This wasn’t a difficult challenge at face value, but then… “Though, there isn’t really anything I can think of, that you don’t know about me. Especially not something that I could put together with these words…”

“Well, I already obtained a key,” Riko noted, “I don’t much need to win another challenge, myself. Besides, since this is so straightforward, and it took you half an hour from waking up to actually, you know. Be awake. I can only imagine somebody else has already done it.”

“We can’t just not do the challenge, though…”

“We could, actually. Monokuma made it clear. The challenge completes and everyone gets knocked out once everyone solves the challenge, except if the challenge specifies differently. But also, each challenge is scheduled. So we could just fail for the entire six hours.”

“That’s kinda rude to the others though, isn’t it? What if they want the sleep?” Nami wondered.

“Everybody slept from midnight to eight, then from nine to two. I think that’s plenty of sleep and people might actually prefer to spend some more time awake and aware, right?” Riko offered, then sat down in one of the chairs. “So we can just hang out. It would be better to do that, right? You’re my friend, so I’ve kind of missed you, you know.”

“Mm… But the riddle says the challenge is coming to a close, doesn’t it?” Nami wondered. “So if everybody actually completed the challenge, maybe that would let us get back to our normal… Well, relatively normal life. It would be nice to do that sooner rather than later… Not that I don’t want to spend time with you, of course!”

“Oh, that’s fair,” Riko said, “But then, there’s another possibility, isn’t there?”

Nami tilted her head to one side, not completely sure what Riko, one of her best friends, was implying there. Not completely. That was a way to say it, of course, not completely. She had an idea, because she knew this girl well enough, but she didn’t like the thought so she was ignoring the assumption.

“If somebody dies, the challenge will end right then and there so that the investigation can begin. Correct?”

Her assumption was correct. Nami groaned and sat down across from Riko. “Yeah, but… I haven’t seen anything about this so-called murder opportunity, and even if I did, nobody would’ve used it. I don’t even wanna think about the possibility… Somebody could have died who I haven’t even seen in more than a day now.”

“That would make it worse?”

“Of course it would!” Nami protested. “At least if it’s somebody I’ve been paired with for the challenge… Then it feels like I got the chance to say goodbye. Not that I actually said goodbye. But. You know what I mean, right? It’s like if one of us turned up dead without having seen the other since yesterday, it would just be terrible, to lose a friend that way…”

“If you put it that way, then I have to agree. I just have this awful feeling… That we can’t escape this without somebody dying. I was afraid during the last challenge. I was scared it would be me.”

“I’m really glad it wasn’t,” Nami said, then touched a hand to her own cheek. Her head was
buzzing, and she still hadn’t fully recovered her wits about her from the amnesia episode… But the thought that somebody could actually die during this challenge was suddenly overwhelming. The assumption was there that it couldn’t happen. But Riko had been scared, she said. Riko could have died. Nami could have died too, probably. Her amnesia episode could honestly be covering an attempt on her life, for all *she* knew.

It was an easy thing to take advantage of.
Riko was lying when she said she was afraid. She had to be lying because there wasn’t any reason for somebody like her to be afraid. But she said it anyway. She was in a unique position where it wasn’t hard for her to think through her statements. She couldn’t just blurt things out. Couldn’t just stumble through sentences. She could proofread everything she said before she shared it. And yet, she said a lie, that she was scared.

Well, no harm done. So what if she appeared more like a real person than she was? So what if she gave the impression that Riko Asahi was somebody at all. She tried to do that, sometimes. It was how she ended up with these friends to begin with. For some reason, right now, pretending didn’t feel like the right thing to do. Yet she did it anyway. She couldn’t just drop the curtain now on her normalcy. She couldn’t now, after so many of her classmates bore their hearts to the world, reveal that she’d been keeping her own in a locked box this entire time.

As if she even had one to lock up, huh?

She looked up and made eye contact with Nami again, who tilted her head. Nami. A kindred spirit. Both of them had finished the previous challenge in an unpleasant state, and woken with it uninterrupted. So she was with Tsumugi last time, she said. How did Tsumugi prompt an amnesiac state? What could have happened? Riko had doubts it was Tsumugi’s own action, though. More likely, she thought, the pair of them had realized some terrible truth and it was just too much for poor, sweet Nami.

She’d remember it. Eventually. But Riko understood the way her amnesia worked, pretty well. As well as Tomoe had explained it to her, way back when she was alive and they’d gotten along. Nami Kaguya forgot things if she wasn’t ready to know or remember them. If she couldn’t handle them yet. If a memory would cause her serious distress, then she simply lost it, going into a state during her forgetting that lasted between twenty minutes and an hour. Somehow, she processed these memories behind a locked door and let them resurface when she could handle them again.

So whatever she learned was just something that caught her off guard, that really shocked her and she couldn’t handle yet. Riko was curious what that could be. But evidently, Nami couldn’t tell her, and she couldn’t quite ask Tsumugi right now. The curiosity of Nami’s amnesiac episode actually helped drag Riko out of her own poor mental state. Not entirely, since she lied and said she was afraid then thought she shouldn’t have done that. But it was an improvement. Thanks, Nami. You have a knack for helping people by not being okay.

Unfortunately for the both of them, being okay was something that would stay out of reach just a bit longer.

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Nami and Riko were waiting out the challenge, in spite of Nami’s reluctance. She wanted to find a way to complete the challenge. She wanted to get back to normal life. She wanted to make sure that if somebody hadn’t already died during the challenge, they wouldn’t. But she couldn’t think of anything for herself, and Riko couldn’t think of anything either. This challenge was actually a disadvantage for people who considered themselves friends; The words in the cabinet were all for assembling things like small talk answers. ‘My favorite food is’, and things like that. Nami had
rifled through the cabinets trying to think of anything.

It didn’t help her much that Riko kept saying it would be fine just to not do it. Made her feel guilty, like her compulsion to solve the challenge and move on from this long-running ‘motive’ was somehow her not wanting to spend time with her friend. She found herself frustrated with the situation, with Riko, and with herself. She just wanted to finish this and go sleep in her own bed. She never felt well after an episode of amnesia. She didn’t feel like socializing. With anybody. Not just Riko.

Didn’t mean she wouldn’t feel bad about it. She was low on energy and she couldn’t shake the feeling that another group… Every other group, would have already managed this. People didn’t know each other that well. If Tsukasa and Randy got paired, that might be a problem. Nami would have had the same issue with Torimi, but not with anyone else. Not even Sayaka, since she was still learning more about her amazing girlfriend every day. It was the unfortunate luck of the roulette, she guessed.

And that was when something happened. When an arm came through the wall, followed by the rest of Dia Hamuko, but there was something different this time. She stumbled in, then looked up and locked wild eyes with Nami. She was covered in blood. Uninjured, but covered in blood, so it wasn’t her own. It wasn’t her own. It wasn’t her own.

“Who.” Nami couldn’t articulate anything better than that. It was a harsh and flat statement, not even toned as a question. She couldn’t believe this right now. Couldn’t handle this.

“Well. Um. See.” Dia was trying to figure herself out. Riko stood up, and nodded to her. She started signing instead, which Riko translated into writing for Nami to read. “Tsumugi called me. She was injured. I caused some corruption by taking her with me but I got her to the infirmary. But there is a body too. Tsumugi’s partner.”

“Who was that? And what happened to Tsumugi?” Nami questioned, smacking a hand against the table. She was shaking. So were the other girls. Dia was struggling to break the news and Riko was just as worried as Nami was.

Dia continued her explanation, translated through Riko, “Tsumugi’s throat was slit but shallowly. She’s okay. But her partner.”

Dia was going to say who the partner was. She was about to. But after Riko finished writing the word, something strange happened. There was a loud, scraping noise. Then the walls disappeared, the tables, kitchenettes, leaving the Duos Challenge rooms as practically an empty plane. Only the exterior walls remained, not the ones separating the rooms. So everybody could see.

Alone on the ground and certainly murdered was Torimi Shinoe.

And Nami felt it coming. But she couldn’t. Couldn’t forget this. Because first, she needed, revenge. So she didn’t forget.

*I'll never forget Torimi Shinoe.*
Chapter End Notes

Edit by Superkisa on tumblr
Nami was appalled, she was furious, and she couldn’t stand this feeling at all. She was fighting, for the first time in her life, against forgetting. Something strong enough that she could find and stop the urge to black out. Twice in one day, too, she couldn’t do that. Twice in one day. One day. Tsumugi?? Tsumugi Shirogane?

Nami immediately suspected her. She didn’t suspect Dia. Everybody would suspect Dia, she was sure, she didn’t. Didn’t at all. But Tsumugi. Tsumugi was her partner before, Tsumugi had been acting particularly strange lately, and Tsumugi was Torimi’s partner now, when she turned up dead. Convenient she was close-to-fatally injured. Convenient. She could do that to herself. Nami wouldn’t put it past her. She didn’t hate Tsumugi. But she could hate Tsumugi if needed.

If Tsumugi made some mention that she was planning to commit a murder, Nami could have forgotten that in her shock. She wasn’t doing well enough to remember right now. But this was her assumption. False as it could be, she had no choice but to hold onto this assumption because her best friend was dead. Her best friend.

She looked around. There was the corruption on the wall, that Dia mentioned, how she got Tsumugi to the infirmary. There was everybody else, nobody out of place, everybody still stood in the squares that their challenge rooms had represented, in their pairs. Nobody was evidently suspicious. There was the body discovery announcement, ringing in Nami’s ears. She didn’t really hear it. Not really. She knew what it was saying. A body has been discovered. Everybody has discovered this poor girl.

Nami didn’t think that she could dislike any of her peers now. She didn’t think it was possible. Until this. Whoever had killed Torimi… Whyever they killed Torimi… Nami couldn’t excuse that. Nami couldn’t understand that. She could never in her entire lifetime forgive that. Don’t forgive don’t forgive don’t-

But the opportunity. She hadn’t seen it. The opportunity to commit murder. And Tsumugi was silenced. And Nami had no memories. Maybe she suspected Tsumugi some amount she suspected her, sure, but at the same time she could suspect herself because what could be awful enough to forget but the fact that she was responsible for her own best friend’s death? Body count, body count, don’t let her raise her body count please oh please no. No, she wouldn’t. Not on her own. But she.

Didn’t.

Know.

That was the terrible thing. The most horrifying thing about her own mental health was her inability to be certain. This was something she and Goro shared, it seemed. The inability to know. That question that only blackout drunks, Steve Urkel, and the mentally ill could ask. Did I do that. Most people who struggled with this sort of thing wouldn’t normally need to ask that question about something this serious. Most people who had these sorts of problems would never hurt another person in this state. But Nami knew she’d done it before. She didn’t know how or why she ever would. But it was possible. Could she have done it again?

God. Oh, God. She couldn’t handle this. She really couldn’t handle this. That was why her brain
was pushing. Just let it disappear let it go away. But she couldn’t. Because she needed to find the culprit. But she didn’t even know where to begin an honest investigation. She didn’t even know where to start. She didn’t know anything.

“Hamuko…” Madara was the first person to speak. Or the first person who Nami could hear. “What did you do?”

“I. Didn’t do anything,” Dia said, “I mean. I did something. I brought Tsumugi to the infirmary. She called me. She was badly injured and Torimi was dead. That’s it.”

“Are we supposed to take you at your word? You’re the only one here who could.” Madara started.

“Shut up!” Nami shrieked. “Shut up. Shut the fuck up oh my god. I believe her. Do you see that corruption? It’s from walking through the wall with Shirogane…”

“Yeah, to put her somewhere she could die on her own, I bet,” Madara said.

“No!” Nami just shouted again.

“Seriously,” Goro came to her rescue, “This is a problem of yours, Madara! Don’t jump to conclusions before we have all of the evidence. Save it for the trial. Hey, Dia. Why don’t we go get you cleaned up?”

“O-Okay,” Dia agreed, then turned and called out as Goro led her towards the door that had become available when the walls came down, “Amai! Could you check up on Tsumugi in the infirmary?”

“Right, will do,” Amai said, and followed after those two to do as she was directed. Definitely the best person for the job. Weirdly close to Tsumugi right now. Not somebody who’d lie and claim Tsumugi was fine if she wasn’t. Yeah. Look at these people, making intelligent decisions in the face of this tragedy.

Not Nami. She wanted to but she couldn’t even move right now. Couldn’t begin to investigate because she stood, frozen in place. Full of anger and grief and confusion. This was beyond anything she felt before. Tomoe, Rei… but now, Torimi. Torimi, who grounded her to her real life and her accomplishments, who deserved better, who. Who was dead. It was a perfect storm.

She was weak to begin with. Torimi was the person in Nami’s life who she had the most positive memories with. Tomoe was her sister, but they’d grown distant, for their own sakes. Rei had quickly become one of her best friends, but it was still quickly. The grief with Rei was for the friendship they never got to have. The grief for Torimi was the friendship they lost. Nami always thought Torimi would be here. And she didn’t think anybody would die during the Duos challenge. She was proven wrong in the worst possible way.

“Hey, Namine.” She froze to hear that, but it wasn’t Torimi’s voice. It was Kurou, somehow knowing just what to say. He put a hand on her shoulder. “We should get to work, right? Somebody’s got to pay for this.”

There was genuine anger in his voice, too. Because Torimi was his friend, as well. Two of his friends in a row, huh? Nami sympathized with him even through her own overpowering grief. He was right, though. Somebody’s got to pay. She forced her legs to move to investigate the body.
Nami caught herself staring, empty, at Torimi’s corpse. This wasn’t working, was it? She pulled her Monopad out. Let’s cross reference. It said that her cause of death was her throat being slit. Yeah, that about made sense. That was the only visual injury on her body. Some of the blood got on her cheek, most of it on the floor. Pooling under her body. She looked peaceful. Like… She’d been killed unaware. Like she’d been killed while still knocked out from the challenge. She didn’t even need to know she was about to die.

That was actually a small comfort, for Nami. She knew that Torimi would have preferred it this way, if she had to pick a way to die. Killed in her sleep. There wasn’t anything else strange about the body, looking at it. Then, Nami crouched down and checked Torimi’s pockets. Her monopad was there, nothing strange about it. A key that was obviously for her ward. Huh, right. She and Amai won the jigsaw puzzle challenge, didn’t they? Nami took the key. Obviously the killer didn’t have that as motivation, since they hadn’t taken it with them from the body.

And finding the key reminded her of something. She didn’t need to say it aloud, though, because Tsukasa was already offering the information. “At the very start of this challenge, we got the key for my ward. We got the last riddle, but we weren’t the first. Me and Madara that time, I mean. When Mono gave me the key, I asked about the opportunity to use it. It told me that somebody had already used their key, so the ‘opportunity’ was void.”

“Huh. That’s weird,” Nami said, “I do remember the riddle last time, even though I ended up forgetting most of the challenge itself. What was the answer?”

“We answered it as ‘to be used’,,” Tsukasa said.

“Hey,” Randy joined the conversation, “We answered ‘to be used by others’. Monokuma also told us that it was voice recognition, so I’ll assume any answer that fits would count. I also got the key from that. Uh… Me and Oishi also realized something kind of important, but I don’t think now is the time to share it. We should focus on this.”

“You’re correct!” Monokuma confirmed, “Any answer that fit would work. You both chose verb form answers, but there’s also a working noun form answer. ‘A tool’. Funny enough, that answer has a double meaning, and could be taken as way less pathetic than your verb responses!”

“Hey.” Sayaka turned up also. “We didn’t answer. Me and Kurou just caught up and chatted… Mentioned that we’re kinda worried about Asahi. It’s… Jeeze. We were concerned about her, and then it ends up being Torimi…”

“She did tell me that she was scared last time, that she could end up dead,” Nami said, “She didn’t mention who her partner was, though. Do you think it’s possible she was scared because Tori was actually killed during the previous challenge? There’s no time of death in the Monokuma file.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a rough accusation,” Goro said from the door, having returned from taking Dia to her room. “Torimi wasn’t Asahi’s partner, because she was mine. Do you really think I’d kill her, Nami?”

“Right now? I can suspect you,” Nami said, “I’m even suspecting myself, because I did have an amnesia episode. I blanked out most of the previous trial. Maybe there was some way that I somehow… I don’t know. This is why we need to figure it out in the trial. You and I have both killed people in dissociative states, Goro.”
“That’s true, but on the other hand,” Goro said, “If either of us somehow did, then it would reflect pretty bad on Torimi! I mean… We both only did those things under serious threat. So I guess it’s possible. But do you really wanna think your friend would put either of us in a situation where we felt the need to lash out?”

“...That’s right,” Nami admitted, then took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

“Definitely something to keep in mind,” Randy said, “The whydunnit is important. It doesn’t make sense for either of you to have done it in that respect. Even if it could have been you, it’s definitely without memory of it, so you can be trusted to investigate.”

“Mm, yeah. And history shows that I’m not the type to really avoid getting caught,” Goro said, “So it’s not like I’d tamper, if it starts to seem like the evidence does point to me…”

“Mm. Yeah.” Nami thought for a minute. “Well, since Mono removed the walls and everything, there isn’t actually much to investigate here. This case probably connects to the last challenge. So, we should go ahead and use a ReWard key to find out what exactly the prize during the challenge is. It… Will still be the challenge prize, right?”

“Yes. It’s technically evidence, so that prize is still available. However, whichever ReWard panel you open for the investigation won’t contain its post-challenge prize.”

“In that case,” Tsukasa said, “We should use mine. My ward’s on the top floor, so we can work our way down from there investigating. And my ward has nothing to do with anything except for housing Motherkuma and a few other miscellaneous things, so my prize probably wouldn’t be as useful as one of the other wards’.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Nami said. She, Tsukasa, and Randy split off to go investigate that; Sayaka, Goro, and Madara volunteered to do one last check of this area, then do a rooms check, just in case. Even though people wouldn’t have normally had access to their rooms, it was possible that they’d been able to get there during the ‘murder opportunity’. It didn’t help that Nami had no idea what that was supposed to be, so her suspicions were still quite heavily on Tsumugi. Not that she wanted to be suspecting anyone yet, without evidence, but her anger needed somewhere to rest, or she never would have been able to focus enough to investigate.

Nami’s investigative team reached the top floor and walked into Tsukasa’s ward. While they went over to the newly visible ReWard panel, she looked over to Motherkuma. And then she remembered. So she asked it. “Motherkuma, is this Killing Game being run by Ultimate Hope?”

“It was. It’s not being run by anybody right now.”

Her memory wasn’t completely back, but she’d recalled that. Randy looked over from the panel. “You figured it out too, huh?”

“That’s part of it. I think it’s why I forgot the last challenge, actually…” Nami lifted a hand to her forehead. “There was… An awful truth. But that’s not a problem for right now. It’s for after this trial. When we can start investigating the Mastermind. What’s the prize?”

“It’s a keycard,” Tsukasa said, “With a note, too. It says ‘the icemaker is the card reader, to unlock your peers’. It’s…”

“It’s a keycard that lets you move between the challenge rooms,” Randy finished for his boyfriend. “It’s the murder opportunity.”
“But… That still doesn’t explain it completely, right?” Nami asked, “I’m confused. Uh. Wouldn’t the culprit’s partner have needed to look the other way for them to be able to go to that room?”

“The final Duos Challenge is called the Waking In Cycles Challenge,” Motherkuma answered, “One third of the participants wake up at the hour. One third at ten minutes past. And one third at twenty minutes past. One duo can contain participants from different waking groups.”

“…Thanks, Motherkuma,” Nami said, “And what does the layout of the Challenge Area look like?”

“The rooms surround one hallway. Monokuma remains in this hallway. With the ReWard Keycard, this hallway can be used to access any individual challenge room.”

“Cool.” Nami gave the machine a thumbs-up, like that mattered, then turned back to her investigative partners. “These factors basically mean that anybody can be a suspect, right?”

“Well, anybody who got a ReWard key before the final challenge,” Randy said.

“Yeah, that’s true. Though somebody could have stolen one, too,” Nami said, “So it wouldn’t be reserved to people who won. Somebody could have even stolen Tori’s key and returned it to her body after killing her, to divert suspicion. We’ll have to figure out what keys were in play during the trial, though. Unless there was an accomplice, it shouldn’t be hard to get the answers.”

“Mm, yeah,” Tsukasa said, “That makes sense. We should keep going, then, right? Just check all the other wards, since we don’t know which ones people have been in, or which one might have had its panel opened already.”

“Hold on a second.” Randy reached out and shut the panel, then tried to open it again. “It automatically locks again. So we wouldn’t be able to tell… And we can’t just steal everyone’s keys and test them all, because that would remove the ability to get the post-challenge prize. The way Mono talked about it, it kind of seems like those might be important information to have before the Mastermind Trial.”

“Yeah… I’m sure we can find the culprit without jeopardizing our future ability to get out of here,” Tsukasa said, “And you better explain later, what that whole Ultimate Hope thing is supposed to mean… But not for now. Let’s go. See if we can find anything.”

So with that, the investigative team started to turn over all of the Ultimate Wards, searching for any information they could find. There wasn’t anything else of note on that floor, or even the next one down. The first ward where they found anything was the Detective Ward, and that was only an effort of thorough searching.

Randy was the one who noticed it. The bookshelf, which had experienced so much use from the participants of this game, had something off about it. One shelf, the books’ spines were just a bit closer to the front of the shelf than on all of the others. So, Randy pulled the books out of the way, and a flurry of paper scraps followed, fluttering to his feet and around the room with the motion. Nami and Tsukasa immediately got to picking up the scraps. They were incredibly tiny, including on them a letter, even just half a letter, each. Monokuma didn’t allow for absolute disposal, so tearing up this paper and hiding it behind a set of books was… Probably the best the culprit could do.

Nami couldn’t imagine what sort of evidence this would be, though. Or what the paper’s contents
might be, even. With or without considering that it could be evidence, Nami couldn’t imagine what was written on it.

“Make sure you get every scrap,” Tsukasa said, “We can pass them off to…”

“Amai,” Nami said, “Amai won the jigsaw puzzle challenge. With Tori.”

“…Yeah. Oishi and somebody else,” Randy said, “Should be able to piece this stuff back together, right? I can only imagine the culprit disguised their handwriting, but if they decided to hide this note, then it’s got to have some importance to the case.”

“Definitely.” Nami said, “This was a good find, Randy. Nice work. This is the kind of thing that we could have missed…”

“Mono wouldn’t let us go to trial without all the evidence we need,” Randy said, “But then, this note might just make it easier to solve, not be a key piece. Kind of makes me wonder, what sort of evidence we might have missed to make past cases easier… Mono probably cleaned them up after the trial so we wouldn’t find them in a later investigation and mistake it for current, though.”

“I think it’s nice that you’ve picked up on calling it ‘Mono’,” Nami observed, then leaned her cheek in her hand. “The culprit tried hard to hide these scraps. Whatever’s on this paper has to be important. No matter what… I won’t let the culprit get away with this. We have to find every culprit anyway, to survive, but. I need them to answer for this.”

“I get it,” Randy said, “But… What are you going to do if the culprit isn’t somebody you can hate? Like if it was Sayaka?”

“...I don’t know. Right now, I can’t think of that kind of thing. I need to think ‘the culprit is irredeemable’. And right now, ‘my primary suspect is Shirogane’. I don’t care if it’s inaccurate. If I had to be angry without anywhere for that anger to go, I wouldn’t be able to be investigating right now,” Nami explained, “I’m really overwhelmed. You know?”

“I know,” Tsukasa said, and Randy nodded as well. “We all are. None of us were expecting another murder to occur during the challenge. At least you’re the one who had a warning from Hamuko. We were just completely caught off guard by the walls disappearing to see a dead body. It’s. Really hard for everyone. And you know, given the history of this game. I’m sure that it’s hard for the culprit too. Whatever their reasoning.”

“...Fine,” Nami said, “Monokuma?”

“Yes, Nami?” It arrived.

“Could the ‘Evil King’s Gun’ be some weapon other than an actual gun?”

“Well, yeah. It’s a metaphorical term. The weapon can be anything. It’s randomized, after all. The algorithm has a heavy influence to actually be a gun, but could also manifest as any number of weapons. So, yes. It’s possible that killing Torimi and attempting to kill Tsumugi could be the work of the Evil King.”

“And finding the culprit, if they are the Evil King, would that count as defeating them?”

“If you’re the one who did it, with this vindictive attitude? Sure, it probably would. Again, I can’t tell you if that’s what’s going on in this case. I’m not allowed. Could be the Evil King. Could not.”
“...Imagine it, Nami. I told you before. It’s completely possible for somebody to be completely rotten underneath, no matter how kind they may seem or how much you might think you know them. But thinking that way, would just make you even angrier, right? So if the culprit was the Evil King, you’d really be bringing them to justice. Unfortunately, you won’t know if they are until after they’ve been executed. I’ll be looking forward to the result.”
“But,” Monokuma said, “if the culprit isn’t the Evil King after all, then that anger won’t help you at all, you know. Prosecuting with impunity, without heart or mercy… That’s not your style, is it? Be kind to yourself and don’t do anything you’ll regret, Nami.”

Before she could react to that, Monokuma was gone again, leaving her standing there more confused than she’d already been. That was a weird answer to receive, and she was left without confidence. What sort of a statement was that? The culprit might be the Evil King, so be merciless so that they’ll be defeated. But being merciless isn’t good for you, and the culprit might not be the Evil King, so don’t.

So what? Honestly, she couldn’t break the anger anyway. It wasn’t her style, so what. Either the culprit was the Evil King and her anger would defeat them, or they weren’t and her anger would be justified because there wasn’t any other reason out there she could accept. Monokuma softening up and telling her to be kind to herself wouldn’t change that. What did it even know, anyway? It was still involved in making them kill each other.

Lacking the memory of she and Tsumugi’s full revelation, there was no reason for her not to think that right now. Obviously Monokuma wanted them to trust it, and it wasn’t unusually cruel. She’d long since acknowledged this. But as far as she knew, it was still responsible for certain aspects of the Killing Game’s continuation. And it acted like it knew her. She was more upset about that. It didn’t know her at all. They weren’t friends. She’d grown only to tolerate it over the past fourteen days, not to love it like she had with Sayaka and her friends. So really. What did it know about what was good for her?

“We need to keep investigating.” She pushed her feelings to the back again and left the Detective Ward to continue. The next ward that yielded any information was the Heir Ward.

There certainly was evidence to be found here. In fact, it was pretty obvious that something happened in the room. There were books all over the floor, with pages torn out and strewn everywhere. Randy was gathering the pages, because the contents could have some meaning to them. Nami doubted that, though.

“It looks like somebody had a breakdown in here, that’s all,” Nami said, “like somebody freaked out. We’ll have to ask who was in here for the Ward Challenge before we assume that it has anything to do with this case…”

“I guess. It’s not unreasonable that somebody would have a full-blown breakdown during these challenges, yeah,” Randy said, “but you said it yourself, anything can be a contributing factor in this case. We definitely can’t overlook anything, if we want to get justice for Torimi.”

“Yeah. Notice I’m not telling you not to pick up the papers… Just, this looks bad. Looks. But it might not be, it might be fine,” Nami said, “so… I don’t know. I guess I just. Tori looked like she was killed in her sleep. If it was something like a struggle in this room, then it means she wasn’t. It’s nicer to think she wasn’t afraid when she died.”

“That makes sense, but…” Tsukasa frowned. “I’m worried about you, Nami. Your emotions are all tied up in this case. We can handle investigating, you know. You’re flipping between being kind of, scary gung-ho about catching the culprit, and trying to rationalize it into the weakest possible version of what you obviously see as the worst possible crime.”
“I… I’m not doing that,” Nami said.

“You kind of are,” Randy said.

“Of course you’d agree with Tsukasa, he’s your fucking boyfriend. Jesus Christ.”

“Nami, you know that—”

“Of course you’d want me off the investigation. Of course you would. I don’t blame you. Since I could be the culprit, and not even remember it, right? I’m starting to remember the previous challenge already, though. That’s why I asked Motherkuma that question. I guess it’s still possible, though. I get it. But from where I stand, you could be the culprit too. You could both be. With an accomplice, this wouldn’t be all that tough to pull off…”

“We weren’t paired together this last challenge, though,” Tsukasa said, “And we already know who was paired with Torimi, so it isn’t like an accomplice could be with the victim and just look the other way. Are you actually accusing us right now?”

“Accusing? No. Just saying that it’s completely possible. So I can’t turn my back on you. I have to keep an eye on the investigation. No matter what,” Nami said, “I’m sorry. But I can’t trust you. I can’t do it. There’s only one person here who I can rely on.”

Tsukasa and Randy exchanged a look, and seemed to decide without words that they wouldn’t ask Nami who that person was. Because the answer would probably, somehow, disappoint them. Whatever. Nami turned to continue looking around the room, but she didn’t find anything else strange. No blood, no other traces of evidence, just the obvious of the books that had been torn down and torn apart. Except… Hm. While the books were primarily pulled down randomly, there was one shelf that had been completely emptied, excluding one book. When Randy and Tsukasa weren’t watching, she slipping it into her investigation bag. While they weren’t watching, because she couldn’t trust them with this.

She wouldn’t share the evidence she found on her own, until the trial. Because that was where the truth could be unearthed. Where it could be found, and exposed. She knew that bickering and accusing people before the trial was useless. She said as much plenty of times before. It was the easiest way to get control of the situation and put the investigation back on track. But right now. She couldn’t help but suspect everybody at once.

Herself included. And even though she’d defended Dia, not her, either. Madara had a few good points, that again, could be gone over during the trial. Nami stayed a few steps back from the boys the rest of the way, as they found nothing in every remaining ward.
With the Ultimate Wards finished, there were only a few more areas to investigate. The Hospitality Ward. Nothing in the gift shop. Nothing in the auditorium. But the Dining Hall still existed. Despite everything, it was still there, still accessible. And Nami went straight for it. Maybe the culprit would think that since the area hadn’t been used in days, that since it had such unpleasant memories associated with it, that it wouldn’t be checked. But she had every intention of looking in here.

So she did. She pushed past Tsukasa and Randy to open the door and look around. Dusty. How’d it get dusty so soon? Maybe it was an effect by that damn Monokuma. She walked straight through the tables, looking back and forth as she went. She’d already made it to the kitchen by the time that the boys followed her into the seating area at all. She hopped the counter and started looking around. At first, nothing seemed strange. That was because nothing was out of place. That’s when she saw it.

The knife block. She approached it, and started pulling the knives out, one by one. She pulled it out, examined the blade, then tossed it to the ground behind her. Randy and Tsukasa took that exactly as she intended; to give her a wide berth. To keep out of her way. There were still two knives left in the block when she stopped, though. She stopped, hopped the counter again, and given her display, had to share this evidence. Even though she decided not to share, she’d made a show of looking for this. She held up the paring knife from the block, caked with blood. “I found the murder weapon.”

She put it into her own evidence bag, though, rather than handing it over. Then, she sat down, trying to gather herself again. The boys, who she did consider friends even if she couldn’t trust them, were staring at her like she had two heads. She was behaving erratically, and neither of them were good at hiding their feelings, so they wore their observations of that fact on their faces plain as day.

“If the knife was from here,” Randy said, “Then that implies something, you know. It implies the culprit did have access to the full building. Only one person…”

“No,” Nami said, “We’re not talking about that. Not right now. It’s for the trial, understand? For. The. Trial. Don’t you dare try to convince me otherwise. Don’t talk to me about your suspicions.”

“…Okay,” Randy said, “Do you think we should look around and make sure that’s not a fake murder weapon, somehow?”

“If it is fake, then the other investigation team will have found the real one. Unless they’re all working together. That’s a bit unbelievable though, so I think I will trust their findings. I don’t know if I trust our findings.” Nami shrugged. “You did a good job finding those scraps, Randy. I’m sorry I’m being a bitch. I am. Definitely overwhelmed. I’m too emotional about this. You were right. But I still can’t remove myself from the situation. It’s too important.”

“I understand,” Tsukasa said, “But you’re kind of acting, well. Extra weird. Even for you. I know what you’re like when you’re upset and it’s not… This.”

“You don’t understand just how much this hurts me,” Nami said, “Yeah, it’s not like this. Because I haven’t felt like this before. I’ve never been this upset.”

“Even still,” Tsukasa said, “You’re a graceful person. I was willing to believe it was just the
emotional impact of her death, until you started tossing knives around like that. I’m worried that there’s something else going on here. That’s all.”

“Something else like what?” Nami questioned, furrowing her brow.

“Something else like you’ve been convinced it’s normal for you to be volatile.”

“...Huh?” Nami froze.

“When you’re in the process of coming out of an amnesiac episode, you’re in a vulnerable state, right? That’s how Kirara kept you around so long. She convinced you that her attacks on you were actually self harm, right?” Tsukasa clarified. Nami couldn’t help but confirm that. She nodded. It was the truth, after all. “So the culprit easily could have messed with your long-term memory. To interfere with the investigation, they told you that you’re aggressive like this.”

Nami couldn’t reply to that. It was possible, she’d admit that. And it wasn’t like the way her episodes worked was a kept secret; It was possible anybody knew about her period of malleability. She didn’t know who Tomoe might have talked to or who Tsukasa may have mentioned it to. If Riko woke up later than her, then she was a sitting duck. Or. Maybe.

She or Riko was the intended target, only for the culprit to change their mind when they noticed Nami’s state? Realized that would complicate the investigation more than for one of them to be the victim? Or both of them to be the victim. If the culprit wanted to frame the other person in the room, it didn’t make sense that they attacked Torimi and Tsumugi. And when it came down to it, framing Nami would have been easy too...

So that was it, huh? The whodunnit was, once again, an important factor. And Nami took some time to breathe, and think, and try to sort it out. Actively, historically, this behavior was out of the ordinary for her. Even at her worst times, she was a careful person. Even if she suspected somebody, she could treat them with courtesy. When it was her prerogative to always condemn the person who deserved it most in her courtroom, jumping to conclusions was the enemy. Right. In her certain memories, this was unusual behavior for her after all. At least to this extent. Even losing Torimi, as rotten as that was, wasn’t about to change the way she behaved in these situations. So somebody manipulated her. Tsukasa was right.

“...I have no idea what else they might have changed,” Nami said, and pulled off her bag, holding it out towards Randy. “You should hold onto this evidence, too. There’s also a book in there. I have no idea if it’s important, but it was the last one left on the shelf. Thank you for... Making me realize. But you’re right. Stopping to think clearly, that’s not my behavior. But I recalled being that sort of person... Even though I never have. It fits the pattern, but don’t worry. It’ll fade, as soon as I remember what it is I forgot.”

“The investigation is over!” Monokuma’s voice came over the intercom, “Everybody please report to the courtroom lobby!”
4:00 pm / 1600 Hours

Nami arrived at the Courtroom Lobby, along with ‘her’ investigative team. Though, at this point, it was more like she was just along with them and they were the real investigators, because she relented to that upon realizing that she was being irrational. Really, truly irrational, as in, it was not something that was normally associated with her own behavior. It was always good to realize these sorts of things, even if it was jarring to do so. She would have hated it if this incorrect aspect of herself persisted any longer than it had.

She lost the absolute vindictive fury, the overwhelming anger that overflowed into her actions. She was still furious, she still wanted to find the culprit. She still wanted to avenge Torimi, and get revenge, for that matter, for manipulating her in this way. But it was a calm fury. Not the unrestrained sort that led her to lash out.

She looked around the courtroom lobby, keeping an eye on her peers as they arrived. Once they’d mostly all arrived… It was one of these people, or Tsumugi, was responsible for killing her best friend and tampering with her memories. Unforgivable, but she could smile at them all as friends. Innocent until proven guilty. That was one of the core tenets of justice, after all.

“Tsumugi Shirogane is excluded from participation in this trial,” Monokuma explained, “Due to her current injury, there’s no reasonable way for her to stand at a podium and involve herself in this debate. So, I’ll be placing a cardboard cutout of her. As I know what happened, as well, I can make any objective statements that she would have been able to contribute were she not injured.”

“You’re able to do that?” Nami wondered.

“Mhm. Anything that Tsumugi Shirogane directly witnessed and would remember, I’m able to speak on,” Monokuma said, “I can offer this information only if the trial leads there, though. For example, if somebody said ‘there was no banana in the room’, and there had been a banana when Tsumugi was there, I can share that fact.”

“Are you capable of lying on her behalf?” Amai was the one who asked this.

“Not really. So I guess be careful with the conversation if there’s anything you think she wouldn’t want the group to know,” Monokuma said, “Sorry. This is actually one of the least free-will processes I can undergo, as a Monokuma!”

“I understand,” Amai said, then nodded. “In that case, I’ll do my best to preserve her privacy, during this trial. Even if she’s the culprit… She doesn’t need to have her entire heart exposed if she isn’t here to answer for it.”

“I agree completely, so please, commit to that promise, Amai!” Monokuma proclaimed, pointing at her. Then, it turned to Nami. “Hey, hey. Nami. You seem kinda calmer than you were earlier. Did my inspiring words land?”

“Yours didn’t,” Nami admitted, “But Tsukasa figured something out, so, yes. I am calmer now. And I will very calmly determine the culprit with impunity. I haven’t any suspects yet, though. We’ll need to put our evidence together to do that.”

“That’s the Nami I know,” Monokuma said, then lifted its paws to its eternal grin. “Good work,
childhood friend-kun! You got through to her! That would’ve been one weird trial, if you didn’t… This way, it’s fair, like normal.”

“Oh, it’s still not fair,” Nami said, “I just told you, even though I’ve been able to return to my usual outlook on if somebody could be the culprit or not, that doesn’t mean anything. I’m well and truly in it. Killing Tori wasn’t fair to me, so I won’t be ‘fair’ to her killer, either. I’m going to steamroll this case to the full extent of my abilities.”

“Oh, I just got chills,” Monokuma said, “This is really it, isn’t it? Nami Kaguya at her full potential… I’ve only seen this once before…”

Nami wasn’t sure which case it was referring to, but that didn’t matter. She’d softened to it again, of course. She realized along with the anger that her vitriol towards the bear was also likely manipulated into her from an outside source, and managed to overcome that too. Monokuma was trying its best, she could tell. It wasn’t necessarily a good ‘person’, but it was doing its level best to be a good friend in spite of the situation. She could grant it that much.

“Oh my,” Goro said, “Yeah, that’s true. I thought the murder I staged could have been enough, but, of course not… After all, she was playing for the normal stakes there. The combination of something to make her angry, and a complicated case, that’s her full potential.”

“You’re right,” Nami said, “You never could have actually prompted me to use my ‘full potential’, Goro. Because you wouldn’t have killed somebody who meant enough to me. I’m grateful to you for that.”

“Doesn’t that sound kinda suspicious, though?” Kurou asked, “Not that I suspect him. But saying that this was what he tried to see from you when he did commit a murder before, and acknowledging that was ‘insufficient’…”

“Maybe a little bit, but I’m not going to jump on that,” Nami said, “The evidence will do the talking in this case, that’s the only responsible way to look at it. That’s always the truth, even though I lost sight of it for a bit. I won’t blame anybody until I have a reason to. With that… Monokuma? Could you be a dear and call the elevator? I think we’re all ready.”

“Yes ma’am!” Monokuma saluted, then the free-running elevator came up through the floor. The doors opened, and everybody piled in. They had more distance between them than usual, because no matter what Nami said, this was a murder of suspicion. Nobody could have done it, so anybody could have, was how it seemed on the surface. And nobody would have done it, but somebody did.

The distrust in the air was tangible, but even so, Nami knew. Once the culprit was found, they’d trust each other again. There was no way to go back now. They were friends. All of them… And a traitor to the peace they’d thought they had.
Penultimate Trial... START.

“Okay, let’s begin,” Nami said, standing at her podium. She would give the briefing, as usual.
“The victim in this case is... Torimi Shinoe. Her body was discovered at 1452. The time of death is
excluded from the Monokuma File, and the cause of death is blood loss from having her throat slit.
No other injuries are listed in the file, and this lines up with the state of the body.”

“No time of death... I guess that means knowing the time would make it too easy to figure out,
right?” Tsukasa clarified.

“Yes, that’s what it seems to imply. If the time of death was during the previous challenge, we’d
suspect her partner. If it was during the time between these challenges, it raises a whole other
question on how somebody was even awake. And if the time of death was during this challenge...
Well, I think that’s the setup we should initially be looking at. We need to pick a point to work
from, and given Shirogane’s current state, it seems most likely that somebody was able to enter
their challenge room.”

“Well,” Monokuma said, “I can tell you this much. Regardless of what the situation is, Tsumugi
Shirogane did not see the killer.”

“Did not see the killer, hm? Interesting,” Nami said, “That’s interesting.”

“We have to pay close attention to Monokuma’s wording! After all, it’s been important before,”
Goro said, “Did not see the killer is a statement which does ensure that we aren’t losing out on
evidence with the lack of her presence, sure. But for a culprit to see themselves, they’d need a
mirror, and there weren’t any of those in the challenge rooms. Thus, Shirogane isn’t excluded!”

“That’s true. It’s possible she killed Torimi, then injured herself to avoid suspicion,” Dia said, “So,
with that, everybody becomes a suspect, don’t they?”

“Not from where I stand,” Madara said, “But before we get into that, I guess Nami’s right. We
should share our objective evidence that we’ve collected.”

“I’ll defer to Randy for that purpose, on our end,” Nami said.

“Right. We found out a few important things, actually. We found a knife with blood caked on it in
the Dining Hall’s knife block, which is probably the murder weapon. We found out what the
ReWard is during the Duos Challenge... A keycard which can open hidden doors in the challenge
rooms. The layout is similar to that of a hotel, with each room opening individually to one hallway.
We also found a torn up note in the Detective Ward, and potential signs of struggle in the Heir
Ward.”

“That’s interesting,” Sayaka said, “We found a knife on the floor in the challenge area. Perfectly
clean. We assumed it was the murder weapon, but since that one’s got blood and all, I don’t know
the significance of this one...”

“Nothing in the rooms check,” Madara added in, “Really, all that our group discovered was that
knife on the ground. It seems like you got more efficient leads. What was that about a torn up
note?”

“Oh, right.” Randy took out the scraps, as transferred into a plastic bag from the gift shop while
they were waiting for the trial to begin. “Oishi, you won the jigsaw challenge, right? Do you think you can get these put back together?”

“Of course I can! Though, it’ll go faster if Madara helps me,” Amai said.

“That’s right,” Sayaka said, “I’m really bad at puzzles, and he basically did our whole challenge himself. He and Amai working together would get us the contents of the note way quicker.”

“I’m game, for the sake of the case,” Madara said. He and Amai were next to each other anyway, so that made it simple. “I’m not going to stop participating just to focus on this one piece of evidence, though. What was that about the keycard?”

“If anybody used their ReWard key during the challenge, they’d get the keycard,” Nami said, “That would let the culprit move between rooms freely.”

“Wouldn’t that mean the culprit needed an accomplice, then?” Kurou wondered, “To look the other way when they left the room?”

“Not quite,” Nami said, “Who can tell my man Kurou why that is?”

“Oh, I know!” Goro raised his hand. “I woke up a whole twenty minutes before Randy did, in our challenge room. So that’s the gimmick of this challenge, right? Some of us woke up at different times. That’s how Shirogane could have missed the culprit, too. If she was asleep, and was woken up by the botched attempt on her life!”

“That’s right,” Dia said, “I woke up at ten past, myself. Then Shirogane called me at about twenty past. I got her to the infirmary, patched her up as best I could, then got back to break the bad news at about fifty past. Madara was my partner.”

“That’s true. I woke up just a minute before Dia disappeared,” Madara said, “But don’t take that as me vouching for her. Just because she was summoned to that room doesn’t mean she did what she said when she got there.”

“You’re accusing me, aren’t you?” Dia asked, frowning.

“Hey now, before you do that. Again, keycard. We need to figure out who had the opportunity to get it, right?” Nami asked.

“How do we even know somebody did? If they didn’t, then it’s pretty clear to me who the culprit is,” Madara said.

“Well,” Tsukasa said, “We know because of when the extraneous riddle solvers got keys. Monokuma said that we won’t get the chance to use them, because somebody already did. So at least one ReWard panel was opened, and at least one person retrieved the keycard.”

“Peh. That also doesn’t mean that whoever did that is necessarily the culprit either, though,” Madara said, “After all, that seems pretty contrived. When did they get the opportunity to use the keys, anyway?”

“Well,” Nami said, “I could have been given the chance, and not remember it. I did enter an amnesiac episode during the previous challenge. And Tori could have, too, we just don’t know. Who else got keys?”

“I received the Journalist Ward Key,” Riko noted, “But I got no chance to use it. Likely because it was for the ward of a dead person, instead of my own.”
“I can vouch for that, I was there when she got her key,” Amai said, “And that’s it for the keys, I think? So we have two ‘who can says’ and one ‘I didn’t get the chance to use it’, so I’ll say that maybe the chance never actually happened?”

“But then, how could somebody have used their key?” Randy asked, “Monokuma definitely said that someone already had, by the start of the final challenge.”

“Well, what if somebody was in their own ward for that challenge?” Kurou wondered.

“Dia and I were in my ward,” Riko said, “But as I said, the key I had was for the late Tomoe Kaguya’s ward, and not my own.”

“...Thanks for not mentioning it for me, Kurou,” Sayaka said, “But, yeah. I was in my ward. But the challenge that I won, the key went to Nami, not me.”

“That might be true, but on the other hand…” Randy hesitated, but couldn’t keep this observation to himself. “We don’t know who the first winner of that challenge was. Who got the key during that challenge, instead of the start of the next one. It certainly could be you, couldn’t it?”
“Yeah, I guess that’s possible,” Sayaka said, “And I don’t have any way to disprove it, though, I
couldn’t even tell you what the riddle was. Kurou and I just talked, and didn’t even attempt to do
the challenge before it timed out. That’s just my word for it, though.”

“I’ll vouch for her, but similarly, I don’t have any proof either,” Kurou said, “So it’s our words
against your suspicions. I’ll admit, though. It does seem in this situation like this is the only way
somebody could have retrieved the keycard.”

“Unless Nami did it in her fugue state,” Tsukasa mentioned, “And didn’t take the card, thus
leaving nothing out of place when she came to. If there was actually a separate opportunity to use
the keys that we don’t know about.”

“It’s suspicious that nobody else is admitting to solving the riddle first,” Madara said, “But saying
‘somebody already used their key’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘somebody already claimed their
prize’. Frankly, I think that this is an absolute goose chase. The obvious culprit is still right here.”

“Do you really think you can claim an obvious culprit when there’s still so much that we don’t
know about the case?” Goro asked, “That seems pretty irresponsible to me! But I guess if you
wanna make your argument, go ahead. We’ll be sure to shoot it down. Bang bang!”

“Shoot it down? Well, if you can, but…”

[Tsukune Madara’s Much Too Early Closing Argument: START]

The culprit woke up at the beginning of this Duos Challenge and was able to give off the illusion
of being summoned using the same trick as Monokuma; Phasing through the floor so quickly that
it’s impossible to tell the difference from simply vanishing. Once doing that, the culprit used this
unique travel ability to check in on each room for somebody that was vulnerable to being killed.
Upon checking Nami’s room to see she in her fugue state and Asahi still asleep, the culprit utilized
knowledge obtained in an illicit outside manner.

Remembering events from ‘another’ Killing Game, the culprit knew that Nami was able to be
manipulated in this state, and planted ideas of distrust and anger in her head. Distrust of everybody,
of course, but the culprit, who she’s been insisting on defending this whole time in spite of all of
the evidence which points so clearly in this person’s direction. After that brief detour, the culprit
continued looking for another vulnerable group, satisfied to have sabotaged the case with their
manipulation of Nami. That was when the culprit found Torimi and Tsumugi, both still asleep.

They murdered Torimi without issue, but made a mistake and didn’t put enough pressure on
Tsumugi’s neck, resulting instead in her waking up, bleeding, in a panic. This was when the culprit
seized upon another opportunity, creating an alibi in the form of motive. Thinking that they’d
escape suspicion if they saved Tsumugi’s life, the culprit dragged her to the infirmary. They also
took the time back in the main building to dispose of evidence. The knife in the block, the note torn
up, everything.

And of course, the signs of struggle in the Heir Ward are the result of the previous challenge. The
culprit may have asked Asahi to be an accomplice, or something along those lines, resulting in a
fight between them.

After disposing of the evidence, the culprit returned to the challenge area to act like the hero rather
than the killer, confident that their ‘rescuing’ of Tsumugi would absolve them of suspicion… Forgetting that nobody else would be capable of this sort of crime.

Isn’t that right, Dia Hamuko?

[Closing Argument END]

“...No, that’s not right at all.” Dia frowned and adjusted her glasses. “There are a lot of things that you’re not accounting for in that argument. For example, the purpose of the note, which you’ve yet to reassemble. The second knife found on the ground in the challenge area. And why I wouldn’t have just killed Nami and Riko when I found them still-vulnerable, of course. You don’t have any explanation for my behavior.”

“Well, that much isn’t difficult,” Kurou said, “Not that I’m agreeing with Madara. I do think this has holes. However, when it comes to ‘why’, the answer is that you’re the Evil King. You were more attached to Riko and Nami than to Shirogane and Torimi, so when it came to picking your two targets, you let your heart get the better of you.”

“That’s a funny accusation, when we don’t even know if the ‘gun’ has been found,” Dia said, “And isn’t your argument that I used a normal kitchen knife?”

“Or the normal kitchen knife is the one that we found on the ground,” Madara said, “And the knife you returned to the Dining Hall was a different one all along.”

“I should say,” Riko chimed in, “I actually think this theory is plausible. However, there was no struggle in my ward. Dia and I were apart during that entire challenge.”

Dia’s brave front melted away in an instant. “Riko, you… Think it’s plausible?”

“In the event that you’re the Evil King? Yes,” Riko answered without hesitation, “Just because I don’t believe you’d kill somebody for no reason, this is exactly the type of motivation which could prompt you to do such a thing. In this world, anyway. I know that Box Hako’s influence had you killing in those falsehoods, and I know we all forgive you for that. But when it comes to here and now…”

“How can you say a thing like that…?” Dia questioned, balling her hands up. “Seriously? If I was the Evil King… Then I wouldn’t make a mistake! Say it was me, and I only just found the ‘gun’. I wouldn’t screw it up like this! I’d have just made sure that Tsumugi was dead! Because then there wouldn’t be a trial and we’d all just get out of here. It’s not like I would have been on a time constraint. And I’m not a coward. I wouldn’t hesitate. We definitely wouldn’t be standing here… If I was the Evil King and had found the ‘gun’!”

“She’s right, you know.”
“Amai!” Dia exclaimed, surprised and pleased that her friend came to her rescue.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out!” Amai gave a salute, then crossed her arms. “Unlike Madara here, I’ve been paying attention to my assigned task, so I’ve kinda missed a bunch of what’s going on. But if there’s one thing I’m sure of, this dumb bitch still doesn’t value her own life enough to be lying now, or to have fucked up the murder in the first place! Anyway, Madara. Shut up and work on the puzzle, I need to examine some knives.”

“But…” Madara started to protest. “Just because she’s not the Evil King doesn’t mean she didn’t commit the murder, you know!”

“Mhm, mhm, sure, yeah. We’ll figure that out and all. But for now, you puzzle, I examine knives. Puh-lease?” Amai held her hands out, and the knives were passed over to her for comparison. She squinted at them for a while, then held them both up. “These knives both originate in the Duos Kitchenettes. The handles are the same as those in the Dining Hall, but the blade quality is worse. The Cafe Monokuma knives, and those that were in my ward as well, are completely different too. So, Monokuma? This knife was left on the floor for comparison purposes when the rest of the Challenge Area was erased?”

“Precisely. It’s a fair play concession,” Monokuma said.

“Yeah, so. This knife did come from the challenge area. It was just hidden outside of the challenge area,” Amai said, “Easily could have been done even during the investigation, fuckfaces. Jumping to conclusions… This is just a normal shitty paring knife. The reason Moogs lived is probably cause these things have got like, a max cap of slitting one throat properly. After killing one human, it was too dull to kill another. Of course, if Dia were the culprit, she could have just gotten another knife. We have no way of knowing which room the knife did come from, but that doesn’t matter… Probably.”

“Probably?” Randy asked, not following Amai’s line of logic.

“Probably. I mean, if it did come from those two’s challenge room, then Moogs is the primary suspect. Taking herself out of the equation with a near-fatal injury… That’d be clever.” Amai tapped the knives together. “And with this, I could be eliminated too. I’d never fail to bring a backup knife if I was planning to slit a fucking throat! Chickens need a backup knife often enough, and those are fragile little horrifying omnivore birds.”

“That doesn’t eliminate you,” Nami said.

“Well… no. But you know what does?” Amai set the knives down and struck a pose. “My ward was removed! Therefore, I couldn’t use a ReWard key, at all! Me and Randy were in the Journalist Ward for our challenge too, which as you know, was already accounted for. Someone else had the key. So it isn’t like I substituted my nonexistent ReWard key for a dead person’s and ended up with
the chance to use it.”

“Are you done being a pain?” Madara asked.

“Absolutely never, dickwad,” Amai said.

“Well, anyway.” Madara gestured to the podium. “I’ve finished putting the note back together. Would you like to hear what it says?”

“We sure would like to, yes!” Nami said, “The culprit tried pretty hard to hide it, so it’s got to be important.”

“Oh, it’s important, but I don’t think you’ll like what it says. Really, you won’t.” Madara chuckled, though he wasn’t amused. He was just laughing at what was about to unfold into a truly fucked up situation.

[ Nami Kaguya.

The next waking person that you see has been your best friend for as long as you can remember. They’re completely trustworthy and reliable, the only person in this Killing Game who is. This person has always been there for you when you’ve forgotten things or lost control of your nasty temper. Only this person can be trusted and would never do anything bad. Monokuma is the least trustworthy person here. Don’t listen to a thing it says.

You will take this person’s keycard and use it at the fridge to access the hallway. Go to the room on the end. Kill Tsumugi Shirogane and Torimi Shinoe through any means you like, but if one of them wakes up, run away immediately. Return the keycard and this note to your very best friend in the hallway and I’ll let you back into the room. I’ll see you soon. Be quick so your partner doesn’t see.]

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No what was she thinking. Why did she think that.

Torimi Shinoe was not her second best friend, she was her best friend. The person who Nami thought was her best friend was the murderer. The person Nami thought was her best friend was the culprit, anyway. Nami was the murderer. That’s what it said. Nami was the murderer. She killed her best friend and she couldn’t even point the finger at the person who was responsible because her very best friend would never do anything wrong and was trustworthy and reliable and couldn’t have possibly done this and couldn’t and couldn’t.

“So that answers it, doesn’t it?” Madara asked, “This note was passed to Nami, probably under the door to make sure she didn’t have a chance at knowing who the person was prior to her brain being muddled by its contents. The truth of the matter, though… It’s got to be. Even though it clearly isn’t her fault, Nami Kaguya is the blackened.”

“Nami Kaguya… Is the blackened…” Nami echoed, staring down at her hands. Her head was spinning. Not again, not again. Why did this. Why did she. Why was she such a rotten person that she could be used this way and convinced to do such terrible things this way why was she like why
why why why why did she have to have a body count again. Body count two well haha look at that look at that she still matched Kanoshi. Just took a little while to catch up. She killed her teacher and he killed Komaru. He killed Kaede and she. Killed. Torimi.

“I’m sorry, Sayaka,” Nami muttered, lifting her head toward the ceiling instead. She felt weak. She didn’t feel like herself. She felt. Out of her body. Where was she. Who was she? “All along I’ve just had this… Rot…”

What was that rot? Of course. It was the sin of her birth. For as long as she’d entered this world ‘Hiro’, something in her was a villain, wasn’t it?

No wonder she was just like him. Could wanting to be, feeling like, becoming and having always been a girl, so she felt… Really free her from the rot? That inheritance from her father. He was a bad man. So for as much as she was a woman, some rot deep within her would, she guessed, always be a bad man. Thanks Dad. For ruining me.

But I’ll die now and stop hurting everybody.

“…Bullshit!” Sayaka’s voice echoed in the courtroom. “Nami. You have nothing to apologize for!”
“Sayaka, I think she was apologizing for becoming the-” Amai started.

“Shut up! Because, she’s not the blackened!” Sayaka proclaimed, pointing at Amai, then around to everyone else before lowering her arm to instead stare straight across the courtroom at her girlfriend. This was… The worst possible result. But it wasn’t a lost cause. Because she knew this couldn’t be the truth, she could do it. She could… Save Nami. “Isn’t the note just a little bit too perfect for the situation at hand? Come on. Those aren’t instructions. That was obviously written after the murder.”

“But why?” Madara asked, “Randy. How well were these scraps hidden, again?”

“Really well,” Randy said, “The culprit obviously didn’t want us finding them.”

“That’s fine. ‘The culprit didn’t want us to find this note’ and ‘this note was written to frame Nami’ are not mutually exclusive statements, you know? This culprit killed one person and attempted to kill another. They aren’t the Evil King because honestly, anybody would have just finished off Tsumugi and ended the game, rather than carrying on and covering up their actions. This is a culprit who wants to win the Killing Game.”

A hush fell over the room. What kind of an accusation was that? How could Sayaka so ruthlessly point a finger like that? An honest desire to win the game… That was nonsensical, at this point. Nobody was malicious anymore. Right? That was what they’d all agreed on. Nobody wanted to kill or hurt anyone. The only explanation for this was that it was a mistake on the part of the Evil King, they told themselves, but that didn’t line up. This was a culprit who was trying.

“The culprit has been trying to frame Dia Hamuko,” Sayaka explained, “Through nature of the crime, it’s easy to frame her. We don’t have an explanation for how somebody got the keycard, so we’re forced to suspect the person who can travel between the challenge rooms anyway. We do know that she can’t transport others without causing highly visible digital corruption, which wasn’t present anywhere. The thing is, framing Dia is just one base.”

“Should we figure out about the keycard, after all, we’d doubt that theory. Unfortunately for the culprit, Nami’s already acknowledged her memories were altered. Without her recognizing it herself, and if we didn’t find the note, we’d have no idea and probably still call Dia the culprit. But in the event we did find the note used to alter Nami’s memories, that’s another avenue through which to direct suspicion. I’d imagine only the first paragraph was actually shown to Nami, and the second was added in after the real culprit committed the murder, hence the over-detailing.”

“Are you sure you’re not just saying that because you don’t want to believe that your girlfriend could do this?” Riko asked.

“It’s not that I don’t want to believe, I just completely don’t believe. I fucking know that she’s killed people with her memory weirdness before, but the thing is…” Sayaka crossed her arms. “This doesn’t seem. Right. Dia? Could you help me out here?”

“When Nami killed somebody during her memory fog before, it wasn’t anything like this. These are written like brainwashing instructions,” Dia jumped in at Sayaka’s request, “When before… She was going to self-harm, and the guy who put her in a bad situation asked her if she planned to kill him. She took that as a suggestion, instead. In that case she already hated the person, and she wasn’t told to do anything… Just told that something was possible. Nami isn’t manipulated into
doing things, she’s manipulated into believing things. There’s a difference. This is just going off of her history this timeline, not even the way it's worked over and over, but that's consistent too.”

“So the person who did this… Didn’t completely understand.” Tsukasa nodded along. “They knew enough about Nami’s memory lapses to know that she could be manipulated into believing something during them, but not enough to realize that was the extent of it. If this was written like ‘Torimi is going to kill you, but she can’t if you kill her first’ then it might have been plausible. But these are just orders. They wouldn’t even work. Right?”

“Exactly, that’s what I was thinking!” Sayaka exclaimed, “Even if that half of the note was put in front of Nami, it wouldn’t do anything! So stop freaking out and beating yourself up, it didn’t happen and it never could! Nami!!”

So Nami. Woke up.

- 

“I’m…” She was shaking, but she was there again. Present. Not feeling outside of herself. Sayaka’s argument was solid enough for that. She was right, of course. Nami was just vulnerable. She was a vulnerable person so when she was told that she messed up, of course she accepted it. She did mess up, of course, because she was a disaster. But she didn’t. She wasn’t. She was capable, right?

Capable in general, but certainly not capable right now. Not capable of continuing this trial. Not capable of finding the culprit. She knew the culprit. But she couldn’t find them. Because the mold her brain had been pressed into refused to reconcile with the idea it could be that person. So she couldn’t get revenge. Not right now. She wasn’t capable of it. And that was okay. Because.

“It’s okay, Nami,” Sayaka said, “I… Can take this from here. No, that’s not quite it. I want to take this from here. I can’t forgive this culprit for any of this. For killing Torimi. For attacking Tsumugi. And for what they’ve done to you. It doesn’t matter who it is. They’re irrevocably cruel.”

“Thank you, Sayaka,” Nami said, then let her weight relax onto her podium.

“Oh. One more thing about that note, by the way.” Sayaka pressed a finger to her chin. “You were wrong, that it was slipped under the door to escape Nami seeing them. Nami would have seen the culprit when they checked in to even be able to see that Nami was in that state, after all. The reason this note is on paper is because the culprit didn’t have time to sit and tell Nami all of this. The note was in Nami’s possession while the culprit was committing the murder. So, come on. Help me find out which one of you bastards made my girlfriend cry. Right?”
“We still don’t know who could have gotten the keycard,” Randy said, “Even though that note seems to confirm the keycard was being used… Huh. This note kind of falls through on framing Dia altogether, since she wouldn’t need the keycard. And proves the real culprit did use it, since they knew about it…”

“Well, just because Dia didn’t need it, doesn’t mean she didn’t have it,” Madara said, “It’s still possible. Actually, she’s also the only person with the opportunity to retrieve it, actually. If she stole somebody else’s key, she could get to any ward she wanted.”

“No,” Sayaka said, “She was being framed. The culprit probably realized that Dia was the so-called opportunity to use the ReWard keys, though. That much is true. To use a ReWard key, if you didn’t happen to have one with you and end up in your own ward, you’d need to ask Dia to do it for you. That’s why the challenge was cut short. To make sure that even if several of us realized this, at most, four of us could do it. Or, we could have made the connection and not any of us answered the riddle till later.”

“The connection?” Kurou wondered.

“That would be the fact that the riddle for that challenge was intended to be an insult towards me,” Dia said, “Though, I can only imagine that asking Monokuma also would have functioned in that challenge, had my identity not yet been revealed. Since the Duos Challenge was inevitable, after all.”

“This is true,” Monokuma said, “The riddle may be simple, but it’s there to imply how to use the ReWard keys. Ask me or Dia to do it for you. But…”

“I didn’t do that. I fetched some medicine for Bakura instead, since he has several broken bones,” Dia said, “I didn’t use any ReWard panels on anybody’s behalf. Monokuma?”

“Err… I mean, this kind of goes against the spirit of the trial, but, no. I also didn’t do that,” Monokuma said.

“So we’re back at square one. Great,” Madara said.

“Not quite,” Sayaka said, “After all. It’s still totally possible to open your ReWard Panel if you happen to have the key and wake up in your own ward. Oddly enough, the culprit… For all of their trying to frame somebody else, has actually been backed into a corner.”

“What do you mean?” Nami asked.

“Well, the culprit probably assumed that they wouldn’t be the only person capable of finding the keycard… That other people would be in their own wards, or in wards they had keys for, at least. Instead, there’s actually just one situation,” Sayaka said, “There are two people here who could have been able to do it. But I was with Kurou the entire time. I had to read the riddle on my Monopad during this trial to be able to even understand that aspect of the case. I didn’t have a key from any earlier in the challenge. Even though I was in my own ward, I wasn’t in a position to open my ReWard panel.”

And everyone was uncomfortably shifting under Sayaka’s words, under the realization that she was leading them to and the confusion at the aspects of it which didn’t quite line up, because certain things didn’t line up. Quite enough. But Nami was just watching on in awe. When it came to
protecting the people she loved, Sayaka could be terrifying and ruthless. Seeing Sayaka reach this level in Nami’s name… Was more proof that she was in love, than any ‘I love you’, even any ‘I wanna get married someday’ could possibly do. This was an absolutely undeniable confession. She was using her talent. Sayaka was somebody whose fury drove her to succeed, and whose fury was built on her own honor.

Whoever dared to hurt somebody Sayaka wanted to protect would be turned to dust in her wake.

“What’s confusing to me isn’t this case anymore. I can see it plain as day. The whole thing, but… Let’s not go there just yet. Why should I? Taking it apart piece by piece and watching you, the culprit, squirm…” Sayaka grinned. “Really, what made you think that this was a good idea? Killing people I care about, that’s one thing… But making my girlfriend feel that way… Come on. If either of us in this relationship is a monster, it’s me. And I’m the monster who chews up terrible pieces of shit like you who think that you can just use other people.”

Everybody looked around, but nobody was markedly more nervous than anybody else in the room. Nothing that they’d call ‘squirming’, and Sayaka was being very careful not to make eye contact with anybody or direct her ire in any physical direction in the room. This was a moment being shared only between her and the culprit. Maybe she was a monster, and she was reveling in the moment she’d captured her prey. Even still, nobody blamed her. Not now. Not anymore. Because the culprit wasn’t the Evil King. So what possible motive could dig them out of their grave now?

“H-Hey, Sayaka,” Amai was the one who spoke up to her, “I’ve never seen you like this before. Are you. Okay?"

“You haven’t? Yeah… You haven’t. Cause when I killed that guy for you…” Sayaka closed her eyes, and slipped her thumbs into the waistband of her skirt, a relaxed but somehow still intimidating posture. “I asked you to leave the room, didn’t I? So, sorry you’ve gotta see this now. Sorry everybody, that you had to be caught up in this. Hey, hey. Did you know I could be so cruel? It runs in the family. But I’ll be back to normal soon enough. Once the scum’s wiped off my shoes.”

“And who’s that, Sayaka?” Kurou asked, the second to put words to the collective discomfort.

“...Since you had to see that, I’ll go ahead and let you in on it already,” Sayaka said, “Even though you already know, don’t you? It’s pretty fucking simple, I think. The culprit is the person who was left alone in their own ward. Solved the riddle first. And opened the panel. How’s that, Asahiiii?”
“So you think that I’m the one responsible for all of this?” Riko asked, unbothered. It showed in her face, not just the fact that her text-to-speech didn’t emote very much. Actually, she looked much more stoic than usual. Completely hard-faced in a way that Nami had seen just once before in her life. Even with her mouth hidden, the look in her eyes. A look of absolute emptiness. With that, Nami didn’t doubt the culprit was her. But the idea that this was pure malice began to waver. It was a malicious act. But was it Riko’s malice? Did she even have that?

“I do,” Sayaka said, “I’m quite certain of it, really.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Madara exclaimed, “The riddle is answered through voice recognition, and Asahi can’t speak! Unless you’re going to go as far as to say she’s been lying about that the entire time? Or maybe you forgot in your little rampage?”

“When I say I can see the truth plain as day, I mean it. But yes, let’s see if any of you can figure it out,” Sayaka offered, “If I just broke down how you did it, right now, then I might never find out why.”

“You’d really want to know why?” Amai asked, “After that show you just put on… Why does it fucking matter to you why the culprit did it?”

“Because I haven’t hated Asahi,” Sayaka said, “I haven’t. I’ve considered her a friend. So I’d like to know what possibly possessed her to do something like this. Of course, I can’t begin to imagine a passable reason, so I guess that I really just want to laugh at how fucking stupid her excuse is.”

“Riko… No!” Amai shook her head. “There’s no way! It’s not possible, you know? So stop… Don’t talk about her like that! Go back to the culprit, or saying ‘you’, or whatever! That’s better than watching you tear into my friend!”

Sayaka turned to look at Amai, and her gaze softened, just a bit. “I’m sorry. I know she’s your friend. But she’s also a piece of shit. I guess I can understand, though, why you won’t believe me. You don’t want to be afraid of two people you consider friends, right?”

“Afraid… I’m not afraid of you!” Amai snipped, “Not even now! I’m not scared of you, because I know you want to protect me. But I want to protect my friends, and that includes Riko! Come on, Dia, you’re with me, right?”

“…She said that the theory accusing me was plausible,” Dia said, “And I did leave her alone for the entire challenge. I don’t want it to be true, either. But it’s. Same as she said about me. Plausible.”

“Wow, petty,” Amai said, then pouted. “Guess it’s a good look on you, though, jeeze. You gotta grow a backbone when I’m trying to defend our friend from unsubstantiated murder accusations, though? Cause, she can’t fucking talk. It’s literally not possible, to happen the way that Sayaka’s saying.”

“Well, I guess…” Tsukasa had input, “She could have found and played the right words off of a tape recording?”

“No,” Dia said, “There was only one tape recorder in the building, the entire time up to now. It was destroyed during Tomoe Kaguya’s execution, because she always stored it in her bra. So Riko couldn’t have done it that way.”
“Monokuma has been very clear, as well, that I may not have this text-to-speech system during everyday life,” Riko said, “As much as I enjoy its accurate representation of my mental voice, I’m not terribly hindered. Except when it comes to answering voice-activated riddles, of course. Then I am terribly hindered.”

“See, Sayaka? Your theory doesn’t work,” Madara said.

“Well, you still haven’t eliminated a particular method,” Sayaka said, “I’ll even help you out, though. I’m not accusing Asahi of faking her disability, of course she isn’t. Really, this was just an incredibly convenient riddle for her.”

“An incredibly convenient riddle?” Randy asked, then furrowed his brow to think on the matter. “So… You’re saying that if it was a different riddle, Asahi probably wouldn’t have been able to answer it, but with this riddle, she somehow could?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Sayaka said, “Come on, you’re all smart. But I guess you aren’t driven by girlfriend fury like I am, so I can understand you being a few steps behind. That’s why I wanted to give you the chance to catch up.”

Nami knew what Sayaka was getting at now. She fully understood the who, and how, and not a single bit of the why and also not a single bit of the being capable of speaking up about it. Riko. Riko, who’d been told just enough about her memory lapses by Tomoe to use it against her, but not enough to effectively frame her into the eternal pit of despair. Riko, who was able to convince Nami they’d known each other much longer than they had. The one person she trusted. Even still, since she understood the how, she could at least articulate some amount of that.

“The noun form,” She said. The noun form, which Monokuma had told them. The noun form, which was just two simple words. Two very simple words.

Randy didn’t understand what she was getting at. Well, she saw the recognition in his eyes. He knew what she was referencing, but he didn’t know how that related to Riko. A secret that only three people should have known. Tomoe died knowing it. And Nami was silenced from it. But she was silenced too late, because Riko also would have needed to say it once to Sayaka when they ran into each other all the way back in the beginning. And there was one other person who knew, because no matter how careful Riko Asahi was, she only had control over the false version of herself she presented in this timeline.

“Riko’s done a very minimal amount of speech therapy,” Dia said, “And can say just as much as she needs to introduce herself and ask for something to write with. Or, as she says, ‘a writing tool’. When a functional answer to the riddle is ‘a tool’… That’s one of the very limited things that Riko can say out loud. That’s… Riko…”

“Sorry,” Her text to speech said, and the apology was just as empty as she was.
Riko wasn’t planning to commit a murder during the Duos Challenge. She wasn’t. Really, that wasn’t the idea. But at the same time, well, she’d been planning to commit a murder the entire Killing Game, if the right opportunity arose. She was a perfectionist in all things and needed to be able to get away with it, after all. So when Dia left and she thought she had the right to feel afraid for even a bit, like she could feel anything, she steeled herself and through the haze of her breakdown, she put a plan together. She answered the riddle and got her prize, and the opportunity for murder was… Perfect to frame somebody else with. She could get away with it.

Riko and Nami woke up in their challenge room at the exact same time, but Nami wasn’t ‘awake’. Riko realized what was happening immediately. Her whiteboard would be too slow, so she retrieved the paper and she wrote a note and she handed it over and she left and she murdered one murdered one murdered one person what did it matter who that person was. And she saw Tsumugi’s eyelids flutter and she was trying to get away with murder so she did another and that mattered to her somehow that one matters.

Why should it matter? She doesn’t care. But Tsumugi isn’t dead the knife is dull she runs and makes it back to the challenge room as needed necessary and she’s done it, has she done it? The knife is in her pocket. She takes the note from Nami and while she’s still glazed over makes an addendum. There’s no way this will be pinned on Riko Asahi. Somebody else will take the blame. She’ll win, won’t she? The body is discovered and everyone’s in disarray. It’s easy to hide the evidence. Easy to dispose of it. She trades the bloody knife for the dining hall’s knife, now in her pocket, innocent.

And anyone could have put that knife in the block, anybody could have gotten a keycard, anybody could have written the note, anybody, anybody, but not her. She can’t do that. There are some the compass points to when it comes to guilt but it won’t land on her she knows, she knows. She holds the key to the Journalist Ward, not her own, that’s as far as anybody knows. And she can’t solve a riddle on her own, oh no, she can’t speak a word.

But there are some words she can speak and somehow, somehow, that monster realizes that she isn’t just as silent as the others came to think. And she’s scared again but how can she be scared if she doesn’t feel anything? Why is there a monster in the courtroom. What is it she did that’s so disgusting. Scum. Piece of shit.

Just the worst, but that’s not right, she can’t be any of those things because she’s nothing. She’s nobody. She’s a durable shell. The one born with the name ‘Riko Asahi’. The original, in spite of the fact that any replacement will be better than her. But that’s all she is. She’s following orders. Doing what she’s meant to do. Expected to do.
That’s all.

And that’s nothing.

People get so worked up about things that she can’t even hope to understand, don’t they? Father says win the Killing Game, and so she will. It’s her job as Asahi. It is.

But, she’s not winning the game. She isn’t at all. Why? Wasn’t it a flawless plan? She’s gone too far emotionally. She’s hurt people. Even if it’s only under orders she’s hurt people and she’s released a monster and she can’t even blame that monster because somewhere underneath she understands. And all the same, well. She could have scattered the scraps of the notes all around. She could have kept the bloody knife in her pocket, instead of leaving it in the knife block. There were ways she could have perfected her crime.

And even in the moment, she knows this. As she’s disposing of the evidence, or, is she planting it? Does she want to be caught? Does she want to be found out?

You’re a smart bunch and if she’s right about that, then you’ll figure out what she’s done and you will end it. End her. End this rotten, rotten charade. From the inside out. Because she’s never been one of you. Never been like you. While you live authentically. While you know what it means to feel. She doesn’t. She doesn’t know.

She missed her chance to disappear, before she became seen. She wishes she had disappeared to be replaced by a new Riko Asahi. Yet, she found herself seen. And seen, and seen, and seen. Seen by the world who watch this game. Seen by Sayaka, who unraveled her ‘careful’ crime. Seen by Kurou, who thought somebody like her would make a good friend for Amai. Seen. By. Dia.

Who she saw, too. How did she do that? Because they’re both shells?

What the fuck.

What the fuck!?

How can somebody who can’t feel a shred of compassion say that she knows what it means to love, enough that she can’t think of ‘myself’ when hurting them?

Well.

‘I’ am not Riko Asahi. ‘I’ am the heart she thinks she doesn’t have. So if she’s trampling ‘me’ to bits in her actions. Of course we aren’t the same.
“You…” Amai clenched her fists, trying and failing to bite back her words. “What the hell, Riko!?”

Riko shrugged. “There’s no use denying it anymore, is there? You’re completely correct. I was the first to solve that riddle, I used my ReWard key, I obtained the keycard. I murdered Torimi and injured Tsumugi. I messed with Nami’s memory. All of that, is what I did, and that’s all there is to say about that.”

“That’s… No! Riko, that definitely isn’t all there is to say about that,” Dia said, “There’s plenty to say about that. Because… I’ve never once understood why.”

“Why somebody would commit a murder? I know that’s a lie,” Riko said.

“No,” Dia said, “I mean… Anytime that you committed a murder, in the fake games. Honestly, I think the reason that I couldn’t deny it was you, even to myself… Is because this case, the whole time, matches your M.O.”

“Oh? Please, do tell. What is it that I’ve done in these fake games?” Riko asked.

“It’s always… This sort of thing. You put the blame on somebody else. You don’t kill immediately, but if a useful opportunity presents itself, you’ll take it. You use other people. Often it was Nami with her memory, but she wasn’t the only person you could manipulate in your plans. Carefully plotted. Difficult to solve. A mystery that seems possible for anybody but you. And every single time… You never said why. We never figured out why.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Riko asked, “That’s because there isn’t a reason. If I did it all those times, that confirms it. I was waiting, this entire time, just for the perfect opportunity to get away with it. I’m just a bad person. How’s that for a reason, Sayaka? Laughable enough for you?”

Sayaka didn’t answer at all, just staring at her. She actually visibly balked a bit at that, her unmoving posture finally showing just a small amount of discomfort in the situation.

“There’s no way that’s true,” Dia said, “There’s no way. It isn’t true and the reason definitely isn’t that you’re ‘just a bad person’. I’m sure of that, so why don’t you just tell the truth?”

“I’m a bad person. So I killed somebody. And tried to get away with it. That’s the entire truth, as far as I understand it myself,” Riko said, “If there’s anything else going on here, then you’ve just invented it yourself because you don’t like the idea that I was able to fool you all into thinking there wasn’t any malice left here. Of course there was. I’m a villain, that’s all there is to say about me. And of course, the Mastermind exists too. You really think that person isn’t your enemy?”

“Nobody!” Dia shouted, hitting her hands against the podium. “Nobody is ‘our enemy’! The Mastermind isn’t, and neither are you! After all…”

“This game is running headless!” Amai finished for Dia, pointing a finger up towards the ceiling. “Monokuma is personally making any changes we observe, and everything else was preprogrammed! No Mastermind is running this, and the outside forces have disappeared too! Am I right, Monokuma?”

“Wowee, thank you! You’ve set me free of my bonds!” Monokuma said, “You’re right! I’m the only one who’s having any impact on changes in the program, and since I don’t know the first
thing about programming, that’s why they’re so minimal. The Mastermind isn’t doing anything, and neither are the folks upstairs.”

“Yeah!” Dia said, “I realized that a while back, but I couldn’t voice it thanks to the censor. I knew somebody else would have figured it out, though. So, you see, Riko? I can’t believe that you, of all people, are an enemy. Because we don’t have an enemy anymore.”

“Stupid…” Riko then hit her keyboard with her fist and garbled noises came out before she continued using it to communicate normally. “Do you realize how stupid you sound right now? I can’t be a villain because nobody else is? If anything, that makes me worse. It makes me not just a villain, but the villain. Your antagonist. The worst person here. Why are we still doing this, anyway? Just execute me and be done with it. Come on. Just throw me away.”

“I can’t do that,” Dia said, “Because you’re my friend.”

“Sayaka? Nami?” Riko asked. “Surely, you’d rather I was just killed right away?”

“Honestly, no,” Nami said, “I want to know, too. The reason why. The real reason why. Because you’re not just a bad person.”

“Are you still fucking brainwashed?” Riko asked, “Obviously, I am. You only cared about me because I told you to.”

“No,” Nami said, “Riko Asahi is the culprit who brainwashed me. We’ve been friends since the start of the Killing Game and she isn’t exactly trustworthy or reliable. She’s done something very wrong. Even still, the time that we’ve honestly been friends is still worth something to me. I did think that I knew you pretty well. So at the very least, if I think you wouldn’t just do this for the sake of killing Torimi, then I need to know what reason you actually had. You want us to just hate you flat out. You don’t want us to understand. But, you know. I’ll still be angry at you long after you’re dead. I’d rather understand, still. I want to know.”

“There’s nothing here to understand. Shut up. Fuck you,” Riko said, “Stop insisting that there has to be something else. There’s nothing else. There never could be. I’m just like this. The heart of this case is that I haven’t got one.”

“I refuse!” Nami said, “Tori didn’t die just for her killer to say ‘it’s in my nature’! I know that it can't just be that!”

“In my nature. Nothing’s in my nature,” Riko said, “That’s all I’ll say on the matter. Beg and plead all you want. If there’s another reason, I’ll never tell. Come on. I wasn’t even going to take any of you outside with me, how about that? Is that good enough to condemn me?”

In spite of her words, there were tears in her eyes.

“The real whydunnit of this case…” Randy muttered, “We can’t just watch you die without knowing that. We can’t.”

“In that case,” Monokuma said, “She really will never tell. But I think I just might be able to.”

And a screen descended from the ceiling.
Riko Asahi was three years old when she asked her father, through means of a scribble on construction paper. She’d had to learn to write very quickly, because although she had a sign teacher, none of her family actually bothered to learn it themselves.

“Dad, why can’t I play outside with Yui and her friends?” Tugging at his pants so that he’d pay attention to her. He wasn’t doing any work right then, but he still needed his attention to be grabbed. He was the kind of man who would take good care of his children, but commonly forget that they were around all the same. Like human toddlers were cats who could keep to themselves but for when they needed food. Especially when that human toddler was mute.

“Riko, I guess it’s time that you understood something,” He said, picked her up, and put her on his knee. “It’s the same reason you have to wear that mask, and have to write instead of talking. You’re not like those other kids.”

She just tilted her head, looking for more of an explanation.

“In fact, you’re not like any of those other kids at all. You’re sick. You’ve got a terrible sickness inside you. It’s really bad. It’s called Despair Fever,” He explained, “And it’s incurable. But don’t worry, with our money, it can be managed just fine. As long as you take your medicine, you won’t go crazy like most people with it do. But you can’t be around the other kids, either. You’re the only person on this whole island who’s got Despair, and we don’t want it spreading. Plus, you wouldn’t have fun anyway.”

Riko blinked back at him.

“Because you can’t have fun,” He explained, “Despair Fever makes it so that you can’t actually be happy. You can’t feel love. You can’t feel positive emotions at all. Just bad ones, like sadness. But thanks to your medicine you can’t feel that, either. These feelings are just words to you, aren’t they? Because that’s what the doctors say. You can’t feel anything.”

Riko didn’t completely understand. She heard his words, and he was right, she didn’t comprehend what they meant. Yet. But as she grew older and learned what sort of emotions people felt, from books and from her sister’s stories of the outside world, she began to comprehend what her father said. She lacked these things. She didn’t feel a thing at all, the doctors said, and so it must be true. If she thought that maybe she was scared, or happy, or sad. Because it sounded like how other people felt. But she didn’t feel these things, and the thoughts always went away, too. Usually when she took her medicine. Maybe it was just the despair creeping through in between doses.

Then she was six and Yui was eight, and things were picking up in their lives as heiresses. Riko had more pressure put on her to do well. She wasn’t sure why. Till one night, at dinner, when Yui was going on and on about the fun that she had with her friends that day at school, and.

“Well, I’m glad you’re having fun, Yui. But your report cards keep getting worse,” Asahi said, “This last quarter, you only got one S. Two As. Three whole Bs. So what do you have to say for yourself?”

Yui shrunk under her father’s words. “I’m still passing the classes, though…”

“You’re an heiress, and a higher standard is expected of you. You can’t keep letting your grades dip this way. Goddamn it. I’ve got one daughter with no heart, and another with no brain. How am
I supposed to feel comfortable passing the company down to either of you?"

“W-Well if you feel that way, Daddy…” Yui frowned and looked away. “Why don’t you? Don’t pass it down to either of us. Find somebody better.”

“No…” He shook his head. “Turning the reins over to somebody who’s not related to us would look even worse than putting Riko in charge would. But letting you run the thing, Yui, would drive it into the ground in a decade.”

Riko held up what she’d written during the argument. “Why not pass it down to both of us, then?”

“What?” Asahi asked.

“If me running it would look bad, but Yui running it wouldn’t function, then we just need to both run it. She’s the one that people think is running it. I’m the one who does the inside stuff,” Riko explained, scribbling the explanation as quickly as she could, “We work together. She’s good PR because she’s cute and happy, right? And I’m bad because I can’t talk and I have Despair. But I think I’m smart. And I don’t feel so I won’t be distracted or get overwhelmed so I can just work hard all the time.”

“Whoa!” Yui exclaimed, “Riko, you’re a genius! And see, Daddy? Since she’s a genius like that, her plan might work, right? I think it’s a good idea.”

“Hm… I have to admit, it could work. It’s possible,” Asahi said, and that was when the plan was put into motion. What else was he to try? The idea made sense.

That was also the day when Yui Asahi started going to Riko’s sign teacher. Now that she didn’t have the expectations to do well in school, since it was thanks to Riko, she felt like she had the time and space in her brain to actually learn to communicate properly with her younger sister. Riko thought she felt grateful that Yui did this. But, again, that was nonsense. Of course it was. She didn’t have a heart.

When Riko was ten and Yui was twelve, Yui got a pet bird. It was a cute little mourning dove that she called ‘Toriko’. Not a very inventive name. Yui was fond of the bird, but Riko found herself fonder, though, that didn’t make sense. She guessed it was more that, she couldn’t leave the house very often at all. So when Riko was poring over her homeschooling work, she’d let Toriko out of its cage to sit with her, in the larger cage which was the study of Asahi Manor, where Toriko lived so that he didn’t keep anyone up at night or wake anyone up too early. Riko was here most of the time. Doing her schoolwork. Doing her studies to manage the company. She was busy all the time, but Toriko was there to keep her company, so it was okay. Besides, she couldn’t feel the stress anyway. She might be picking at her skin and tearing up her fingernail beds, but she wasn’t stressed, of course she couldn’t feel it. When she caught herself, she took her medicine.

The medicine balanced everything out and then she didn’t feel a thing, for real. Nothing negative sneaking through. No ghost of what a normal person could call stress, leading her to poor habits as she studied. Maybe she was taking the medicine too often. Maybe. But it was better to feel nothing than to have the despair sneaking through. Even still, as she started needing to take the medicine more and more often, an injection every few hours instead of once a day, she took Toriko out of his cage less often too.

What was the point of having a bird next to her anyway?

But she still paid attention. And she took care of him, even though he wasn’t her own pet. She and Yui spent some time together, during the period where they had Toriko. Yui would come and hang
out in the study, and play with Toriko and chat with Riko while she did her homework. And Riko knew she couldn’t feel love, but she was somehow satisfied to have this friendship with her big sister.

Then came the day when Toriko died. It wasn’t anything that anyone did in particular, in fact, nobody was in the study when it happened. The vet ended up saying that he’d had an undetected cancer, and that he probably died without too much pain. Riko was allowed out of the house to go to this vet visit. Yui was crying, but she wasn’t. She’d taken her medicine just a few hours before and she stood there, stoic. She didn’t care because she couldn’t care. But she did care. When the medicine started to run out, she wanted to cry over she and her sister’s precious pet.

And to cry over the friendship that fell apart. Riko was twelve and Yui was fourteen when Toriko the mourning dove died. And Yui saw her younger sister’s unmoving face and that was when she realized, Riko guessed, that when their father said Riko didn’t have a heart, he wasn’t exaggerating. She didn’t feel a thing, did she? She was a cold and heartless monster. Frigid. Unmoved. So Yui stopped talking to her. What was the point of having a friend who didn’t care about you?

One night, Riko missed a dose of her medicine, and she caught herself sobbing. Crying over everything at once. Toriko, and Yui, and just how overwhelmed she was by everything that was going on. She lost both of her friends and she had the entire weight of her father’s company on her shoulders. She was good at it, but that didn’t change the fact that she didn’t do anything else. She never did anything else. She studied and slept and studied and slept and ate alone because opportunistic infections were the bane of her existence, but why should they be? Would it matter if she died? When she was nothing at all? That was the first night Riko wished that she could disappear and be replaced.

A better Riko Asahi could exist, and it wasn’t her. Find somebody else to be Riko Asahi, please. Somebody who could have loved her pet bird and loved her sister and her family, and who was strong enough to do what she needed to do in her life.

Then she got it together, took her medicine, and went to sleep. For another day of studying and nothing else.

When Riko was thirteen, she made time to learn hobbies. She’d thrown herself so much into studying everything, that the material was easing off. She took photographs around the house. She baked cupcakes for herself, and Yui would eat them too. Mom and Dad never would, like she was some untouchable. But even now that Yui knew her sister was empty, she’d accept sweets anytime. There was a peace between them, even if the friendship could never be.

When Riko was fifteen, she was selected by the Ultimate Initiative to fight against Despair, to be a beacon of hope, what a fucking joke that was. They didn’t know what was inside her. They only saw her accomplishments. Apparently they almost offered the role of Ultimate Heir to Yui, but then found out from her father that Riko was the actual brains behind the operation. Funny. Yui would be a much better beacon of hope than the one girl in Okinawa tainted with Despair.

Even still, she accepted the title. Her father pushed her to. She accepted it, and that night, he sat her down to tell her something. “Riko. Now that you’re an Ultimate, I need to give you some instructions, okay? When you’re an Ultimate, it’s possible you could be selected to participate in a Killing Game. If this happens, everyone will know you’re the real heir to Asahi. And you’re weak. You’re a weakling and you’re bad PR. So if it’s revealed, there’s only one way to mitigate the damage. Prove your competence. Win the game, okay? Otherwise, it would spell the doom of our company. And I know you don’t want that, do you?”
She didn’t. She loved her family and didn’t want to drive their company to the ground, or she would, if she was capable of love. Everybody always said she wasn’t capable of love, or feeling, or anything. But she could have sworn. Could have sworn.

The infirmary in the Neo World Hospital didn’t have her medicine, and without it, she could have sworn that she felt emotion. That these were feelings. Good ones, too, but that wasn’t supposed to be possible. It wasn’t. And when the cure for Despair Fever was shared, she sneakily tried to use it. She didn’t feel any less sick. And didn’t feel any less feelings. This was certainly not the same medicine she had before. And, somehow, she felt. Her illness all along was certainly not Despair Fever.

She had a heart, after all, but she had a duty to her father and her company. So she cried, and cried, and killed someone. But she didn’t try hard enough not to be caught. She just wanted to disappear.

It’s time to disappear, Riko Asahi.
Trial 5/3: An Execution Of Impunity

Execution BGM: Bad Dude (By ZZZangan on ao3 go read DRF too)

[Riko Asahi’s Execution: The Villain Of The Story]

The screen that had shown Riko’s past changed scene to a strange room. It looked a lot like one of the challenge rooms, but dingier. There was a keg in it. Riko turned and looked at the room, then nodded. One of those tendrils shot out once more, grabbed her around the waist, and dragged her away, dropping her into the room unceremoniously. It was obviously even the drop was haphazard, just the first step of her execution. At first, it looked like she stood up anyway, but when the light hit properly, it seemed that her limbs had been grabbed with fishing line. Puppeteering her to her feet.

Were Tsumugi there, she would have noticed a similarity between this execution, and that of Angie Yonaga. The person who came in dead last in Ultimate Judgment’s rankings, it seemed, would be killed through the use of near-invisible strings. These were already digging into her skin through her clothes as they commanded her to stand. Just for a moment, to stand. Before they began moving her. She was being dragged around and manipulated by the strings, which were slowly digging in, bits of blood starting to seep into the fabric as the strings had effortlessly cut through her clothing.

That was when the bottles started flying. Glass bottles, and it was obvious what sort they were. Asahi bottles. They were already broken in half, and while several outright missed Riko; It seemed as if the strings were actually making her avoid them, actually, several still did. Some grazed her. A few managed to hit at exactly the right angle to embed themselves in her skin. Riko was already breathing heavily, and she was completely limp; A ragdoll at the mercy of the strings. Had she put in some effort to follow the movements, maybe it wouldn’t be hurting so much. As it was, gravity was sliding the fishing line through her skin at an alarming rate. But that alone wouldn’t kill her, nor would the blood from the beer bottles. Not yet.

She was physically fragile, sure, but not fragile enough. This was an execution, and it wasn’t quite showy enough yet. And-

“Riko!” Amai cried out at the screen at top volume, hoping she could hear her, “Don’t… Don’t die yet, okay!? There’s… You need to do it at the right time!”

Nobody understood what that meant, but Amai sure seemed passionate about it. She was shouting at top volume. Crying. But Riko couldn’t hear. Even if she could, it wouldn’t make a difference.

[- that was when the flower fell down from the ceiling. It was a hydrangea, like the ones from the interior garden. The ones that Riko liked. The ones that she hated, all at once. Frigidity. Heartlessness. It was her flower. This one wasn’t a color any hydrangea came in, though. It was stained in black. It fell down in front of Riko, and when it reached waist level…

It exploded.

Not into a rush of petals or anything; An actual small explosion, which knocked Riko backwards. The lesions from the strings shifted with that movement, as they grew even more taut than before, her motion actively pushing her away from them to slice, slice harder. It was the first of many of the flowers, which started to fall and explode, pushing her every which way. Back and forth and let
the strings destroy. Pull her apart. Slice her to pieces.

Destroy this Riko Asahi, make her disappear. Disappear! Just fucking disappear already!

She couldn’t stand this. This was terrible. She hated it. Why was it going on so long. Why did it hurt so much. Just let her die already, like she’s wanted to for years. She has wanted to. She has. She’s been living in a confused state for so, so long. Pushed in every direction. What she needs to do. Who she needs to be. What she can’t be. What she is anyway. She’s sorry so sorry very sorry and how is that possible? How can she be sorry?

And even now as she’s dying, she can’t even apologize and she can’t even scream. She can’t find any catharsis but suffer silently as she’s killed so much slower than she wants to be. What a letdown. What a letdown. She’s sorry to her friends for what she did to them. She’s sorry to her family for failing and doomng the company. She’s sorry for not being good enough for anyone or anything and she’s sorry for being nothing.

And a cascade of flowers came down, suddenly, hiding her from view. The same black hydrangeas, of course. They fell and the moment that Riko was completely obscured, they all exploded, all at once. When the dust cleared, she was there, backlit. Like the corpse would be too terrible to see in proper lighting. There was just the shadow of her injuries, of skin stripped from bone and blood dripping over her entire body to pool underneath where she was still strung up like a marionette. The strings were cut, and she crumpled into that puddle. Riko Asahi was absolutely and undeniably dead.

Gone for good.

Disappeared.]

“No!” Amai shrieked, and started pounding at the podium with her hands. “No, no, no no! Why! Why do you have to fucking take away my friend! Why!? If she could have just… A little sooner or a little later… Riko… Why…”

“Amai?” Sayaka asked, “What are you talking about?”

“You… You fucking. Hate her.” Amai pointed at Sayaka. “I won’t tell you. I won’t. Just know that she could have had a fucking chance.”

“I don’t hate her,” Sayaka said, “I hated what she represented. But in the end. I guess that her reason was something worth accepting. Her methods, disgusting, but… I know how ‘the good of the family’ can be. I just have to wonder…”

“I’ll forgive her,” Nami said, clutching her hands to her heart. “I. I will. Even with everything she did. I won’t yet. I don’t yet. I fucking can’t. But I will. Because… She was broken too. I won’t say she’s not to blame and it’s not her fault. It is. Still. It wasn’t all her. She did these cruel things and she tried to get away with it. There was malice in this case, but she wasn’t the one feeling it, it was the malice of…”

“Her father,” Sayaka finished, spitting her words, “And whatever doctor was suppressing her emotions with those drugs. Those are the prey for the monster you witnessed today. Not their poor fucking puppet. But even God won’t be able to help them… When I find them.”
Torimi Shinoe was a girl who never really felt loved.

She grew up with a mediocre family in a mediocre town. She went to a mediocre school with mediocre teachers. Nobody outright did wrong against Torimi. Nobody did anything right for her, either. When she was a kid, that was the situation. That was how she grew up. She was fed and clothed and even given statements that she was loved, but she didn’t feel that way at all. The love felt predicated on her being somebody she wasn’t. As she grew up, she’d learn how to feel love predicated on her being somebody she wasn’t. When she was a kid, she didn’t learn it yet. That pretending, on some level, was the only way to be loved.

She had no siblings. Just a mom and a dad. Her grandparents were the spoiling type who only visited for holidays and gave her lots of gifts but never understood what she wanted. She had to give them lists of things she’d like. Not the things she wanted, but things she wouldn’t dislike. This was because they didn’t know who Torimi was, and if left to their own devices, she’d receive gifts she would never use in her life. A pretty standard life, nursing a quiet sadness only for herself.

When she started middle school, she wore the girls’ uniform for the first time. She started being bullied, but not too terribly, not so much that it made her miserable. No more than she would expect, the backlash for her own existence. That was okay. Her parents worked late, so they didn’t need to know. Late enough that once she was old enough, she was responsible for feeding herself. So that was when Torimi started lying. What did you have for dinner, Torimi? And she’d answer, with something, when it was nothing. Because she looked in the mirror in her uniform, and she felt cute.

And she thought, if she grew up any more than this, then she’d lose that, she wouldn’t get to be cute anymore. If she got any taller, if she built any muscle mass, anything. So she searched and searched the stars and the cards for a solution, and the only answer she found was to prevent herself from growing. Don’t give her body the tools it would need to betray her. Don’t do it. And nobody noticed because nobody paid attention to Torimi Shinoe. Nobody took her aside and said ‘you’re killing yourself with this’. She was weak all the time, but she thought, that made her a more attractive young woman. From where she stood there weren’t any downsides.

And nobody stood to notice them.

It was probably a miracle, that Torimi lived through middle school. Then, when she was fifteen and about to start high school, she decided that she was tired of living somewhere that she wasn’t seen. She packed up her things and took off to Tokyo, looking to make a living for herself, and another miracle, she managed. She was able to maintain a very small apartment, and people came to get readings from her, and she was able to be with men who might not consider her a girl but would overlook her age and that was what she wanted, right? It was a sort of ‘love’. It let her feel like someone was there to see her and care about her, even if it was a lie, even if it was just for a short while.

And it was just for a short while. Torimi managed to go a majority of her life without experiencing a scrap of real human affection, but just a few months after she’d moved to the city, Torimi was invited to work with the legal system in the city. Her predictions had such an accuracy rate that she could be a valuable asset in investigations and trials. On the latter part, there was only one person she could be assigned to. Two years her elder and an absolute prodigy, Nami Kaguya needed a legal team. So Torimi joined.
Soon after she joined, she found out that Nami and Kira were both Ultimates. They confided in her because they thought once she was old enough, she’d probably get selected as well. It surprised her, but a few weeks later she did hear from the Ultimate Initiative. Under certain circumstances, they’d give somebody their title early, and she was granted hers. She felt good about that. Even if nobody saw her, at least they saw her talent, at least she was acknowledged for her skills.

It was only a few more weeks before Torimi was seen in another way, though. Just a few more weeks until she made her first friend. When Nami Kaguya invited her to lunch, and she wanted to go along. She accepted the invitation, even though ‘lunch’ was honestly a foreign concept to her at this point. One meal a day, and a small one at that, just to keep her going. That was her normal. Even though she was older now, even though she probably wouldn’t do any more growing even if she did start eating normally, it was a hurdle that she couldn’t manage in her mind. For so long, eating had meant condemning herself to a life where she couldn’t be as cute and pretty as she needed. And she did need it. So much of her self-worth was wrapped up in being able to like the person she saw in the mirror, that she never would have made it if she lost the cuteness she had somehow managed to acquire.

There wasn’t any way for Torimi to know that she still could have been beautiful without putting in
all of that self-destructive effort. No way of knowing that even if she did grow taller, she’d be capable of doing so with grace. Even when she met Nami, even when she saw a woman who hadn’t taken her ‘preventative measures’ who was beautiful and admirable, she could never think that would apply to her. But she went to lunch with Nami. She decided that could be her single meal that day, and ordered a salad. Nami didn’t say anything about that, but when they were done eating, she got her leftovers wrapped up, then handed them to Torimi.

“I’m terrible at remembering to eat leftovers,” Nami said, “So, would you like them?”

Torimi wouldn’t, but she wanted to be friends with Nami, so she did. It was a pasta dish, a heartier meal than she’d eaten in years. She put it in her fridge when she got home with every intention to forget about it, but a text later that night from Nami… Asking what she thought of the meal, somehow prompted her. She guessed that she could eat a few bites, just to be able to hold that conversation. Once she started eating the leftovers, she didn’t stop. No matter how her worldview was warped, her body was still starving, and seized the rare opportunity to eat carbs. She felt very sick that night, but better the next day.

So Nami became her best friend, and subtly encouraged her out of the pit she was in. Out of the miracle that she could still stand up, and she became more energetic, healthier, and she didn’t grow any taller. She didn’t stop worrying about that. But she was seen. And it turned out, that was enough.

Torimi Shinoe never really felt loved. She had one best friend who loved her, though, and she understood that. As for any other sort of love, well.

Maybe there was still a chance.
Yui Asahi was once approached by a girl and asked if she would like to have a conversation with her little sister. Because this group the girl was in was going to infiltrate and find a way to contact those who were in the Killing Game, among other things. Yui was surprised to hear that was where Riko had disappeared to; The family had assumed she was kidnapped for ransom, and they hadn't yet received a note because the kidnappers wanted to instill more dread. After all, Riko got through the age of seventeen without incident, the age where an Ultimate usually would be stolen away for a Killing Game.

Yui didn’t hate her sister, of course. And frankly, if any of the other True Radicals had come to find her, she would have gone with them. But not when it was Ryouma Kobayashi, who Yui asked, “Tell me. What do you think of your father?”
“My father?” Ryouma blinked, stood at the doorway in surprise. “Well, I haven’t seen him in
years, but we didn’t exactly leave off on the best terms. Frankly, I don’t want to be associated with him, and I don’t care what happens to him. Why?”

“Well. I could be mistaken…” Yui said, “But, is his first name Ryuuto, by any chance?”

More blinking on Ryouma’s part first, but then she nodded. “Yes, that’s his name. Do you know him?”

“He’s Riko’s doctor,” Yui said, “And I have my suspicions about him. So, I think I’ll have to turn you down. There’s something which would be of more use to my sister, than to have one last conversation with me. Could you give me the address, though? If she does make it through, at least I can be there waiting for her when it’s over, can’t I?”

“Yeah, of course,” Ryouma said, then wrote down the instructions for Yui on a notepad she carried with her, handing over the torn-out sheet of paper. “Just keep this to yourself, okay? Don’t bring anybody else with you when you come.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Yui said, then gave Ryouma a bright smile. “I’ll see you soon, then, Miss Kobayashi?”

“You will,” Ryouma said, “Certainly.”

And once she was gone, Yui made her decision.

Yui thought that she was a pretty stupid person. Growing up, she’d come to believe that about herself very quickly. She couldn’t keep her grades up to her father’s standard and have a social life at the same time, which meant she didn’t have any natural intelligence at all, just the ability to put in the work and no desire, only obligation, to do so. She thought she was pretty stupid. But even somebody like her could become suspicious of a doctor who blatantly lied.

Yui knew that Riko had emotions. It was obvious. Riko put her own well-being on the line frequently. For Yui’s sake, for sake of the Asahi family in general. She put her all into becoming the functional heir, and it was clearly not because she wanted power, or even praise. She sympathized with Yui and stepped in to help her. When Toriko the mourning dove died, Yui overreacted at the fact her sister wasn’t reacting. But she noticed it, eventually. It took years for her to understand in retrospect. Those brief glimpses into a true version of Riko, before she took her medicine again. So Yui became suspicious.

It was the testament from the man’s own daughter, that she didn’t trust him, which made up Yui’s mind. That, and the fact that she probably wouldn’t see Riko again, so she had to make it up to her somehow, the years that she pretended that girl was a monster just because everybody else did. She knew about Riko’s promise with their father, when she became an Ultimate. She had a faint hope in her heart that Riko would be able to overcome that, but she had her doubts. Especially when she’d also be trying to handle an influx of emotions she hadn’t been allowed to feel for years, told she couldn’t possibly feel.

Yui loved her sister, even if Riko had no way of knowing it and even if for years she’d failed to show it. Even after she realized it might be something other than what they’d been told which plagued Riko, Yui felt too guilty to just try and put herself back into Riko’s life, to rekindle the friendship they’d once had. And too afraid to voice her concerns. Just keep the status quo. Don’t bother the nice doctor, even if you have reason to think he’s not so nice at all.

This would be Yui’s apology, to a girl she could have rescued once. She could have reached in and pulled her sister from the void that everybody pushed her into. She could have just said, something
so simple. ‘I don’t think you’re a monster. I think you have a heart’. She didn’t, so this was her penance, as she walked into the office. “Doctor Kobayashi.”

Ryuuto looked up from his paperwork. He was a live-in doctor for the family, mostly for Riko’s sake, but since they had him, may as well. “Ah, Yui. Is there something the matter? Are you having late-season allergies again this year?”

“Well. Something is the matter,” Yui said, “I think that you’ve been lying to us.”

“...Whatever would I be lying about?”

“And Riko,” Yui said, and took a step forward. She shut the door behind herself, and leaned against it. “I think that when you told us she doesn’t feel emotions, you were lying. I don’t think she has ‘Despair Fever’ at all. So what’s the truth? I want to know.”

“Yui, you’re being ridicu-” Ryuuto started.

“I am not!” Yui snapped, cutting him off in earnest. “I know what I’m talking about. When she missed her medicine, or it was almost time for her to take it again... She’d cry and she’d smile. She wasn’t blank anymore. Besides, there isn’t a reason to lie to me anymore. I’m firing you either way. I met your daughter just now, and I don’t think I want you in my house anymore. The difference is that if you tell me the truth, you can keep your original career. Ultimate Traveling Doctor.”

“How do you expect to fire me?” Ryuuto asked, getting to his feet. “If you’re already dead, how could you fire me? You’re a stupid little girl, aren’t you? Locking yourself in here with me, and saying a thing like that. You haven’t got the upper hand here.”

“Yes I do,” Yui said, unwavering where she leaned against the door. “It’s kinda funny, actually. Yeah, I’m stupid, but I figured you out. Riko came in and took the weight off my shoulders so you all paid attention to her instead. You’ve got no idea what I can do, Doctor.”

“Only a real idiot like you’d fail to realize how obvious it is that you’re bluffing.” Ryuuto moved forward, and in one swift movement, grabbed both of Yui’s wrists and pinned her against the door. Wrists above her head in each of his hands, and his knee against her abdomen, keeping her completely in place. She coughed in pain, just once, and otherwise didn’t give him a reaction. He locked eyes with her. “Whatever my daughter told you is bullshit. She never would have gotten where she is today if it wasn’t for me, you know.”

“All she told me was that she doesn’t like you,” Yui said, “But given the public secret of her talent manager, I guess I can assume what ‘getting her where she is today’ implies. I really hope you never touched my little sister. But I’m not even trying to ruin you... I just wanna hear the truth and get you out of my house.”

“For an idiot, you sure can jump to conclusions,” Ryuuto said, “I guess you won’t back down, so I can tell you, sure. I never did anything to your sister. When I visited my wife and daughter, fine, you got that right. And sure, I was a liar. Your sister was just an easy target for testing. Really, she just had chronic leukopenia. An opportunistic infection of pneumonia robbed her ability to speak properly as an infant. It’s through my intelligent design that she lived for so long with that condition. Isn’t it quid pro quo, if she owes her life to me, that I can use her life as I see fit? So, yes. Her medicine throttles emotions. Works quite well, if I do say so myself...”

“Yeah, so do I,” Yui said, then smiled, but it was absolutely empty. Even still, Ryuuto didn’t realize.
“Well, since I told you the truth, I really do have to kill you. If you’ll go and sit on the cot and let me inject you, I’ll make it quick. If you struggle and make things difficult for me, then I might just take certain liberties first. Which would you prefer?”

“What kind of question is that? Obviously, I’ll go quietly,” Yui said. Ryuuto eased up the pressure but didn’t let go of her wrists, and set her down on the cot. He grabbed a zip-tie and attached one wrist to the cot itself, then did a check to make sure there wasn’t anything she could use as a weapon in the perimeter of the restraint. Confident in that, he turned away to prepare the injection.

For somebody who was fully ready to strip her down if she didn’t agree to die, it was an egregious mistake on his part, and a miracle on Yui’s, that he didn’t bother to check her body too closely. Assuming that she was too stupid to bring a weapon to a conversation with an employee, was he? His knee to her abdomen to pin her had, unfortunately, driven the tip of the knife strapped to her thigh into her skin, but he failed to notice the blood from that. He only noticed Yui’s knife when it was plunged into his ribcage from behind.

“I’d say sorry about this, doctor, but I’m not really, right now. But don’t worry, I’m sure that I’ll be overwhelmed with guilt… When the medicine wears off.”

Yui Asahi considered herself a pretty stupid girl.

But at least she wasn’t as stupid as everybody else thought. Just like her sister wasn’t the monster everybody else thought she was. Two weeks later, both of the Asahi sisters would be knife murderers. But only one would really regret it.

Guilt, sure. Yui Asahi hated that she’d taken a life. But she didn’t regret killing Ryuuto Kobayashi. She never would. Because it was her penance. Something was broken that could never be repaired, between the heirs to Asahi. They’d never get the chance, and Yui could only blame herself for turning away when she should have reached out a hand.

*Even if I can’t forgive myself, you’ll forgive me someday, right, Riko?*
Everybody felt awful.

This was an undeniable fact of this trial; Everybody did. It was a tragedy that didn’t allow anybody catharsis. As far as anybody within the game knew, the people who were truly responsible for this murder hadn’t paid at all. Thus, the negative emotions stayed. They remained stuck. Even saying that they could forgive Riko someday, even as they acknowledged it wasn’t malicious on her part, there was no release. Anybody who was close to Riko still felt betrayed by her actions, and anybody who was close to Torimi still felt furious at her death. And just had to deal with that. Just had to keep feeling that.

They’d been spoiled, that’s what it was, by two trials where the culprit wasn’t truly executed. Mitsuru killed himself, and the only complication of grief was that he had a good reason to do it. In the case where Goro had been spared, everybody had time to figure out their feelings before seeing him again, and couldn’t commit to grief with the idea that he was still alive. Thus, to finally see somebody well and truly executed again… It was an utter complication on everybody’s hearts. They wanted to miss Riko. Wanted to grieve Riko. But at the same time, couldn’t outright forgive her for what she did to Torimi. The clash of an undeserved punishment with the idea that she did need some form of punishment. Just not this. Killing Games were just so brutal.

Nami found herself thinking back to her conversations with Kira. Back then, she’d thought that though it would be nice if the Killing Games could stop, it wasn’t her problem. She was alive and well and beyond the point where she thought she’d be in danger of getting involved with one. As horrible as it was to look at from the outside, it seemed like standing against them would be more trouble than it was worth. Now, Nami wished that she hadn’t thought that way at all. Everyone who came before her, everybody in the past Killing Games, had to experience these sorts of feelings. She didn’t want anybody to feel this way, ever again or ever before.

She couldn’t do much about the before, but if it really was true… If Ultimate Hope, who were running the game, had been disrupted on the outside, then maybe this really would be the final game. Maybe it could be, even, without her contribution. But if that wasn’t so, then she’d put herself into it, if she could. If she made it to the other side, if there was anything for her to do, she’d do it.

How she ever could have turned the other way from this, she didn’t know. Maybe it didn’t seem real until she was personally involved. Like even though she knew what was going on, it didn’t click. That people were really dying. That suffering made its home there in such a way. Even as there was despair in the outside world, pervading their everyday lives, at least those were everyday lives. And at least as prone as terrible things were to happen, there wasn’t this insistence that anybody could be lost, killed, at any time. And there wasn’t the guarantee that the culprit would also be somebody you cared about, and punished.

Out in the real world, if somebody Nami loved was murdered, then the culprit was likely a member of Ultimate Despair. Somebody who might have been good and true once, or in another life, but in this one was irredeemable. Somebody whose death wouldn’t shake Nami at all, if they were even caught, and many weren’t. It always felt this way before, but never to such an extent. Torimi had been her closest friend. And Riko, Riko had a lack of personal responsibility. Those who were really responsible for this, weren’t here to face the consequences.

That was the point of a Killing Game. Those which were trial-based, like this one, bred suffering through these same moral conflicts that Nami was just now truly acknowledging. The ‘demon-
hunting’ games were those which instead relied on constant fear. Those without the trials, without
the punishment, left vulnerability at all times. The concern of covering one’s actions was only for
witnesses in the moment, and betrayal meant even teaming up could be unsafe. There was the
difference, but it was the same idea. Amplify a negative human emotion to an extreme through a
particular ruleset, fueled by adrenaline.

Nami could acknowledge all the good which was coming of this killing game, and still wish that
she and all her friends had never become involved. For a game that was running headless, with a
moderator who seemed keen to help the participants rather than hinder them, something this awful
had still happened. So, everybody was finished with the day. Maybe tomorrow they could get back
to normal. Nami doubted it, though. In spite of the fact the information to point to the Mastermind
would become available and an end would be in sight, well.

Nami wasn’t sure she felt up to, even, investigating that much. It wasn’t like she was being pushed
to despair. It wasn’t like she lacked hope for the future. But then, at this point, what was the rush to
find that information? They had just been proven wrong, on the matter that nobody would kill
again. But Nami couldn’t imagine it happening again. Even now. They should have time to grieve,
then investigate. The danger wasn’t there. Not really. Right?

Then again, there was that thing Monokuma said. How the Evil King might still need to act,
because it wasn’t even certain the answers would be there. How somebody might still need to die
even with the final floor opened. But that was a tomorrow problem. Yeah, a tomorrow problem. Or
maybe even later. Certainly not a problem for right now, because it was time to go to sleep.
Everyone seemed to agree. Time to go to sleep and end this rotten day already.

Tomorrow was new. Tomorrow, they could confront grief, if nothing else. Tonight wasn’t for that.
Tonight deserved to be cut short and throttled and erased.
Daily Life: Day Sixteen (A New Day)

6:00 am / 0600 Hours

“Sorry to say, but it’s morning, and there will be an announcement at breakfast, so you won’t be allowed to skip it and stay in bed. Much as I wish I could allow that, frankly…” The morning announcement roused Nami. “You kids deserve a break. Unfortunately, I’m not able to give it to you. Except for Shirogane, of course, who is excluded by injury until considered ‘undeniably capable’ of returning to normal obligations.”

“Gee. Thanks,” Nami said to empty air, technically. But also to Sayaka, since she was still uncomfortable going back to her own room.

“…She’s trying.” Sayaka shrugged.

“She?” Nami questioned.

“Well, I dunno. I kinda think the person controlling Mono is a girl. Based on how it talks, and the fact that it was wearing lingerie,” Sayaka explained, “But that’s not super important, is it? Right now we have two things to worry about.”

“Yeah… And right now, I know which one I want to focus on,” Nami said, “I just… I can’t worry about anything big right now. I have to handle the fact that Tori’s dead.”

“I get it,” Sayaka said, then reached out and grabbed Nami’s hand. “I’m here for you. I… Obviously this is freaking me out too. I’m still. I mean, I really got along with Torimi too, but. It was more… The howdunnit stuff. You know. What Riko did to you… She was our friend and she knew things and she used that to manipulate you. She learned how to manipulate because she was being manipulated, sure, but she still. Did it. And I can’t just let go of the way I felt. For a while there, I honestly hated her.”

“Yeah. I get it. So did I,” Nami said, “I think part of the reason I can’t be as mad at her as I should be is because I was, well. So out of it. The more I think about the fact that it was actually her fault I needed to feel that way…” She groaned, and dropped back onto her back with an arm over her eyes. “I thought after sleeping for a night it would make more sense. Even just a little. But it doesn’t. I still don’t even have a little bit of an idea how I should feel or how I do feel or. Fuck! Mono’s right, we do need a break! I want a break!”

“…We’ll get one soon,” Sayaka said, “If there’s any mercy in this world, anyway, then we’ll get a break when the game is done.”

“You really think our world’s got mercy in it?” Nami wondered. It was an honest question.

“Mhm. For sure,” Sayaka said, “My dad’s out there, and we figured out that our enemies, well, aren’t. I dunno what waits for us out there, but. Even if there’s people who think we shouldn’t have a break, I know my dad’ll make sure we can get one. For at least as long as this game ends up taking us. Maybe even a whole month where we can stop worrying for a little while.”

“That’d be nice,” Nami said, “Really nice. Weird to think about, that a month is longer than we’ve been here. It feels like so much more than that.”

“Mhm. Time isn’t real when you’re in an extended life or death situation,” Sayaka said, “Then again. Wouldn’t it be nice if normal life could go this slowly? It feels like we have more time. To
process our feelings. To grieve. To care about each other. All of it, good and bad, we’ve got more
time to sort it out.”

“Yeah… I’m gonna get a shower. We should both try to eat something at breakfast, too. It’ll be the
first normal meal in a few days, after all,” Nami said, then stood up and went to shower. Once she
was done, Sayaka got a quick shower as well; After the Duos Challenge, it felt necessary. Then,
the two of them made their way up to Cafe Monokuma. Once there, they sat down, and Amai
delivered food to them. She’d been making individual meals a lot more than her initial buffets, in
part because that was easier for her, and in part because she’d gotten to know everybody’s tastes.
And… In part because then she could make Riko’s meal fresh just before she returned to her room.

Nami could taste it in her food. Good as ever, this was Amai, after all. But it was loveless, lacking.
It wasn’t that Amai had lost her love for her peers, but rather, that she’d lost one of the few sources
which really gave love back to her. One of her closest friends was a traitor to them all. And was
dead. That had to be difficult. Nothing was wrong with the food, but it wasn’t up to Amai’s
standards; And that was confirmed once everybody had wandered in and Amai sat, without a plate
for herself.

And, when the clock eventually reached eight, Monokuma made its appearance. “Hey everybody.
Sorry to make you come all the way out here, but at least, it’s not bad news. Actually, there won’t
be more bad news. Any remaining motives and preprogrammed events were mysteriously disabled
last night, which is a relief, isn’t it? But, since a murder did occur, the final floor of the Neo World
Hospital is available to you… And I need to announce which wards have opened up, there.”

Mysteriously disabled? Nami thought about that for a moment. Yeah, she was well aware that the
people on the outside were allies, not enemies. Somebody must have figured out how to edit the
program to some extent, though she doubted that a modification to get them out of there without
the win conditions was out of reach, even for the best. Making the Neo World Program safe to exit
through other means seemed possible, but not while people were still trapped in it, she imagined.
She only understood a little of this sort of thing, thanks to Megumi telling her about the more
interesting bits.

Megumi… She wondered, if maybe…

“Anyway, you probably already figured out what this batch of wards would include,” Monokuma
said, “But there’s the Ultimate Astronaut’s Ward, the Ultimate Blackmailer’s Ward, and the
Ultimate Fortuneteller’s Ward. Due to the fate of its owner, that last one has the same stipulation as
the Runner’s Ward; You’ll be locked inside, and it doesn’t have every feature available that it
would have if she lived this long.”

If she lived this long. She came so close to getting out. It’s almost done, and there will be some sort
of salvation on the other side… But Torimi just missed it. Nami was ready to be done with this
cruel false world, but first, she guessed. She should see what gift Mono had for Torimi.
Daily Life: Day Sixteen (Mono's Note)

9:00 AM / 0900 Hours

After breakfast was done with, Nami got up and left. She didn’t tell anybody where she was going. They could probably tell, but if she took the time to say it aloud, then somebody might decide to accompany her. They were all so sweet and kind and ready to be there for her but she didn’t want anybody there for her. She needed to go alone, to learn what was left behind with her best friend. Alone like they both were, when they met.

If anyone did follow her, they didn’t catch up by the time she made it there, to the Fortuneteller’s Ward. She reached for the door, and like always, was transported inside. The timer above the door read 1:42:18. Nearly two hours, just for her in here? Well, this was what she wanted, so she couldn’t exactly complain that the randomizer decided it should be for so long. She took a look around the room, and.

Unlike most of the other wards, this one was an exact replica. It looked the same, down to even the smallest stains and dents, as the shop that Torimi had back in Tokyo. Nami recognized it in a heartbeat, and it was a while till she felt another one of those. Frozen at the sight of it. She was frozen at the sight of a lot of things lately, it seemed. She’d be glad if there was nothing this surprising again for a long time yet. Once she got out. She had to get out, first, because this game would just keep throwing surprising things at her as long as she was in it.

That wasn’t something to worry about for two more hours, though. She stepped into the room, bypassing the crysal ball in the center and the shelves of various fortunetelling tools, to the far wall. To that panel. The ward was a memory of Torimi that was constructed by the program. Nami was aware of this. Mono only built two rooms in this place itself, Dia’s Ward and Cafe Monokuma, as far as she knew. The ReWards were predetermined, too. Even so.

She reached into the pocket on her skirt, which Goro had been kind enough to sew there for her. From it, she produced a key that matched the room around her, visually, and slid it into the waiting keyhole on that panel. Turned, pull, and she was right. Inside the panel there were two things.

The first was another, smaller crystal ball. The other was just a piece of paper. She reached in, put the paper back in her pocket, then lifted the ball. There was something written inside of it, but she couldn’t make it out. It was too small. This was something personal, though. What was written on the paper was probably something to do with the mystery of this place, based on what Mono had said before. This crystal ball was placed there for a different reason, Nami’s prediction had been correct.

She brought it over to the table in the middle of the room, and removed the ball which was already there, placing the new one onto its stand. She knew how this worked, she was very familiar with this place. Everything else was identical, so this would be, too, right? She dropped the original ball on the floor and it rolled away to the left wall. She pulled out the chair, sat down, and pressed her foot against a switch on the floor.

The lights shut off, leaving only one that shone underneath the table, illuminating the ball. Torimi always said this was just for the effect of it, since she could just as effectively read what the crystal had to tell her without the light, but people enjoyed a little showmanship when it came to these things. As for Nami, she couldn’t read what this crystal had to tell her without the light from underneath, but that was because its contents had to be projected onto the ceiling to be legible, and Nami had no psychic abilities to see anything less straightforward than that.
This was all she needed, though. As expected, she looked up to see a message written there, among the glow-in-the-dark stars that Torimi had once painted herself. Nami offered to help, but all that Torimi would accept was that she tagged along to buy the stepladder. There were constellations in those stars the likes of which the world had never seen. Inaccurate, but lovely. Shaped to the image of a sky that Torimi Shinoe saw in her dreams.

If she hadn’t been killed, she would have gladly pointed those out to anybody who asked. Kurou could hear about the constellations and their meanings. Nami could be refreshed, because her memory wasn’t good enough to pass it on to anybody right now. If only it was. But she never really thought she’d need to. The thought that she could lose her best friend, and the truth of these imagined stars with her… Was one that Nami never truly entertained. Even as she said and claimed that she did, that she knew not to get too attached because this was a world which could take anyone at any moment. She hadn’t. Not seriously.

If she really did, then she would have thought to make an effort to better maintain the memory of Torimi. The sort of things that she thought and shared with such enthusiasm to Nami, who she called her only real friend for so long. Even as Torimi found her way, more and more, out of the hole of people she associated with who didn’t treat her well and would never have given even half a shit about her beautiful constellations. At least she didn’t die there. At least she didn’t just waste away to nothing, right?

But maybe this was worse. She was getting better. She had people who loved her. Unlike when she first moved to Tokyo, there was the promise of a future there. She’d learned to care about herself and keep herself alive and then she was murdered.

Nami blinked back tears to read the message on the ceiling. What that person had to say.

“Dear Torimi,

I know you won’t be the one reading this. I know that. But I can’t imagine writing this any other way, than to you, not about you. I just want to say that I’m sorry. If you knew everything, you’d probably suspect that I was trying to get you targeted specifically. And you’d know I could do that. But I didn’t, I swear it. It’s true, I didn’t like you, before. For a long time I just thought you were a nosy brat who needed to mind her own business… But I changed my mind on that.

I know now that you weren’t a brat, and you weren’t nosy, at all. You were just doing your best to look out for your best friend this whole time. Maybe that did mean doing things other people wouldn’t like. Like making sure any girlfriend of Nami knows if they meet your approval or not. I guess what I’m trying to say here is that. I didn’t want this to happen. I hope you know that, wherever you are now.

Sincerely,

Mono.”
11:00 am / 1100 Hours

Despite the fact that she initially thought that the timer on the door back out of Torimi’s ward seemed particularly long, time ended up flying by for Nami in there. She got lost in it, in all of it. In the room around her, and in Torimi’s constellations, and that letter. Oh, that letter. Torimi should have heard all of that before she died. She should have. How dare Mono wait to say these things until she was dead?

Maybe this was the only way that it could get away with something like this, with showing such outright affection and care for those it was supposed to be torturing. Such remorse for the work that it was forced into, and… If Nami’s theory was right, remorse for what the person controlling Monokuma had done in the past as well. Maybe because that message started to make it clear, who that person could be. Nami couldn’t imagine how it was that person, but she had her theories. And Torimi should have heard the contents of that note while she was alive. But she didn’t. So Nami, when the timer ran out, shook those thoughts from her head. It was time to rejoin this ‘reality’, among other people.

The Neo World Program wasn’t reality, but it was a world. And within that, Torimi’s ward had served to Nami as yet another world. She hated to leave, but she knew that she couldn’t just stay here forever. Even as somebody who struggled with several forms of mental illness and severe dissociation episodes, she’d never been the type to let that keep her from doing what she needed to do. She was a driven person, and managed to avoid the levels of executive dysfunction that would do her no favors in soldiering through her life.

As soon as she left, she found herself face-to-face with Kurou. That wasn’t surprising, given that he was Torimi’s other closest friend here. He probably came to find Nami. Why was she speculating on this? She could just ask, “Hey, Kurou. Looking for me?”

“Yes, I was hoping that you’d be here,” Kurou said, “Don’t worry, I haven’t been hanging around for very long. I knew that it wouldn’t let you out for a while, so I spent some time in my own ward. Would you like to see what I made?”

“I’d love to,” Nami said, then lifted a hand to wipe her eyes. She was back in this world now, and crying over Torimi had to wait, once more, for another world. As much as she wanted to just take some time to grieve, she knew there were more important things, in general. Maybe not more important for her, but once the game was over, she could grieve as long as she needed, take as much time as necessary to recover.

Kurou nodded back, then turned and led the way down to his own ward. The two of them walked inside, and he gestured to the item in the middle of the room. It was a chair, with particularly long legs, and a design at the back which had several stars surrounding a heart. “I… Well, I don’t know. I guess I wanted to make something that she would have liked. The stuff we make here is going to be lost when we wake up anyhow, so… It’s just, something I did. Because I wanted to be thinking about her.”

“She’d love it,” Nami said, then chuckled. “You made it tall. She always looks so short when she’s sitting at the table… You totally should have done this sooner. She’d appreciate it.”

“I know…” Kurou groaned, and scratched his head. “I didn’t think of it, I guess. I… Jeeze. I let that kid down, didn’t I?”
“I didn’t mean it that way-”

“Well, not just this,” Kurou said, “It’s. Generally speaking, you know? I was trying to look out for her, and to be her friend. Or I guess, in some part, to be her guardian. Maybe that was weird of me, since she’s not like Bakura, she didn’t ask for somebody to act like a parent. Even so…”

“Her family never really cared about her,” Nami said, “They didn’t hate her and they weren’t cruel, but they didn’t care. Even if she didn’t ask, I think you were doing the right thing. And I don’t think you let her down.”

“...I did. The last time I saw her before she died, she told me that she didn’t feel like a lovable person,” Kurou said, “So if she died, feeling that way, like we didn’t love her as much as we do. Then I let her down. And I’m sorry to say it, but you did too.”

“I know I did.” Nami crossed her arms and looked away. “I didn’t take it seriously enough, the threat that I could lose her. So I didn’t do enough. She had… She had this dream, about a starry sky, and its constellations. I should have memorized those, so I could pass it on for her. But I didn’t, so the constellations died right with her.”

“...Yeah,” Kurou said, “But there isn’t anything we can do about that, now. Except make sure we don’t let anybody down like that again. If somebody else dies, that we care about… They’ll know they were loved. And their memory will be carried along.”

“Mm. We need to do better,” Nami agreed, “In the future. Which, we’re gonna have, right? We’ll have a future.”

“We will,” Kurou assured her, “We’ll be able to find out who the Mastermind is, now that the top floor’s open. And then, we can leave this place. I don’t know what’s waiting for us or what our lives will look like after something like this… We can’t just go back to normal… But I know that we’ll make it work. We have to, after all.”

“I agree,” Nami said, “I believe in all of us. I really do. Even now… We’ll be okay.”

“We will,” Kurou said, then ran his fingers along the back of the chair he’d made. “It’s not something we can afford to fail at. We’ll be okay because we owe it to everyone who couldn’t.”

And somehow, this conversation, which allowed for Nami to take the blame she felt was hers, had a catharsis to it that mourning alone couldn’t give her.
Being Dia Hamuko was a mistake.

It really really was a mistake and this girl never should have done that. Being Dia Hamuko. Hah. It only ever ended in disaster and now it did, it always did every single time and why would this time be any different? Just because some people say they preferred Dia and they were glad that she became. A person. That didn’t mean it was a good decision. Of course it wasn’t. Unlikely things happened when she let herself be Dia, and this impossible thing… Was to know why Riko Asahi would commit a murder.

Dia grit her teeth and she dug her fingers in. She thought she’d make the plushies. The plushies for her fallen friends, but now, she was ripping through the seams of the turtle meant to represent Riko. Tearing the effigy limb from limb, slowly, slowly. Riko Asahi was a manipulative person who took whatever murder opportunity seemed perfect to her. She’d never admit the reason why because she couldn’t handle the fact that what she wanted was so different from her obligation. This time, the reason why came to light. Because Dia didn’t play along. Box was able to stop these things from happening, Box was able to help her friends. Dia wasn’t. Dia was just a worthless shell and she was a fool to ever think otherwise…

She hated. Hated, everything, right now. She hated Riko Asahi for committing such a cruel murder. She hated herself for daring to exist. And she hated, hated. Hated everybody here.

Well. Not quite.

She loved them, too, but she hated the situation with them. She hated that she felt so afraid of being judged for her own actions and she couldn’t judge them for theirs at all. Unconditional love was offered her, so she had to give it back, right? She didn’t want to, though. She wanted to acknowledge the fact that she really did know the worst things that her friends were capable of. She wanted to be able to get angry.

“Fucking hell!” Dia blurted out, and finished tearing the plushie apart. Stuffing flew everywhere, and she leaned into the force to fall over backward and lie on her back, on the floor. She threw an arm up over her eyes, pushing her glasses against her skin. “Can I just. Forget? I know that somebody can do that. Erase it all. Anybody?”

Of course, nobody came. She took deep breaths, and removed her arm to stare at the ceiling. Goro was right. She was still worried what everybody thought about her and she still wasn’t completely showing herself. The version of herself that they could hate. It wasn’t like she wasn’t a bouncy, bird of a girl. At the same time, birds got mad too. She was mad. About all of it. About everything at once. She was asked to forgive the worst things her friends were capable of doing, and yet she couldn’t ask that same forgiveness of them. Even on the small scale, of forgiving her for negative feelings.

Maybe if she said something sooner. Maybe if she shared with Riko that she knew, about her plan, the bones of it anyway. Maybe Dia could have prevented this. But then, what was she thinking about preventing for anyway? Preventing bad things was Box’s job all along and why did it have to be her goddamned responsibility, ever? Like her friends weren’t responsible for their own actions and it was up to her to make sure that they didn’t tear each other apart? No. No, that was how she tore herself apart before and she fell right back into that, if in a different and more genuine way. Being Dia, but still carrying Box’s obligations with her, because how could she just give up on a task she’d had for so long?
This was what it took. She’d made it from the end of ‘her’ trial, to the end of Riko’s. That was all she could manage, between pretending everything was okay and feeling over the moon. She was. She was so euphoric with the fact she was being embraced for who she really was that it wasn’t all an act. Her friends saw her in two ways. ‘A Dia who was overjoyed’, and ‘A Dia who was scared of rejection’. Together, that resulted in an ignorance of her past.

She screamed at the ceiling again, this time without words. She sounded like a pterodactyl. It was obviously a scream of anger over a scream of terror, so hopefully nobody would come running, worried that she’d just witnessed another murder. And again, and again, until her lungs could scream no more and she stayed there, on the ground. Staring up to that ceiling which caught her screams.

Until she could look up at the real sky outside then she wouldn’t find catharsis in screaming, would she? She felt no better, because it wasn’t like her frustrations had anywhere to go. They just bounced right back to her and the pit in her stomach refused to subside. The familiar misery that she kept at bay for only a few days. She needed to meet other people. People she never had to see dead and dying and murdering, too. People whose darkest, worst sides never needed to be revealed to her. Or at least, when she couldn’t pretend those didn’t exist.

And it all came back to Riko. Riko, fucking, Asahi. Who was never really her friend when she was Box, but wanted to protect her when she was Dia. What did that mean to somebody like her? Was it because an AI like her couldn’t feel emotions, same as Riko? That was obviously false. But Riko’s lack turned out false too, didn’t it? So maybe that was it. They were kindred spirits in the expectation that their emotions were inhuman. It wasn’t because they were friends this time around that Dia didn’t mention Riko’s history, though.

Those pasts didn’t seem very real, comparatively. So maybe she thought Riko could have been different this time, just by virtue of this time being the truth. Now, she should have been able to be angry. To exorcise all these demons against the manipulative nature of each and every one of Riko’s kills through every iteration, and yet, she couldn’t. Not even to Sayaka, not even to Nami, those impacted by that cruelty in a profound way. They couldn’t be angry because it wasn’t ‘Riko’s fault’. Dia couldn’t be angry because nobody else was angry. And she was pure and good, right? So she couldn’t be the only person seething with rage.

It wasn’t ‘Riko’s fault’. Yeah, that much was fair, she’d admit. It was a feeling she had herself. It wasn’t ‘Dia’s fault’ what she did in the false games. She was possessed by the idea of Box Hako, like Riko was possessed by the idea of the Heir To Asahi. But Dia still held her actions against herself. She’d hold Riko’s actions against her. In other games, she saw more success. She turned people against each other without dirtying her own hands. She framed others and got away with it. She smiled when she won the Killing Game. No matter the reason, Dia couldn’t just say ‘I’ll forgive her’ and be done with it the way it seemed the others could.

In those other games, Riko didn’t self-sabotage the way she had in this one. So maybe that was it, for what made this the truth. The real game was the game where Riko Asahi didn’t want to win. But she still tried. It was in her nature to try.

Dia screamed again even though it meant nothing. At least it made everything feel okay for a few moments before it bounced right back to her.
Armed with one cathartic conversation, one good cry over words written on a ceiling, and an as-yet unread but very important note in her pocket, Nami decided that in spite of her grief, it was high time she put in at least a little effort to make use of the top floor. Monokuma said that it should be possible to discover the Mastermind’s identity with this floor available… And even if it did later state it was unsure if such a thing would actually work out, at least there was some evidence. The paper Nami found in Torimi’s ward proved that. Though, she really should read that, so she pulled it out halfway up the stairs.

It was actually two news articles, taped to one piece of computer paper, each of them dated. They were each short, and each… About Torimi. She stopped walking and leaned against the railing to examine them more closely. The first was when Torimi first arrived in Tokyo, just a short piece on her shop and some odd speculation that she might not be human, since nobody ever saw her eat. Nami couldn’t help but scoff at that. Good grief, people would more likely jump to the idea that the medium who couldn’t be observed eating anything was some sort of supernatural creature, than to think maybe she needed some sort of help…

And, well, the second article was the natural consequence of the first, wasn’t it? While the first was an enthusiastic piece encouraging people to visit Torimi’s shop, if in a strange way, the second was condemning her for having passed out in public. Thanking the good samaritan who was witnessed on the scene volunteering to take her back home, but for Torimi to pass out like that, she had to be drunk or on drugs or something. Nami took a deep breath, then pushed the paper back into her pocket and covered her mouth with her other hand.

These were real articles. It wasn’t like she’d seen them before and forgotten them, but having read them, she had some natural knowledge that they hadn’t been faked in the killing game. Frankly, this same paper had probably written about her before, too. Even still, they were insensitive. Ignoring the simple but unpleasant answers. And for that matter, a good samaritan? Really? Like Nami would believe that. It isn’t like ‘Torimi was the sort to have much trouble with… Frankly, whatever anybody wanted to do with her, but it made Nami feel sick anyway to see the situation twisted up like this. That was an odd moral issue she’d have to think about some other time, what sort of line was crossed when somebody was in a state not to consent, but would have if they could? Later. Eventually, to figure out how mad she should be on Torimi’s behalf.

Even so, this was meant to relate somehow to the overall mystery of this place. Who the Mastermind was, and what the purpose of this game was. Even so, Nami couldn’t imagine its relevance. These articles were trash, and she could say that much, because she had Tomoe’s taste to go off of. This trash related to the truth in some way, so she couldn’t just tear it up the way she wished she could. Maybe if Torimi was still here, and saw this, she’d have some theory on it. Nami couldn’t even begin to think what deeper meaning it might have.

So she wouldn’t worry about that, yet, and would instead continue on her way. She wanted to see what the deal was with the Astronaut Ward first, then the Blackmailer Ward. Given that Amai was under the impression that she would never have a ward again, it was interesting, she thought, that a new one now existed for her. Especially since Monokuma had refused to ever offer a ReWard key for this one, too. Nami believed that Amai was telling the truth on that matter. She arrived on the top floor, and opened the door.
“Oh! Hello, Nami!” Tsumugi called out to her without even glancing up from the papers she was working with. The interior looked like a lab, and Nami had to assume that it was a replica of the aeronautics lab at DIYEAR industries, since Torimi’s ward had also represented a replica. There were posters and diagrams all around, and even a coffee machine in the corner. Plus, for some reason, a small pile of plastic toy animals set on top of a device which did who-knows-what.

“This ward is pretty interesting,” Nami said, “Isn’t it? You feeling better?”

“I am, mostly. At least, the wound’s shut, so I’m back on my feet! I can handle the pain! As for the ward… Well, it’s just an exact replica of my lab at DIYEAR,” Tsumugi confirmed Nami’s suspicions, “Honestly, my Ultimate Lab in the last game was cooler than this one, in general, but… Jeeze, look at these!”

Nami leaned over Tsumugi’s shoulder to read the papers, and frowned. “I can’t make sense of that at all.”

“It’s… Well, you see.” Tsumugi adjusted her glasses. “Last time… I was told that I had the opportunity to find the formula which would unlock the very form of space travel I’ve been working towards. A formula which explains how it’s possible to move beyond the speed of light without exerting any sort of G-force on the passengers… I didn’t find it there. But it’s right here. Ultimate Hope really figured it out, and. Now it’s been given to me. I wasn’t offered my ReWard key by Mono, because the ReWard had already been placed in the open. And this is it. It’s… The fruit of my survival.”

“Wait. Are you saying that these papers actually… Make it plausible? Civilian space travel?” Nami wondered.

“I mean, frankly, it was always basically possible,” Tsumugi said, “At least, since I started working on it. That’s why I focused more on ways to make living in space sustainable. But this… Living on a space station doesn’t need to be outright sustainable, with faster-than-light speed. It just needs to be sustainable enough to settle another planet.”

“Why not just, Mars?” Nami wondered, “Or the moon?”

“Well, if we can terraform anywhere, we’d want somewhere with better resources than that,” Tsumugi said, “Besides, that’s hardly an adventure! We can make it somewhere all-new… In another solar system! Far away from all of this!”

“Away from all of this…” Nami trailed off.

“I mean,” Tsumugi backpedaled, “You don’t have to come. Obviously, you can. I’d like if you did! I’d like if everybody did. But I know that you have lives and stuff, here, on this planet. Or you might just hate the idea of going somewhere totally unexplored, with somebody like me. But, I’m excited, in general. Ryoma and Kaede are gone. I couldn’t fulfill my promises, with them. But there’s still somebody left, who I made this promise to, that we’d go to space together… So even if nobody else wants to join me. I’ve… This is the best thing to ever happen to my research.”

“Maybe that’s how we’re meant to find our future, after the Killing Game,” Nami said, and put a hand gently on Tsumugi’s shoulder. “I don’t know anything about our lives, after, yet. But if it seems right, to do this, I won’t have a problem following you.”
Nami ended up spending a while longer in Tsumugi’s lab. Some of the time was just spent talking with her, and listening to the way she put her research into layman’s terms. Some of it was spent looking around with a keen eye to see if there was any evidence lying about on the identity of the Mastermind. Tsumugi kept talking while she did this, which made it a bit easier to do. She was just multitasking, checking for evidence while talking to a friend. Even so, she didn’t find anything in that room. When it became clear there was nothing there, Nami decided to move on. She bid goodbye to Tsumugi, and found herself back in the hallway.

She took another deep breath to square herself. Every so often, she needed to pause. Even though it was more in her nature to keep going, to keep trying despite anything, that didn’t mean that it was easy. Like somebody who was a workaholic, who would find a vacation unpleasant but wasn’t immune to the stress of the job. Nami’s continuing on was absolutely a matter of effort, but it was still one she couldn’t stand not to undertake.

Next stop, Blackmailer Ward. She wandered down the hallway towards it, keeping an eye out for anything that might be in the hallway, but failing to catch anything with the cursory look that she made. Then, she opened the door to the ward. Nobody was in there, and it was another replica. This time, of somewhere that Nami didn’t recognize as having significance, but it was clear anyway. A replica of an elementary school classroom, down to small desks and chairs, with a teacher’s desk up at the head of the room. Nami made her way past the children’s desks to investigate it.

Once there, she reached out and pulled open the primary drawer of the desk. It came easily, and pieces of paper fluttered out of it, scattering themselves around the room. Nami sighed, then started to collect them to put them back. She supposed this was the chance to see if any of them had information that was important to her, but…

After reading the first one, she wasn’t so sure that she should.

“I’m going to tell everybody what you did, and this time, you can’t stop me.”

Even still, she read a second, and a third, and discovered that they were along the same lines, blackmailing notes, or promises to reveal secrets. And after three, Nami realized that she really shouldn’t be looking at these. Particularly that first one… These weren’t for her eyes at all. These were certainly from Amai’s past, and were personal. She put the ones she’d already collected back in the drawer, then shut her eyes to try and gather the rest without letting herself in on things she wasn’t meant to know.

“...What the fuck are you doing?” Amai questioned, about six minutes into Nami’s cleanup efforts.

“I… Well you see, I was investigating, for the Mastermind stuff. And I opened the drawer and all of these went flying everywhere, and I read three and realized I really shouldn’t be reading them, so now I’m trying to clean them up without reading any more.”

“What even are… those…” Amai trailed off as she got closer and could actually see what they were. She stopped, then looked around, seeming to just now acknowledge the appearance of the room around her. She brought her arms in around herself. “...This is… This place…”

“Are you okay?” Nami asked, standing up. She’d opened her eyes when Amai asked her what she
was doing, so she set her current handful into the drawer, then approached. “The ward’s a replica of some place, right?”

“This… What the fuck,” Amai hissed out, then raised her voice to a shout. It was tinged with hysteries already, breaking into a shriek. “Monokuma! What’s the goddamn meaning of this, huh!? Didn’t I already get punished when I lost my ward?? You had to put this fucking thing here??”

“I’m sorry,” Monokuma said, appearing as it was summoned. It seemed sincere. “This wasn’t my idea. All the wards were pre-built. And since this ward does include some evidence somewhere, I wasn’t allowed to just delete it. If you found the component of the mystery that’s in this room, then I think I’d be permitted to destroy it.”

“What’s going on?” Nami asked.

“This ward isn’t ‘mine’. I’m the Ultimate Blackmailer. That means that it’s not my primary talent. So a ward for the Ultimate Blackmailer, it’s…” Amai bent at the waist suddenly, dry heaving since she hadn’t eaten breakfast. Then, she whimpered, “This is the ward which would belong to him.”

“That’s true. But the notes in that desk are all the notes you left for him,” Monokuma said, “There’s so… Many.”

“Yeah. Because I never went through with the threats,” Amai admitted, “I didn’t figure out… How. I never did. I was always more scared of the consequences for me than the consequences I threatened for him. Fuck! Why did you do this why is this here why did you have to fucking remind me of all of that!?”

“I think,” Nami said, “The evidence must be mixed in with all these notes.”

“...I can’t do it.” Amai shook her head. “I can’t look at those godforsaken things again, I can’t do it! I can’t read them and see how pathetic I used to be!”

“Are you okay with me reading them, if it gets rid of this ward?” Nami asked, “I can tell you another secret about me, if it helps. I can… How can I help you, Amai?”

“Help me?” Amai asked.

“Yeah,” Nami said, “Help you. Remember? I don’t want you to feel afraid. I don’t want you to get hurt or do anything you’ll regret. And I definitely don’t want you to feel alone. Ever. So tell me how to help you.”

“You don’t have to tell me another fucking secret. I already know way more about you than I’d ever need to know,” Amai said, “It’s better if you read them than if I do. Way better, since, I can’t. I can’t do that. Fuck! You two had better not mention this to anybody.”

“My lips… Don’t exist, but they’re sealed anyway,” Monokuma said.

“Same here except my lips do exist,” Nami said, then picked the notes back out of the drawer to start sorting through them.

“Wait!” Amai exclaimed, then took a deep breath. “It’s just. I don’t want you to be caught off guard or anything, so, I should tell you. This guy, he’s… The one I had Sayaka kill for me. A-Anyway! That should be more than enough information and I’m going to get the hell out of here, and thank you for doing this so we can erase this place and all! Goodbye!”
So Amai was gone, leaving Nami to sift through her miserable truth for a scrap of evidence which would likely not mean much of anything. The people who set up this game really did want them to suffer, huh? Monokuma walked over, sat down next to Nami, and started to help with the notes. So it was allowed to do that. That was nice of it. It already knew anything and everything about Amai. About all of them, didn’t it?

That was what was required of a Monokuma.
Daily Life: Day Sixteen (The Missing Week)

5:00 pm / 1700 hours

The effort of searching through Amai’s old blackmail, even with two people trying their best, took right up until dinner. When Nami found the note which was definitely the odd one out, definitely directed at somebody else, she stood up and read it aloud to Monokuma.

“Everybody knows how rotten I am now. Thanks to you, I think I’ll die soon. At least I won’t go down alone. At least I’ll see her again. No, seriously. Thanks to you.”

“...Well that’s not frightening at all,” Monokuma said, “By which I mean, yes, it’s kind of fucking terrifying! Do you think that was written by somebody whose life got ruined by Amai?”

“I don’t think so, and you don’t either,” Nami said, “Do you?”

“I kind of just wanted to make sure you realized it, yeah,” Monokuma said, “You want to understand Amai’s heart, don’t you? So if you couldn’t realize she was the author of this note, too, then you’d be way too far behind to ever accomplish a goal like that.”

“...Well, that’s kinda sketchy, but I guess I shouldn’t expect any better from you. At least you’re using your powers for good,” Nami said, “I don’t think she’d remember writing this. None of us remember being kidnapped for this game, I think? And since my birthday happened... Yeah, I’m missing about a week before, even with recovering my other memories.”

“Do you think something happened in that week?” Monokuma wondered, “Besides being grabbed for the game, I mean. It’s weird. Usually the participants vanish several months in advance, but it seems like the furthest back wasn’t much more than one month. Unless you count Hamuko, of course.”

“Huh. So those numbers aren’t off-limits either?” Nami wondered.

“They should have been. I guess whoever disabled the motives and events was also able to make the filter a little bit weaker. I can’t really say anything that I know to be true, outright. But I can make theories about what happened to you guys, since I don’t. Really know why you’re here. Why it’s you, anyway. Ultimates from multiple years. Seemingly, living okay lives. It doesn’t make sense.”

“You infiltrated this game, didn’t you?” Nami asked, “You weren’t supposed to take over being Monokuma. You just did it. Right?”

“Mhm,” Monokuma said.

“Well, keep building the profile, then.” Nami smiled. “If you can figure out what we really do all have in common, and why we were picked... Knowing the point of the game can be a path to Ultimate Judgment, can’t it?”

“You’re right!” Monokuma exclaimed, “Smart as always. I’ll keep working on it, the way that I’m able to. We have the same goals.”

“We both want as many people as possible to make it out, sure,” Nami said, “But unlike you, I’m not interested in what happens in the meantime. I can’t take any satisfaction in this chaos... Well. Anyway. I should get to dinner, so, keep what I said in mind, alright?”
“Of course,” Monokuma said, then watched Nami go. She needed another deep breath once she got out of the room. Talking to Monokuma like that, in a way that was almost genuine… It was exciting, in a way, and in another, left a pit in her stomach. She had no idea how to feel about that creature, or the person who was piloting it, but she was glad to have an ally. And giving orders to reach a greater truth was a nostalgic act, in a way.

When she arrived at Cafe Monokuma, she sat down and had her food delivered immediately, when Amai leaned on the table, whispering, “Were you able to find it? Is that place going to be removed?”

“Yes, and I think so,” Nami answered, “What I did find, though… Well, you kind of have to see it for yourself. Here.”

She handed the paper over. Amai furrowed her brow as she read it, then handed it back. “Oh. Huh. I guess… I might… No. Fuck. Augh, fuck!” She dropped a plate on the ground, and everybody turned to look. She grimaced at the attention, then lowered her voice to speak to Nami again, harsh this time. “I’m. I might remember writing that, but I don’t want to fucking deal with that, on top of everything else, right now.”

She hit the table with her hand one more time, then stormed back to the kitchen area. Sayaka sat down across from Nami. “Is Amai okay? Are you okay? Get in another argument?”

“No… Not exactly,” Nami said, “Really, arguing with her about what Riko did would have been better. She’s kind of falling apart, even though we’re so close to the end. Because of the way the ward’s set up, and… This note I found, which is supposed to be evidence for the game overall.”

“…Jeeze. I wish I knew what to say to her,” Sayaka said, “But the thing is, she was only vulnerable with me once. And I knew the solution that time.”

“Yeah,” Nami said, then glanced around to make sure nobody was listening in. They’d all gone back to their own conversations, so she felt safe saying it. “You killed her elementary school teacher that time. Right? But you met a long time after she was in elementary school…”

“She was…” Sayaka sighed. “She was like me. A favorite. She got followed through her life by this guy, even though it should have ended when he wasn’t her teacher anymore. That’s all I know about it. I put an end to it. How I work.”

Nami decided not to explain how Amai had spent all those years threatening to expose him, only to be too afraid of her own consequences to do so. That was something which had been entrusted to her, and not to Sayaka, so she didn’t have the liberty to share it. When Amai returned from the kitchen, the room quieted again. Obviously, people were worried about her. Even Nami turned to look.

Amai squirmed under their gazes, then looked up at the ceiling. “Stop… Look, I’m fine! I’m totally fine so stop fucking looking at me like I’m not! I’ve had friends betray me and die before, you know! And there’s definitely nothing else I gotta worry about! If you really need to be concerned about somebody…”

She raised her voice then, and pointed accusingly across the room. “Be concerned about Tsumugi, okay! I’ve been keeping this secret because I thought that was the right thing to do, but. But I’ve been starting to think sometimes sharing a secret is the better thing to do for somebody! So ever since the investigation of Akamatsu’s death, Tsumugi’s been sneaking oxy from the infirmary! She’s relapsed into her old addiction again, so if you gotta worry about anyone, just fucking worry about her already!”
“...Why you gotta be such a fucking bitch, Amai?” Madara questioned, “Making things up just to get the attention off of you…”

“I saw her doing it,” Amai said, “That first time. She admitted everything to me and I said I wouldn’t tell anybody unless she gave me a reason to. Fuck, if you don’t wanna take me at my word, just look at her. She had her throat nearly slit yesterday, and she’s already up and walking around already? Monokuma didn’t even declare her capable yet! She’s high as a fucking kite, right now.”

“Well, even if she was, why share that, huh!? You’re just being cruel again,” Madara said, “I sure as hell don’t blame her, in this situation.”

“I’m… I’m not blaming her,” Amai said, and grasped at the hem of her own shirt. “For once in this goddamn shit life of mine, I’m not! I’m saying this because I do care about her. Moogs… She’s my friend and I. Think it’s a waste to worry about me when she’s right there and she needs help and I don’t want to lose her!”

“... I’m not an idiot, you know,” Tsumugi said, “Lose me. Hah. Like that would happen.”

“You’re… Not denying it?” Madara asked.

Tsumugi shrugged, her eyes glazed as she stared off to one side. “What’s the point? I mean, a lot of people have probably noticed and didn’t realize because they didn’t know. I was… I am, an addict. I thought I was fine, before. I almost relapsed once in the last game, but I didn’t. Then, as soon as I saw Kaede’s body. I needed something to stop hurting so bad, so I went back to old habits. It’s not like any of you are really any better.”

“So, during our Duos Challenge…” Tsukasa realized, “You were starting to go into withdrawal, but you took more pills in the bathroom?”

“Mm.” Tsumugi nodded. “Yeah. Does it need to be a big deal? I mean. I’ve seen other people drink, and self-harm, starve yourselves, retraumatizing yourselves. Does it need to be so much bigger that mine has a chemical dependency…?”

“You’ve also seen people die because of their bad coping mechanisms,” Sayaka said, “So what about that? Amai’s concerns are valid. About you dying.”

“And I told you I’m not an idiot!” Tsumugi snapped, just for a second before her demeanor became sickeningly calm again. “I’m not really getting *high*. And I tested the waters. My tolerance is still higher than any amount I’m taking. I… Can feel my wound right now. It’s dull, but it’s there. So if I’m exercising enough self-restraint in a goddamn relapse where I’m in the worst emotional pain of my life, and some pretty bad physical pain to boot, that I can still feel it? Do you really think there’s a risk of overdose? Heh. Let’s be real, if I was stone cold sober when Asahi attacked me, I might not have been able to call for the help I needed….”

“That’s not an excuse!” Amai’s voice cracked. “I… Yeah. You’re probably right about that last bit but I. I mean. You stopped before, that means, you don’t want this. Do you? Are you really okay, relying on those things again?”

“You can’t possibly understand,” Tsumugi said, “I told you. It’s an unhealthy coping mechanism, but it’s not different from any of yours, except that I’m somehow a bad person for it, huh?”
“I don’t think you’re a bad person at all!” Amai insisted, “I’m just worried! I’m really worried! I’d be just as worried, okay, if I cared about anyone else here like I care about you and I knew they were hurting themselves this way!”

“...Look. I was already planning to try and quit again if I make it out of here,” Tsumugi said, “So could you just lay off, unless you’re seriously going to make everybody here stop hurting themselves to get through this shit?”

“You’re right,” Amai said, “I can’t do that.”

“I thought so,” Tsumugi said, “So you really haven’t changed the whole time you’ve been here. You’ll just keep putting people’s baggage out there for everybody to judge, won’t you? It’s plain to see. I thought you were my friend, but you’re still just a bitch.”


“Well, let’s use your excuse against you,” Tsumugi lifted her head to lock eyes with Amai. “If you have to worry about anybody, you should have worried about Asahi. She was your friend too. Maybe if she was using, then she wouldn’t have done what she did.”

“She’s dead. I can’t worry about her anymore,” Amai said, “So I’m worrying about you and you have to deal with that, okay! Nobody here thinks you’re a bad person. But we want you to be okay. Just because your ‘friends’ last time around were ready to say fuck you if you screwed up even a little bit doesn’t mean that’s what we’re doing here. I just. I’m being fucking honest, you hear me? You know how tough that is!? I. Want. You. To. Be. Okay.”

“I thought I knew that already,” Tsumugi said, “But outing my addiction to everybody like this? What does that accomplish? I already felt plenty ashamed. Now I just need to deal with people knowing.”

“I…”

“Amai.” Madara put a hand on her shoulder. “Sit down.”

Amai’s shoulders slumped under Madara’s hand, and the tension was gone from her form. “I. Shit. Okay. I acted rashly and I fucked up and I can’t fix this. Alright. I can’t. I’ll sit down. Sorry.”

And that wasn’t enough, but at least she admitted it.

Amai didn’t accomplish anything with that outburst, really. Everyone already worried about Tsumugi. Knowing why they worried did nothing but make Tsumugi feel like she was being judged, even if she wasn’t. Nami knew she wasn’t judging her, she made a good point. It was just another coping mechanism, one that had a chemical dependency, and a heightened risk. The root was the same, though.

Something to escape this misery. Something to get away. Something to feel okay, just for a little while. Anyone who wasn’t okay had something like that. It wasn’t good and it wasn’t healthy, but they couldn’t dare to point fingers at whatever anybody else had, to accomplish that false happiness for a bit. The only true solution was to reach a life which didn’t need to be escaped from, and sometimes, that wasn’t feasible.

Tsumugi lost a lot of people, but Nami thought. Maybe once she escaped this planet, she could lose the emotional dependency. Break the chemical dependency. And stop escaping from her life. Until then, she hoped that Tsumugi could make it out. Make it out of everything she needed to reach the
other side of. This game, her addiction, this fight with Amai? All of it. Tsumugi stood and left the room with her food, to eat elsewhere. Nami didn’t blame her for that either.

It was hard to feel like everybody condemned you, even if you made a point that they had no right to.
The rest of the meal went by in what could only be described as uncomfortable silence. It wasn’t pleasant at all, in any way or by any means, after the argument they’d all been made to witness. Amai had vanished into the kitchen section again and hadn’t returned since, removing herself just as Tsumugi had. Everybody was still worried about her, so if it was a deflection tactic, it didn’t work. Nami wasn’t so sure about that, though. Nami thought, maybe some part of it was deflection, but Amai seemed legitimately freaked out. Her concern was genuine, if nothing else, and even if her methods were unhelpful.

Once Nami had finished her food, though, she couldn’t just leave it at this. The uncomfortable silence required breaking, so she stood up and addressed the room. “I’m going to the arcade until it gets too late. Anybody’s welcome to join me.”

That was all she needed, and she left the cafeteria. Moments later, Randy and Madara ended up joining her in the hallway. “Hey, Nami. Do you think that I was, uh. Too harsh on Amai?”

“Who can say?” Nami shrugged. “Do you want to play video games with me, or what? I think that we could use a little bit of fun. Relax some, before we have to really sit down and figure out the Mastermind’s identity.”

“Uh. Yeah, alright,” Madara said, “I guess you’re right about that.”

“I know I am,” Nami said, and didn’t stop walking. The boys followed after her, and when they reached the arcade, she turned around to face them again. “Okay! So, it’s just the three of us. Kind of surprised that Tsukasa didn’t come along, but… What should we play?”

“I kind of just want to play smash,” Randy said, “I feel like I’m really angry at just everything and nothing at once. So virtually beating up my friends is like. Give me the catharsis!”

“Hm, I could agree with that,” Madara said, “Well. I wouldn’t say that I’m really angry, but at the same time, that game works for me. It’s relaxing, anyway, even if you don’t have frustrations to be blowing off…”

“None of this stuff is frustrating to you? Are you serious?” Randy asked.

“It’s not frustrating. It’s just tragic,” Madara said, “I don’t feel angry about any of this, just sad. There’s nobody even left to be angry yet, since it’s been confirmed, Mono is the only authority of this game left, and even it’s just trying to swim upstream against the programmed stuff. So who am I supposed to be mad at? I’m just upset that this had to happen.”

“Well, I mean. You can be mad at the nebulous concept of being in a Killing Game,” Randy said, “That’s what I’m mad at!”

“You have fun with that, then,” Madara said, and approached the console. He pulled a controller, sat on the floor, and started setting up the game. Randy and Nami looked at each other, both shrugged, then sat to either side of Madara. Time to play games and maybe work out some of that anger and definitely not worry about any of the specific problems they were dealing with right now. A break. Just a short one. Nami wished more people had joined in to take that break, she thought they could use it, but she wasn’t the keeper of her friends.
So the three of them simply settled in to play a fighting game, for whatever purposes they had. Madara didn’t mean to take this break and had wanted to talk to Nami about something more serious, but she shut him down and he went with the flow. Randy wanted to get his anger out. Nami… Well, sure she wanted a break, but getting the anger out was a good idea too. She was plenty angry. At the situation, at Riko, and to some extent at the person controlling Monokuma. For all the good intentions clearly at play, something still rubbed her the wrong way about Mono.

She let herself stop thinking about those things for a while, just focusing on the game instead. That was able to last for a good while, though as soon as they grew tired of it, the bad emotions rushed back. That was okay, though. She wanted the game to serve as a break from feeling these things, and it did, and she didn’t need to feel okay for any longer than she was playing. Negative emotions still had a purpose. She’d be pretty awful, not to feel these things about the situation...

Thinking like that was what killed Torimi, though. Nami couldn’t imagine being in Riko’s position, of course. Being told that she couldn’t feel anything, having her emotions suppressed her entire life, then suddenly subjected to everything at full force while laboring under the belief it was impossible… It wasn’t an easy thought. Even as she couldn’t imagine how awful it would be to be in Riko’s shoes, though. She hadn’t ever been a good person, had she?

Nami was just going to think in circles about this, for a long time, it seemed. Understanding how it happened, and hating Riko for what she did? Those weren’t mutually exclusive. By the time Nami had finished spacing out thinking about this, Madara had left, but Randy stayed by her side. She turned to look at him. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to sort out how I feel about this game, you know. I don’t think it’s possible. I’ll be confused forever.”

“…Yeah, I get you,” Randy said, then reached a hand out to her shoulder. “Me too. I think that’s okay, though. It’s been a whole mess. Good stuff’s happened, and some real bad shit too. We can be confused forever, we don’t ever need to work it out.”

“It feels like we do. It feels like when this is over, we need to find normal again. That’s what everyone seems to think. Tsumugi says that she’ll be able to kick the habit when the game is over, and I can’t help but worry that even though me and Sayaka are in love, that things will change when we get out. Like I want this all to be over already, and at the same time, I don’t… I don’t know what the end will bring with it. And that’s scary. I cannot change this.”

“That’s shared trauma for you,” Randy said, “But all I can say is what everyone’s saying. We’ll be okay. I don’t know anything else.”

“But can’t it be fine, if we’re not okay?” Nami asked, “At least, for a while?”

“That’s fine too. I think that’s fine too.”
Sayaka Yamaguchi was somebody who was really looking forward to getting out of the Killing Game. Unlike her girlfriend, she had no reservations or confusions on what would come next; She knew exactly what she had to do. She’d apologize to her father, but profiles be damned, she’d kill them. Tatsuya Minami, Asahi… That doctor and Kiyoshi too, she thought, because she had no way of knowing those two had already been murdered by others. It didn’t matter how badly it would reflect on her family, for those important people to die. She had, for so long, bowed to that idea. She wouldn’t any longer.

Her father… She loved him, and he was a relatively good man. He wouldn’t shut down any operations of the clans they acquired, but any endeavors which were directly Yamaguchi trafficked only weaponry, not people any longer. He’d reformed their crime based on his own ethics, that was the best Sayaka could ask. She could look the other way if she disagreed about anything that they or their subordinates did… But no longer could she leave darkness untouched just because her father considered those people business partners. Riko had fallen to the rotten conclusion of doing too much for her family, and Sayaka was determined never to become like that.

Surely, after all of this, he’d be able to understand why she could no longer make those exceptions.

Having a goal, she wanted to get right to it. She was angry and she was determined. These were people who were responsible for so much harm, and she’d looked the other way for too long. Tatsuya, who’d brought unfathomable pain to Mitsuru’s mother, to Yuuri, and had destroyed Shinjiro. Asahi and Doctor Kobayashi, whose malice infected and possessed Riko until she was willing to plan a murder if and only when she felt certain she could get away with it, dragging Nami down in the process. Kiyoshi, who ruined the lives of anyone who crossed his path, including Goro, a boy who Sayaka wished only to protect forever, a boy who she’d be willing to consider her own son.

Always. She had always done what she could, because she could. She didn’t care where that put her on a moral compass, she just knew that she was capable of it, and she was putting net good into the world, even if she herself didn’t qualify. It was always her job, but never her ambition until now, until she knew so viscerally how much these people had crashed into the lives of her friends. These were the people who could be held responsible, for Shinjiro and Rei, for Yuuri, for Mitsuru. Losing her friends, and leaving the ones she had left, damaged in a way that she couldn’t fix herself. All she could do was get revenge… And she wanted this revenge, with every fiber of her being.

But it did her no good to be so impatient about this. There wasn’t any revenge to be had from inside this game, and while she saw her anger as a tool, there wasn’t a use for that tool until she got outside. So, she needed to set it aside, and her decision for how to set it aside was to go to the garden. Even though cooking was a nicer hobby for her, she’d either have to be around people, or use a room which would only get her thinking more about revenge, rather than less. Instead, she’d gather fruit, maybe to make another tart later on, or maybe just to be there.

After ten minutes there, she realized. This wasn’t working, and she couldn’t set her anger aside all on her own. She thought that she needed to be alone to pull it off, but maybe not, after all. So.

“Dia?”

“Wh-” Dia was a bit off-guard when she appeared in the garden. “Oh hello Sayaka. I didn’t much appreciate that, you know.”
“Sorry,” Sayaka said, and brushed one of her twintails back behind her shoulder. “I’m trying to calm down, because I’m very angry right now. Gardening alone didn’t work, though. So I thought maybe we could help each other.”

“Each other?” Dia asked, “You’re not just getting me to do you a favor?”

“I’m actually not,” Sayaka said, “I mean, I could be mistaken, but… You’re pretty pissed off at Asahi too, aren’t you?”

“Mm…” Dia looked away. “Well, yeah! You know what, I’m not going to mince my words! I’m mad at Riko because I feel used! She became my friend because she saw weakness in me and then she framed me for murder! I’m super angry and I want to just get mad over and over and say that I hate her! I hate her so fucking much but I can’t, do that! Because I’m Dia Hamuko and ohh, I can forgive anything and she was my friend so I have to be sad that she died and she just turned out to be some pathetic puppet all along so it’s not even her that I’m allowed to be mad at, but I’m mad! I’m mad anyway!”

“She did use you,” Sayaka said, “She used you, and she used Nami. I’m mad too. It was never a given that things would end up this way, no matter how Asahi tried to say it was. She was weak, or maybe she was a bad person deep down anyway. There’s people in positions like hers who don’t kill anyone. And if she really had to kill someone, she could have found a less cruel way to do it. I think it’s perfectly valid to hate her too. I just choose to hate the people that I can still get revenge on, instead.”

Dia puffed up her cheeks and balled up her fists, then blurted out. “You’re gonna kill Riko’s dad, right?? Can I come?”

“I am. You want to… Come?”

“I want to come with you and I want to see him die!” Dia confirmed, nodding earnestly as if she hadn’t just said something like that. “I’ve never got any catharsis! I’m here and I can’t hold it against anybody, the sorts of things you did in the false games. And I love you and you’re my friends. I don’t want to be mad or know you’re capable of that stuff, but I am. And because I love you, there’s nothing… Nothing to make me feel any better for the ways you’ve all hurt me and each other! So I. So I want to watch somebody die. Who I’m allowed to hate.”

Sayaka looked at Dia for a moment as she breathed heavily, waiting for the answer. Then, she grinned. “Knew you had it in you, kid. Yeah. You can come. Now, let’s make some bouquets and maybe we’ll calm down. Does us no good to be this fired up when the game’s not over yet.”
Things had changed at Hope’s Vestige over the last few days.

Ice and Speak didn’t even show their faces in the common areas anymore. Hashi and Megumi were constantly spending time together, poring over every option and theory they had on if the issues of the Neo World Program could be resolved any more than Megumi already had. They carefully cracked the preprogrammed events and motives, but the participants still couldn’t escape without a win condition.

Akane took a lot of shifts sitting in the main room. Was she waiting for newcomers? A little bit, but mostly, she just wanted to be here, to be with her brother. Her brother’s body. Maybe that was weird, or creepy of her, but the thing was. When the game was finished, this body would lose its physical support. It would begin to decay and need to be buried. At least while he was dead inside the program… He may be braindead, but he didn’t look like a corpse. He looked asleep. Akane wanted to memorize his face so that even when she grew up, she wouldn’t forget him. Was it so wrong to want to do that, with somebody who acted as a third parent to her for so long?

This meant that Akane was the one who was there, when Nate got back. Thanks to Kyoko’s advanced airing schedule, Nate’s plan to kill Kiyoshi as that trial was airing had been sped up. Now, he was here. And he had somebody with him. A blonde girl, dressed in black, whose eyes were absolutely empty. Akane had a second where she felt as if she shouldn’t let them in, but it was Nate. The others trusted him, for some reason, so she opened the door.

“Ah, I was hoping it would be you,” Nate said, “This is Wanda Morinaga. She’s unlikely to get along with my own collection of allies, at least, certain members. The best thing for her would of course be, to be left alone. If I put her in a room, she probably won’t leave. I trust your friends more, to let her be. May I?”

“I have no authority,” Akane said, “So I dunno.”

“Oh, I am going to do it then,” Nate said, then walked right past Akane and into the Failed Ultimates area. He set Wanda up in a room at the end of the hall, seemed to do a short double take, then shut the door and returned to the main area. “Just let your friends know she’s there next time you see them. That Ouma kid could probably bring her meals without her minding. Long as… He keeps quiet about anything else he sees in that room.”

“What do you mean?” Akane asked.

Nate shrugged. “I’m not totally sure. I guess I just gotta say, it’d make things a lot more boring around here if my allies over in the radical side knew certain things?”

“Boring? That’s what matters to you?” Akane asked.

“I mean, yes.”

“But while you were away, the Killing Game had its most malicious murder yet. After all this time, there was still a bad person there. I think you could have gotten along.”
“Oh, Asahi?”

“You expected this?”

“I did. Does that matter? Any warning of mine wouldn’t have landed, of course. I chose, I pointed Kanoshi at Akamatsu, rather than Asahi. Both of them were dangerous, but he wouldn’t listen to me, and he’d only internalize once.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“You don’t have to. I’m a bad person who’s decided to do something good,” Nate said, then brought his hands up as if he was framing the roof for a photo. Looked dumb. “Of course, I’ve heard about this outer-space plan. I won’t be coming along. Just because I helped bring this about, doesn’t mean I deserve to see its fruits.”

“You won’t be alone,” Akane shrugged. “I’m going. I mean… Anyone who doesn’t have somewhere else to go, is. But Kyosuke’s not interested. Doctor Kirisame says that her home hasn’t even been touched by despair, either, so she’ll be going back there when her work’s done. A friend of hers is dogsitting, because her boyfriend’s on the way here with some other girl from Okinawa who does want to come.”

“You really think I care about the everyday life of some random Okinawans? What could they know about the world, anyway?”

“She’s kind of the smartest person I’ve ever met. She’s messed with the Neo World Program without hurting the participants…” Akane looked away, twirling an end of her hair. “Mister Kyosuke’s gonna go back there with them. Bet you could too. If an ex-despair like you wouldn’t stand out too much, that is.”

“If I wouldn’t be welcome in space, I wouldn’t be welcome in Okinawa. The point is to make a space without the sort of tragedies that I bring about, isn’t it?” Nate asked.

“I dunno,” Akane said, “I’m just a kid. But then again, I dunno. Didn’t you kind of prevent a tragedy, bringing that Morinaga girl here?”

“You say you’re just a kid, but that’s more give than a lot of people my age are willing to give me,” Nate said, “I mean, you can’t really wrap your head around what sort of things I’ve done, can you? But I guess I’ve got a question for you. Do you think anybody deserves a path to redemption?”

“Absolutely not.” Akane’s gaze turned cold as she answered. “Anybody? No, no way. There’s people who’ve cemented themselves into their roles. People who’ve done things I can’t forgive, and I don’t think anyone should. But, people your age? Like you’ve had the chance to do that yet. You’re what. Nineteen? You’re a kid too.”

“I’d be tried as an adult,” Nate said, “And I very well should be. I think you’re saying I’m forgivable because you’re too young to conceptualize the things that make people unforgivable.”

“Oh, I know,” Akane said, “But really, I draw the line, with parents. If you kill your own child, or ruin them in a way that their death can be traced back to you. That’s what I can’t forgive. Don’t bring a kid into the world just to destroy them. That’s the worst, I think.”

“Well, where does that put me?” Nate asked, “I helped a guy ruin his kid. That’s all I’m gonna tell a little girl like you about it.”
“If you’re talking about Yuuri.” Akane looked up and smiled, her orange eyes glinting as Nate seemed to actually realize the connection for the first time. He knew it, but not in a way that was real. Now, he understood. “Tatsuya Minami ruins children by having them. All we can do is try to fix his damage when we grow up. So all you really did was set him back a few steps. I can forgive you. If you want to really try.”

“Not sure I know how to do that,” Nate said, “But you’re a pretty intense kid.”

“Well. I figured out how to fix myself,” Akane said, “After I was ruined just by having that rotten father. So maybe I can fix an idiot like you, too. If it means that you stop hurting people and earn a place somewhere that’s not just gonna break you again.”
Nami managed to keep herself occupied with various things, investigating the top floor with interspersed breaks to keep her level head, until the nighttime announcement sounded. It was just generic, but Mono had that same apologetic tone as it did that morning. Nami stretched out, and decided that she may as well go to sleep, now that several areas were off-limits anyway. She’d put more effort in than she’d been expecting to, so that was good enough for the day.

She hadn’t found anything, though. She was trying to keep her spirits up with the pride that she’d accomplished the act of looking, but it was a bit worrisome that she wasn’t finding much. Just the items from those two wards, and nothing else. Maybe the other ReWard keys would produce results… She hadn’t tried hers yet. That could wait. In general, she was starting to be concerned. Neither of the pieces of evidence she found pointed to a Mastermind; She felt like she was getting closer to an answer about The Killing Game, but an answer about Ultimate Judgment might be out of reach after all.

Mono did say so, once, that it was worried about that kind of thing. The Evil King was a failsafe in that possibility. Nami trusted Mono’s words, even if she didn’t completely trust it or its motives. If Mono said it might not be possible, that was its way of saying that it couldn’t find the necessary information itself. It had faith in the game’s participants, hence the might. Just because it didn’t perceive enough evidence as existing, didn’t mean that the players couldn’t find it or make a connection that Mono may have missed. Even so, there was that option.

The Evil King’s Game. An addition which had prompted one murder to occur, and clouded several investigations, without ever really being involved. An additional win condition, when it was possible the main conditions couldn’t be achieved. It was the perfect thing, for Mono’s motivations. Nami understood, now. She understood that much.

This Monokuma, the person behind it, was somebody who wanted to see what happened. Somebody who was reveling in the ability to oversee a Killing Game, but at the same time, didn’t actually want the participants to die or to suffer. Somebody who liked the idea in concept, and would take any nuggets of interest possible, but hated the situation overall. They were stuck in here, too. They were a participant too. And no participant of a Killing Game could escape unscathed.

This understanding gave Nami a certain sort of levity, though. Mono was an ally, undeniably. Even an ally who enjoyed chaos was an ally. The Evil King’s game bred chaos, but also added win conditions that could be met, no matter what the original runners of the game intended. If Ultimate Hope actually intended for this to be an unwinnable game. There was still hope. A normal sort of hope, the hope of escape and success, not that of zealous virtue. Mono had given that to them, so even with the dread that it may be necessary, Nami didn’t feel crushed. She felt relieved that even if it did turn out somebody still needed to die, there was a way out. There was still a way out.

She arrived back at her room, and Sayaka was already there, standing next to the door. “Hey.”

“Hey there,” Sayaka said, “You find anything?”

“Not since before dinner,” Nami said, “And those bits didn’t seem to have anything to do with who
the Mastermind is. Just… About this game in general. Hey, when’s your last memory before waking up here? Do you know the date?”

“Huh? I guess…” Sayaka thought for a moment. “It was September first, yeah. I remember because my dad was joking about it being autumn now, and I corrected him that it’s actually the twenty-first. I never really thought about that before.”

“I wish there was still a way to contact the outside. I’d bet anything that the first wasn’t the day you were kidnapped to be here, and your dad could tell you that,” Nami said, “But I guess it just has to be a theory for now.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense,” Sayaka said, “If there is a reason we were the ones selected for this game, it wouldn’t do for us to remember it, huh? Especially since we now know, who planned this thing. Urgh… Fuck! Fuck that, nope. Don’t want to think about that stuff.”

“That’s what Amai said.”

“I super don’t blame her! Jeeze. You really gotta tell me that right before we go to sleep? That’s gonna give me nightmares…”

“What if I hug you really tight all night long?” Nami asked, “Would that keep the nightmares away?”

Sayaka’s pout softened a bit. “Well, uh… Maybe. Can’t hurt to try.”

“I thought so.” Nami laughed, then used her Monopad to unlock the door. They both walked into her room and got settled in for the night, both trying to put the serious matters out of mind, because at least they were together. And they would be, for as long as they could. Nami might have worried that Sayaka would leave once they were on the outside. Sayaka might have been preoccupied with her plans to get revenge. They both may have had serious concerns for the nature of the game that they were involved in.

That, again, didn’t matter right now. It was night, it was their time, it was time to fall asleep, next to each other, close, and in love. That wasn’t all that mattered, but it could be all that mattered, just for a bit. Just for a few hours. Each night, this was all that they needed to think about, and neither of them had any nightmares this time.

Another night in the Neo World Hospital. The sixteenth night, like the sixteen participants they’d started off with. More than two weeks. Just half a month, that stood apart from their pasts and couldn’t help but define the rest of their lives. This event they couldn’t escape from. This event that inevitably found and stole and destroyed what they’d built before, as Ultimates.

And soon, they’d all need to rise from that dust.
Nami woke up. The morning announcement started off generic, but ended with something that did catch her ear. “And, I’m sorry, but I do have to say something at breakfast again, so you’ll have to make it.”

She chuckled to herself. That was an empty apology; As much as Mono might feel bad for making them get up and get to breakfast, this was a pretty good way to avoid letting them slip too much. If they weren’t allowed to stay in bed and skip meals, then it kept them on a more solid baseline, whether they actually ate at that meal or not. It was unfortunate to admit, but a lot of depression symptoms had a habit of spiraling. If somebody could be forced to begin the process, then at least they might not get worse.

So, Nami got out of bed. Sayaka was still dozing; The announcement woke her, but not completely. It seemed she was more capable of hitting snooze than Nami was, and that was fine. Actually, it worked out well with situations like this one, where there was just one bathroom and they both needed to get ready for the day. Nami could use her natural proclivity to wake up once she stirred, and Sayaka could grab that precious extra bit of sleep while her girlfriend prepared. Of course, again, in the future that problem could also be resolved by showering simultaneously… But they sure weren’t there yet.

Once they’d both gotten ready in turns, though, they made their way up to Cafe Monokuma and claimed a seat. Amai was of course, already at work cooking, though breakfast wasn’t quite ready yet this time. She seemed to be a bit frustrated, actually.

“Are you like, good?” Nami tactlessly called out.

Amai stopped, then turned to Nami, and sighed. “Well, no?”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“It’s… Urgh. I just, it’s not working.” She put down the spatula she’d been holding. “It isn’t working. I mean. It’s fine. I can make a meal. But it’s… Not good. It’s not the way I want it to be. But I. I don’t… Know.”

Nami turned to look at Sayaka, then smiled as she turned back to Amai. “So there’s no way you’d make something good enough that you’d want to eat, anyway?”

“...Yeah,” Amai said, “Right now. I can’t do it. I’ll be okay, but right now. Yeah, right now I just feel kind of empty. Riko… And Tsumugi. I fucked up and I feel alone.”

“Thank you for being honest with me,” Nami said, “Why don’t you let Sayaka finish making breakfast? Just relax and take a break.”

Amai looked around Nami, got a thumbs-up from Sayaka, then nodded and stepped out from the kitchen area. Sayaka stood up, patted her shoulder along the way, then picked up where Amai left off on the pancakes that she’d been trying to make. Nami put an arm over Amai’s shoulders and led her back to the table where she and Sayaka had been sitting. Amai didn’t say anything else, just sitting in that chair and staring at the table’s surface, but Nami could tell looking at her that it was a weight off her shoulders, not to need to push herself through doing something she couldn’t be
satisfied with.

Goro joined them at the same table when he got to the cafe, though he didn’t say anything to Amai, just speaking right to Nami instead. “Hey, morning.”

“Morning, Goro,” Nami said, “How are you doing?”

“I mean, I don’t have a specific reason not to be fine,” Goro said, “So. Sorry that I didn’t really talk to you yesterday, or anything. I didn’t talk to much of anyone. You holding up? Feeling better from the episode yet?”

“I am. My mind’s clear, anyway,” Nami said, “Feeling better might be a stretch, but not much more than other people. Even though you weren’t directly involved, it’s got to be pretty unnerving that a murder like that could happen this late in the game…”

“That’s exactly it,” Goro concurred, “I wasn’t directly involved. I got along with Shinoe, but it’s not like we were friends yet. And I never got to know Asahi very well, either. But it’s… Huh. I mean. This whole time, I’ve been beating myself up so badly, for what I did. Like no matter what anybody said or did, I was still going to be the worst person here. But the way that Asahi… It even scared me. Somebody like me, appalled by a murder…”

Nami put a hand on his head. “Somebody like you, that makes perfect sense. You weren’t exactly planning what you did.”

“...I was still cruel, though. To you, and to Hamuko, and…” He glanced at Amai. “To Oishi, too. Killing those guys. I can accept that, as self-defense, and as a bad reaction on my part. Staging the scene, though? Why, if I did that, can I even begin to let myself think that maybe, she’s more worthy of condemnation than me? I went out of my way to make it horrific.”

“She planned to commit a murder if she thought she could get away with it, the whole time. You never meant to get away with it; Just to make it an interesting case when you’d already made your first mistake,” Nami explained, “You didn’t outright try to pin the blame on anybody else. Maybe it was cruel, in some ways, but not in the same ways.”

“It isn’t…” Goro looked away. “How? I just mean, how can I sit here and say ‘Asahi is worse than me’ when for both of us, it was because we were broken? The difference of self-defense against planning… Feels like it should be a point in my favor, but then I remember, it wasn’t like I planned to make it this far myself.”

“I think the difference,” Nami said, “Is the choices. Riko had to choose, over and over, to commit her murder, to cover it up, and to do it all in cruel ways when something simpler could have sufficed. You had two choices. Die, or kill your attackers. Then, leave them there, or make it into a case worthy of a Killing Game. I think you made the right choices, and I think Riko made the wrong ones. Does that explain it, for you?”

“...I guess that it does. Hey, thanks,” Goro said.

“Anytime. That’s what a replacement mom is for, right?” Nami teased. Goro turned a bit pink at her statement, but he also smiled that small, but genuine smile of his that his ‘new mom’ thought was just as radiant as his old mom had.

While they’d been talking, others had filed into the cafe, and time had of course, passed. Exactly at eight, Sayaka started to serve pancakes, and Monokuma appeared.

“All righty, everyone! Hopefully, this is the last mealtime announcement I actually need to make…
But it is required of me. I’m sorry you were so misled in the past. I wasn’t able to say that something hadn’t happened yet… Or let you know I’d be informing you when it did. That’s right, this entire time, it’s been a programmed requirement of me…”

Mono took a deep breath before finishing the statement, paws folded in front of itself and head dipped. “To tell you that the Evil King has found their Gun.”
The Evil King has found their Gun.

The Evil King’s Gun has been found, by the Evil King, the only person capable of finding it.

The failsafe which Mono had added into the game, and the win condition which had motivated so much strife between them, was coming to fruition suddenly. It was one thing to suspect who the Evil King could be, and another to be outright told. You were barking up the wrong tree this entire time, because the gun hadn’t even been found yet. But now it has been. And…

“...Of course,” Dia said, “This is exactly what I was saying during the trial, isn’t it? All of us know what the responsible thing to do, as the Evil King, would be. Use the gun, and don’t fail. The fact it hadn’t happened yet made it kind of obvious, the gun wasn’t discovered yet.”

“Is that even still the responsible thing to do at this point, though?” Tsumugi asked, “After all, we have every main hospital floor available to us. That means we should be able to find the Mastermind… Right?”

“About that…” Mono groaned. “I said it before, I’ll say it again. You might not. Be able to find the Mastermind, that is. This game does have special evidence only available now that you’ve reached this point… Both on the top floor, and added to the rest of the building. Unfortunately, I don’t know if that evidence is actually… Capable of releasing you.”

“What do you mean?” Tsukasa questioned, getting to his feet. “What are you trying to say?”

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Mono said, “You might be able to figure out why you’re here, but the Mastermind… It’s…”

“Yeah,” Amai said, “I mean, I figured as much. I’m sure some of you realized it too, right? It’s totally possible that whoever put us here never really meant for us to make it out alive. I didn’t… Want to think about it, but it seems like it could be.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Monokuma said, “I think that the people who set up this game, before my groovy self came to tip the scales for you heathens… Didn’t want you getting out. That’s the real reason that I instituted the Evil King’s Game. I wanted to give you another option. It was the best I could do. Do you believe me?”

There were murmurs of confirmation about the room. Reluctant, but nonetheless agreeing. There wasn’t any reason to distrust Mono, at this point. It was probably telling the truth; It had, after all, established for a long time now that it was trying its best. Admittedly, it was a bit harder to commit to this decision after Riko, somebody who’d played a long con, but there wasn’t a downside to believing Mono in this case, right?

Nami supposed it was possible this information could make the Evil King act even if it was unnecessary. It was possible that Monokuma was just making a ploy to get two more people dead, instead of letting them get out with the trial of the Mastermind. But Nami decided that she couldn’t let her experiences jade her to the idea of trusting people, so she would trust in what Mono said. It hadn’t given her any reason, since it appeared in this game, not to. She had every reason to believe that it was trying to be the best person it could be, and was telling the truth.
“I do believe you. But don’t make me regret it,” Nami said, the first really firm response.

“I won’t,” Mono said. “All I want is for you guys to be able to get out of here, to get back to the rest of your lives. And… For this game to end. I’m tired. Really tired of this. I’m stuck here just as long as you are.”

“I know,” Nami said.

And with that, Monokuma left. It didn’t say anything else, it just left, but that was fine. Nami knew that was just because it wanted to say more, that it still couldn’t. The censors were weakened, not removed. If they were removed, she had no doubts that Mono would speak in no uncertain terms, would tell them all everything that it could and reveal the secrets of this game itself. The onus was on the rest of the participants to figure it out, though. That was the way it had always been, and the way that this game would be as well. Nami was okay with that.

She had no confidence that they’d be able to find the truth, or expose the Mastermind. She’d keep trying, but really, she imagined at this point that the game would end with something relating to the Evil King. Which did mean two more people would have to die. Two at the hands of the Evil King, she imagined, since it would be more rash than she believed any of her friends would be, to try and sniff out and defeat the Evil King personally.

She’d brace herself for that, and accept it. Obviously, she didn’t want anybody to die. These were her precious friends. She certainly didn’t want to lose two more of them, but when it came down to it, if she was ready… Then she’d be able to manage it. If she worked to accept now that it seemed the end of this game would still have more loss to it. Or perhaps… She’d be one of the losses, instead. She didn’t want to die, obviously. But neither, at this point, did anybody else. Everyone wanted and deserved to live, didn’t they?

So she was prepared for whatever needed to happen. Mono was right, the rest of their lives were waiting for them on the other side; For all of them. She could only hope, then, that the Evil King wouldn’t let them down. That they wouldn’t end up trapped here forever, or… That another pointless murder would happen. Every death felt pointless, retrospectively. Knowing that the Evil King couldn’t have even acted yet, and how nobody who died had been the Evil King themselves. But then again, again, it was the nature of the game.

A manufactured tragedy that could, that should, be over soon. And until the time the Evil King decided to act, Nami wouldn’t give up on finding another way, even with the thought there wasn’t one. Maybe she could do it anyhow. Maybe not. Either way, somebody would save them soon.
“...Hey,” Goro spoke up, “What do you guys think it means, that thing that Mono said all the way back when the Evil King’s Game began? The Evil King’s Gun can only be found by the Evil King…”

“Well, isn’t that exactly what you’d expect it to mean? The gun’s not visible to anybody who isn’t the King,” Amai said, “Uh… Right?”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure about that. Dia?”

“Now that you mention it, that’s right. I was… Technically considered in the role of the ‘reality manager’, though mine was supposed to be a more general, making sure nobody loses it. It’s true, though, a gun that’s just invisible to all but one person is a little too much on the unlikely side,” Dia answered, “I don’t think that would have gotten through the programming.”

“Right, right. So I was thinking, before we all start being weird about this… The Evil King only just now found the gun, right? And maybe, it’s not a matter of failing to figure it out. Maybe they really couldn’t get it, until now.”

“What are you getting at, Goro?” Sayaka wondered.

“The ReWard Panels,” He clarified, “Isn’t it possible that the Evil King’s ReWard Panel held the Gun? And that way, it wasn’t irresponsible of them to wait this long to act… They just weren’t allowed to.”

“That’s… No,” Nami said, “I don’t think so. The ReWard Panels were part of a preprogrammed event which was in the game long before the Evil King was even a concept. But you might have a point that it is something physical that’s only accessible to a particular person…”

“Hmm, oh yeah,” Goro said, “Well, it was worth a shot, huh? Despite the name, I don’t really think that the ‘Evil King’ is a bad person for taking this long. Even if it wasn’t that they couldn’t get the gun before now, it might be something weird and complicated… I guess that we can’t really know, until after the game I guess.”

“Are you just saying they’re not a bad person because it’s you?” Tsumugi wondered.

“If I was I couldn’t tell you!” Goro laughed. “Oh, but, for real. Whoever it is, you’re in this room, so. I’m officially volunteering, whoever it is, that I’m willing to be a victim if it means ending this thing. Even though I’m not against the idea of having a future anymore, I’m not totally sold on it either!”

“Oh, shush. everybody is thinking that,” Nami said, and reached out to grab Goro by the arm and pull him back down into his seat. “None of us want to die, but we all want to live less than we want our friends to live. Whoever it ends up being… I guess that’ll have to be the Evil King’s choice.”

“That does seem to be most fair,” Kurou said, “It’s a big responsibility to put on one person, so the last thing they need is for all of us to act like we’ve got a say in the matter. Given we can’t in any way determine who it is, for one. And for another, Nami’s correct. If we did do the heartless thing of having a vote, we’d all vote for ourselves, wouldn’t we?”
“I wouldn’t, but that’s just because I have something really important I need to do outside,” Tsumugi said, “I wouldn’t redirect my vote at anybody. I just would prefer not to be killed. I have a promise to keep.”

“That’s so valid,” Nami said.

“Thank you,” Tsumugi said, then averted her eyes. “Huh. If I said that in the last game, somebody would have made some comment that I was being selfish by saying that.”

“Well, I think your promise is important to keep, too,” Nami said, “If you pull it off, you’ll change the world, yeah? So, if anything, it’s the most selfless thing that you can do in this situation. I think so, anyway…”

“That’s kind of you to say.” Tsumugi pressed a hand to her chest. “I promise, I won’t fail.”

“It… That doesn’t even matter,” Amai said, “Your accomplishments… Don’t define your worth or anything. We’d want you alive, even if you fail to keep whatever this promise is.”

Tsumugi almost looked like she was going to rebuke that somehow, but instead, she just nodded, keeping that soft smile on her face. She didn’t need to make it a fight, to say that Amai wasn’t someone who should say that. Just because they got in a fight, Tsumugi didn’t need to jump to thinking that Amai wanted her dead.

“Really, we should stop talking about this, though,” Madara said, “For everything we can say, how we’d be fine with being the one to go… If the Evil King had just started shooting people right here in this room, we might run away, or fight back. It’s survival instinct, or maybe revenge instinct. So if we do want anything to happen… Let’s go about our lives as usual, for as long as we’ll still have them?”

“That seems smart,” Sayaka said, “But like, finish eating first? I put a lot of work into making this much breakfast, you know…”

Her glare put Madara back in his seat, and he continued eating the pancake he’d only initially had three bites of. This prompted the others to keep eating too; Sayaka’s food was very good, they’d just all gotten caught up in the Evil King issue. Sayaka joined Nami and ate some herself, and Amai even got up the nerve to try a bite. She didn’t spit it out, but she didn’t take a second one either; Still, high praise coming from her.

As people finished eating, they did filter off, scattering around the building the way that they usually did. There wasn’t a reason to disrupt their normal habits just because they now had it confirmed that the Evil King was capable of acting; And Madara was right. Whoever the Evil King was, they were still more likely to act in a less open setting than this one. Killing two people for the good of the group was a difficult enough task. Doing so in front of all the others? Nami was glad she wasn’t in that position, because it seemed like it would be something near impossible.
In the process of everybody wandering off after finishing breakfast, Nami and Goro ended up leaving at the same time, and found themselves in Goro’s ward. It had been a while since Nami had legitimately been in here, besides poking around for evidence. Actually, did she ever really hang out in this room? Goro stepped forward and sat down at one of the sewing machines.

“What’re you up to?” Nami wondered.

“Well,” Goro said, “Since my wrist’s healed up enough that I should be able to, I kind of wanted to see if I could throw together a quilt... I get cold really easily, and there aren’t any extra blankets in the rooms or anything.”

“Ohh, that makes sense,” Nami said, “But… Won’t it still hurt, even if your wrist is mostly better? If we are going to spend another night here, couldn’t you just get a blanket from Hamuko’s ward?”

“I already tried that…” Goro sighed. “Apparently, they can’t leave the ward. If one of them was used in a murder, it would constitute unfair evidence or something, I guess?”

“That’s weird,” Nami said, “But... Well, I guess it’s pretty inventive of you, to jump straight to making yourself a quilt when that didn’t work. At the same time, why don’t we give something else a shot, first?”

“What did you have in mind?” Goro asked.

“Sayaka hasn’t been sleeping in her room for a while now,” Nami said, “Because the mirror’s broken, and it’s easier to leave than to try and clean it up. So, maybe it would be alright for you to take her comforter?”

“...Oh yeah, that would be easier,” Goro said, “If it’s allowed.”

“We may as well give it a shot, anyway. Come on.” Nami gestured for Goro to come with her as she turned to leave his lab. “So, you run cold, huh?”

“Yeah.” He nodded as he followed after her. “Really cold, actually, I’m pretty chilly all the time. Back at home, I used an electric blanket most of the time. Where we lived never got super hot even in the summer, either, so I usually wore layers even then. I really prefer being nice and warm.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” Nami said, “For when we get out of here.”

“...Assuming all three of us do, you mean,” Goro said.

“Well, not quite. Assuming you do, of course, but me or Sayaka... Even without the other, we’d still want to take care of you. It’s not like we’re saying this stuff like we’re playing house, we both love you a lot and you need somebody to take care of you. And that’s what we want to do. We might not be very good at it without the other, but we still... Would...” Nami trailed off as Goro had suddenly wrapped his arms around her, holding her as tight as his injured would allow. She just took a breath, then smiled, running her hand over his hair again.

“You saying stuff like that... God, it’s everything I ever wanted to hear,” Goro said, “But also. No, it won’t happen. I’m sorry that I even brought it up, of course the three of us will get out of here...
together! Let’s not… Let’s not think about ‘ifs’ anymore. Let’s not. You were right with what you said. When we get out of here.”

Nami brought her other hand up to Goro’s head as well. For some reason, touching his hair felt like the best way she could communicate her feelings to him. The fact that, somehow, she’d come to see him as if he were her own child. She didn’t know how she got here, how she’d grown into the view he’d had of her all along as if she could be his mother; Never to replace Hanako, not really, but to fill the void she left behind.

Then, they pulled apart. Nami smiled, and continued walking towards the dorms. She opened the door to Sayaka’s room; It had been left unlatched since Sayaka stopped using it, just in case of something like this. Since nothing needed to be hidden or protected, there was no need for the Monopad-based lock. Nothing had been touched in there anyway. Nami stepped forward, and she stopped when she looked at the floor. Right, the outfit that she’d set out, thinking Torimi might like to get out of her ‘talent attire’. She forgot to ever offer it to her… And now she wouldn’t be able to. But she shook the thought away and went over to the bed, instead, bundling up the comforter.

It was about the size of her, even bundled, and she took it to the door. No alarm sounded, the blanket didn’t vanish, nothing seemed to indicate that she couldn’t take the blanket out of that room when she did. So, this worked. She looked past the blankets to give Goro a cheeky grin, then wandered in the direction of his room. He moved to walk ahead of her, and she noticed his limp for the first time, but decided not to mention it. He unlocked the door, and Nami walked in, dropping the comforter on his bed. “There we go! That should make you a little warmer, right?”

“Mhm! If the Evil King doesn’t end up acting today… Then I can be warm and comfy tonight,” Goro said, “Maybe the night after, too? But it’d be really irresponsible if they waited that long to get us out of here…”

“Definitely,” Nami agreed, “Come on, we’re impatient now! The Neo World Hospital is boring and I miss the sun! Do you miss the sun, Goro?”

“I so miss the sun! And not the fake sun like was in my execution!” Goro confirmed, balling his hands into fists. “I want to lie down in the nice summer sun, come on! I wanna lie down in the sun with a comfy blanket like this one and soak up solar power like a cat! I don’t care if that sounds dumb, it’s how I feel… So that Evil King better not take too long!”

“He better not! I mean, I’m still going to try to investigate the Mastermind, too. Just in case… Even though Mono says that it won’t work.”

“Who knows. We could take a gamble and point the finger at somebody, anybody,” Goro said, “But I’d kinda rather take my chances, with the Evil King killing two people and it might be us, than to act on no real evidence to pick a Mastermind and maybe everyone gets killed. You know?”

“Yeah. Whoever it is… We’ll have to be sure to remember them the best we can. With all the gratitude we can.”
“...Did you consider this, when you were writing your code, Megumi?” Hashi questioned, staring down at the screen. It reflected in her glasses a string of information that honestly would be nonsense to any layman.

Megumi was across the room, pouting. “I made the code, you didn’t, so you really think you can accuse me of failing at something within it? I had nothing to consider, the system wasn’t in front of me. I did what I could to the absolute extent I could, which is more than anybody else has done. So, no, I didn’t consider it. That wasn’t a mistake. It would have been impossible for me to do so.”

“I-I Wasn’t trying to… Well, okay. I’m sorry,” Hashi said, “What we actually need to worry about is how we’re going to fix it, right?”

“You’re right,” Megumi said, and wheeled herself back over towards the machine. “Sorry I snapped at you, I guess.”

“No, I deserved it…”

“Your wording was off, but it was a legitimate concern,” Megumi said, “I mean, really, you even could have been assuming I already had a solution. When it comes to this… Well, unfortunately? There is no perfect solution. With the way that my protocol works, the only real option here is to turn it off when it seems they’re close to getting out. If I knew a solution to this issue, frankly, my protocol wouldn’t be cycling the way it is. Active for eighteen seconds, good grief. You think I’d want to do that, Hashi?”

“No, I, I don’t, never thought you would-”

“Oh, calm down. I’m not mad at you or anything,” Megumi teased, “You’re so sensitive. I guess that I’ll miss that, though… When you’re off beyond the stars.”

Hashi froze. Stayed quiet for a moment, then asked, barely a whisper, “You’re not coming, Megumi?”

Megumi looked away again. “No. Do you really need to ask me that question?”

“W-Well, I mean, I kind of…”

“I suppose I keep forgetting. You’re the sort who stays stuck in the past.” Megumi sighed. “Maybe when I was younger, I would have jumped at the chance. To leave this place, go somewhere my talents would be appreciated and my bad memories could never follow me? Well, she would have thought it a dream. The me you knew, before I had a proper sense of self.”

“But you’re not like that anymore, are you… You’ve grown, while I’ve been stuck.”

“I wouldn’t say you’ve been stuck. Your work is impressive, and I recognized it right away when I saw that Dia girl,” Megumi said, “Before she even recognized herself, mind you. You’ve got a distinct style. I do think you’ve grown, but you put that growth in other places.”
“Even so…” Hashi bit her lip. “I still can’t understand, exactly. Why you’d want to stay here, on this planet.”

“I frankly can’t see any reason to leave. I’ll miss those of you who go, of course, but I’m sure I’ll find a way to keep in touch. I’ve found a place to belong, though, and it’s here. Oh, and from the utilitarian perspective, Okinawa needs to retain my husband far more than another planet needs to begin with him.”

“Your husband!!?” Hashi questioned.

“Oh, we aren’t married yet…” Megumi trailed off. “Actually, last we spoke, we were just engaged to be engaged. I wasn’t ready yet. But I suppose, saying that… Maybe now I am. Hm. Well, if we aren’t married by the time you leave, you will come back for the wedding, yes?”

“Of course! Though, I’m not sure I took you as the sort to want a big party…”

“Not too big. Just big enough to calm the part of my soul that still claims that he doesn’t actually love me. Enough witnesses to verify he certainly does. You of course, and Nami, and Aoto… Yes, that seems nice. His family, of course. And he’ll want to invite a few others, but he’ll gladly put a cap for my sake.”

“Are we planning your wedding now? Is that it?” Hashi asked.

“...No, no, of course not.” Megumi chuckled, and tucked a bit of hair back behind her ear. “The task at hand is much more important. There isn’t much point to planning that wedding, if one of my guests died first, is there?”

“I imagine not…” Hashi admitted, “But you’ve got to return the favor to us, you know… If it’s possible, anyway, you’ve got to come by if any of us out there in space have big life events, okay?”

“I will. I don’t doubt it will be possible, I do intend to involve myself in the process of building your craft. I won’t rest until I’m certain that it can make the trip. To visit us, or to help one of us visit,” Megumi said, “So, you’re underestimating me if you think such a thing won’t be possible. I have no intention of breaking any connections, as we reach a tipping point in the world. My connection to Okinawa, and mine to my friends who’ll be departing… It may be a test of my abilities, but I’ll certainly triumph.”

“I… I’ll help too! My input should be at least a little bit of a positive, and I definitely want it to be good enough… That we don’t just make it where we want to be, but so it isn’t something that keeps us apart forever.”

“Well, I should expect you’ll help too. It’s not like we’re overflowing with engineers here.”

“Right! Right… It would be irresponsible if I didn’t,” Hashi said, “Sorry. You know how I am. Anyways… How soon do you think we’ll need to act?”

“That’s a good question,” Megumi said, “After all, it’s an instant win if the Evil King’s Gun kills two people. We’ll have to keep a close eye on things and make a judgment based on that. Of course, the programming on this thing is atrocious… There’s a lot of ways it could bug. Let’s get one more person in here so I can explain our options, and we can watch in shifts.”

“That does seem like the best option.” Hashi stood up. “Any preference, for who I ask to join us on this task?”

“Hm. Well, Nagata seems reliable,” Megumi said, “Doctor Same, of course. Or your girlfriend.
Whichever one of them feels up to it, actually. I’d be willing to put my faith in any of them, when it comes to this.”
Daily Life: Day Seventeen (Good in a 'real' way)

Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 26th
Time: 1300 Hours

Sayaka had been spending some time investigating on her own. Even though Nami had taken the job upon herself, and was honestly doing as good a job as she could expect to when even Monokuma thought there wasn’t enough evidence available, Sayaka felt compelled to give it a shot on her own. Maybe it was just some compulsion to be doing, something. Contributing somehow, even if she doubted she’d find anything left behind by Nami. Though, her investigation did focus on other areas of the building.

Just in case.

It was only when she reached the carpenter ward, that she finally took a break. And that was only because she ran into Kurou, who was making… A something. That was the only way she could really describe it, actually. A something.

“Hey, Kurou. What’s that you’ve got there?” Sayaka decided to ask.

“You know, I’m really not quite sure myself,” He admitted, and took a step back. “I kind of think I just wanted to be busy making something, but I had no intentions? The things we create in here will be lost when we get back to the real world, anyway, so I think it doesn’t matter much that I created something without a purpose or a real meaning, or anything…”

“Well, I don’t think something needs a purpose or a meaning to exist, even in the real world,” Sayaka said, “But you know, I get it. I don’t really want to do much leatherworking in my ward, even though I love doing it, because part of that is loving that I can make things… And use them, or give them to other people.”

“It’s a bit disappointing,” Kurou said, “To know that this is simulated, and that even though we’ve been given all the tools to do what we love, it’s empty, in a way. We can use it to destress, but we can’t have the same creative fulfillment… Well, I suppose, it’s too kind even to give us that half of the equation, isn’t it?”

“If they were going to put in the budget and effort to hold the game in a real life facility,” Sayaka said, “Then I don’t think this stuff would be a priority anyway. It is nice, having unlimited resources, even if we can’t do everything we want with them. Hm…”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Well, this is really impressive technology. It’s kind of a huge waste that it’s being used for Killing Games. If it could be made safe, wouldn’t it be cool, in some ways? You could learn a new skill without needing to put money into the resources that will go to waste when you’re just starting out. And you could have a lot of unique experiences, too. Even just for entertainment, it could be a lot more useful than this.”

“Maybe… The reason it’s only being used for the game is because there isn’t a way to make it safe? To make it that dying in the simulation doesn’t kill you in real life?”

“Can’t be true,” Sayaka said, shaking her head. “I mean, sure. Maybe it isn’t possible to divorce
death in the Neo World from death in the real world. Even then, it would be used for the things I mentioned. There aren’t exactly many deaths associated with learning most hobbies. Even something as frivolous as a virtual amusement park would only have the risks a real one presents, without the resource usage…”

“You sound pretty clever on this,” Kurou said, “I can’t say I expected it of you, exactly. Not that it’s unexpected either… What I mean, is, isn’t resource management a completely different thing from yours?”

“I am the Ultimate Little Sister… Just because I’m an enforcer, my dad’s the oyabun, you know.” Sayaka turned away, twirling one end of her ponytail. “I learned a little about all parts of the business, but resource management’s something I kinda enjoyed anyway… I mean, you heard, right? I like to hunt, and cook, and leatherwork. That’s all part of the same thing. I want to be able to be as much help as I can, in the situations I know about. Is it that weird that I think about how the Neo World Program could be as much help as it can?”

“If you put it that way, then it does make perfect sense. So, do you think the real reason it’s only used for the Killing Game is because the people behind this are keeping it to themselves?”

“It’s the only reasonable explanation.” Sayaka looked around, then pulled out a chair and sat in it backwards, leaning forward so her twintails hung over its back. “Well, we know who’s behind this now. Ultimate Hope. And, one of them used to be the Ultimate Programmer. Did you know that? I can’t quite remember where I heard it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Anyway, she made this thing, I’m pretty sure. If Ultimate Hope is in charge, and she’s Ultimate Hope, then she made it. And they’ve been using it to hold this game, for who knows how long they’ve been in charge? When it could do so much good for the world. Even if it was just joy in entertainment, even though it could be so much more. Therapy, education… But even without that, it should have been shared with the world.”

“What are you getting at here, exactly? I’m curious.”

“What I’m getting at is, well…” She took a deep breath. “With that in mind, you know. I don’t think it matters why we’re here. If Ultimate Hope picked all of us for this game, for a reason. Their name doesn’t mean they’re good. If we’re here because, maybe, we weren’t good enough as Ultimates for them? It means nothing to me. That’s what I decided, it means absolutely fuck-all! Any hope worth having would want to share this technology with everyone who could get something out of it! Not keep it to themselves, torturing and weeding out the Ultimates that they think are unworthy!”

Kurou was quiet, watching as Sayaka breathed heavily. She was staring at the floor, just breathing over this chair, like voicing these feelings took something out of her that she wasn’t entirely prepared to give. This was the mark, though, of something genuine. Something which Kurou could be certain she really believed with all her heart. A hang-up that any of them would have, she decided to cast it aside. Not to care. So… “I won’t care either. If that’s what’s really going on here, if this is some sort of test. If these games have all been tests. So what if people like that think I’m a bad person? I said I’ll become somebody I can be proud of. Me. It matters what I think of myself, not what some strangers with power do.”

“Yeah…” Sayaka lifted her head, and she was grinning. “That’s the spirit! They’re strangers. Strangers who get to have the power of playing ‘all good’ like that’s something you can assign. I don’t think I’m good. But I’m not so bad, I deserved to die in a Killing Game. Nobody is, and just
because we’re Ultimates, we get held to that kind of standard, huh? I think my theory’s right. And I think I like it, you know. We know who put us here. We can guess at a why, and we can cry about it like, oh my god! I’m a fucked up person who Ultimate Hope thought shouldn’t keep being an Ultimate, and everyone who already died just couldn’t cut it! Or. They’re sick, zealous fucks who don’t know the first thing about us, and they’ve failed to be ‘good’ in a real way, more than we ever have. I like that better. For natural conclusions, I like that a lot better.”

“I do too. Thank you for telling me that,” Kurou said, “Had I realized these things on my own, maybe I’d have fallen into thinking that first way you mentioned. I’ll admit it. But being introduced to your perspective, I have to agree. If these were people who didn’t think Torimi or Mitsuru were good enough, then they’ve really got no business judging anybody, do they?”

“I think not.” Sayaka stood up, fixing her hair, but still wearing that grin. “No business at all. I say we’re good enough, so now we are. We’re good enough for us. That’s all we need.”
2:00 PM / 1400 Hours

While Nami was talking about the future with Goro, and Sayaka was sharing her moral revelations with Kurou, there were two people who really just wanted a distraction right now. Tsukasa, and Dia. And he knew just how they could do that, because he could tell, she definitely needed something to think about besides the Evil King. Thus, he found her. On foot, because he didn’t want to be rude, and he was right in assuming that she was in her ward.

“Tsukasa?” She asked, poking her head out from the blanket fort that she was in.

“Yes, it’s me,” He said, and approached. “I came looking for you. Looks like I was right about where you’d be. Do you still have that laptop from the arcade?”

She moved the blankets a bit more to reveal that she had it, in fact, open on her lap.

“More terraria, huh?” Tsukasa observed, “Well, you can keep playing that if you like, but I had an idea for what we could do.”

“Oh?” Dia wondered.

“I brought a laptop of my own. Remember when I mentioned Stardew Valley before? You said that it might be nice to play the same way that reading a book is nice. And, I think that we could use something like that right now. Don’t you?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah… A virtual farm might be the right thing to get my mind off of all this. Do you want to come sit in my fort? Me and Goro made it, so there’s room for two… It’s very comfy!”

“I’d like that, thank you.” Tsukasa tucked the laptop under his arm and carefully climbed into the fort, making sure not to knock over any of the walls or ceiling. “It’s very nice in here, actually. Are blanket forts something that you enjoy?”

“Well, since the stuff was in my ward, I guess so?” Dia shrugged. “I mean, I’m still kind of figuring out what sort of things I actually like, myself. But I like comfy things like this, so I don’t dislike blanket forts. It’s nice to have! But I dunno if it will still really count as something I really like when I get to understand myself better.”

“Yeah… You really are pretty young, aren’t you?” Tsukasa asked.

“How old am I is a really good question!” Dia chuckled nervously. “I could be one, or seven, or eighteen… It’s weird. I mean, thanks to Box’s memories, I have the necessary worldly knowledge of a teenager. But when it comes to time being able to figure out and develop my own tastes, I’ve had almost none of that?”

“It must be weird, to be old enough to be considered an adult, but not even completely know what you’re interested in…”

“Mm. It is. I know I like soft and cute things, and rococo style, and crunchy foods but not slimy ones. I know that I like girls and I want to date someone who’ll take care of me. It’s exciting to...
finally be figuring these things out, being me… But it’s already wearing off, a little bit. The excitement. And I feel like there’s a monster underneath that I need to figure out how to deal with… Ah, sorry! That’s, too much.”

“It isn’t,” Tsukasa said, “You need to say these things, and we’re all willing to listen. It’s not surprising that you’d end up saying ‘too much’ to us, since you’ve known us for so much longer than we’ve known you. It’s natural you’d be comfortable talking to us even if it seems we shouldn’t be close enough for that, in this timeline. If that makes sense?”

“I think you’re right,” Dia said, “Huh. Hm. Yeah. I figured out already that I need people I’m allowed to hate, but I need some friends I get to know normally too…”

“As long as you don’t stop being friends with all of us, though!” Tsukasa reached out and tapped the top of her head. “I’d be really mad if you did that. Make new friends but keep the old, and all.”

Dia laughed, then fixed her glasses. “I wouldn’t dream of forgetting about you guys! Unless, you wanted me to, anyway…”

“Well. If you don’t want to forget us, you shouldn’t. Even if we said we wanted you to, then that would just mean get out of our lives. Actually forgetting all about us, that’s kind of ridiculous to ask of anyone,” Tsukasa said, “Except for Nami, I guess.”

“I do wish I could forget a lot of things, but I can’t. I can’t wipe my own memory. If I could, then I’d want to lose all the extra games. I really… I really hate knowing the worst things that you could all be capable of. And the best things that the dead people could have done, for that matter. It would be so much easier if all I knew was here and now.”

“I don’t think that’s a really good way to be thinking about it?” Tsukasa said, “Maybe I don’t know much, and I’m wrong. But I mean. It happened, and you can’t change it, and won’t you be happier if you accept it instead of wishing it was different?”

Dia thought about that for a minute, then made her decision. “No.”

“Oh. I figured I could be wrong, but… Well, do you care to elaborate?”

“It’s not something I can accept. It happened and I can’t change it, but I don’t have to say, that means I’ll be happier if I’m fine with it. Trauma doesn’t work that way. The memories I have… Hurt me. A lot. I can’t accept that I was meant to get hurt like that. I just have to try and move forward, instead. And I can wish it didn’t happen. It didn’t get me where I am today. Didn’t help at all. So. No.”

“I didn’t mean…”

“Honestly, saying that I should just accept what I’ve been through would be like telling your boyfriend just to accept the body he was born with. Do you realize how it sounds if I say it that way? Just because somebody might be happier if they ‘accepted’ something, doesn’t mean that’s possible. Doesn’t mean it won’t hurt anyway even if you try.”

“I’ll… Admit it,” Tsukasa said, “I haven’t really been through anything that hard, before this game. And Randy… He says, anyway, that even things which did happen to him, don’t mean much, and he’s fine. So I don’t understand how that works. Being hurt, badly. And you were hurt by us. Even if we don’t remember doing it. So anything you feel. You’re allowed to feel it. That’s… Better, right?”

“It’s not perfect,” Dia said, “But it’s better. Say that to people if you need to, someday.”
“I just might. I mean. If I can, I want to… I want to stop being complacent, and try to make my hometown a better place. I’d just been going along with the flow, and that included humoring members of despair. Even catering to them. I’m going to go back to my company, and I want to change things.”

“I think you can,” Dia said, “I mean. I do. Yeah, that’s what I mean. I think you can. Box’s memories say that people who become despair are stuck that way. But that can’t be right, can it? If I could be saved. Anybody can.”

“And I want to, so can I… Do you think I can save them?”

“I dunno. We’ll wait and see. But, you do have the power. You’re the richest, most politically relevant guy in your hometown, yeah? I bet you can save somebody.”
Having exhausted their individual activities, Sayaka and Nami did as most couples did, and gravitated back towards each other. It happened naturally, in the hallway of the top floor. Because Nami had finished with Goro and returned to her task at hand, of investigating. And because Sayaka had never stopped. So at the peak of the hospital, the girls found one another again.

“I’ve come to a conclusion,” Sayaka said.

“You have?”

They closed the space between them to stand face to face. Or, close to it, given Sayaka’s height deficiency. “Yeah. I thought about it, what it means for Ultimate Hope to decide we’re the ones here. And I decided that I don’t care, I don’t give a shit what some strangers think of me or you or anybody here.”

Nami thought about that for a moment, a few moments, then smiled. “Good. Because I don’t give a shit either! You and Amai both freaked out thinking about why, but the why doesn’t matter. Why us? Whatever. It’s a bad reason and it doesn’t matter anyway cause we just need to look ahead to getting out of here, right?”

“That’s exactly it! Oh, and I got Kurou on board with my philosophy too,” Sayaka said, “I’m good at that. Well, also, I impressed him with the way I figured out these Ultimate Hope clowns couldn’t actually be good people.”

“Oh? How’d you decide that?” Nami asked, “The fact they put us in this Killing Game to begin with?”

“No, no. As somebody who acts in methods of divine vengeance, I couldn’t make a call like that. It’s because of this program. The Neo World Program… Should be getting used all over the world, for better things than this. Even if I acknowledge punishment of criminals as a justifiable use of the software… So is education, entertainment, mental health care. You know?”

“Congration! You surprised me too. With that reasoning. I mean, it’s good, and you’re right! I wouldn’t have thought of that, though. But, you’re right. With that in mind, it’s stupid to entertain the idea that we deserved this? Like, really stupid?”

“It is! Of course we didn’t! And I know a thing or two about what people deserve!” Sayaka confirmed, then took one more step forward to wrap her arms around Nami. She took a deep breath. “It’s not this. Never could’ve been this.”

“Do you believe Torimi?” Nami asked, “That we would have still met, if this never happened?”

“A hundred percent. Come on. Of course we would have! We can’t credit this to the game. No matter what, we’d all be better off without the Killing Game.” Sayaka pulled away a bit to look up at Nami. “Nobody is better for their trauma. Everything good that we can find in it… Could have been found another way. The things we learned and the connections we made. I’m not grateful to anything that’s hurt me.”

“…Yeah,” Nami said, “I don’t think being hurt made me a better person either. Just made me a hurt person. I improved on my own time. And if we would have met anyway… Then I think you’re
right.”

“Of course I’m right, babe. I’m learning emotional maturity and shit.”

“And you would have learned that even without the Killing Game?”

“Of course I would’ve. Long as we really did still meet. I’m not learning this from being in the Killing Game. I’m learning it…” She looked away, face flushed. “From knowing you, Nami.”

“Me?” Nami asked.

“Yes, you! I. I’ve needed to learn to process my shit in a better way, and be open, for you? I think? I mean. I had to be less prickly, to spend time with you like I wanted to. I had to tell you that I liked you. I had to get over myself to tell you about Tanaka, because you deserved to know. And. I even had to admit, I love you more than is reasonable with the time we’ve known each other. Lots of stuff I could have kept to myself, but I managed not to, for my sake. Or because it was better if you heard it and our cards were on the table. Fuck, I just… I’d have done that for you. No matter the situation. It’s you, Nami. It’s always been you.”

“Ah… Sayaka. That’s. Thank you. Thank you for telling me. You had to show emotional maturity to explain that to me, too, you know.” Nami gave a nervous chuckle as she took a step back. “That kind of makes me feel bad, though. Cause. I dunno, I can’t think of examples, of how I’ve gotten better for you.”

“Well. I can. So there.”

“O-Oh, so I have? That’s nice. I was worried that you were here working on being a really great girlfriend this whole time, and I’ve been, just Nami, like this is fine?”

“Well, even if that was true, I think it would be okay. But I do think you improved for my sake, in some ways? Well. Maybe I’m wrong, but… You give me sweet compliments all the time, and you give me my space, and I know you don’t totally approve of my morals, but you set that aside because you love me… right?”

“I guess I didn’t think of some of that because I think that’s the way I’d be in any relationship with somebody I actually love. But since that didn’t happen before… Well, you’re right?” Nami stepped closer again and reached out, pressing a hand to Sayaka’s cheek. “Well, for the morals… I think that nobody deserves to die unless they’ve proven they could never get better. And in your eyes, maybe it’s easier to prove that, than in mine. That’s the difference, is all. We still agree on what’s good, and what’s bad.”

“The fact that you’re flexible like that, for me… That’s what I mean. You could hate me. You could hold it all against me and say that, I kill people who don’t really deserve to die, and that makes me terrible too. I know I’m not good, just that I use my bad to try and put more good in the world. It…I think part of the reason I waited to try and get closer to you, why I kept my distance, was because I knew. You’re really good. You’re optimistic and you can forgive people who I condemn in a way they can’t ever come back from. Of course you’d think I’m bad. But… You didn’t. You forgave me too.”

Nami leaned in, and pressed her forehead to Sayaka’s, keeping her hand right there against her cheek. “Of course I did. If I can forgive people so awful that you kill them, then I can forgive you, right? I know they’re terrible. And some of them… Are beyond saving. That helps too. Maybe I could forgive some of them, but some of them have proven to me, that they can’t be better.”
Sayaka placed a hand over Nami’s. “Thank you. For everything, Nami. I love you, so much. But. Even if I… Even if nothing else had happened. I think that what I needed to make it through this game, was that. For you to forgive me the way you did back then. You never held anything against me, no matter what sort of things surfaced from the depths. If you… Who’s so good… Didn’t forgive me? I don’t know. Maybe I wouldn’t still be here.”

“Sayaka…”

“That never would have been a problem if we weren’t in this game. So. I kind of wish I could have met you. Somewhere, somehow. In a way where you didn’t need to save me before you could love me. Where you didn’t have that on your shoulders. The fact that I needed you to hear it. When I said I’m sorry.”

“You heard it too, Sayaka. When I said sorry,” Nami said, “And we can’t turn back time. Maybe things would be better if we fell in love in a better place, but now we’re here. And we are in love. However we got here, it’s the future which matters. And I… Won’t let go of you, ever. Unless you want me to. But I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to either.”
Daily Life: Day Seventeen (Bottles)

5:00 PM / 1700 Hours

Following their conversation, the girls agreed to continue investigating, this time together. Sayaka was good at finding information, while Nami was good at determining the importance of that information; So, frankly, it was a bit of an oversight on both of their parts not to have worked together on this sooner. Unfortunately, resolving that oversight didn’t seem to do much, and by the time they needed to go to Cafe Monokuma for dinner, nothing new had come to light. It wasn’t much of a disappointment, given neither of them expected results.

Upon arriving at the Cafe, it seemed that Amai had gotten her groove back to some extent, because she was in the kitchen again. She wasn’t smiling as she worked, but she didn’t seem as frustrated either. Nami hoped that meant she’d found some sort of personal peace, or reconciled with Tsumugi. The latter seemed unlikely to have happened so soon, though. Tsumugi could be observed as being used to having grudges held against her, so given the chance, she’d probably hold her own grudge for at least some time.

Better than the last ‘grudge’ of hers, which did result in a revenge killing. Nami didn’t ever want to know the details of that incident. It was easier to trust in the Tsumugi she knew now, than to bother thinking of the Tsumugi who was left in that game. Nami believed, absolutely, that Tsumugi as she was now, was no threat to anybody. All she wanted was to survive and to keep her promises, and maybe be a little bit less miserable along the way, right?

That was understandable.

“Yo, Sayaka,” Amai called out, “Thanks for helping me out. You know, with breakfast. I’m good to handle dinner, but I needed that break! Good to know you’re here for me, and shit. Can I ask you one more favor?”

“Yeah?” Sayaka answered, pausing where she stood to continue the conversation, since the table they’d been angling for was a bit too far away to keep talking.

“Mono said it would remove the Blackmailer Ward once there wasn’t evidence left in it… But the ward’s still there, and I don’t think Mono was lying to me. If it can’t, something’s still there, so uh… Think you could help me out with that? Hamuko, too, if she’ll agree…”

“I’m game,” Sayaka said, “If you’re sure you want to let us go through your shit like that…”

“I thought about that. But, then… The ward’s open to everybody. Anyone here could have already seen it, without my knowledge, or my permission. So I just have to. Be okay with that.” Amai looked away, staring at the vegetable she was chopping instead. “I’m not allowed to keep my secrets anymore. Unless I let people help me get rid of them. Maybe they’ve already circulated, but maybe not. And since Nami missed something, you and Hamuko are my next choices. Not like, Oh gee, Nami missed something, what a bitch. I couldn’t even stand to go looking on my own. So. I can’t be mad about this sort of thing.”

“I get it,” Sayaka said, “Just let me know when you’re ready, I’ll hang out here in the Cafe till then. Right?”

“Right. Thank you so much.” Amai smiled, then returned her full attention to meal prep, so Sayaka joined Nami, as well as Randy, at the expected table.
“Hello hello, it’s my favorite girls,” Randy greeted her, “I mean, Nami was already here. But now you also are, so it’s collectively, my favorite girls. How you holdin’ up?”

“Surprisingly well!” Sayaka said, “I almost did badly. But then I didn’t.”

“Wow! You figured it out! Real philosophy hours!” Randy reached out a hand. She high-fived it.

“Unfortunately, not all of us live the sort of lives where ‘just don’t be sad’ works,” Nami mused, “But I’m happy to see that it did, in this case. And. Does, consistently? For you, Randy? How do you even do that?”

“It’s my special power. The world tries to give me trauma or whatever and then it just doesn’t stick.” He shrugged. “I mean, think of it like this. When I would have been getting traumatized, I was so apathetic to my own body it meant nothing to me. I was already in a safe position when I figured it out and started liking myself. As for this game, well. There was Kaede, and I’m kinda just putting off processing that all the way. Otherwise I’ve been lucky. You two, and Tsukasa, you’ve all stayed alive.’

“...Makes sense,” Sayaka said, “When you do get around to processing that all the way, you’ll talk to people, right? Don’t pretend it’s fine when it isn’t.”

“I’ll be responsible, I swear! I’ll lean on you, and Tsukasa, and my dad, and my big sister… If they’ll let me, I mean. In any case, I won’t mourn alone or anything.”

“That’s good,” Nami said, “I’m in a similar position. This game is designed not to give any of us time to grieve for real, so… We’re all just postponing stuff, and we need to have support when it comes time to face it.”

“I’m winning at postponing, though! Come on and give me a prize!” Randy proclaimed, “I haven’t even cried once!”

“That’s not actually a good thing! But okay! Here’s your prize!” Nami reached out and tapped Randy on the head. “It’s not a prize. I fooled you. It’s an admonishment for actually being bad at handling your emotions because even if you’re soldiering through you oughta cry at least a little bit, you know.”

“Ahhh! Hey!” Randy complained, “No I’m just doing what Kaede would want me to do! She’d want me to put my all into solving this shit and getting us out of here before worrying about the fact that she’s gone, right?”

“Well, yeah, she would want that,” Sayaka said, “But, we’re both doing that anyway. And she was smart, but not infallible, right? She also said that Tsumugi shouldn’t make other friends and look where that got us. Her emotional smarts… Kinda in the gutter, let’s be real? So, I agree.” Sayaka also tapped Randy on the head. “Bad puppy! If you’ve gotta bottle it up, leave the cap unscrewed a little bit so it doesn’t explode if you get shaken up in the meantime!”

“I lost your metaphor, Sayaka! Japanese still isn’t my first language, remember?”

“My metaphor is that you want your feelings to be a [water bottle], not a [coke bottle]! Does that one make sense?”

“Yes it does, thank you and I’m fine and that metaphor doesn’t apply!” Randy staved off the admonishing girls and slumped in his seat. “Jeeze. You’re like, aggressively compassionate, huh? Don’t worry about me so much. Even if you’re right, that’s a future me problem. Let’s just eat dinner for now. And I am not a puppy! I’m a full-grown rottweiler, if I must be a dog.”
Daily Life: Day Seventeen (Maybe Kaede Wasn't Great For Tsumugi After All, Actually?)

7:00 PM / 1900 Hours

Dinner went by, and everybody started to split up. Sayaka and Dia went to help Amai with getting that ward deleted, for real this time. Nami supposed that it was possible there had been more than one piece of evidence, and she and Mono both just assumed that was it when they found the first one. A bit of an oversight, sure, but it had taken two hours just to get that far, so could the pair of them really be blamed for seizing the opportunity to be finished?

Nami, having failed once, wasn’t on that team, so she needed to find something else to do with her time. She didn’t need to look far, though, because Tsumugi approached her first. “Nami? Do you think you could come to my ward with me? I’d like to talk to you about something, if it’s alright.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure thing!” Nami agreed, and got up to go. The walk between Cafe Monokuma and the Astronaut’s Ward was a short one, so their conversation didn’t resume until they were there.

“So.” Tsumugi pressed her hands together, turning to face Nami. “I wanted to… Well, remember what you said yesterday? If it’s what seems right, then you’ll follow me. But then, what Amai said. And, if you please just, consider. I’m not a reliable person. Why would you ever want to follow me?”

“Because you’re smart,” Nami answered without even a second’s hesitation, “And this is what you know. I mean, come on. I wouldn’t follow you into war and I wouldn’t follow you into business, but following you into space? That’s different. It’s your expertise. If your expertise seems like the best path, then I’ll walk it with you.”

“I… That actually does make sense. Thank you for putting my nerves to rest. Do you think? Do you think it’s the best path?”

“I couldn’t tell you that yet,” Nami said, “I mean, it is complicated. I wouldn’t go if Sayaka doesn’t want to, for one thing. It’s a lot to think about, and if you die here, then it’s not even something to think about. So when we’re outside and it’s really viable, that’s when I’ll decide, if I think it’s the right thing for me.”

“That’s a good way to decide this sort of thing,” Tsumugi said, “I’m… I’m going no matter what, of course. I’ll miss everybody who doesn’t.”

“You won’t have to!” Nami proclaimed, holding determined fists at chest level. “Well, a little bit, you’ll miss the people who stay behind. But just in the, not seeing them in person often sort of way. Same way you miss somebody who moves to another country. That’s all.”

“There doesn’t currently exist any form of communication technology which can work over those distances… The cost of creating a new world for ourselves is losing everything we still had in this one. I mean. You know what I mean. This real world.”

“Poetic as that is, it doesn’t matter,” Nami said, “I know that my friend, Megumi, isn’t going to leave this planet. It’s not her style. And she’s a genius. So, she’ll find a way to keep in touch, no matter what. So it’s fine. Nothing to worry about, no tragedy here!”

Tsumugi just stood there for a moment, and blinked a few times. Then she fixed her glasses, and
laughed. It was a full-force laugh, and it started off sounding as if she found that legitimately funny, only to give way to the kind of laughter that makes you ask if somebody’s okay.

“Are you okay?”

“I was just. Oh my. I was so resigned…” Tsumugi explained, catching her breath between words. “I was resigned to it. I thought, well, it’s plain to see. That’s the way that things are going to turn out. And now that’s. Just, like it was nothing, you took that weight off of me? I’m in shock, Nami, shock. That you could make all my long-standing worries just disappear like this!”

“Glad to be of service, then. It’s the truth, of course. If I was lying, I would have needed a moment to think of it, after all.”

“You tell the truth about a lot of things. Like thinking I’m smart, and then proving maybe you were telling the truth you thought I was smart but you were actually wrong to think that because I sure wasn’t smart with not even stopping to think that a method of communication could be invented for this purpose?”

“Communication isn’t your expertise. In any form of the word, let’s be real here. So, I’m still correct. You are one smart cookie, when the situation calls for your particular cookies.”

“I like that. Do you mind if I use that?”

“Go right ahead, if you want to sound like the bumbling oaf in conversation that I’m always certain I am?”

“I don’t think you are!” Tsumugi giggled, then let it peter out. “Hey… Thank you, you know. For talking with me, normally. Just like a person. It’s been. Well, you know, I’m not used to being able to keep chatting with people, and joking around, after they find out the way that I am.”

“The way that you are?”


“I’d say that list got progressively less true, down to nonsense at ‘disgusting’,,” Nami said, “But, sure. I’ll grant those things. Doesn’t matter to me, really. You’re my friend and I want to see the good in you, and I can understand the bad. It’s like.. All that stuff you said about your addiction being just as much an unhealthy coping mechanism as any of ours, you don’t really believe it yourself.”

“Why would I have said something I didn’t believe?”

“Well, I dunno why you’d do that. I just know what I think, looking at you. It’s kinda like. Hm…”

“I’m fishing for pity all of the time and trying to make other people feel bad for judging me on my bad actions?”

“No! I don’t think that!” Nami waved her hands. “Why would you think I think that??”

“That’s what Kaede thought.” Tsumugi looked away, wrapping her arms around herself. “It’s what she told me I was doing. That by calling myself a bad person all the time, saying how awful I am… I was trying to lead people into saying I wasn’t. Which made it even worse. I. I don’t think I know how to talk about this. If I tell you that I feel like I’m garbage, then I’m just manipulating you into validating me. I’m doing it right now, aren’t I? I’m… I’m sorry!”
“Shh. Tsumugi.” Nami put her hands on her shoulders, turning her back to face her. “Don’t overthink it right now, okay? Don’t think you’re looking for pity or anything like that. Just tell me, honestly, how you feel.”

“I feel… Terrible. I don’t like myself at all. I thought I was trying to become a better person but I haven’t succeeded in anything I tried. First Kaede and I were hiding so I had no chance at doing real good deeds and starting to make up for it all. Then she died and everything just hurt, so much. And I feel… Ashamed. I’m really mad at myself for giving in and taking them again but it was worse to feel it all! It was so much worse so don’t blame me for defending my choice! If it makes me bad to condemn myself… Then my only other option is to make excuses, right? Because manipulating people into feeling bad for me… Just like the feelings of losing Kaede… is worse than what I decided.”

“You’re all twisted up, aren’t you?” Nami asked. She was surprised to hear it herself, the same tone that came when she talked to Goro. That nurturing voice as she tried her best to help somebody who had her sympathy. “What’s better and what’s worse, what’s a lesser evil. Don’t think about that stuff. Believe me this, Tsumugi… The person who hates you most, for relapsing? It’s you. It’s just you. Anything we feel about it, it’s not that you’re weak, or bad for being addicted. Especially Amai. It’s that we want you to be safe, and not need those to feel okay. And maybe a little bit, she’s… Frustrated. That being your friend isn’t ‘enough’ to keep you away from the drugs.”

“It has nothing to do with good enough friends. And everything to do with me. I lose people and I fill their void with drugs. Nobody could replace Ryoma. Nobody could replace Kaede. No matter how hard somebody tries, the hole is there. And I just. I’m not strong enough to leave the holes empty. Not yet. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me. It’s okay. I understand. Right now, you’re not in a good place to try to repair those holes, or fill them in a healthy way, or learn to live with a hole in your heart. None of us are. You will be, though. Believe me. And we’ll be there to help.”
Nami waited it out with Tsumugi for a while, until she was stable again. Or, maybe more stable than she had even been before their conversation started; Either way, Nami was there for her. Once Tsumugi was back to an okay emotional standard, they split ways.

It was kind of emotionally exhausting, for Nami. She’d sorted out a lot of her own problems, or else set them to the side, and in doing so made herself kind of an empathy sponge, huh? By getting her own shit together, she became the person who needed to help others with their shit. She was okay with that. She didn’t mind. As she’d surprised herself with that tone of voice, it seemed that she was just the nurturing sort. Even still, she had to go to bed early after a day like that. If not go to sleep early. So she was back in her room, with a book.

Another one of the mysteries. The books from Kaede’s ward were the best reading in the hospital… Even if Nami wasn’t so sure how she felt about that girl, anymore. Kaede was friendly at heart, but thought isolation was the safest way to get through her second game. She failed to understand her girlfriend. She took detective proteges, in Randy and Sayaka. And what exactly… Was it? That brought Kaede and Sayaka together? What mystery did they investigate that had Sayaka calling her ‘Kaede-nee’, again?

It was.

It was…

The Mystery of The Mastermind

Wasn’t it?

Nami closed her book, staring at the cover. That’s right, that’s right. Kaede called for the Mastermind Trial even though they were nowhere near accessing every floor of the building. She blamed Dia for it… And Dia confessed that she was supposed to be psychiatric support, so she was working with the Mastermind, but it wasn’t her. Hah, that fell through. Like everything else, that assignment was attached to the idea of Box Hako, not to Dia herself, and Monokuma said that it would be nice and instead of killing them all…

Ah. So that was it.

It had been mentioned that the previous game ‘broke’. It went off track. And if they’d had backup participants, that could have been resolved. So Ultimate Hope had backup participants this time, and a ‘reset’ option that Monokuma or, she supposed The Mastermind, would be able to access. And Mono hit it. Mono reset the game… Instead of letting the program fulfill its lose condition.

Mono hadn’t just become more helpful all along. It had thought fast. It took the only tool available to save all of their lives when Kaede and Sayaka jumped to conclusions. When the great detective and the headstrong enforcer teamed up to fulfill a wish they shared. To get everybody out. To uncover the truth and prevent any other murders from happening. A wish which got them all killed, except that it didn’t. Thanks to Mono. But it did get some people killed, that wish. It did.

Whose blood went on the hands of that idealism? Was it the four people who died before the reset, condemned to be lost before the attack was made on the premise of the game? Was it anyone and everyone who died after? Or was it Torimi? Was it just Torimi? The only person who died, who wouldn’t have been involved if not for that reset. Yet, could Nami blame Kaede? Pinning that
blame, also pinned it on Sayaka. Nami didn’t blame Sayaka at all. Sayaka was just… The rocket, the crazy person called Kaede was strapped to, wasn’t she?

Sayaka just wanted to end the game. She was emotionally immature and her education was askew. She learned a lot of things too early in her life, but other things she probably never learned. The Ultimate Detective can’t be wrong, so push her to find the truth which will save everybody, and trust in her conclusion no matter what it is, right?

But that was.

Well, the bottom line was, it wasn’t fair to blame anyone. For any of this. It was done and over with. Maybe somebody could be faulted. Maybe something was because of the reset and maybe it wasn’t. Mono saved their lives and maybe also doomed Torimi. Nami didn’t have the fortitude, not really, to decide what any of that meant to her, or any moral implications.

Of course, the girl with the broken memory remembers what everyone was supposed to forget.

9:30 PM / 2130 Hours

Then, there was a knock at the door. Nami took a deep breath and composed herself. She put the book down on the nightstand, then stood up. She went to the door, opened it, and there was Sayaka. Sayaka who seemed… Shaken up.

“Did you remember too?” Nami asked.

“Remember what?” Sayaka tilted her head, and that was when Nami saw it. On her cheek, where Nami couldn’t see it at the initial angle, was an injury. A fairly long gash, actually. Seemed relatively shallow, but was bleeding quite a bit.

“…Forget that, what happened to your cheek? We should go to the infirmary, get that cleaned and bandaged, right?”

“I… Kind of just want to go to sleep.” Sayaka dipped her head. “I’m sorry. I… I’ll explain it, but not now. I just. Okay?”

“No explanation needed, until you’re ready, but. Can we at least get a bandage on it? Come on.” Nami grabbed Sayaka by the hand and started to pull her in that direction. She didn’t resist and walked with her, though she didn’t say anything else. That was fine. Nami did tell her she didn’t need to explain. Once there she quickly, but carefully, got the wound cleaned and covered up.

Still silent, Sayaka and Nami went back to the room. Nami was already in pajamas, so she lay down. Sayaka got changed right there in front of the closet, then lay down as well. She grabbed both of Nami’s hands, sighed, and shut her eyes. Nami didn’t yet. She stared at Sayaka, and at that injury on her cheek, and she wondered. She thought and she wondered.

And when she did fall asleep, it was with a heart full of dread.

Tomorrow… Hadn’t a chance in Hell of being a good day.
6:00 AM / 0600 Hours

It was going to be a bad day.

“Hey everyone! It’s morning. Breakfast isn’t mandatory today, but don’t let that stop you. It’s the eighteenth day of the Killing Game, fingers crossed that number doesn’t get much higher, am I right? Go ahead on to the day, then.”

Mono was right. If today was bad, if Nami’s feeling of dread was fulfilled, then that could end the Killing Game, wouldn’t it? Well. That was an upside. She hoped. She really hoped, because she wasn’t sure anybody here could handle it if another murder happened which didn’t fulfill one of the Evil King win conditions. If people died and they were still just stuck here.

But, she sat up nonetheless, prepared to meet a day which promised not to be good. Because, it wouldn’t be good. If anyone died it would be bad, because no matter how overwhelmingly good the act of escape would be, that couldn’t outweigh, for the day. Maybe getting out today would make tomorrow good. Couldn’t outweigh the loss of another friend, though. Two more friends. The Evil King and their killer? Or two victims of the king? If the latter happened last night… Shouldn’t they have gotten out already?

The sense of confirmed dread gave way to a more confused one, where Nami was no longer quite sure what was going on and maybe Sayaka’s injury was unrelated all along. But if it was just an accident, she would have said so last night, right? She seemed very out of it, shell-shocked, when she came to the room.

“Morning, Nami…” Speak of the devil, Sayaka spoke. Just kidding she was an angel.

“Hey, good morning.”

“Sorry I was weird last night. But I… Still don’t really feel up to explaining this? Sorry.” Sayaka sat up, rubbing her forehead with her free hand, while the other had remained holding Nami’s through the night. “I think it’ll get pretty self-explanatory soon enough, though. So. We can just wait till then, yeah?”

“…Yeah. If it’s going to explain itself.” Nami climbed out of bed, stretched out, then let out a heavy sigh. “You know. I’m tired. Whatever happened, I don’t want to have to deal with it. But I will. I will. Just felt like complaining a little bit first. I’ll get dressed.”

“Well, I’ll help you with it,” Sayaka said, “I did pretty well with that last case, right?”

“You did! My hero. For real, thanks, though. It’s nice to not feel like, if something went wrong, I’m the one responsible for figuring it out.”

“You’re good at it, but you’re not responsible,” Sayaka said, “It’s everybody’s class trial after all, right? We’re all responsible for finding the truth, together. So if there must be another class trial… Then we’ll do it. Just like we always have. You know you’d be lost without all of us chattering about our theories~”

“It’s true, I would! Just because I sometimes need to tune you out, I’m lost with a pile of evidence in front of me. I said it before and I’ll say it again, somebody else has to give me my deduction options before I can drag the truth out of them,” Nami said, “It really is a team effort.”
With that conversation squared away, Nami and Sayaka both got ready for the day, and left their room. Upon arriving to Cafe Monokuma, it seemed that Amai was… Just getting started on breakfast for the day, and they were actually the first other participants to arrive.

“Did… Did the morning announcement play half an hour early just in our room?” Nami asked, jumping to the only logical conclusion for this situation.

“Breakfast isn’t mandatory today, so people aren’t feeling the time crunch of ‘being here by eight’,” Amai explained it away, “It’s just been a while since that happened, so it feels weird. As for me, I was running a little slow today, I’ll admit it. I snoozed my alarm and didn’t get up for real till the announcement… So, breakfast will be a bit later. Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize,” Sayaka said, “It’s nice of you that you make the meals, to begin with. I hope you’ll eat this one yourself, though…”

“Well, I did eat dinner last night… I’m still kind of off my groove, so this breakfast, maybe not. I’m good to make it! Just. Hm, grappling with things, you know?” Amai frowned. “I mean, after what happened last night, it would be a bit weird if I was already eating again, wouldn’t it? I’m rattled…”

“What happened last night?” Nami asked.

Amai turned around completely and put her hands on her hips. “Excuse you! Your girlfriend comes back to your room with a huge cut on her cheek and you don’t ask her how she got it!? What?”

“Well, she didn’t want to talk about it, so I didn’t press the issue.” Nami shrugged. “Why? What happened?”

“…What happened is we screwed up,” Amai said, “Whatever. It’s… If you don’t know about the failure yet, I don’t wanna be the one to tell you! Fuck off! I’m making breakfast!”

Nami was just more confused with this statement. It implied… So many different possibilities that she couldn’t actually make a single assumption. Failure? What they screwed up? Rattled? Anything could be the explanation, but it absolutely didn’t do anything to relieve any of Nami’s dread. It intensified it, actually.

She sat down at a table. Sayaka sat down across from her.

“Are you… Going to tell me what happened?” Nami asked.

“I just don’t know where I’d begin,” Sayaka said, “I don’t really understand it myself, to be honest. It’s so weird that… If I didn’t have this cut on my cheek, then I’d think it was a dream. So you’ll have to see it to believe it. That’s the truth.”

“Can you take me there, then? To what I have to see to believe?”

“I think that it’s better if everybody has the opportunity to get something to eat before everything gets thrown into disarray, don’t you?” Sayaka shifted in her seat.

“Everything will be thrown into disarray. Got it. Properly throttled the last scrap of hopes that I had that things wouldn’t turn out to be insane today. Go crazy go stupid.”

“I sure hope we don’t go stupid! It’s hard enough to try and wrap my head around this stuff when I think that I’m not completely dummy,” Sayaka said, “It’s. Well, one way or another. The game has to end today.”
8:00 AM / 0800 Hours

Despite Amai saying that breakfast would be on the later side, it was still ready just a bit past eight. This time it was another buffet-type, rather than individualized meals. Pretty simple, but still good, because Amai made it. And it was probably because the meals weren’t individualized, that everybody had already loaded up and begun to eat a plate by the time that anyone realized that some people just hadn’t shown up to breakfast at all.

Sayaka was right, that it was better for people to eat something before everything went topside. Amai had even engineered her serving style for this meal to make sure that her peers would be juked into consuming at least a portion of a meal, before the real proceedings of the day began in full, unpleasant force. Even still, it was only a matter of time, and eventually Tsumugi noticed.

“Hey?” She spoke up, “Has anybody seen Madara?”

“Hm…” Tsukasa thought about that for a minute. “Kurou and I, we ate dinner with him last night, but I haven’t seen him around since. And he isn’t here right now, is he?”

“No, he’s not,” Tsumugi said, “I was thinking that the room seemed a little bit underpopulated, and he definitely isn’t here right now. Er, Mono? If possible, have you seen him?”

“I’ve seen him under the heading of ‘game supervision’, but under the heading of being a participant, no, I haven’t,” Mono answered from where it was sat at the table with Nami and Sayaka. “By which I mean, I do have innate knowledge of everybody’s whereabouts. Buuuut, I can’t report that, it’s just there for the sake of me having the facts in a case. If he’d called me to him at any point, then yeah, I could tell you, and I would. But he didn’t.”

“That’s awfully concerning,” Kurou said, “Especially given the announcement that you made yesterday morning, Mono.”

“I sure did make that announcement. But, don’t you think, if the Evil King had acted, then… The game would already be done,” Monokuma shifted where it stood. “Unless. Well, I mean. The software did seem pretty buggy. It’s possible something went wrong?”

“...Are you saying that our survival this whole time hinged on a win condition that’s liable to glitching!?” Randy questioned, getting to his feet. Huh, he seemed annoyed. Nami guessed that was the consequence of the bottling they’d discussed yesterday. “That’s bullshit!”

“Well, it’s better than our survival having no option at all, isn’t it?” Kurou asked, “I do believe that’s what Ultimate Hope intended with this game. Better a win condition that doesn’t work perfectly than a win condition that’s unattainable.”

“Megumi must be rolling her eyes halfway to Jupiter,” Nami said, “Looking at this shit.”

“Who the fuck is Megumi?” Amai questioned.

“She’s my friend who’s good at like, hacking stuff? I never really understood her work but. She is definitely who deleted the pre-programmed events and motives, and she’d definitely think it’s a whole mess that our win condition could glitch.”

“There’s… There’s no knowing yet if that’s what happened, really, I mean…” Mono protested, “I.
I’m sorry. I don’t understand this either.”

“...I hope that’s not what happened,” Goro spoke up, his voice small, “I hope that Madara’s okay.”

“I do too,” Kurou said, “Sorry, you’re right. We’re all so caught up in worrying about the Evil King, but. That might not be what happened. Maybe he just slept in, and he’s fine.”

“I don’t think it’s likely!” Goro whined, “But I don’t want... I don’t want him to be dead, come on! Even if it would get us out of here, that’s not worth it... I dunno if anyone would be worth it but, Madara? I mean.”

“He just met us,” Sayaka said, “He never had friends who stuck around before, but we totally meant to do it. So, he can’t... Die yet, right? He needs to live long enough to see we’d stick around.”

“What are you talking about, Sayaka?” Tsukasa asked, “I thought you knew what happened. I overheard what you said to Nami this morning, I was on my way in.”

“You... You know, Sayaka?” Goro questioned, staring at her. He seemed scared, and more shaken up about the idea of Madara being dead than he’d been before. Nami understood that. She’d just yesterday promised him a certain future, and more deaths were a disruption to the happy ideal.

“I don’t. I don’t know anything about Madara! I know part of what happened, but.” Sayaka grasped at her own arms, shaking. “Nothing about him. Didn’t you notice her, too? She’s not here, either?”

And that was true. She wasn’t either. Focus was on the first observed in Madara, and she was somebody who tried not to ruffle feathers. The suppression of her real emotions, attempts to keep the peace in everything she did, left it easy to forget she was in a room. Or fail to observe that she wasn’t. Quiet girls were easily lost to the world, and their secret loud interiors along with them.

“...Dia?” Monokuma asked to the air.

But nobody came.

The room erupted with shouting; All the same, really, all shouting her name to no result at all. Each time, a bit of the room distorted. That red and black corruption taking root in Cafe Monokuma as they cried and cried for somebody who was supposed to appear when called and didn’t, she didn’t appear at all. And when everybody quieted, and the dust settled, the room wasn’t the same anymore.

Cafe Monokuma, decorated nicely, the place they cooked and ate, a gift from Mono when too many murders tainted their existing locations to do those things. It was ruined now, corruption branching around and across. The floors and walls still worked, and the furniture stood up, but where it had been corrupted, plates fell through to shatter on the ground. Everybody looked around in fear at the way that their desperation had destroyed someplace that had once been pleasant. But there was more fear than that.

Dia Hamuko was required to come when called, right?

So why didn’t she???
9:00 AM / 0900 Hours

Tsukune Madara and Dia Hamuko were missing. They were nowhere to be seen. Madara could have been okay, he could have, let’s entertain that thought, right? Think he’s fine, Nami? Yeah right. Yeah right. He’s not fine.

Amai knew that he wasn’t fine, he couldn’t be fine. Dia wasn’t fine. She wasn’t coming and trying to summon her ruined the cafe. The cafe which means so much to you, Amai, means so much to you. Where you could show your friends you love them the only way that love makes sense to you, by cooking for them, you could do that and now you can’t and your friend’s gone isn’t she she’s gone she’s gone you’ve lost Box Hako and you’ve lost the friend who once upon a time tried to be her replacement.

Kurou’s mind was buzzing. He felt this way when Torimi died and he felt this way with Madara missing. Those were kids who severely needed his dad-ing prowess and he’d tried his best with both of them but now it seemed he’d lost both of them. Where’s Madara? Where’s Madara? He worried about Dia too. But Dia wasn’t his kid.

Sayaka stepped forward, holding her hands out as she stood in one of the branches of corruption. “Let’s all take a minute and calm down, okay? This is. Uh, this is a mess and it’s weird, but what I need to show you… What Amai and I need to show you, is even weirder than this. So if you need to like, yell incomprehensively to get this out of your system first? Yeah I’d recommend that.”

A few people yelled incomprehensively, including Amai. Even though she knew what was going on, that didn’t make it any easier for her. After that died down, Sayaka pointed at the door. “Cool, you’ve got that sorted, then? We’re gonna go see something weirder.”

“So do you think that you could, uh, clarify a little bit? What the weird thing is?” Kurou asked, “I would sort of like to be a little bit prepared to know what we’ll see there?”

“I… I’m sorry, I really just, don’t know how to explain it,” Sayaka said, “Come on, then.”

Without further hesitation, she walked out of the room. Those who remained in Cafe Monokuma shared a glance, but then followed after Sayaka. She led the way to the stairs, and started to climb. Nami was right behind her, then the rest of their peers, with Amai bringing up the back of the group. Nami was nervous. What could be waiting for them? The stairwell had some corruption in it too, even just going up one floor.

At the landing, Sayaka pointed out towards the hallway. “Just take a look down that way, for now. The real problem’s two floors up from here still, but…”

“Oh, what, the fuck?” Goro questioned, grabbing onto Nami’s arm as he peered around her at what they were all seeing.

All over the hallway, there was blood. Far too much blood, frankly, more blood than murdering every single participant could possibly produce. And, accompanying just about every splatter, the edges were leaking corruption into the facility around them. Nami steeled herself against it, curbing her shock. If Goro felt her shaking in fear, after all, it would only make things worse, so she bit back everything in her that wanted to experience what she bore witness to.
“It just gets worse from here,” Sayaka said, “But the real problem is on the eighth floor. Come on. Let’s go. Try not to throw up, okay? Amai and I took the trouble to make sure you’d eat first, before all of this got… Well. Moving on.”

Before the group was even able to fully process the sixth floor, they were on to the seventh. The corruption was getting worse now, encompassing the entirety of three separate steps, though they still functioned to stand on. The seventh floor… Wasn’t as shocking as the sixth, even though it was more intense. There was still that impossible amount of blood, and the corruption, but bits and pieces of the hall, including the ward signs, had been moved around, sticking out in strange places and impossible angles.

“…Mono,” Nami whispered, turning to look at the bear. “This is some pretty serious glitching, you know. How did you miss this?”

“This. Uh. Isn’t completely the glitch I was referring to. It could be connected, I do think it’s possible that what I was referring to, uh, might have happened? This is different, though,” Mono explained. “This is actually kind of frightening and I’m worried that if I follow you all the way to the eighth floor my own integrity might be in jeopardy, but… I’ll do it anyway.”

“You don’t have to endanger yourself on account of the situation,” Nami said, “You can go back downstairs if you want.”

“It’s fine. I’m a participant too, so I need to see it, I think,” Mono said, “No matter what it does to me.”

“If you’re sure about that…” Sayaka muttered, then turned her attention back to the stairs. She reached the top step and moved out of the way, so that the rest of the group could join her there. What they saw was… Confusing, to say the least.

It was Box Hako. Many, many Box Hakos, actually. At least ten, all the way down the hallway. Flickering in and out as if they were fluorescent lights, each one of them hanging from the ceiling. Each one with a pool of corruption in the floor beneath them. That was horrifying enough, but what was worse was the obvious origin of the glitch. The door to the Blackmailer’s Ward, still there, was beyond distorted. Sayaka led the way down the hallway, and the group observed the Boxes were effectively holographic; Upon accidentally touching one, Kurou’s shoulder went right through.

It was skin-crawling. And at the door to the Blackmailer’s Ward, the true source could be observed. The inside of the room was utterly coated with blood, but for small streaks of corruption cutting through. In the center, Dia Hamuko was collapsed on the ground with a hole in the back of her head.

“A… Body? Has been discovered?” Mono spoke out from behind them. “No need to proceed anywhere, you’re all already here.”
“What… Happened?” Tsumugi questioned, staring at the scene for just a few moments more before turning her eyes to Sayaka and Amai.

“We fucked up,” Sayaka explained, “We were working in this ward, the three of us. And then, Dia got shot. She fell over, and… Even though we both said that we’d be fine getting killed by the Evil King, we ran away. We should have just stayed put.” She brought a hand up to the bandage on her cheek. “I got shot at, too, but it only grazed me. And… That’s. The problem. This game would have been over yesterday if we didn’t panic and run.”

“Did you see who did it?” Kurou asked.

“No,” Sayaka said, “I’m pretty sure they fired from the Empty Wings, somehow.”

“From the Empty Wings… Well.” Goro sighed. “That’s got to be where Madara is, right?”

“He could still be-” Randy started.

“He’s not!” Goro snapped, then took a few deep breaths and shook his head. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just. Didn’t you hear how Mono said it, for the announcement? We’re all already here. That means that he isn’t okay. He’d be told to proceed here along with all of us if he was still alive. But if. It’s. I don’t know how this game is still happening, if that’s, true…”

“We’ll figure it out,” Nami said, reaching a hand out to his shoulder. “If there’s one thing Megumi taught me, it’s that no bug or glitch happens without some internal explanation. We might not understand the programming of the game, but you understand the rules really well. If we put our heads together we can figure out what’s going on.”

“Before we start investigating,” Amai said, “We should check the Empty Wings, right? Just to. Just to be sure. We can’t just say Madara’s dead and be done with it, without seeing his body. We can’t give up on him like it’s nothing!”

“If he’s anywhere…” Kurou said, “It would probably be the quarantine room, right? Anywhere else in the Empty Wings, and he’d have been killed by the facility as soon as night fell. Mono? This may be too much to ask of you, but can you say if that happened?”

“Well, let’s see…” Mono thought for a minute. “No, the facility has not killed anybody. Nobody has violated a rule. Cool! It let me say it.”

“So we know where to look first,” Sayaka confirmed, then turned and walked away from the initial crime scene. The rest of the participants gradually tore their eyes away to join her, and they approached the elevator, since it was six floors down to get across to the Empty Wings. They rode it down to the second floor, then walked across the hall between the areas. As soon as they arrived in the stairwell to make their way to the quarantine room, there was some evidence to find.

In fact, the murder weapon was lying there. And, yes, in spite of the fact that the Evil King’s Gun had the capacity to generate as any sort of weapon, it was a gun. Just a simple pistol. Nami spotted it first, as it was one floor down, between the railings. Like it had just been dropped right down the center of the stairwell. She held up a finger for the others to wait while she went to retrieve the gun. She almost grabbed it in her bare hand, but something told her that maybe, that wasn’t the best plan. It looked like it would retain fingerprints well, and unlike the other murder weapons which had honestly been used by too many different people to rely on that, it could be evidence
She placed it in her bag using the hem of her skirt, then rejoined the group. Once she was back, everybody went upstairs and approached the quarantine room. Along the way, Nami looked around, but nothing else was out of place out here. None of the corruption, no signs of struggle or anything. Just the Empty Wings as they’d always been, and how odd was it that she could even observe that? When she’d first woken up, this place was such a maze. Now, she could probably navigate all of it without even consulting her Monopad, and notice if anything changed, too.

She’d gotten used to this place, over the past eighteen days that they’d been here. It wasn’t that it became like home to her, but she knew it, she knew her way around to a degree she never could have expected when she first found herself in this unfamiliar place. Soon enough, she’d be in another unfamiliar place, and she’d have to learn it. Then another, probably. And hopefully, then, she’d just have one more left to learn. Her house and her neighborhood.

The house that she’d share with Sayaka and Goro, right?

She hoped so. She really hoped that this, this awfulness they were experiencing right now as they searched for Madara, would be over. Would be the last of it. And then, there they were, in front of the the quarantine room. Nami drew the plastic curtain back, and there she saw him. The room was fully corrupted now, but that was likely just its natural spreading effect which was, fittingly enough, quarantined. Lying on his side on a cot, it almost looked like Madara intended to sleep there. The bullet hole in his forehead and the blood which had caked onto the sheets and the floor proved otherwise.

Or maybe he did intend to sleep there, and that was when he was killed. Either way.

“A body has been discovered. Once more, everybody is already here to see the body. The Monokuma File for both corpses has just been sent to your Monopads. Honestly, I’m not even sure what’s going on myself, or why the game isn’t over. But I think that the best bet is to investigate these deaths, as well as any ReWard panels you’ve neglected to inspect before now. This will most certainly become the Final Class Trial. Finding the truth will lead you to the outside world. You can be sure of that, even though the situation’s strange. One way or another.”
Deadly Life: Day Eighteen (Recovery Discovery)

Nami stepped into the room and opened her Monopad. It was always good to check what information they were provided with, after all. In this case, everything was there that she needed. Time and cause of death.

Dia was killed by a bullet to the back of the head at 2128 the previous night, while Madara was killed by a bullet to the forehead at 0545 this morning. That was… More of a gap than Nami expected, and it already gave away an aspect of the case. The culprit was in the quarantine room with Madara almost the entire night, they’d have needed to be. So what exactly was the reasoning there, she wondered? If the culprit was the Evil King, then they should have killed Madara right away. And the game should have been over.

So… Well, Nami didn’t have a working theory on any level just yet, just because of the absolute strangeness. She was still trying to wrap her head around what happened to Dia and the effects of her death, which was… She wasn’t freaking out so much about the simple facts. At least, not for Dia. For Madara, sure, yeah, once she stopped reeling she’d be distraught that he died. But Dia… Now that she thought about it, wasn’t Madara one of the only other people who knew that Dia would be restored from a backup after the game, if she was killed here?

Then again, that statement didn’t really mention anything about Dia’s death resulting in widespread data corruption and… Could the repeat copies of Box Hako’s corpse be considered artifacting? She’d call it artifacting. So maybe it wasn’t reliable after all. Maybe Dia’s death being impermanent had a secret caveat, of only being so if she wasn’t killed by the Evil King? Nami definitely didn’t want to think about that or entertain that idea. Instead, she approached Madara’s corpse, like that was any better.

There was only the one injury in his forehead, nothing else. No bruises, no hints that he’d been in a fight. Just one wound. She looked closer at it; There were burns around the edges, which implied a close range shot. Not that there was much range to be had in this room, anyway, but it did seem like it wasn’t from all the way across the room. And then… not that it probably mattered, but every observation that could be made, should be made, in situations like these.

“The others left,” Sayaka said, getting Nami’s attention. “I said you and I could handle investigating and they should just go try to calm down.”

“That seems like a good plan, yeah. Did even Randy agree to that?”

“Well, not quite. He said that he’d do the rooms check, just in case. Investigate the tangential stuff… He’s shaken up, too,” Sayaka said, “I… Got to process, at least some of this, overnight. What about you, though? Are you okay?”

“Honestly? Not really.” Nami sighed, lifting a hand to her forehead. “This is all… It’s a mess. I feel like. I mean, two people got shot. The game should be over. But it’s not and now we have to figure out what happened, still? I’m. This is tough to deal with. But I just need to focus on the case because, like we’ve been saying. We’ll have time to grieve once we’re out of here. If we’re not out of here yet then the truth will get us out.”

“Right. But that doesn’t mean I can’t worry about you…” Sayaka said, “I’m. Not doing so hot either. Madara wasn’t dead yet, last night. He was killed this morning, right? It’s. Well, bottom line is I’m in the same boat as you. Confused, but we need to figure it out.”
“We do,” Nami said, “Anyway. Madara’s body matches the report. There’s burns around the bullet wound, so he was shot pretty close up.”

“Huh. Yeah, it does seem pretty point-blank,” Sayaka said, “That… Kind of points to something, but the location of the shot contradicts it, at the same time.”

“...I really don’t want to think about that option, you know,” Nami said, then noticed. Madara’s Monopad was under the cot, screen still on, and still opened to the rulebook. She picked it up, and read the rules over again.

The Dining Hall and Empty Wings are off-limits at nighttime (10 pm - 6 am). The quarantine room is excluded from this restriction.

Upon discovery of a body, all areas become available. Personal rooms are unlocked and, should it be nighttime, the Dining Hall and Empty Wings are made available. The Empty Wings will remain available for twenty minutes following the conclusion of a trial, to facilitate leaving.

Personal rooms are unlocked from either side only by the owner’s Monopad.

Standard Killing Game Trial Rules apply. Standards can be checked in another menu.

No one culprit can kill more than two victims.

Attending breakfast and dinner is required in the event of motives being delivered at mealtime, except in extraordinary circumstances. Mealtime is defined as 8 AM for breakfast and 6 PM for dinner. Monokuma withholds the right to change the time if everyone is present early.

In the event there are two culprits, one will be secretly rescued from their execution and held in the Quarantine Room until the following trial.

The violation of any of the above rules will result in a punishment of death.

Entering the ward of somebody who died before the ward was made available will result in being trapped in that room for a randomly generated length of time, as displayed above the door.

Garbage and dirty dishes (unless dirtied with blood) left around will be removed from areas that have been fully vacated. Sinks and trash cans are emptied on a schedule that is for MONOKUMA’S EYES ONLY!

Just the same ruleset as before, right? It seemed a bit strange to Nami, that it was left open. Was Madara checking the rules again before he was killed, or was he trying to tell them something? Maybe he thought they’d somehow forget that the rest of the Empty Wings were off-limits during nighttime. Obviously, that fact was important to the case, but did he have that little faith in them? It couldn’t be that, Nami had refuted his dot-connection efforts plenty enough times before that he’d defer to her deductive abilities…

As for what this did mean, though, she’d have to think on that a bit longer. It couldn’t just be as simple as a reminder of the nighttime rules, so Nami slipped the Monopad into her evidence bag. Then, she stood up again. “Okay, next?”

“I actually… Don’t see anything else in this room? So we should start moving,” Sayaka said, and before Nami could even reply, turned her back on the crime scene. So, Nami followed her. Out of the quarantine room, back into the Empty Wings proper, and… There was something.

The quarantine room was in the middle of a hallway. They’d come at it from one direction, but in the other, the hall seemed to go on for… Too long. Longer than it did before, Nami was sure of it. So she started walking that way, moving in that direction. And at the end of the hall, the end of the...
hall that was too long…

There was blood. Blood, and items scattered over the floor. Items that Nami couldn’t help but recognize. No bodies, but it seemed, this room… Was…

Where anything left behind during an execution ended up.
Deadly Life: Day Eighteen (Scheduled Collection)

Nami walked into the room. She didn’t really want to, but the doorway was narrow, and Sayaka wouldn’t be able to see past her for as long as she remained put. So she went inside, and Sayaka saw it. “Is this… Is that what I think it is?”

“It’s a recovery room,” Nami said, “Personal items that were lost in the executions… Gathered up here. Has this. How long has this been here?”

“It’s got to be new,” Sayaka said, “Well, one way to find out, right? Monokuma?”

Mono’s… Head appeared on the ground. “Hello, hello. What’s up, friends? Sorry for my shabby appearance, but Dia’s glitches did impact my visual integrity, as I worried. The rest of my body isn’t quite myself right now!”

“When did this room here first appear?” Nami asked.

“Oh! The recovery room has technically been a part of the Empty Wings since the end of this last case. Case one, Pool. Two, Arcade. Three, Cafe Monokuma. Four, Garden. Five, Recovery Room. I interfered just a little bit. The arcade was originally meant for case three, and Cafe Monokuma was of my own invention. Wasn’t that nice of me? Anyway… This room was scheduled for now, so that there’d be enough in it. Oh, and the bloodstains here are fake.”

“Oh, that’s good to know. Makes the room slightly less creepy,” Nami said, “There were only four executions, but there’s still a good amount of stuff in here…”

She took stock, for a moment. There was a mangled tape recorder, a camera, and a coat; Tomoe’s. A floral button-up, and a gold pocketwatch. Nami had never seen Shinji with the latter, but she assumed it was his from its placement. Goro’s entire original outfit was crumpled in one corner, topped with one of the Kiyoshi masks from the execution. Then, Riko’s whiteboard, the accompanying marker, and a key.

A key? Nami approached that first, and picked it up. She stared at it for a few moments. This was the ReWard key that Riko had used as her alibi. The key to Tomoe’s Panel, which Riko claimed meant she couldn’t have opened her own panel. She still had it when she was executed… Nami assumed it was gone forever, but here it was. Going off of… The note Amai wrote, and the newspaper articles about Torimi… Nami had to see what was in Tomoe’s ReWard Panel, didn’t she? Part of her wouldn’t want to. Part of her didn’t need that right now. But she’d have to.

Her sister, who was her first serious loss to the Killing Game. Who would be so proud to hear that Nami had lived and made it this far. Proud that she got a girlfriend, if she got over herself. Maybe not proud that girlfriend was Sayaka, unless she got more over herself. Even still. There would be an indication, on some level, of why Tomoe was selected for this game.

Amai’s was vague, but she knew what it meant. After seeing that, Nami could almost understand what Torimi’s meant. So Tomoe’s… She’d be able to grasp, wouldn’t she? Even with the space between them, Nami knew and understood her late sister. More now than ever before, since the Killing Game had informed her of a certain secret. Tomoe intended to carry all of that to her grave, but the trial was too much, and it spilled out.

Nami would know whatever a note regarding Tomoe really meant, and her own as well. Because her own was there. She had her key and she hadn’t used it even though if she was really devoted to
finding the truth, she should have. Should have already opened her ReWard panel. The reason didn’t matter. Sayaka was right. It didn’t matter if Ultimate Hope decided they weren’t good enough, because Ultimate Hope wasn’t good enough either, by anybody’s standards. Even still.

Nami was afraid of the truth. Even if she could assume that everybody here wasn’t ‘good enough’ for those people, the details frightened her. She put the key into her pocket rather than into the evidence bag.

Then, Sayaka tore up the Kiyoshi mask.

“Hey-”

“There’s no way this is evidence and if I can’t kill the real Matsubara yet then I’m going to destroy the effigy of him placed before me. I just can’t help it, babe.” Sayaka dropped the shreds, and shrugged. “It’s a compulsion. Magic, like when Sleeping Beauty saw the spinning wheel and just had to touch the spindle. I see image of a piece of absolute scum shit, I destroy it.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” Nami said, “I got the Journalist ReWard key, from the Asahi pile. Urgh, that… I don’t like that. Why’d I say it like that. Fuck.”

“Yeah, that didn’t sound great at all. But I’m not sure what would be a more accurate way to refer to these, so… They’re the fucking, dead people piles.” Sayaka groaned, then glanced over to the ‘Tomoe pile’. “Hey, that tape recorder. That’s the one Dia said your sister kept in her bra. What do you think was on it?”

“Well, there’s no way to find out now. It’s super destroyed, it definitely won’t play again,” Nami said.

“…What’s with the black ooze?”

“Huh? Oh, that’s the data storage,” Nami said, “You’ve never seen one of these before?”

“Tape recorders aren’t exactly commonplace,” Sayaka said, “So, no…”

“Huh. Well, yeah. Tomoe got to test an early prototype, but this model’s been around for a few years by now. The liquid stores the sound recordings so they can still be recovered later if the recorder’s destroyed, as long as you can pour it into a new recorder. It’s super resilient and has a ton of storage space, but only works for sound data so far. At least, that’s what Tomoe told me.”

“…So if we could fix the recorder, or find another one to pour the stuff into, then we could hear what was on this one?”

“Sort of? It’ll probably be missing some bits, since some of the ooze, you know, came out during the execution,” Nami said, “And, well, I dunno if I want to hear what’s on it. Even though it was in here-”

“Maybe we have to,” Sayaka said, turning to stare at Nami with the recorder in her hands. “Even though it’s all broken and leaking, and won’t play… It looks like it can still record? And it looks like it’s been… recording. Like. It might have. What happened last night.”
Location: Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 21XX, September 27th
Time: 1000 Hours

“...This thing’s programming is just disgusting,” Megumi griped, “Even without being able to look entirely into its guts right now. Disgusting. And that woman called herself the Ultimate Programmer. I don’t even get the grace of that same title thanks to her actions, and I’m this much superior? It’s ridiculous.”

“W-Well I think we need to give her some credit. It isn’t the Neo World Program itself, it’s the Evil King’s Game… Which was never used before, so, never tested, and, um,” Hashi stumbled through her sentence, “Isn’t it my fault, too? Dia’s causing that glitch…”

“She is. Of course, that glitch wouldn’t matter if not for the others.” Megumi groaned and pushed a palm to her forehead. “It’s aching, Hashi. This poor programming has given me a headache. You call that Ultimate? I’ve read amateur’s programs which don’t cause me pain, because they know what they’re capable of. This is a dump. A landfill of misplaced ambition.”

“Ah. Once the people are out of the program, do you think you could clean it up? That Yamaguchi girl makes a really, uh, good point. That this technology could be used for much better purposes than this one…”

(Of course I can. I can do whatever I put my mind to, remember? Both of our worlds could use the Neo World Program, for much kinder purposes.”

“Yes, I completely agree!” Somebody much more enthusiastic than Hashi chimed in.

“Wh… Shigure?!” Hashi questioned, turning to see her. “You’re here? I haven’t seen you in, so so long! You’ve been in Towa this whole time, haven’t you? And I… Should have realized that…”

“Please, please.” Eriko chuckled a bit. “It’s Hashi now, right? I would have come to see you sooner myself if I could’ve, but I couldn’t risk being seen over here and the secret of our revolution getting out. It’s been a long time, huh?”

“Very long…” Hashi looked away. “Well, you know. When all of you were taken for the Killing Game, I felt alone for quite some time. I’m glad to see you. Um… The others who survived?”

“Yeah, we’re here. Whether you’d want us to be or not.” A young man who looked old came into the room as well.

“Oh, hello, Yasuda,” Megumi said to the newcomer, identifying him correctly as Hansuke Yasuda. “If there are any more of you, I’d request you take this reunion to another room. A crowded workspace is, to say the least, distracting.”

“Oh! There are a few more of us and we will take this to another room. Er, the one we came in through, is that alright to use?” Eriko asked.

“If you don’t mind being next to several corpses, then, it’s perfectly acceptable.” Megumi waved them off. Everyone exchanged a few shrugs, then went back to the entrance room to have their conversation. Hashi, of course. Eriko Shigure and Hansuke Yasuda.
And a few others. Kotoko had already cut straight to her existing friends. Blake and Reiji went to meet up with Iwako, as there was a connection there too. Some others, as well, had already gone to find their places, since the Failed Ultimates had frankly grown their numbers quite a bit in secret. The Inoues had gone to greet Akihiko. That left in the entrance room, Miria Hayashi and Daisuke Harada.

“Hashi? Oh, it’s wonderful to see you,” Miria proclaimed, and stepped forward just once. “I would have visited sooner, see, but you know how Towa City can be. Or maybe you don’t. Did you get my letters? For the first year or so I couldn’t send any, but the rules loosen up as soon as they think you… Won’t figure out the truth, I suppose?”

“I, uh… No, I didn’t, but it’s nice to hear you sent me some!” Hashi smiled at her estranged friends. “I was living in the basement for a while, then I left DIYEAR, so my address wasn’t the same anymore. So it’s just as much on me, that we haven’t been able to talk. Now we can, though! Uhm. Have you heard the full plan?”

“We have. And we’re all planning on joining you,” Daisuke said, “I can pack up my business and move… For us, it’s kinda like. How do I put this? We’ve been stuck, in this bubble anyway. Towa City’s hardly on Earth to start with?”

“What Harada means is that!” Eriko raised a hand. “It’s better to live in a bubble where we know we’re contributing to a bright future with our talents, than a bubble created through annual judgment days… If that makes any sense?”

“It makes… Perfect sense,” Hashi said, “More sense than my reasoning, really. I’m just going because I’ve never liked it here. Maybe I won’t like it there either, but. Well. Maybe I can be useful, like you guys, too.”

“I mean, mine’s not really that intense. Do you really think my shop will make a bright future?” Daisuke asked.

“I think that your creations make people happy, so, of course.” Miria flexed an arm in slow motion and without any change in that soft smile of hers. “Really, if you start to think hard about it. Building a city on another planet… We can have more of an impact than we ever did here, no matter what talent goes into it? What do you think of it that way?”

“Weren’t you completely satisfied staying in Towa City, Hayashi?” Hansuke asked, crossing his arms.

“That was before I knew. I mean, all that I really want is to live somewhere I can be happy, that’s peaceful, with Chi-chan….” She brought her hands over her heart as she said this. “Towa City stopped being that when we learned the truth, though. Even if I was alright with it… And I wouldn’t say I am… She would not be satisfied with living under those ideals. Of course, I’d still like to see more of this planet someday. There’s mountains left to scale. I imagine that she and I, at least, will come back once things settle down.”

“It’s… Yeah. We were convinced Ultimate Hope had saved us. Even, that I could have that title myself! That we were stuck in this place because Despair would kill us if we left,” Eriko protested, “But that was all a lie! I don’t care if… If Ultimate Hope is the best good that can exist in this world? We have to find a new one. If the best good is still that rotten, then we have to find something better somewhere else!”

“…I think that you would be considered the best good in this world. Upstanding people of any origin, doing their level best. And since you’re in the shadows, well, I guess that you should go
elsewhere. A world where you can stand in the light. Hm?” A young man that none of the newcomers recognized spoke from the doorway.

“I dunno about that…” A girl stepped out from behind him. “Personally, I think the best good is proooobably that ponytail.” She was looking straight at Daisuke. “You single?”

“Uh...Chronically???” He managed to answer, though his voice cracked midway, through the shock that covered the entire room at that question.
Location: Neo World Hospital, Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan  
Date: 21XX, September 27th  
Time: 1000 Hours

Having finished their visit to the recovery room, Nami and Sayaka turned to make their way back to the main building. It seemed like they’d have a better shot at finding relevant evidence there, and using the ReWard keys while they were at it. The first stop would have to be the Journalist’s Ward, for two reasons. One was because it was just the closest ward that they had a key to, but the other was that Nami figured it possible that there could be another tape recorder inside the panel. If they could transfer the liquid in and play the recording from last night, then that could offer some important insight to the case.

So, the two of them arrived in the Journalist's Ward. Nami spotted the ReWard panel straight away, at the far end of the room. Nami went to it, pulled out the key, then hesitated.

"You alright?" Sayaka asked.

"The ReWard info in Torimi's ward was about, before the game. When she was in Tokyo. I guess, it's..." Nami took a deep breath. "I know that Mono said we should go ahead and gather up everything that we can, before this trial starts. Even still, I don't know if I... So much is already going on, do I really want to learn something about Tomoe that I didn't know before? There's already so much of that. I never realized just how much she suffered because of what our dad told her to do... And I never knew about her friend when she left for work, Kizuto. She never mentioned him either. I already feel like I've learned plenty about her."

"...Yeah," Sayaka said, "Is it possible, if it's a tape recorder... Would pouring in the other recorder's data overwrite what's already there?"

"I couldn't tell you," Nami said, "Really, I don't know about something like that. I just know what Tomoe told me. I guess to be on the safe side, we will have to listen to what's already on there first. Assuming it even is another recorder, of course."

"We won't know until you open the panel," Sayaka said, "If you don't want the info, then we can just get rid of it. Or ignore it, or whatever. It can't matter that much, can it?"

"I don’t want to never know it, that’s the thing," Nami explained, “I don’t want to know right now. But I want to know. It’s just a lot, all at once. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?"

Sayaka thought for a bit, then nodded. “Yeah, I do. I never had anything like this with Kaiba, but… Mm. If I found out two things she’d never told me, I would want to wait a little while before hearing a third.”

“...Sorry for saying this, but I always forget that your sister died too,” Nami said.

“I don’t bring it up much, so, I forgive you.” Sayaka chuckled, though nothing was funny. “Kaiba died in a really honorable way. Dad always said, don’t be sad. She made the right decision. Sometimes when people do what’s right, it means we can’t see them anymore. So I try not to think about her too often. Otherwise, I’d be sad. She wouldn’t want that.”

“Was it hard for you?” Nami asked, “Seeing me and Tomoe together? Or... Seeing me mourn...”
her?"

“It was, both things were. That’s why I threw myself into that foolish investigation with Kaede.” Sayaka looked up with a bitter smile, eyes watering just a bit. “I could have a new big sister, and we’d do something great together, too. The right thing, and everyone would be better off for it, and we’d live through it too. But… That didn’t work, huh? And it’s my fault now. My fault that Torimi and Madara were here to die at all.”

“…So you did remember it too,” Nami said.

“I did. And.” Sayaka lowered her head again, shaking it. “I understand if… Now that you know, you might not trust me. And you might not want to be with me. And I should have talked to you about this sooner but there really is just so much going on and I. Didn’t want to face the music, honestly.”

“There’s no music to face here,” Nami said, “I can’t put the blame anywhere, not really. You and Kaede were bouncing off of each other, and I can’t hold either or both of you responsible. Come on, I already thought about all of this last night. Those four were already kidnapped, in reserve for any necessary ‘reset’. Mono just took the opportunity to force the reset at a time when any other path would have killed us all. If we think about it, maybe that was the idea. Leave us with our memories of how the game ends, and of course we’ll seek that escape. Then we’ll die for trying, because how dare failures like us have hope for the future?”

“If you put it that way, then I feel a different type of bad. I guess being manipulated is better than just, paving the road to Hell with good intentions.” Sayaka shrugged. “I dunno. Trying to figure out how I feel about anything I’ve done is weird here. All I know for sure is that I want to have a future and Ultimate Hope has no right to judge us because they also suck so there.”

“That’s all you really gotta know for sure, probably. Certainty is overrated and morality is a construct, or something! Just do what you feel is good and try to make people happy and things will work out. Or like, they won’t, and you’ll end up dead, but everything is like that! Fuck!” Nami threw up her hands, then turned and unlocked the ReWard panel. Sitting there was, as predicted, a tape recorder. She picked it up, turned back around, and hit play.

“I’ve made a grave mistake. The information provided by Miss Mars… I can’t allow the higher-ups to publish it. Her ‘Ultimate List’. I wouldn’t intervene normally. If these Ultimates let their guard down enough for one woman to gather up their names, then obviously, they deserve it, right? I’m on there, but I know I wasn’t as careful as I could have been, and I’ve always been prepared to contend with the possibility of Despair knowing that I’m an Ultimate.”

“But… Nami’s name is on that list too. Yet, I failed to convince my bosses. Maybe there’s still a chance somebody else can keep them from publishing it, but my mistake, was my failure to do so. I don’t know what to do anymore. I haven’t the faintest idea. I’m not surprised that Nami discovered a talent after I left… I’m the parasite, after all. But I can’t just sit idly by while she’s endangered by my very own publication.”

“I think I might know a way to keep your sister safe,” A stranger’s voice sounded, then the recording cut out. Moments later, it started again from the beginning. This was all that was on this particular recorder. And what it mentioned… the ‘Ultimate List’...

It jogged a few memories loose, to say the least.
“That’s what it was…” Nami realized, and gently set the recorder down in the panel, though she left the door open. “The reason we were selected, Sayaka, it’s not that. It wasn’t that anyone decided we were bad people at all! We did fail as Ultimates, but in a different way! We let our identities get discovered and published to the world. That was it, that was why. I’d bet you anything, everyone here appeared on that list and was exposed as an Ultimate.”

“So it was chance,” Sayaka said, “It was just whichever of us happened to get figured out. And if they were planning to kill us all for that... Well, that still makes sense, right? Only really good Ultimates who can stand for ~hope~ are able to stay hidden forever, so we must have just been subpar. And having that list published, Despairs would have come and murdered us soon anyway, so it’s not like the blood is really on Ultimate Hope’s hands, right? That’s how they’d rationalize it.”

“That’s exactly it, that makes perfect sense to me.” Nami nodded. “Yeah... That’s got to be the truth. We were found out, which makes us ‘failures’ as far as these people are concerned. Even if we were old enough not to normally be selected for a Killing Game. It was easiest to use us, since they thought we’d get killed either way. That’s... Well, I actually think that’s pretty comforting. Even though we said we wouldn’t care what they think, with a week missing, I really worried I might have actually done something super terrible in that time and that was why…”

“Mm, yeah. I’ll admit, kinda had lingering doubts, too,” Sayaka said, “So, yeah. Maybe they were planning to get us all killed just for having our identities discovered, that’s still a shit thing to do but at least I don’t feel really judged or anything.”

“Except that the Mastermind is still Ultimate Judgment, right?” Nami noted, “So there’s that. Otherwise, though. Yeah, thinking about it... The two newspaper articles on Tori might have been how that ‘Miss Mars’ person figured her out. And the note that Amai wrote, that was probably addressed to Mars too, or to the newspaper which published the story.”

“You’re probably right,” Sayaka agreed, then pulled out the broken recorder. “Should we try and get the recording from last night to play on that one, then? I uh... Dunno how these work, obviously. Since I didn’t even know what the ooze was at first.”

“Yeah, we should. Anything we figure out about this place in general... Isn’t as important as solving the case and getting out of here, right?” Nami said, “If it works out we do need to find the Mastermind after all, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

With that, Nami took the broken recorder, and popped open the newer one. She didn’t understand these on the same level as Tomoe did, of course, but she knew how to use them. She was able to fit what was left of the old one’s liquid into the newer one, since it only had the one recording. Then, she messed around with some buttons for a bit, before pressing play.

The sound of a gunshot rung out of it. She’d timed the playback perfectly, and it had been recording for a while. In fact, she wouldn’t be surprised if it had data running all the way back to the first trial; The ooze could hold a truly staggering amount of sound in it. After the gunshot, there was one set of footsteps. Then, another. The first one stopped for a second, then there were sounds of a scuffle, but no voices involved. The gun fell to the ground, but was likely picked up again. Then there were one set of footsteps just a bit long. The other did the same. Then, nothing. The quarantine room probably contained sound as well, and that was the noise of two people entering that very place. It confirmed that Madara and the culprit were in there all night, together. There
were two people in the quarantine room. This took place over the course of approximately half an hour, but Nami did run the tape back at quadruple-speed, so it only took eight minutes to listen to.

“...Alright, that doesn’t actually give us much insight,” Nami said, “But it’s something. Moving on, then.”

“Where to next?” Sayaka wondered.

“Well, my end goal is back at the first crime scene, but along the way we should stop at my ward, to open that panel. I also want to talk to Motherkuma one more time,” Nami explained, already moving towards the door again. Sayaka followed right after her.

It wasn’t long before they reached their first stop, Nami’s own ward. She had to use her ReWard key, after all. This was on the way, and besides. She had a sinking feeling that once she investigated the first crime scene, that would be all the evidence available after all. After stepping into her own ward, she turned back around and pushed her evidence bag into Sayaka’s arms. “I should probably look at my ReWard, first. And I forgot I wanted to check the gun for prints. As Kaede’s former disciple, you could handle that for me, right?”

“Sure thing. You’ll be okay on your own here?”

“Yeah!” Nami saluted. “I’m sure I will be. Meet you in Tsukasa’s ward, to talk to Motherkuma?”

“Meet you there,” Sayaka agreed, then gave a nod before running off with the evidence bag to check for prints on the gun. The first murder weapon that was actually unique enough for fingerprints to mean anything. And Nami had to use her key.

She took it from her pocket; She stored the keys in the same pocket, next to each other, twins. Her own ReWard panel was, instead of on a wall, placed against the front of the judge’s bench. She approached, inserted the key, and opened up the panel.

There were two things inside, just as there had been in Torimi’s panel. One placed by the organizers; A manila file folder. She pulled it out and opened it, to see a picture of herself pinned to what had the look of an opening statement about it. The author was listed as ‘Mercury Mars’, and went on for a while about how her ‘sources’ led her to believe that Nami Kaguya was the Ultimate Prosecutor. She cited Kiyoshi Matsubara, a couple called the Okitas who were involved in Nami’s case against the foster care system, and several others. Nami guessed it wasn’t surprising, that the people who experienced her power would come to at least a partial understanding. Even if the title was a bit inaccurate, anybody reading this would gladly believe Mercury. Whoever that was. Nami waited a moment, then dug out the articles written on Torimi.

‘Mana M.’ was the name signed on those, which was suspiciously similar. What sort of person would have this kind of access, though? Writing a gossip column for a Tokyo newspaper, writing an academic paper on Nami, anonymously donating a list of Ultimates to a publication in Hokkaido… It was strange, and she’d need to think more on it. A name she’d never heard before, suddenly being wrapped up in all of this? Somehow, she didn’t think that person had anything to do with this, now. The Killing Game. But probably with getting them selected in the first place. She could think about that sort of thing on the outside.

The other item was undoubtedly placed there by Mono. Unlike in Torimi’s panel, nothing needed to be done with it to understand its message. Nami didn’t know a lot about flower language, but she did know this one. She looked it up, because one of them had been mailed to her once. From an unknown address, no note attached. Just one of these. A striped carnation. Pink and red.
Carnation, fascination. Striped, wish I could be with you. Red, my heart aches for you. Pink… I'll never forget you.

*And don’t you dare. Ever. Forget me.*

Yeah.

She figured as much.
Nami set the carnation back in the panel. Then, she took one petal from it. Closed the panel, took her key, and wrapped the key in the petal before returning it to her pocket. Then, she took the manila folder with her as she left her ward. Upstairs to continue onward, to Tsukasa’s ward, right? But as she was on her way there, the relevant boyfriend blocked her way. “Hey!”

“How did you do that?” Randy asked, then shook his head in a way not dissimilar to a golden retriever. “Doesn’t matter! Come with me. I need to open my ReWard panel before the trial, right? But you’re the one who’s been gathering all of the big picture stuff. So, come open my panel with me.”

“Sure,” Nami said, then followed Randy into his ward to open his panel with him. He pulled out his key and opened it. There was only one item in there, which made sense. Mono had no reason to say anything specific to Randy. So there was just whatever Mercury had to say about him, Nami supposed. Mercury Mars, Miss Mars, Mana M. Whatever her real name was. The person who made the Ultimate List and had nothing to do with the carrying out of the Killing Game.

There was a receipt in there, which Randy pulled out, then furrowed his brow. “This is… I’m sure that nobody by this name ever paid me for anything.”

“Let me see.” Nami took the receipt, and read it over.

**Payment of:** One Hour, 4200$ owed, 1800$ paid ahead.
‘Ultimate’ Services Rendered.
From;
Randy Sempers unto Mercury Mars.

“Huh. Well, I guess it could have happened in the week right before the game started, right? That’s when all this stuff was published about us, I think,” Nami said, “Right, so you know, uh. This Mars person sent the publication Tomoe worked for a list of Ultimates and the theory is that we were all on it. I don’t think she actually has anything to do with the game itself, but it’s probably a direct result of her exposing us that we were the people selected.”

“Oh. Well, I really doubt this receipt is legitimate anyway. I mean, I wouldn’t have generated something written like this to start with, and to boot, it’s really rare that I take on women as clients. Not just that they’re usually uninterested, but… it’s exceptional circumstances. I’m not personally attracted to women, after all, so I’ll only work with them if I think there’s something I can help with. Say, alleviating a fear of being with men, by being a… less intimidating sort of man.”

“Isn’t that kind of, wildly dysphoria-inducing?” Nami asked.

“Yes! That’s why I don’t make a habit of it!” Randy confirmed, “Anyway, I bet this receipt is faked.”

“.Thinking about it, maybe all of the documents are faked. The gossip column might just be stylized to look like newspaper, and it’s easy to fake an academic evidence statement? The tape recorder has to be real, though. Can’t fake Tomoe’s voice, not really,” Nami said, “And that one was just talking about what Mars did, anyway.”

“Do you think Mono would know about this?” Randy asked.
“I’m… Not sure I want to ask her,” Nami said, “To be honest with you. I just had a certain suspicion confirmed, and I don’t know how I feel about it yet.”

“Oh. Well, since you didn’t volunteer what that suspicion was, it’s fine, I won’t press you to tell me,” Randy said, “But we probably should ask her, about this Mars person. If you’re right that she doesn’t have anything to do with the game, just with our selection, that shouldn’t be a censored topic, right?”

“Right. Don’t worry, we can ask during the trial. I just would rather take some time to work through what my opinion is supposed to be, and not see her again before I do.”

“I guess that makes sense?” Randy said, then looked back to the receipt. “Are we sure… That this Mars person isn’t related? That she’s not the Mastermind?”

“The Mastermind is, or was at one point, a participant,” Nami said, “We know that much. I also think that, you know, that super violates Knox’s First. Mono’s been very clear about fair play up to this point, so I don’t think that it would suddenly break a rule like that one.”

“That’s a good point,” Randy said, “There’s no real requirement for crimes to follow the decalogue, but Mono made a point of saying that it did. I don’t think it would do that if Knox’s First was going to be violated, even when it doesn’t necessarily have control over that fact. So, does that mean the Mastermind can’t be any of the four additional participants?”

“Well, I dunno. They arrived early enough it might qualify as being ‘in the first act of the story’, and we do know that they were kidnapped the same time as the rest of us and just had delayed addition to the game. The Mastermind could be one of them, to throw us off the trail,” Nami said, “Anyone that we’ve personally met is a suspect, is what it comes down to, really. Some last-minute counterfeiter from the real world, I think she has to just be that.”

“If you’re sure,” Randy said, “Anyway, my rooms check yielded nothing, so you know. Nothing out of place at all, just the same as last investigation.”

“Thanks for covering that,” Nami said, “Even if there’s nothing there, there could have been.”

“Of course. I’m still a detective, no matter what happens, right?” Randy gave her a thumbs-up. “I’ll help any way that I can. And, hopefully, it’s all going to work out okay! And maybe we won’t even ever need to be detectives again.”

“That really would be nice…” Nami sighed. “Even still. Randy, we’ve almost made it through. It’s almost fine now. We can see the sun again and smile soon. All we have left is to solve this final mystery.”
Randy and Nami parted ways, mere moments before Sayaka and Nami met up again. Nami got to Tsukasa’s ward to find Sayaka already there, standing in front of the motherkuma. The obsolete technology that would have created new Monokumas, if that person hadn’t taken over playing Mono. The useless bear factory which wasn’t permitted to lie.

“Hey, Sayaka,” Nami greeted her as she walked into the room.

“Hi. Did you find what you were looking for, in your ReWard panel?”

“Mhm. Both things I was looking for, actually. You know the ‘Mars’ that Tomoe mentioned? There was an article written on how I was probably an Ultimate, by a ‘Mercury Mars’. The same name appeared on a receipt in Randy’s ReWard panel, and on the articles about Torimi, ‘Mana M.’ was written,” Nami explained, “I really don’t think that she’s related to the game, but it seems like she was definitely responsible for exposing us as ultimates…”

“That’s correct,” Motherkuma said, “The Ultimate List was provided by Mercury Mars, the Ultimate Counterfeiter. She included her own name to escape suspicion for long enough to disappear. She has no hand in the Killing Game itself.”

“...Thanks, Motherkuma,” Nami said, “That wasn’t really a question, exactly, but I’m glad to have it answered anyway. That’s good to know.”

“So, this thing… It’s a machine that can’t tell lies, but is preprogrammed to give evasive answers to anything it’s not supposed to answer, right?”

“That’s right,” Motherkuma answered, “I can’t lie, but I’m not obligated to tell the truth either. It’s the only way to get my programming around the Laws of Robotics.”

“Oh. Will Dia be subject to those?” Sayaka wondered, “And why don’t those apply to normal ‘kumas?’”

“Artificial Intelligences are not naturally bound to those laws. Robots and Replicants are two different things, so for your friend, it depends on what sort of body she’s placed into. As for the bears, it’s because I create them, and I don’t personally cause harm to humans or humanity. This is what you’d call a loophole.”

“So that’s why you can’t lie. You can’t even get close to personally harming humans while exploiting a loophole like that… That’s weird, but I think I get it,” Nami said, “So, I know that you can’t tell us who the Mastermind is. Even if I listed off each participant and asked if they were, you’d say something vague and avoiding. Like… Am I the Mastermind?”

“It’s hard to say who’s responsible for all of this. You very well could be. Even if you’re not the Mastermind yourself,” Motherkuma said, “Oh, I see what you mean. Yes. I’d say the same thing no matter who you asked it about.”

“I thought so. But you were able to tell us that Mercury wasn’t involved. So, confirm for me. The Mastermind is a participant?”

“The Mastermind, defined as being the one with the role of Ultimate Judgment, is a participant in the game. The Mastermind, defined as being the one in charge of the game, was Ultimate Hope. However, the two who hold that title in its truest form are dead.”
“So you’re allowed to tell the truth about things once we know them anyway?”

“Yes. There’s no reason to dodge questions that you’ve already confirmed for yourselves.”

“But you’ll dodge theories that we aren’t sure of yet.”

“Mhm. I suppose that my best use is to confirm things that you actually already know. I’m not a very useful machine at all.”

“Well, we still have our doubts, even if we’re ninety-percent sure of something. That way, you can put those doubts to rest. It’s limited use, but it’s still useful in those situations!” Nami protested.

“You don’t need to assure me I’m useful. I can’t actually feel useless or anything,” Motherkuma said, “I don’t have any form of intelligence programmed into me, just a sophisticated speech-recognition protocol. My emotions don’t exist so you need not show pity for me.”

“Still. It’s the truth, so I have to say it. Even if you don’t have the capacity for it to mean anything to you,” Nami said, then turned to Sayaka. “Can you think of anything else to ask it? Because I’m running out of ideas.”

She wasn’t about to ask it to confirm her theory on Mono’s identity. She needed to deal with that all on her own. And honestly, she felt it was a question that Motherkuma couldn’t even know the answer to. It had responses prepared even for the event that its masters were killed, but those masters couldn’t have predicted even the fact that somebody would take over the role of Monokuma, let alone who that somebody would be.

“Ah, well… It’s hard to think of stuff, since Mono had some of its censorship lifted. I feel like every burning question I’ve had about this place, it’s been answered, just now or by Mono earlier. Like I kind of… I kind of just want to go right ahead to the trial. I don’t have many questions left. What I do have left, I know that only we can find the answers. So I want to find them. And I want to leave.”

“I do too,” Nami said, “I agree with all of that, really. And I think we can do that. We just need to investigate the first crime scene for real, and then we should have our info, the investigation should be over.”

“We’ll stand in that courtroom one last time,” Sayaka confirmed, “And we’ll end this thing!”

The girls nodded, and left the room to tackle that final bit of evidence. They’d stand in the courtroom one last time, with hopes that nobody else would ever need to stand there. The Killing Game was a terrible thing and they wished they’d never endured it, but an end was in sight, and with that end came the promise of a truly bright future. No more suffering, for them or for anybody else. Because, well, Nami had to admit.

Kira was never wrong when she said that disrupting the big factions, deposing their leadership, would result in a peaceful world. That the stalemate was the result of the Quiet War being one between figurehead individuals rather than the groups on the whole. Ultimate Hope wouldn’t carry on Killing Games in the future, because so few of the members even knew that Ultimate Hope had ever been responsible for them. Despair wouldn’t, because for years they hadn’t, likely nobody there even really knew how anymore.

Future Foundation learned their lesson about these things a long time ago, and the Ultimate Initiative’s only stake in this conflict had been determining those individuals whose talents could shine a bright light through the dark. Maybe the world wouldn’t fix itself. Maybe the apocalypse
couldn’t be reversed, only stall forever in its current neutral state. But Nami wouldn’t feel bad about that. If she went with Tsumugi… Then they’d still be leaving behind a world where Killing Games would become history, whatever problems remained. Earth wouldn’t be forsaken by any means; Just given a blessing, then left behind to see how much better those who remained could make it.

Nami had hope, not just for herself, but for the entire world. It was full of despair, but her life hadn’t been a miserable one. People lived their lives and found happiness in a stabilized ruin. Her hope was genuine and nothing like the twisted ‘hope’ that flew that banner. The real kind. A belief that history could only go up from here. So let’s go get it.
Returning to the crime scene was strange. It felt strange, mostly just because of the fact that the crime scene was thoroughly glitched out and getting there did require walking through a veritable forest of afterimages of a girl who’d been dead for over a year, but who they all thought they knew for just a short period of time before it started to become clear she wasn’t who she said she was. For somebody who had seven years of practice, Dia still managed to suck at keeping her identity secret.

Not that Nami wanted her to keep her identity secret. Speaking of. “Why did you ask about Dia and the Laws of Robotics?”

“Oh, well. She expressed to me that she wanted to come with me, when I kill Asahi Senior,” Sayaka explained with an odd flourish of her hand. “If she was stuck following some dumb laws of robotics, then she’d actually be obligated to stop be from doing that. And then we’d both be seriously disappointed.”

“Dia wants to see you kill someone…?” Nami asked.

“It’s not surprising. I kind of always thought she’d end up asking me when it came to some fuck or another. I mean, please, remember. She’s spent a very long time watching all the people she loves dying horribly over and over, and the hands of each other. I’d have been shocked if she didn’t want to see an uncomplicated murder.”

“Well, I’d like to think that if I was in her position, I still wouldn’t want to, uh. Watch a person die?” Nami noted, “But if that floats your mutual boat, then good for you both!”

“The girl’s got a mean streak,” Sayaka said, “I think she’s tried to keep it a secret cause she’s worried about getting judged for it, or something. We’re the only people she knows in the world so of course she’d be freaked about the possibility of us turning on her.”

“Oh. Yes, that’s right. Isn’t that a bit unfair, though? She knows all of us at our worst states and she won’t even show us hers? That’s not very cash money of her.”

“It’s not like it’s that bad.” Sayaka rolled her eyes. “I mean, she just wants to watch somebody else kill someone. At worst, she’s an ultra-lazy sociopath, which, I think is pretty much fine actually.”

“If you put it like that, I guess I have to agree. If I can let it slide that you’re a literal career killer slash vigilante, then I can’t be caught too off guard by Marie Antoinette’s Robot Reincarnation.”

And that was when they reached her ‘corpse’. It wasn’t so jarring, to talk about a girl in present tense only to walk into the room where she appeared to be dead, as one might expect. Nami supposed that was because she remembered it was only temporary. That information that she, Madara, Tsukasa, and Dia herself heard, straight from Mono. It was possible that Dia could lose some time, or have some data corrupted, probably. But she wouldn’t be erased by this murder.

Any evidence that might have been in the ward was basically nonexistent at this point, with the blood and corruption covering everything. Nami and Sayaka dutifully searched the room, for any items that may be blending in, but turned up nothing except for a few shards of glass just under the window. The window which had been broken, shot through to attack from outside of the room…

Nami stood up straight and looked through the hole. It was the same grey expanse that always showed through this place’s windows, and the roof of the Empty Wings. Visible from up here,
since it was an extra floor up. Nothing was on the roof, not like that would matter, since going up there would apparently result in immediate execution. Or maybe just regular punishment, now. Mono didn’t have the same vendettas as the original Monokuma. She had no reason to.

Even so, there was something strange about looking out to see that roof, looking through this hole. Something that Nami couldn’t quite put her finger on, but just for a moment.

“Were you and Dia… Both standing right next to the window last night?” Nami asked.

“No. I was, but she was a bit further into the room. Still right in front of it, but, there was some distance. Why?” Sayaka asked.

“Well, I didn’t see any holes in the windows the next floor down… I mean, the top floor of the Empty Wings. And there’s no way a bullet could get far into the room from an angle like that, either.” Nami cupped her chin in a hand. “But that isn’t… Possible, is it? Nobody’s allowed on the roof, but the only way that Dia Hamuko could have been shot through this window was if somebody fired the gun straight ahead. From the roof.”

“I didn’t even think of that!” Sayaka exclaimed, “But you’re totally right! What the hell…” She pulled out her Monopad, double-checking it. “The rule hasn’t been removed, or anything. So I… What’s happening? What does this mean?”

“Are you sure that the bullet came from outside?” Nami asked.

“Of course I am. I mean, the hole in the window confirms it, right?” Sayaka pointed, then hesitated. “Well. I guess that it could be made in any direction. If somebody who was in the room wanted to cover it up, they might have counted on us running away… They had plenty of time to get glass from anywhere else and put it here, to seem like the shot came from that direction…”

“We can discuss this more in the trial, of course. I just think that it’s strange,” Nami said, “Did you find any prints on the gun, by the way?”

“No, nothing. Not even a partial print or a smudge, it’s pristine,” Sayaka said, “It was either cleaned really well, or never touched directly by human hands, I guess.”

“The investigation is now over!” Monokuma’s voice suddenly came over the intercom, causing both girls to jump in surprise. “Evidence has been gathered, everything that you brats have any sort of access to, it’s been discovered. That means it’s time. Please proceed to the courtroom lobby. Everybody’s final class trial will commence very soon.”
Deadly Life: Day Eighteen (Promised Future)

With that announcement, it was time to leave the crime scene. Sayaka and Nami double-checked that they had all of their collected evidence with them and hadn’t left anything behind, then went to the elevator to make their way over to the lobby back in the empty wings. This investigation really just had them running all over the place, huh? People could say what they wanted about the third case, but at least the victims were all in one building. The investigation wasn’t nearly this inconvenient, was all.

Despite having been all the way across the facility from the courtroom lobby, Nami and Sayaka were some of the first people there. The only one who’d arrived before them was Kurou, who greeted them when they walked in, “Hey! I assume that since the announcement sounded, your investigation turned some stuff up?”

“Some,” Sayaka said, “It’s kinda weird? A bunch of the stuff we found actually makes this shit make less sense than it started off making. We’ll get to the bottom of it during the trial, though. I believe in that.”

“Of course we will,” Kurou confirmed, “No matter what, we’ll find the truth, right? That’s the way we’ve always done things, and it’s the way we always will. For this trial, and anything we may need to face together in the future.”

“Together?” Sayaka asked.

“Well, after going through an event like this, I can’t imagine parting ways in any serious fashion, can you?” Kurou asked.

“I certainly can’t,” Tsumugi answered as she walked into the room, joining them. “That’s why I would love if everybody joined me, in space. I understand that’s not for everybody, but. I really would like it, to be able to build up a new civilization with my lovely friends! I don’t want to split up at all, and I want… Maybe it’s too ambitious, but I really do want to build a new world together with you.”

“Well, if it’s building you’ll be doing, then you probably need me!” Kurou chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve got no problem with doing that, and I’m sure that Ayu won’t either. We were never that attached to our existing home, and I’d just feel weird going back to my normal life.”

“I haven’t even got a normal life to return to, by this point. I was working with DIYEAR before, but I don’t think they’d let me go back there now. And my moms… Hah. They never watch the games, but I still don’t think I could face them after what I’ve done. Or let them know that Ryoma’s dead… Yeah. They’re better off never seeing me again. That’s not me self-hating or whatever, it’s the conclusion I’ve come to from a scientist’s perspective.”

“My normal life…” Nami thought. “It was a good one, but I don’t mind leaving it behind either. I built it for myself, after all. I can build a good life all over again.”

“I’ll go wherever you go,” Sayaka said, “Honestly, it’d be nice to get away. From my ‘normal’ life. It isn’t like I disliked it, but I kinda realized I have different priorities now than I did when I was growing up? My dad can handle things here. He wouldn’t want to leave.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Randy asked, walking in. Tsukasa was right behind him.

“Who’s coming to space with me to make a new colony on a distant planet when all of this is
over,” Tsumugi answered.

“Oh. Well, sorry to say, but that won’t be us,” Tsukasa said, “Randy and I have a responsibility to our hometown. Now that I understand how to hold up against Despair, I can’t just leave it the way it was before. I have the most political and economic power in the city, after all. Anything I can do to clean it up, I need to.”

“That’s a shame… But I understand,” Tsumugi said, smiling in their direction. “Actually, that’s very noble of you! I can’t possibly hold that against you. But you’ll be in touch, won’t you? Nami says she has a friend who can probably come up with a way to communicate over that distance, so you won’t have any excuse to grow emotionally distant!”

“We promise!” Randy confirmed, “I’d never wanna not know you guys, that’s stupid. If you couldn’t communicate over that distance I’d be so pissed. You can’t just become somebody’s friend then fuck off forever like that!”

Amai stood up. Turned out she’d been in the room for a bit already, but was sitting on the floor. “Hey. Moogs? Can I come along? Am I… Welcome?”

“Of course you are,” Tsumugi said, “It doesn’t matter if I’m upset with you, right now. If you feel like you can’t thrive on this world, then it’s only natural to invite you to a new one.”

“…I thought my parents really cared about me. But they probably didn’t even realize I was missing. And it’s not hard to find my parents, either. I’m sure that the people outside asked them to come and talk with me, and they weren’t there. So they turned it down. Even if they’d take me back, I don’t wanna go back there. I don’t wanna go to people who secretly never gave a shit about me,” Amai said, “But you people do, for some reason. I dunno why, but you all actually. Give shits about me, I think? It seems like it, anyway. I hope I’m not wrong. So I. Want to stay with you. Even if I can be a bitch and I’ve said some shitty stuff and I’m a terrible fucking friend. I wanna stay.”

“…Of course you can.” Tsumugi dipped her head. “Stupid. It’s not like I’m going to stay mad at you forever, you know.”

“Thank you,” Amai said, wrapping her arms around herself. “Thanks so much. Thanks, everybody, really. For making me feel like somebody does give a shit about me. For a little while there, you know, I didn’t. So I was lashing out, more than I normally would. I was really scared of everything and everyone, and you made that better for me. So. Thank you, and I’m sorry.”

“Of course, Amai,” Nami said, then paused and looked around the room. Randy, Tsukasa. Herself, Sayaka. Amai. Tsumugi. Kurou. Only one person was still missing before the trial could begin.

And, just as she had that thought, Goro walked in. So that really was everyone. Eight people, half of the number they initially started with. Nine if they considered that Dia would be coming back, and ten if they counted Mono. It wasn’t so bad a bodycount, for a Killing Game.

“So this is it, huh?” Goro asked, “The last trial of the last Killing Game. At least. It fucking better be! Hahh… I can’t believe this. I’m actually seeing the last trial. And I actually feel relieved that I made it here.”

“You really wanted to survive, all along,” Nami said, “You just couldn’t see it, until you really did almost get killed. I’m glad, though. You’ve got a lot of life still waiting for you. Just like we all do. So, let’s go. Let’s grab our future and close this chapter.”
"Welcome to the final class trial. Whatever the result, I won't allow this trial to end with the game still continuing," Mono said, "So, go right ahead. Wow me and find the door to your future."

"Of course, Mono," Nami said, smirking in its direction. She'd decided how she felt about it now, and that decision was to be grateful to her. She really was doing her best. "Here's my briefing, then. The victims in this case are Dia Hamuko and Tsukune Madara. Both were killed by gunshots to the head, one from behind, and one to the forehead. Dia was killed at 2128 last night, and Madara was killed at 0545 this morning. Dia was found in the Blackmailer's Ward, and Madara in the Quarantine Room."

"It's pretty clear that the Evil King is somehow involved in this case," Goro said, "I mean, only the Evil King can find the gun, right? But it's weird. The wording on the Evil King's game states outright that one of the win conditions is for 'The Evil King's Gun to kill two people'. That happened here, so it should have been an instant win. No matter who you think it is, or if somebody other than the Evil King pulled the trigger. Right?"

"Well, think back to the third case," Nami said, "We were told that the win conditions can get into arguments with each other, right? It's possible that Dia or Madara were the Evil King themselves. That win condition qualifies as when the Evil King has been defeated, and the culprit has been found and executed. Maybe the game's not parsing the win correctly because it's also trying to manage the other win condition."

"Yes, that's one of the possible glitches with the Evil King's game, and always has been," Mono confirmed, "I was worried about that glitch this whole time. The glitch relating to Dia? I have no idea what's up with that, but it's likely that the win conditions are arguing with each other and that's why the game's still going."

"Well, that's just one possibility," Goro said, "I mean, think about it! We all saw what the heck Dia did to the top floor, so all sorts of weirdness is going on here. We should probably start off with figuring out which of them is the Evil King, right? If we're gonna try that road."

"There are a few things odd about the gun, and Dia's death," Sayaka said, "To start with, the gun didn't have any fingerprints on it. It was either cleaned really well, or, and I think this is more likely, nobody ever touched it directly with their hands."

"The other strange thing is that in order to fire the gun through the window at the right angle to kill Dia... The culprit would have needed to be on the roof of the Empty Wings. That's off-limits, so it doesn't make sense," Nami elaborated on it, "So it's possible that the culprit was actually in that room to begin with, and just staged the scene to make it seem like the bullet came from outside."

"That sounds like you're putting me under suspicion." Amai pouted. "Are you serious? If I was the Evil King, I would have picked somebody else to target! I mean, Madara, sure. But Dia, and trying to go for Sayaka too? They're my friends! I had my pick of targets, frankly, I would have killed another boy along with Madara."

"You can say that," Randy said, "But you can't deny, it kind of does seem like the only real possibility. Right? Nobody can be on the roof and therefore nobody could have shot into the room at the correct angle from outside. So it kind of falls on you. Or I guess Sayaka, if she gave herself
that injury to try and exonerate herself?"

"I saw it happen," Amai said, "One shot grazed Sayaka's cheek, she dropped to the ground, and a second one came and hit Dia. Both were definitely through the window."

"We didn't find the bullet that hit Sayaka, though..." Nami admitted, glancing to her girlfriend apologetically. Sayaka shrugged; It was a trial, she wasn't off-limits by any means. The truth was more important.

"Mhm. If it grazed her cheek, then it should have ended up in the room," Kurou said.

"I grabbed it," Amai said.

"May we see it?" Nami asked.

"No," Amai said.

"Why not?

"I don't have it anymore. I picked it up right before we ran out of the room but I don't have it anymore."

"Well then, where is it?" Nami questioned, "Since we didn't find it in the facility anywhere? Randy even did a rooms check, and he didn't find it, right?"

"Nope. Nothing of interest in the rooms," Randy confirmed, "So, what's the deal, Amai?"

"Well, of course you wouldn't find it, you're respectful people and you don't go rifling around people's clothes any more than necessary," Amai said, "But the bullet that was fired at Sayaka ended up in Madara's pocket. Mono?"

"...Yes, she's telling the truth. It was my bad for not encouraging you to retrieve that evidence, so, yeah. You didn't actually have all of the evidence, so here you go, an evidence bullet! Bullet in Madara's pocket, a literal bullet. That's pretty funny, isn't it?"

"I don't know what that means," Nami said, "But, moving on. Amai, does that mean that you were the other person in the Quarantine room with Madara last night?"

"May as well admit it, yeah, that was me. I was there. But I'm not the Evil King. Well, fuck, you know. Even if I was the Evil King I'd be kinda forced to lie and say that I wasn't so that's not really a useful statement, is it?" Amai groaned. "Let's just leave it at, yes. After being fired at, I went to the Empty Wings to try and figure out who it was. Madara and I got into a physical fight, and he had the gun. I picked it up, then we ended up inside the quarantine room."

"...Yeah, that checks out," Nami said, "Actually, it makes perfect sense. Now that I think about it, even without your testimony, of course. It makes perfect sense. Tsukune Madara was the Evil King."
"How did you come to that conclusion, Nami?" Kurou wondered, "I admit that Amai’s testimony seems quite damning, but could also be a lie, even an unwillingly lie. What is it exactly that makes you so sure about this?"

"Well, thinking about it more in-depth, I realized something. We were discussing just recently about the wording of the Evil King, yeah? And how it's phrased that, only the Evil King can find the gun. Goro thought that it may have been that the gun was in a ReWard panel, but I don't think that was it at all," Nami said, "I actually think that the reason only the Evil King could get the gun may have been that they were exempt from a particular rule."

"What rule is that?" Tsukasa asked.

"Oh, oh! I think I know this one!" Goro raised his good arm up in the air, enthusiastic. "Right, I figured that part out! The Evil King is allowed to go on the roof without being killed, right? So the gun was stored there the entire time, and that's also where the shot was fired into the Blackmail Ward, isn't it?"

"That's the idea!" Nami confirmed, then reached into the evidence bag and came out with Madara's Monopad. "It's this, that clued me in on that fact. It was left open to the rules page, which I thought was just Madara thinking he was smarter than all of us again and reminding us that somebody had to be in the Quarantine Room with him all night long. But actually, he wanted us to realize that it was him. Because only he was capable of doing it."

“That also explains why it took this long for him to find it,” Goro noted, “I was thinking, there’s no way that somebody would have waited this long to look for the gun. So it had to be somewhere weird. He would have been able to see it on the roof through the windows on the top floor, but only from there. So really, he wasn’t doing anything wrong, not searching for the gun despite being the Evil King or anything. He just had already looked everywhere he could think of, until he could see onto the roof.”

“He’s known that the whole time he was here…” Sayaka muttered, “So that’s what all of that was about, huh? He kept saying that he didn’t count on making it out of here, that he didn’t think he could live through it… And all along, it was because he was the Evil King. The right thing to do, for him, would have been to get killed, since he couldn’t find the gun for so long…”

“I think you’re right,” Kurou said, “Maybe what we thought, all this time… Madara didn’t really want to die, and he wasn’t hopeless for his future, he just knew that it would be best for us if somebody was to find him out and murder him. Until he did it himself… He couldn’t have even thought to show us his Monopad, the fact he was exempt from one of the rules.”

“…Yeah, that sounds about right. This whole time…” Randy sighed. “I can’t imagine if that had been me. Stuck, not able to tell anyone anything or do anything about it. Jeeze, it must’ve been torture every time somebody got killed.”

“So we agree now? Because of the information about the roof, you know. Madara was the Evil King, for real, yeah?” Nami clarified. Everybody around the courtroom nodded; That was one aspect of this case which didn’t need any further debate. It was a truth that they could all agree on, and one piece of the puzzle out of the way. However large the puzzle really was, which they had no way of knowing…
Tsukune Madara was the Evil King.

That was one, one piece sorted out. Now it was time to move on to another.

“Well, that part of it makes sense now,” Nami said, “And a bit more, too. Madara killed Dia for a particular reason. He was one of the only people in the room when Mono told us that Dia wouldn’t be permanently killed; If she died in the Killing Game, there might be some issues, but she would still be restored from a backup version. He was one of the only people who knew that.”

“So do you think,” Sayaka said, “He picked Dia because he knew that she wouldn’t stay dead?”

“That’s exactly what I think,” Nami said, “And the bullet that grazed you, you’re certain that came before the one that killed her?”

“A hundred percent. I got hit first, then another bullet hit Dia.”

“Mm, that makes sense. So you were never a target, and neither was Amai. Running away from the ward wasn’t a mistake, because Madara wouldn’t have actually shot either of you anyway. He wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of shooting through a window if he was picking at random. The only person in that room he intended to kill was Dia,” Nami said, “Because she would be able to come back, eventually. Even if he had to hurt her, that was worse than killing any of us who wouldn’t.”

“He still needed a second victim, though,” Kurou said, “So it’s just minimizing the damage, isn’t it?”

“I’m not so sure about that!” Goro exclaimed, hitting the podium with one hand. “If he didn’t know Dia could come back, then it would be ‘minimizing’, in his mind. But as far as Madara’s concerned I don’t think he thought of it as him killing anybody at all.”

“What do you mean?” Tsukasa asked.

“Well. I mean, I can’t totally put myself in his shoes! But I do know that if I was in his position, then really, I’d have realized it easily. And I wouldn’t hesitate to do it either, you guys know me. The Evil King’s Gun must kill two people, and then the game is over! That’s how it was supposed to work, if things didn’t get weird... Since it’s tied to the weapon, well, it’s pretty simple! Madara killed Dia, who he knew would come back to life. And his second target, all along, was himself.”
“...I hate to say it, but it doesn’t surprise me that was his plan,” Kurou said.

“But he probably couldn’t go through with it, right? At least, he didn’t do it right away. Amai, you were in the Quarantine Room with him all night,” Tsumugi said, “So you would know. He died early in the morning. He didn’t kill himself straight away.”

“That’s because... I was trying to stop him,” Amai answered, “I was trying to talk him out of doing it, obviously!”

“But he still turned up dead,” Nami said, “And shot at point blank range, to boot. My first thought seeing the muzzle burns...”

“At the same time, the angle doesn’t make sense,” Sayaka said, “The forehead? People don’t fire guns like that. They go from the side, or from below, when they shoot themselves. Trust me, I’ve seen it before. It wouldn’t make any sense... Doesn’t even seem like Madara would be capable of doing it from that angle, really.”

“But if Amai wanted to get revenge,” Tsumugi said, “Why wait till nearly morning? I believe her. At least, I believe that she was trying to keep Madara alive...”

“Yeah, see? If even Moogs believes in me, then it’s gotta be the truth...” Amai frowned.

“Well, then why not tell us the whole truth? You must have seen what happened,” Tsukasa said, “Since you were right there.”

“Hey now, you don’t know that. I could have been asleep on one of the cots, only to wake up when I heard his gunshot!” Amai protested, “You can’t just assume that I have all the answers! You were all gung-ho to figure out this final case, so figure it out already! It isn’t like I want to talk about what happened... Come on. If I did see what happened, get it through your idiot skulls. I had to relive finding Box that way, when Dia got shot. And then that, too? You’re fucking smart, so don’t just look to me to say it all! Use your goddamn brains!”

“Alright, Amai,” Nami said, “I’ve been given much worse challenges than that, so I’ll take you up on it! At least you’re telling me outright to find the truth, instead of putting it in some weird death-wrapped riddle, or something.”

“Well, then I guess we do need to figure it out,” Goro said, “Personally, I think that even though it was Madara’s plan to take his own life, he ultimately didn’t.”

“Why’s that?” Sayaka wondered.

“Well, it’s more stuff with the game rules!” Goro explained, “We already figured out, at least one of the glitches going on here is that the Evil King was defeated, and it needs to resolve that. If a culprit killed them, then that culprit needs to be executed to resolve that win condition. Whatever’s going with Dia... I don’t think that the game would be malfunctioning on this front unless there was a culprit in Madara’s death. Plus, what Sayaka said. The angle makes no sense. And one more thing. Isn’t Monokuma supposed to prevent suicides after one’s already occurred? Or at least try to?”

“Mhm, yeah,” Nami said, “That makes perfect sense. So Madara was thinking that he’d kill Dia because she’d come back, then himself because he thought that was better than killing somebody
else. But that didn’t happen, so it means that instead, Amai is the culprit who killed him. It’s the only other possibility, since the Empty Wings were still off-limits at the time Madara died, and we know Amai was in the quarantine room with him.”

“But she only did it just a short while before the morning announcement…” Tsumugi observed, “So those two were in there for an entire night first. So I don’t think that’s exactly what was intended there…”

“Of course not! You’re right, if I wanted him dead, I would have just killed him right away without a second thought,” Amai exclaimed, “If there’s one thing you shouldn’t doubt in this case, it’s the fact that I did everything I could to avoid Madara’s death!”

“Okay. I won’t doubt that,” Nami said, “But the point still stands that everything points to you as the culprit who killed Madara and caused this glitch. So I’m not sure what to think. How could it be possible you did everything you could to keep him alive, and you still shot him?”

“Well, that’s the mystery to figure out, isn’t it?” Amai questioned, crossing her arms. “I’ve told you something that’s an absolute truth, but it’s on you to figure out how it’s possible for that to be true!”

“We do need to still consider, there were no fingerprints on the gun,” Sayaka said, “It makes sense, Madara wears gloves… But forgive me if I can’t quite believe that Amai would be careful enough to keep her fingerprints off of the gun, too.”

“She might not have been planning to use it, and she picked it up carefully the same way we did; To check for fingerprints,” Nami said, “It’s possible somebody other than Madara was the Evil King and just passed the gun on to him for example, and their fingerprints could have been there. Or even, it could have had the fingerprints of the Mastermind who prepared the gun. Am I right?”

“Yeah. I held the gun with the sleeves of my sweater cause I thought maybe it’d have other prints on it!” Amai confirmed.

“That’s actually pretty responsible of you, I’ll admit that much,” Randy said, “Still, this is really weird. You obviously shot him, but I don’t doubt you at all when you say that you did everything you could… Like. It really does seem like an absolute truth.”

“That’s because it is! Anyone who could lie about something this serious is somebody I’d be super afraid of. I guess, Asahi might have… Well, trust me, please. I’m not like her, even though we were friends.”

“Asahi…” Tsukasa muttered, “Amai, about her. You said something right after her execution, that she could have had a chance, but you won’t explain why. And you kept saying that stuff about, how she shouldn’t die yet.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

“In that case, we have our answer,” Nami said, “How it’s possible for these two statements to be absolutely true. Amai Oishi did all she could to prevent the death of Tsukune Madara, and Amai Oishi shot Tsukune Madara in the head. That’s because… She made sure of something. She has some theory, that there’s a way for people not to die when they are killed, right? So she put that theory into action. She shot Madara at a time when there was a chance it wouldn’t kill his body in the real world!”
“What makes you think that’s possible?” Tsumugi asked, “It’s always been pretty clear, dying here means death in the real world. In the last game, the bodies were even being auctioned of to wealthy Despairs to help fund the games.”

“I don’t know exactly what it means,” Amai said, “But I thought, hey, maybe it’s possible. Maybe it’s possible, so shouldn’t we give it a chance? I’ve had this weird feeling for a while now, really weird. For eighteen seconds, my stomach hurts, just a little bit. It’s unsettled. Then for the 42 left in the minute, I feel completely fine. Back and forth like that. I know these things, even the smallest disturbance in my gut, thanks to my talent. And I thought… Even if it’s just the smallest chance, what if when my stomach’s hurting like that, it might mean… Saying it aloud sounds fucking stupid, huh?”

“No, not really,” Sayaka said, “It happens every single minute?”

“Yes. If you pay attention, you’d probably notice it yourself too. Take a minute,” Amai said. Everyone went quiet for a bit.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, you’re right,” Nami said, “It’s really subtle, though. I never would have noticed if you didn’t tell me to check for it… Besides, this physical form is so unreliable anyway, if I only noticed it happening to me then I’d probably just assume my stomach hated me.”

“You really don’t talk like a human sometimes,” Kurou observed, “I’ll admit, before we learned about Dia, I was thinking it wouldn’t be strange if you turned out to be the AI.”

“It’s the language of a generation long past, babey.” Nami gave him finger-guns.

“Anyway,” Randy said, “I can feel it too. I bet that we all can if we pay attention, and… It’s too regular not to mean something. So it’s definitely not dumb! The best assumption is to hope that when that’s going on, people don’t die for real! So Madara could still be alive, right? Really, anyone could still be alive!”

“Not anyone,” Amai said, “This only began after the fourth trial, after all. And like I basically said at the time… Riko died during the forty-two seconds where there wasn’t the stomachache. Where I felt the same as I have the whole time I’ve been here, and the status quo was definitely in effect. Madara, however. Yeah, when I eventually did shoot him, I made sure that it was during that time. I guess it’ll test my theory, when we wake up from this thing! We’re going to, soon, after all.”

“And you waited till nearly morning to do it, because you wanted to spend as much time with him before he died as you could, right?” Tsumugi asked.

Amai looked away. “N-No, obviously not! I hate that guy! I barely even decided that I would see if I could save his life and we’re definitely not friends at all!”

“Mhm, sure.” Tsumugi smirked as she relaxed against her podium, leaving Amai to stand there fidgeting, evidently unsure of how she could refute the accusation that Madara was her friend after such a simple and flippant dismissal.

“Anyway… Yeah, that’s what happened, but you know, there’s a bigger problem here!” Amai managed a response, in the way that changing the topic and failing to address what required her response was a response. “We still gotta figure out what to do about this… Glitch. Right? I mean. There has to be some other way to resolve it! I don’t wanna get executed just because stupid
Madara would have killed himself if I didn’t do it!”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Goro asked.

“I mean, if I gave him back the gun… He was feeling the thing too, you know, the stomachache? And he was going to do it in the forty-two seconds. He was gonna specifically make sure that if the eighteen seconds meant survival, he wouldn’t do it then,” Amai answered, her voice cracking every few words. “And I couldn’t do that! I couldn’t let that happen again, okay!? I don’t care how much he didn’t want to live, I wanted him to and I know all of you do too!”

“Of course we do,” Sayaka said, “And we want you to live, too, we… Want everyone to make it out of this who can! And Madara, really, good grief. We told him, you know. Plenty of us said it. We won’t leave him behind, we’ll be his friend as long as he’ll let us. But he… I guess he already made up his mind that we were liars, or that we just didn’t know enough to hate him like all the others yet.”

“Which is stupid,” Amai said, “Seriously. What an absolute fucking idiot! I don’t even like him, I tried not to, we were fighting all the time. And I still didn’t wanna see him go! I don’t wanna… I don’t want him to die, and I wouldn’t want him to stay behind on Earth, either! I want that dummy in my life, somehow! We weren’t friends. We weren’t, we wouldn’t count as friends. We could be, though! We could be serious rivals. We could be the type of friends who fight all the time but always know we love each other in the end. We could. If. He lived.”

“I’m not sure I’d call it stupid,” Kurou said, “I spoke to the boy during the Duos Challenge, myself. I think I did understand the way he felt… And it wasn’t stupid of him, to think that we didn’t care. He was just going off what he thought he knew. It isn’t stupid to base your understanding of the world on your personal history. Of course we were lying to him, from where he stood. Even the people who told him they’d be on his side, eventually weren’t, right? So he never would have believed us. It’s actually smart to think that way, even though he was wrong.”

“No it’s not! It’s totally fucking idiotic! Couldn’t he just read the room and see that among us, he was stupid likeable? That even people who never said they wanted to be his friend, did anyway!?” Amai demanded, hitting her hands against the podium. “And now! Now what if I was wrong? What if he’s… What if he’s dead for real anyway but now I’m the one who killed him and I’m gonna. I’m. Am I gonna fucking… die… now?”

“Don’t resign yourself like that!” Nami shouted, her pitch breaking with the strength of her outburst. “If we can help it… If there’s anything we can do, Amai! There’s two glitches already, who’s to say there can’t be more? You’re not sentenced yet, not in a case as weird as this one!”
“Yeah, you’re right about that,” Mono said, “Now that you’ve realized it, looks like I’ll be able to explain it to you.”

“There’s… There’s a way that I don’t have to get executed?” Amai asked, “It’s still possible for the game to end, without me dying, without that happening at all? For real?”

“Of course there is,” Mono said, “But actually, I’m kind of impressed, so Nami. Do you think you can explain the options? I’ll still tell you what they are, I just wanna see how much of this you’ve figured out.”

“Seriously?” Nami asked, then sighed as she held a hand under her chin. “Well, actually, I guess that’s exactly what I’d expect of you, isn’t it? Hah. Okay, I’ll play. It’ll work out in the end either way, won’t it?”

“Yes. If you fail, which I don’t expect you will, I’ll still reveal the truth. I do want the best for all of you who remain, wherever possible,” Mono said, “But then again. I’d be remiss to just let an opportunity like this slide without asking to witness your stunning intellect again.”

“…Sure.” Nami dropped her hand. “Well, the thing to consider is the order of operations, isn’t it? There are two glitches happening here. Amai’s defeat of the Evil King is overriding the fact that the Evil King’s gun killed two people… And Dia’s being shot with the gun is causing corruption and artifacting of the Neo World. I think, anyway.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Tsukasa said, “I’m probably the most tech-savvy person in this group, strangely enough… I don’t really know a whole lot about this stuff, but I do use computers at work, and I’ve played video games my whole life. That’s the closest I can get to a qualification to confirm your theory here?”

“Thanks, Tsukasa,” Nami said, “So we’ll work off of that information for now. It has to be a combination. If shooting two people with the gun is supposed to be an immediate win, then the culprit aspect still shouldn’t have overridden that fact. Unless we consider the other glitch… Dia’s data is backed up, and getting shot prompted severe glitching in the area. On top of that, Mono did give us the body discovery announcement in person, to our faces.”

“So, what exactly are you saying here?” Amai asked, holding her hands in close to herself.

“If I’m correct with what I’m thinking, then Dia hasn’t actually been killed at all. The body discovery announcement was just Mono speaking about it manually, not the facility’s auto-detection,” Nami explained, “The reason that she’s corrupting and artifacting the area around her is because she’s not dead, she’s just stuck there with a bullet in her brain. She’s still alive, experiencing the feelings of dying, with her mental processing impaired. That’s representing itself in the area around her because it wasn’t supposed to happen like that.”

“How do you think that it did happen? Or, that it was supposed to happen?” Goro wondered, “That girl’s a real tough cookie… So I guess that I can buy it, if she’s holding on through sheer willpower or something…”

“Think to one of the particular artifacts. Box Hako, the way she really died,” Nami said, “It’s not a matter of willpower or anything like that, but it’s probably an issue of personage. I’m going to say that, given her role as a ‘psychiatric support’, as one of the Mastermind’s ‘helpers’, if she was
killed then it would be an afterimage of Box which constituted the body, and Dia herself would have dispersed into the program. Am I on the right track, Mono?"

“Yes, you haven’t said anything untrue so far. That’s making me think that the good Doctor Kirisame taught you a little bit more about her computer passions than you thought!”

“You don’t have to understand how programming works, to think about these things… I could just as easily be talking about a ghost returning to the ancient ruins which leant it form. So… The Neo World Program doesn’t know what to do, if Dia is herself and she gets killed. It’s falling apart and attempting to produce the false Box Hako body, but it can’t do it properly because it wasn’t her anymore. An image for the program to use doesn’t exist of Box Hako having been shot, only Dia herself. And since the program can’t leave the body it wants to, she can’t disperse either, so she’s… Stuck that way.”

“Bingo! I knew I was right to see if you could figure it out on your own. This program never accounted for what to do if Dia was killed in a way that Box Hako had never been! It stored plenty of images from those false games just in case, but hey, the gun didn’t exist yet in those.”

“So that explains why all of this is happening this way,” Nami said, “Madara thought he was being clever, knowing that Dia wouldn’t stay dead… But she’s in a sort of programming loop right now, isn’t she? Preventing her from flagging as somebody killed by the gun. At the same time, she's flagging herself as having been killed. Resolving the other glitch might free her, right?”

“Yes, precisely,” Mono confirmed further, “As of right now, the system perceives that the Evil King’s Gun has killed Tsukune Madara, and that the culprit who defeated the Evil King is Amai Oishi. Therefore, what are our paths forward?”

“Our paths forward?” Nami asked, then thought for a minute. “Well, I guess that there are a few. There’s the obvious; If Amai is executed, then it completes a win condition. The culprit who defeated the king is punished for the crime of murder, and the game is over. It’s the simplest route, sure, but that’s the one we already said we’d rather avoid…”

“Mm. There are others though, right?” Amai asked, crossing her arms where she stood. “Like, I can take one for the team if I absolutely gotta! But we should weigh our options first!”

“That’s true. I’d rather not weigh anything against your life, but…” Sayaka lifted her arms in a shrug. “Nami, what are our other choices? Have you figured that out? Or should we shake it outta Mono here?”

“No, I think I figured it out. If the problem is that Dia’s not flagging the system properly, then the option to resolve that would be to shoot somebody else with the gun. That’s not really desirable either, is it? We can’t just say we’re putting Amai’s life up against somebody else’s. So the third option, well. That’s the one we tried to take once before. The option that almost got us all killed once, if not for Mono’s quick thinking… Still. We could always begin the Mastermind Trial.”
“Wait. No!” Amai shouted, “No fucking way! We can’t do that just for my sake, that’s bullshit, no!”

“Why not?” Nami asked, “I’m sure if this much was on the line, we could figure it out. I don’t have any theories myself yet, but that isn’t so shocking. I need to hear other people’s ideas before I can sort through things, but that’s worked out every other time… Except for when Kaede and Sayaka initiated the Mastermind Trial too soon. We have some amount of evidence now, at least!”

“I’m. Really not sure that evidence is sufficient, you know?” Mono fidgeted in its seat. “I don’t have any secret clutch way to save you guys again. Hitting the ‘reset button’ that time was all that I could do!”

“Why do we remember that now, anyway…?” Tsumugi wondered, holding a hand to her head. “You said you’d erase our memories so that we couldn’t learn from that mistake. So that Kaede could get the memories back when it would hurt her most…”

“Sure. Then she died and I got more attached to the lot of you. I mean, at the time I used the reset to save your sorry butts, I kinda only cared about a few of you brats. I wanted to see what you’d do! I wanted to see stuff like Akamatsu’s horrible realization that she was responsible for the reset, all of it… But then, I liked you? It’s weird. I guess that’s what happens when the sample’s this close to the heart. My own age, all Ultimates too. So I messed around and returned those memories just as soon as I knew you’d understand that I used the reset to save your lives. Maybe I had some cruel intentions at the time… But it really was the only way to keep the game itself from ending all of your lives.”

“You’re talking pretty funny for a Monokuma,” Tsumugi said, “But then again, I guess we knew that. You’re certainly a different Monokuma than the one which moderated my game.”

“I am,” Mono said, “But that’s not a now question. The now question is what you plan on doing to finish this game. My personal recommendation is not to take the nuclear option but, hey, whatever floats your boat.”

“Is the Mastermind Trial really the nuclear option, though?” Nami asked, “I mean. I don’t think it’s impossible to determine the Mastermind based on the information that we collected. At least, we can rule a few things out. Motherkuma already confirmed that Mercury Mars isn’t related to the game itself, she’s just the Ultimate Counterfeiter who got us put here…”

“…Mana?” Mono questioned, then looked away. “Well, Motherkuma can only speak truths, so you can trust that thing. She had no reason to even bother lying now anyway, if she had a brain she’d want to feel useful again after all this time…”

“So, one person’s been eliminated,” Amai said, “That still leaves way too many options for Mastermind! Since Mono counts as a participant too, that’s what, twenty-one possible suspects!? I don’t want to take that chance! A one out of twenty-one chance that I’ll get spared and we get out, against the odds that everybody will die?”

“Kinda surprising to see you take the ‘for the good of the masses’ stance, Amai,” Sayaka noted, a finger pressed to her cheek. “When you first got here you would have watched us all rot for your freedom, assuming you weren’t the one who had to get your hands dirty!”
“O-Obviously I never wanted to kill anyone with my own hands.” Amai pouted. “But you’re right. When I woke up here I was so fucking scared and angry, I’d have taken any chance to get out, fuck all of you. But it’s like I said. You actually made me feel… Cared about. So I super don’t want you to die.”

“It’s funny. You also killed Madara yourself because you cared about him. The very thought of murdering someone made you feel real sick, but you did it because you thought it might save him.” Sayaka dropped her hand and giggled. “You’re such a sap, Amai! All along, you really were as sweet as your name, huh?”

“…Talking like that, makes it sound like you do think that I’m gonna die,” Amai complained, “But I guess it. I guess if those are our three options, then I should, shouldn’t I?”

“I really just don’t want you giving up,” Nami said, “Even if… You’re right. The Mastermind Trial is a huge risk and I’m. I think we could figure it out but even Mono says there isn’t actually enough evidence to do that and. I just. If we all got killed, that’s what they wanted us to do? That’s why they put us in here?”

“I know. I understand that now, as fucking shit scary as it is…” Amai chuckled. “Somebody like me wasn’t fit to be an Ultimate. That’s the truth in this game. None of us were, right?”

“According to some weirdos who decided they’re the Final Authority on what makes a good person, yeah. So what’s that matter? I say, fuck ‘em.” Sayaka leaned forward on her podium, lifting a hand as she did. “Look, think of it this way, for sure! Even if it was somehow justified to put us through these Killing Games, even if we really were just awful and this was a reasonable punishment, have you seen any VR this advanced, anywhere else in the world? So, keeping it to themselves proves it. They’re just selfish bastards who think they’re better than the rest of us.”

“Huh??” Amai looked up, and over at Sayaka. Then, a smirk broke on her face. “Goddamn, you’re right! Here I was feeling all guilty for fucking up my Ultimate-duties this whole time, and who are they to judge us?”

“Plus,” Nami said, “It’s completely possible they decided we were all too bad to keep being Ultimates because our natures were compromised. That Mars person, she published all of our names and talents in a national paper. Our morals had nothing to do with it, but we’d become useless, because Despair knew where to find us now. I think?”

“I can’t answer that,” Mono said, “I don’t understand Ultimate Hope’s motivations, all I know is that whatever they were, they were poor ones. You stupid heathens… Didnt deserve this. Nobody in history ever has.”

“And nobody in the future ever will, either,” Amai said, “But before we can reach that future, we need to put an end to our present. And we can’t do that… Through the Mastermind Trial. So I. Well, I might have an idea.”
“An idea?” Goro wondered, “Well, your ideas are usually pretty solid! For a bunch of idiots, most of us are also pretty smart. Funny how that works. Well, let’s hear it, Amai!”

“To begin with, I want you to give me the gun. Er, Nami you. You’re the one who has it. Not Goro you.” Amai held out a hand, and the gun was passed across the courtroom into her palm. “Great! Thank you! Now then, let’s consider our options. I could, you know, shoot any one of you. But I don’t really want to do that, get?”

“Right. You didn’t even want to shoot Madara to begin with, so you wouldn’t want to do it again,” Sayaka said, “So, what’s your actual idea?”

“Well, it’s simple. At this point, I should… Take my chances, really. I could shoot myself during the time when it might not mean permanent death. Because my options are to die, or die in a way that I might not stay dead,” Amai said, “That’s it, if I don’t want to endanger everybody. I’d count as a second kill for the gun, and as executing the culprit. Since, we did find out that Goro’s murder of Kyosuke counted as an execution for him, it doesn’t have to be the whole thing. And then it’d resolve both win conditions anyway, so no room for more glitches!”

“I… Well, don’t do it just yet!” Nami protested. Amai relented and set the gun down on her podium. “Good. Jeeze, I… I’m sure that there’s some other way to do this, something else that we can do! That’s still half a chance of giving up and I don’t want to take that route unless it’s absolutely necessary…”

“Well, no matter what, I don’t want to be officially executed! I couldn’t possibly time that properly, for one thing. For another, those things look so fucking painful!” Amai complained, “So, like, obviously I don’t wanna deal with that. I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You did kill Madara!” Mono pointed out.

“That’s not wrong because he might still be alive and also he was gonna kill himself anyway so, like, even if he died for real that’s not on me. I tried harder to keep him alive than he was keeping himself alive. Absolves me of all responsibility!”

“Weird way to look at it, but I guess if it helps you sleep at night,” Mono said, “By the way, I’m not about to stop this trial, so. As long as none of you give a real closing argument or cast all your votes, the facility won’t do anything on just a confession. Feel free to keep sorting through this stuff as long as you like.”

“Thanks, Mono. I don’t think we’ll need that long, though. The only path forward is my option,” Amai said, “So I’ll just need to take it, at the right moment, and hope for the best! It’s funny. I really never thought I’d wanna die for anyone. Well, not quite. I didn’t think I’d wanna die for anyone, after Box was gone.”

“…You loved her, huh?” Tsumugi asked.

“Of course I fucking loved her!” Amai snapped, “And I wasn’t going to just sit by and goddamn fail again! Twice now, It should have been me… I should have known, I really should have known that night that she was going to die! I encouraged her… I encouraged her to do something and I didn’t realize what it was and maybe she wouldn’t have done it if I had even just realized what the fuck she meant but I didn’t and she’s gone! I couldn’t sit down and let Madara die, not when I
knew what he was planning! And I can’t let any of you die, either!”

“Well I can’t let you die!” Nami exclaimed, pointing a finger across the courtroom. “I can’t just let that happen, Amai! Because I made a promise to you, didn’t I? I told you that… You thought we were wolves, but we were all mice like you. We were all scared. And I wanted to do whatever I could to make sure you wouldn’t be scared, even though back then I didn’t even like you a little bit and I’m pretty sure you hated me back!”

“I didn’t hate you back, you just fucking terrified me…” Amai admitted, “And you… Kinda kept me away from my friend, back then, too. I was just scared and jealous.”

“Nami didn’t keep me away from you,” Sayaka said, “You were being a bigger bitch than usual and I didn’t wanna be around you when I had better options. And… I’m sorry that I didn’t understand what was going on with you. I was gonna do my best to keep you safe either way, you know.”

“You wouldn’t have kept me safe from Nami!” Amai protested.

“In any case.” Nami sighed, tapping her fingers against the podium. “I said I wanted to protect you and make sure you weren’t scared of me or anyone. Letting you die just to save the rest of us, is kind of breaking that promise, isn’t it? So if the gun really does have to kill a second person. Let me ask that it be me, who’s second to have the theory tested-”

“No!” Mono shouted, and everyone turned to look at it. The single cry had seemed to absolutely break the voice of a Monokuma, coming forth as somebody entirely different. Nami’s fingers went from tapping, to gripping the front edge of her podium as she stared.

“I mean. See, I mean,” Mono continued, her voice back to ‘normal’, “It isn’t. Well, I’m not saying that I, er, think it specifically shouldn’t be Nami. That’s not what I mean. Rather, I think you’re acting too rashly in all senses. You don’t need to assume one of you has to die, right off the bat, like that. Why don’t we take a break?”

“A… Break?” Amai asked.

“Yeah. Here, how about this. Why don’t you just watch the video feed of what really happened to Amai and Madara in the quarantine room, and maybe you’ll calm down? Start thinking clearly? Stop trying to throw away everything I’ve worked for?”
Amai and Madara rushed into the quarantine room, and the plastic which hung over the doorway was still swinging shut when the time, displayed clearly on Amai’s Monopad in her hand, switched to ten. Her other hand was wrapped around Madara’s wrist, but his was around hers just as much, a trapeze grip. And it was impossible to tell who had dragged who inside. The gun… Was still in Madara’s other hand.

“What just… Huh?” Amai asked, looking at the locked grip they had on each other with wide eyes. “You were. You saved me?”

“You saved me also?” Madara asked, then they both let go and looked away. “I didn’t want the rules killing you, that’s all. So I tried to bring you in here, but you were also bringing me in here, even though…” He waved the gun in his other hand.

“Well. You know, obviously,” Amai explained, “Would it really be ‘defeating’ you, to let you get skewered by those spears? Stupid. The game wouldn’t end if I let you die that way. Now, what I wonder is why you bothered with me. You killed Dia, after all, and fired at Sayaka.”

“Dia was my only target there, trust me,” Madara said, starting to pace the small area of the quarantine room. “I don’t want anyone to die who doesn’t have to. She’s got. She has some sort of backup, I think? The bear, it said so. I asked it what would happen to Dia when the game was over, and it said she’d be fine, even if she got killed. So it’s fine, it’s fine! It was all going to be fucking fine, but then you had to come chasing after me like some stupid kid with a deathwish and ruined everything!”

“Oh, ~yeah~, I’m gonna apologize for stopping you from killing whoever was your other target. What the fuck are you thinking? Ohh, yeah, I bet that Kurou’s secretly just like Riko, hiding some dark secret and planning to commit murder in cold blood. Bet that’s what’s going on in your puny dipshit brain, Mister King.” Amai crossed her arms. “If you’re killing anyone, it’s gotta be me, you know. It’s you, so it’s gotta be me.”

“What?”

“I’m your nemesis, after all. If you’re the Evil King, then that makes me the hero who’s supposed to stand against you! So, it’s real simple, buddy. This here is our final showdown, and I’m unarmed. Monologue all you like, then end the hero’s life. It’s… The way it has to be, I guess.”

“What the fuck… Are you talking about? Are you seriously telling me that you’d take a bullet for them? I’m not the only one who’s hated you.” Tsukune looked down. “You’re supposed to be a selfish idiot who’d gladly let us all rot, just to save yourself.”

“And you’re supposed to be so stupid you thought I would have killed those guys in my very own ward, and… And also just a jerk!” Amai shouted, pointing a finger at him. “And now you’re the Evil King, too! So just be that stupid jerk and kill me already, right!? It doesn’t matter if you think I’m supposed to be selfish, I… I gave up on humanity, and these people made me believe in them anyway. So I don’t want to see you kill any of them. I know all their favorite foods… And I couldn’t even cook them a proper last meal. So I should be the one to go.”

“Oh, please. All of them? What if it were Randy I wanted to get rid of? Or Goro? You don’t care much for those boys, right?” Madara asked, gesturing toward the door with his gun. “You’d lay down your life for the boy who put dead bodies in your ward, or a man who you’ve hardly even
spoken to at all? Look. I’ve watched you, Amai. You talk to me, Dia, Tsumugi, Nami, Sayaka, and Kurou. That leaves Randy, Tsukasa, and Goro… As non-factors. I’m certain all you know about them is their favorite foods. So… I don’t believe you. What’s your fucking ploy here?”

“How am I supposed to have a ploy for literally asking you to murder me instead of whoever you were planning to kill?” Amai asked, “The game has to end. Somebody has to die. And we’re right here. I am looking at your gun right fucking now. I don’t know why you’re hesitating when I know you hate me, you just hate my goddamn guts, so shoot me!”

“I do hate you. That’s why I don’t trust you to be altruistic,” Madara said, “Besides, I’m not planning to change my target. Whatever you say to me, I’m not going to change my mind.”

“I just don’t get it! You can end the game right now, you know! Do it, just fucking do it! Why make it go on any longer!? Why didn’t you do it sooner!? What the hell is your problem!?”

“I have a lot of problems.” Madara pulled out his Monopad and showed Amai the rules page. “This isn’t one of them. Well, it is a problem. I wasn’t nearly clever enough to realize that the rules were different for me. That only I could retrieve the gun because nobody else was allowed on the roof. I let this go on for this long, because you’re right. I am too stupid. This Killing Game told me everything I needed to know about myself.”

“…Hey, wait, now I’m not so fucking sure I like what you’re saying.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve never liked a word I’ve said. This should actually make you happy to hear, though. I am going to end the game before morning. I can end it right now. You’re completely right, Amai.”

So Madara stopped in his pacing, turned to face her. A grin split his face and he flicked off the safety. Amai’s breath caught in her throat.

*I can’t fucking let this happen again!*

And he lifted the gun to his chin.
"What the fuck are you thinking!?" Amai questioned, the barrel of the gun now wrapped in her sweater's sleeve. Somehow in those moments, she'd wrenched it away and even had the foresight not to do it with her bare hands. She wasn't even sure herself, why she took that precaution. All the same…

"I'm thinking that I need to die. I couldn't convince you to look away, so you forfeited your shot to avoid witnessing my suicide," Madara answered coolly, as if he was talking about… Basically anything else but this. "But then, well. Seems you surprised me instead. Now, don't get me wrong. It isn't some impulsive decision, on my part. I thought this through. If I kill myself, it fulfills both win conditions. The gun's killed two people, and the Evil King is defeated."

"You're… It let you say that to me?" Amai questioned.

"You caught me red-handed with the gun. I'd be seriously shocked if the game tried to make me lie to you after something like that." Madara groaned, then sat down on one of the corrupted cots. "Yes, I'm the Evil King. This whole time, it was me. Is it that shocking that the game would pick me? I'm unwanted, and I'm no good either. Tsukune Madara is the Evil King. Even a Killing Game can tell how rotten I am."

Amai mimicked his movement to sit across from him, holding the gun in her lap. "It was selected at random, you know. Completely. It could have just as easily been me, or Dia, or even Tsukasa. Are you seriously gonna tell me you think Tsukasa's got an evil bone in his body?"

"Well he is a capitalist." Madara chuckled, but his expression turned sour. "But it wasn't you, or Dia, or Tsukasa. It was me. That bear can say it's random, but I think it's clear. It's just telling me what I've already known, this entire time. There's something wrong with me-"

"You're fucking seventeen! Of course there is! Jesus Christ, man, there's something wrong with all of us!" Amai protested. "You gotta wonder. You gotta use that damn brain of yours, I know you've got it. You look around at people and you wonder, why not? Why can't I be happy like them? You do that?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, yeah, duh. So do I. Even with people close to me, I always looked at my parents and I thought, what's their deal? Why can they smile for real? I sure can't, and my best friend Box sure can't, so why? And how? I always used to wonder about that. That's the thing, Madara. You're among people who have something wrong with them. Nobody puts so much of themselves into perfecting one skill the way Ultimates do, if they can be happy in the normal way."

"So. Uh. What's this theory, anyway?"

"It's. Look, I just mean… Maybe when you're around people who aren't Ultimates, you feel inadequate. But you just haven't figured it out yet. You will! Look at Nami. Until more shit was happening, in this Killing Game? She had her life together. She was being happy and successful. Just takes time and distance, I think. I think our talents are really a distraction and once we sit down to figure out our trauma for real, or whatever? Yeah, I bet that's it. The secret to seeking out a happy life!"

"This world's fucked anyway. A happy life is a joke."
"I really don't think so, dude. It might be a bullshit state of affairs, but plenty of people are happy! You wouldn't feel like you're failing as a person or whatever if they weren't. Civilians will always carve out their own happiness in times of war, it's fucked up and scary but it isn't all-encompassing. Maybe that happiness is in leading a normal quiet life. Maybe it's by turning cruel and getting joy from hurting others. They still find it. And we can too. If we just… Realize. We're civilians too. We never meant to be considered 'symbols of hope' or whatever. I just wanted to cook good food. You just wanted to set shit on fire. It's other people who said we had to do that in the name of the world's well-being."

"Civilians don't get stuck in Killing Games," Madara said, "And when did you become so damn nice, anyway? I kinda expected you to be, you know. Egging me on."

"Why the fuck would I ever do that!?" Amai questioned, then took a deep breath to collect herself again. "I just. Look, neither of us ever wanted to be Ultimates, right? Just wanted to exist. Most Ultimates probably feel this way too, if you think about it. So why bother with it, yeah? Some burden stuck on us by other people who think it's somehow commendable that we buried our feelings so deeply in our talents? Just live. Just live and find your own way to be fucking happy, Madara."

And she put the gun to her head.

"Fuck you!" Madara cried out, "If you're gonna do that shit, come on, at least wait for it!"

"...Huh." Amai lowered it again. "You get the stomachache too? And you were gonna… Knowing about it you were still gonna… You waited till…"

"I dunno if it means anything. But if it means what I got a feeling it means, I want nothing to do with it." Madara dipped his head. "I gave it a shot. Carving out happiness, or whatever. But nobody ever wanted me around. And what kind of happiness can you make alone? I wanted somebody to call my family. Tried again, and again. It never worked, and then I ended up here. The Evil King. I've never been worth shit, I don't wanna have these nightmares too. If you shoot yourself with that gun, Amai, it won't stop me. I'll take it from your corpse and I'll die too. It solves nothing."

"Okay. Then. Monokuma?" Mono appeared, and looked to her. "I foiled his plans, didn't I? Isn't that a defeat? Didn't I defeat him? It's fine, right? It can be over? I defeated him without killing him so. We can both get out?"

"...The people who made this game are cruel, Amai," Mono said, "They'd never allow for such a happy end. I'm sorry. The facility won't acknowledge it."

"Fuck the facility." Amai turned towards Madara again. "Well, I guess we just wait here till morning, then. I still won't let you do it. Let's just talk, okay? We'll talk. If you really insist on dying, dipshit, don't you want somebody around to remind people of you? It's something Nami said once. Everyone deserves to be remembered!"

"...If you insist."

"And so," The Mono in the courtroom said, as the screen shut off, "Madara and Amai talked, all night long. And at the reported time, Amai caught him off guard, shooting him in the forehead and killing him during the portion of the minute where she had her stomachache. I can't tell you what it means, you know. I feel it, but I don't understand its nature at all. It's completely unfamiliar to me. But, I do hope you're right, if that's worth anything to you."
“In that case,” Nami said, “Amai, we can’t let you die. We really can’t. It has to be one of us, because if you die now, then everything you did to remember Madara for him will be useless. See, who’s being stupid now? It’s you. You are. What are you, Amai?”

“I… An idiot?”

“Not just an idiot. An idiot sandwich. Hey, that even matches your talent! Ultimate Idiot Sandwich. You hear me? You’re really gonna take my motto like that, my motivation to try and remember everyone the best I can, then throw that away just because suddenly you think that you need to save our lives? Come on. Come on! None of us knew Madara as well as you apparently decided to get to know him. I don’t think anyone in the entire world did, because, you know. His trauma was about never connecting with others and being abandoned over and over!”

“...Well then what the fuck are we supposed to do!? If we shoot anyone else to give it a shot at surviving with the stomachache, there could still be a culprithood glitch that happens. Killing me, obviously, resolves both. I’m just doing the same thing that Madara planned on doing before we knew that Dia was trapped in death limbo.”

“Death limbo sounds like a really dangerous party game,” Goro said, “I prefer ‘perishment purgatory’, myself. I think Dia would take my side, too! Because we are best friends and all.”

“Oh, right. Were you? Aware that she’s like that?” Sayaka asked.

“Like what?”

“You know…” She made a throat slicing motion.

“Yeah, obviously. What, did you really think I’d get along so good with the boring Dia that she let you guys get to know? She knew that the way I’d like her best is as her normal, crazy bitch self!”

“...Yeah I can buy that,” Nami said, “Anyway, none of that is what we’re trying to figure out right now! We need to find a way to the end the game without risking our deaths. I mean, Mono, you said it just now. We don’t need to assume that any of us need to die. Which means, what, are you saying that the Mastermind Trial is viable after all?”

“Absolutely not. You shouldn’t begin the Mastermind Trial. There isn’t evidence to prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt, I think, and if you started it then there’s no going back,” Mono explained, “And, really. Do you want to leave Dia the only survivor from your group? That’s stupid. She only didn’t become a real culprit because she’s lazy and is also fond of you guys. But if, like, Kyosuke? Was still alive when she became Dia for real? If it was easy to kill him I bet she would’ve.”

“I don’t think that’s true?” Nami said, and mumbles around the courtroom proved her wrong. “Well, fine then, whatever. I don’t get what you’re saying, Mono, but I just think we’re going in circles at this point.”

“Well… In a video game, don’t you sometimes have to go in circles for a little while to see what you missed so you can progress?” Tsukasa offered, “There’s still another option, so we have to find it. We will find it, because we can’t progress from this point. And Mono doesn’t lie to us outright,
so we know that there has to be some option that doesn’t involve any of us dying.”

“What if… What if, uh, Mono said that she wouldn’t end the trial unless we made a closing argument or cast our votes, right? So that means it can just keep going as long as we do neither of those things…” Nami said, “So I guess that it’s fine if we go in circles until we find a way forward. The only downside of doing it is that we’re in this game for longer, right? We can keep talking about this forever if we need to, though. I don’t want to just get out of this game knowing that we could have kept one of our friends alive and didn’t.”

“You say that, but I don’t agree. I mean, you saw what I said to Madara. I just want this to end. It doesn’t matter… If I get to see the other side of it. The Killing Game just deserves to be over,” Amai said, “That’s the way I feel. I fucking hate this thing, so much. All I could do against it, is die and end it, right? Or kill somebody else and end it. Fuck. Fuck! Why’s it… Why’s it gotta be this way, huh!? Mercury… Mercury ruined our lives, getting us sent here! And the least she could do… She could have been here too. If she was gonna pull that. Why isn’t she going through it with us? I… I just.”

“I understand, Amai. I feel the same way.” Nami dipped her head. “If my theory is correct, that we were put in this game for failing as Ultimates because our names were published in that list… Motherkuma said she published her own name there to avoid suspicion, but she got away with it while we ended up in here. Most of us were old enough. We weren’t afraid of being picked anymore, but then we were.”

“I accepted that I was gonna die, you know,” Amai muttered, clenching her fists. “When that list was published, I knew! I knew that, I was gonna get killed. Somebody was gonna come find me and kill me. Then, I woke up here, and I’d forgotten that. I forgot that I accepted my death and I had to just be terrified the rest of the game that I would be killed. It was less inevitable, but a whole lot scarier. So when I saw that note I wrote, to Mercury. I remembered. That’s why, okay? It’s…”

“It’s not that I wanna die and it’s not like I really wanna keep everyone here, specifically, alive!” Amai continued, now shouting. “It’s that I remembered that I was ready to die anyway! I expected to be murdered, I was just waiting for it, so I accepted it and that’s why… I don’t mind dying now, if it puts a stop to all of this!”

“Well sucks for you, because I bet a bunch of us also felt that way! Having your secret exposed to the world is really, really frightening. But in the end, no Despairs came to kill us in our sleep, or beat us up on our way to work. Hope came to punish us for opening ourselves up to that, and put us here, and dying now? That’s what everybody wants. It’s convenient for Despair, the more of us get killed for becoming ‘useless’. It was Ultimate Hope’s goal all along, to kill us, because of that. So I say we stick it to them both. We won’t die. You know what we can do?”

Nami struck a power pose where she stood, a finger pointing to the sky, before finishing her thought. “Who says we need to start the Mastermind Trial, to try and figure out the Mastermind? Let’s get it locked down first, then we can give it a shot. Nobody’s in danger, and we just might realize something that Mono couldn’t, about who among us was cooperating with Ultimate Hope!”
“Yep, yep,” Mono said, “That’s totally correct. Like I said, the trial won’t end unless you vote or make a closing argument, or if I intervene, of course. I have no intention of intervening, so there’s no reason you can’t just use this trial, which is investigating the deaths of Madara and Dia, to discuss the greater mysteries going on in this facility. I won’t stop you, and the facility has no method to!”

“Oh, shit,” Amai said, staring at Nami. “You’re right… Huh.”

“I am right. It just took some walking in circles for me to realize it.” Nami lowered her finger, and blew on it even though it hadn’t even been a fingergun gesture originally. “There’s nothing to worry about. We’ll figure it out, without the danger of getting it wrong. So, let’s go. Who is the Mastermind?”

“I haven’t actually put much thought into that mystery,” Randy said, “I don’t want to believe that it could be any of us. We know that it can’t be Dia, right? Since she’s labeled as an assistant?”

“Dia is the only person who’s absolutely off-limits, as the Mastermind,” Nami said, “It could be anybody else. For example, Amai might be insisting that we let her die to fulfill this win condition so she can take this secret to the grave, and atone for it in the process…”

“But that’s only an example,” Sayaka said, “Really, there can be a case made for all of us. I’m the Mastermind because I’m most likely to align with Ultimate Hope’s goals, might be another one. After all, we know that I kill people who I consider to be disgusting scum. For all you know, maybe I thought you all were, too. Then again, if I was motivated by something like that, I probably wouldn’t have fallen in love with Nami.”

“It could have been me,” Kurou offered, “I lied to you about my wife and child, and they’re actually already with Ultimate Hope themselves. I was only permitted to join them if I agreed to play Ultimate Judgment in this game and prove that I no longer had attachments to the criminal world. That’s plausible as well, isn’t it?”

“Quite plausible. But, how about this one?” Tsukasa offered, “I lied to you about my wife and child, and they’re actually already with Ultimate Hope themselves. I was only permitted to join them if I agreed to play Ultimate Judgment in this game and prove that I no longer had attachments to the criminal world. That’s plausible as well, isn’t it?”

“Quite plausible. But, how about this one?” Tsukasa offered, “I’m somebody here who, prior to this game itself, didn’t have existing trauma. Even though I grew up in an area full of Despair, my company has thrived. Myself and my boyfriend both made it this far because I planned it this way, and I’ve always been in contact with Ultimate Hope, given my social status.”

“Hah! Like it could be you.” Goro put his hands behind his head and chuckled. “Well, an obvious suspect is me, isn’t it? I wanted to get revenge on all sorts of people, and I had nothing to lose! Ultimate Hope offered me a chance to get back at the legal team that failed me, and get back at Kiyoshi too by revealing his high levels of shit while participating in his favorite reality show! Buuut, just like all those other options, there are holes. Sayaka wouldn’t date Nami if she was the Mastermind. I’d have a better grip on myself than to manslaughter two people in a panic if I was in charge. Tsukasa… well I guess actually his doesn’t have holes in it…”

“Yeah, it’s kind of funny, how possible it is that I could have been Ultimate Judgment this whole time,” Tsukasa admitted, “I don’t even have a reason to say that I’m not. I can tell you that I’m not, but you don’t have a reason to believe me. Ah, the curse of being normie-kun.”

“You’re not normie-kun to me, babe!” Randy protested, then turned to the rest of the group. “I know it seems plausible, but you don’t actually believe that Tsukasa would be the Mastermind, do
you?"

"I don’t," Nami said, “But really, I don’t believe anyone who’s still alive would.”

“You’re the one who said that we could figure out who it is! Come on, somebody has to,” Amai complained, “The Mastermind exists, we know that much. They didn’t give us enough evidence to figure out who, but we do know there is one, so we can figure it out! Put your personal biases aside and actually look at us critically, will you!?”

“I already have,” Nami said, “Plenty of times. Every single trial before this one, I considered everyone equally suspect until the evidence showed me the way. And now, I’ve sincerely thought through the possibility of the Mastermind being one of you, and I just don’t think that it’s likely.”

“So are we back to square one just like that?” Amai asked, “Back to me dying? Cause, you kinda gave me some hope against that, bitch?”

“Of course not,” Nami said, “I said that we’d sniff out the Mastermind, and I have no intention of giving that up. But when I think about it, it can’t be any of you, because things would have been different if Ultimate Judgment was still here, you know? The game wouldn’t be this far off the rails. If the Mastermind, or Ultimate Hope on the outside, were still involved, those would be Mono’s checks and balances. The only thing standing in her way has been baked into the programming. Nothing has changed, and we’ve been able to openly discuss who our real enemies are for a while now.”

“So?” Amai prompted, “What are you saying here?”

“Thinking about it, look, we have four win conditions available to us. Discover the Mastermind’s Identity in the Mastermind Trial. Get away with committing a murder. Defeat the Evil King. The Evil King’s Gun kills two people. Think about what’s missing from that list. ‘Death of The Mastermind’. The game is capable of continuing even if Ultimate Judgment has been killed. There isn’t a win condition for that, this time around. So. I think that the Mastermind isn’t among us anymore. I don’t think it’s any of you. I think that they’re dead.”
“...Oh,” Goro said, “Oh, huh. Yeah that seems right. I didn’t even think of that one, Nami! Good job surprising me, for real! That’s good to know, keeps us from suspecting each other as much, but now we just have a totally different set of equally plausible suspects to think about...”

“Mm, that’s true,” Sayaka said, “I mean. I don’t think it would have been Kaede?”

“No,” Tsumugi said, “She wouldn’t have cooperated with Ultimate Hope again. Even if they wiped her memory of the first time she helped them, she still remembered that we were in our last game. After going through that and personally experiencing it, she never would have done that.”

“She cooperated with Ultimate Hope before?” Kurou asked.

“Well, yes. She designed all of the motives that were used in our game. And... Admittedly, though she never said anything about it to me, at least one of the motives used this time around was probably an extra one of hers that she’d designed. A reject, or one that just didn’t end up being shared in our game,” Tsumugi explained, “But considering that, I don’t believe she would have gone on to be Ultimate Judgment for this game. Besides, I think that the Mastermind is required not to have any memories wiped anyhow.”

“Well, then it sure can’t be Nami, either, even if it was somebody alive,” Sayaka joked, then got a serious look on her face. “I’d like to remove Mitsuru from suspicion, as well. Dia was never supposed to leave the Box Hako persona behind, after all, and he basically forced us to acknowledge her as her actual self. It doesn’t line up.”

“Well, but, I’m getting confused now,” Randy said, “I kind of thought, well, that whoever was controlling Monokuma was also the Mastermind. But you said that they have opposing goals, and, well. We don’t actually know who that person is yet, either, or if they’re dead, or-”

“Mono is listed as another participant,” Nami said, “And it’s stated that the ‘maximum number of simultaneous participants’ has been seventeen. This can only be, because Mono is somebody entirely different, and not the Mastermind. She wasn’t even here at the beginning, after all. Motherkuma was just producing original AI Monokumas at first. If Mono was going to be this way from the beginning, there would be no Motherkuma in the building.”

“So, okay,” Tsukasa said, “Mono is a separate person, and isn’t Ultimate Judgment. That makes sense. And, knowing that, does back up Sayaka’s movement to clear Mitsuru. So our remaining suspects are... Ruka, Kyosuke, Nozomi, Akabane, Yushu, and Tomoe.”

“Four suspects who two of us have never even met,” Kurou said, “So I don’t think anything Amai or myself could say would be of much use.”

“Shinjiro had that fucked up moral compass deal!” Goro offered, “It wouldn’t surprise me at all, if it had been him! He was super judging all of us all of the time. He specifically thought that a bunch of us were too terrible to be allowed to live... And since he committed a murder himself, it’s obvious he's willing to do bad things for the sake of what he thinks is the greater good!”

“That’s pretty reasonable, yeah?” Nami said, “The only thing that makes me wonder about that option is the fact that we’re all here. Would Shinji have really wanted to work together with a group that considered him, and his friends, to be bad enough Ultimates to deserve a Killing Game? Especially since he was the one of them who was above age to end up in one of these.”
“Mm, yeah… That’s not something to rule him out, though. That guy was a hypocrite,” Goro said, “So, he’s still a suspect. His friends, though… Well, there was Rei. I don’t think she’s a real option unless we end up eliminating too many others, the only case to be made for her is that she did know about Dia and didn’t tell anybody.”

“Wait, she did?” Nami asked.

“That’s something that I figured out,” Kurou said, “When you spoke about her, I remembered. Rei Akabane was working with the actual Ultimate Roboticist. She certainly has to have created Dia, and they were living in the same place. Your friend could probably be considered a ‘mom’ to Dia. It would be surprising if she was unaware.”

“By the time that Rei died, Dia was still keeping up the Box Hako act pretty well,” Nami said, “She was trying to figure out who the ‘one AI’ was… So she probably knew Dia existed, but couldn’t tell which of us she’d taken on the form of. Kurou, do you think that’s possible?”

“Probably? It would be hard not to know this sort of project was going on, but the details, like what the AI would look like, could be easily concealed. I dunno. My knowledge is very marginal,” Kurou said, “I just met Ms. Hashi once, and heard she was staying with Rei. I’m not exactly an insider source.”

“Right. Sorry.” Nami shook her head, then folded her hands under her chin. “...I’m sorry, I can’t actually really focus on which of the dead people is the Mastermind right now. I mean. Well, there’s one mystery here that only I know the answer to. I think I should probably share it.”

“Oh, you mean…” Goro tilted his head. “Do you know what Mono’s real identity is?”

“Yes, exactly. I feel like you can’t take my word that she’s not The Mastermind, and not somebody that we knew, unless you can see who she really is,” Nami confirmed, “So, Mono. I think that it’s high time you dropped that ridiculous disguise and show everybody your true identity. You’re not somebody that everyone’s met. You’re not Yushu or Tomoe taking on another form after faking their death, or anything like that. You’re a completely different person, taking on the role and appearance of Monokuma.”

“You’re the seventeenth participant, or the twenty-first total. That second number would be your age, since you’re the oldest person here, too. Ultimate Psychologist, Kira Kirara.”
“Sparkle, sparkle!” Mono proclaimed, and in seconds, the bear was gone. Reclining on that throne instead, now, was her. Kira. Looking down on them, with the same grin she’d worn the entire time she was playing the role of Monokuma. “I mean, it’s not like I made it difficult for you, princess.”

Nami and Sayaka both cringed to hear that, and Amai grimaced on their behalf. Then, she stepped out from around her podium. “Mono, uh, Kirara, well. I’m gonna recommend that you not use that sorta pet name, alright? I don’t care if you were this secret helpful Monokuma this whole time, I’m not gonna hold back if you’re a bitch to my friends.”

“Oh?” Kira asked, then leaned forward. “Oh, oh! That’s just precious. You girls share a trigger word, you have so much in common. Well, I don’t plan to do that again, don’t worry, don’t worry. I went for the lighter one to poke Nami with anyhow, and really, I don’t want to be a bitch, as you put it. Nothing I said as Monokuma was a lie. I somehow ended up caring for you brats. I’m not going to be cruel. And of course.” She waved a hand in front of herself. “My blessing still stands!
Truly. Sayaka, you and Nami are a wonderful couple and I wish you the world.”

“What are you doing here?” Nami asked, “What are you doing alive?”

“Obviously I faked my death after publishing my research. Somebody or other would have killed me for real if I didn’t,” Kira explained, “That didn’t stop Mana from putting me on her Ultimate List, of course… Well, I’m sure she knew.”

“Mana… Mercury Mars?” Nami asked, furrowing her brow.

“Ah, she was my girlfriend before you. More obsessed with me than I was with you. Really, I probably should have taken some time to look at myself and wonder if my inability to properly relate to a romantic partner and instead keeping you at the distance of my ‘favorite test subject’ was the result of that relationship. Many mistakes on my part, et cetera. Psychologist who can’t properly analyze herself. She probably did that whole thing to try and get back at you, Nami. She’s pretty weird like that. So, blame me for that too. I’m serious. Go ahead. I deserve all the ire you want to send my way.”

“I… Don’t want you to be here,” Nami said, “I definitely didn’t want you to give me that flower. Fuck you, Kira. I. It’s hard, okay! I can see that you’ve become better than you were when I knew you, but I didn’t want to see it! I wanted to know you became better, far away from me, out of my life! And you’re here, instead? Did you follow me!?”

“Frankly, I wouldn’t even say I’ve become better. Just acknowledged my faults. I was a piece of shit to you, a terrible girlfriend. So I decided not to be a girlfriend, and see if I could at least be a good friend. I think I succeeded at that, right? But at first. That wasn’t my intention at all. Girlfriend, friend, none of that mattered to me. I wanted to be a good hero.” She shifted in the throne, leaning towards the podiums with her hands sandwiched between her knees. “I came here with the intention of absolute sabotage. Ruining the Killing Game so much, that nobody would even want it to happen again. Participants be damned. But then, one of the participants… Was you. Nami. And Torimi in the reserves, too. I never expected the participants would be people I knew.”

“What were… What were you going to do?” Nami questioned.

“I’unno. Probably fuck with Dia enough that she snapped and engineered everyone’s deaths, or something? If you know enough about people, then you can absolutely make sure that they all die in unsatisfactory ways.” She shrugged. “I was going to cross that bridge when I got to it, but yes, my intention was to tank the game’s ratings. End the Killing Game through bad television. Maybe it would’ve worked. Population psychology says yes, and the way Hope used these games to build their ranks off anyone who was ‘worthy’ enough, in the toilet. Of course, as a participant, the death of Monokuma itself would signal the end of the games.”

“Are you fucking insane? That plan sounds, really haphazard at best!” Sayaka exclaimed.

“Sanity is a social construct. I can say that, remember my talent?” Kira took a deep breath, then climbed down from the throne. She pulled aside the ‘dead’ symbol for Riko and took her place in the courtroom. “Anyway, now that you’ve found me out, it seems that my Mono-filter’s gone missing. I do not know who the Mastermind is. I was made aware of every available piece of evidence, though, the fact the evidence was mostly counterfeited by Mercury was kept from me until you mentioned it. I can’t conclude the Mastermind’s identity based on the evidence.”

“But…” Nami frowned. “You know everything about us. How our minds work, don’t you? So you should have been able to determine somebody’s motive, the whydunnit… is still a sincere and important part of any mystery. Yours, for example. You infiltrated the game as Monokuma
because you want the world to change, and Killing Games to end. You changed your strategy to helping us instead because I was here, a decision which was supported by the fact that another group overpowered the leaders of Ultimate Hope out in the real world.”

“Yes, you’ve got that right.” Kira folded her hands under her chin. “I couldn’t bring myself to show true cruelty to the girl I once loved, and that spiraled out into wishing I could protect each and every one of you. You really have her to thank for your lives. It’s as simple as that. I’m fallibly human, and my calculated plot to shake things up and take our world out of stalemate was spoiled by one cute memer.”

“That’s not surprising,” Goro said, “I knew from day one that she was the protagonist. Also, hey! I take offense to the fact that you mentioned knowing Torimi, but not me!”

“Unlike Nami, I was never all that invested in your case,” Kira said, “No offense. But really, you showbiz kids are a bit beyond repair? Psychologically, I mean. Freeing you from your trauma wouldn’t mean a thing if you didn’t find help from somebody immediately after. I preferred cases where I couldn’t see that all our work could be for naught.”

“Hate to say it, but that’s fair. Even now, I would have considered going back to Kiyoshi if Nami didn’t say she wanted me to live with her!” Goro offered a sarcastic laugh. “It’s a tale as old as time.”

“Precisely. Moving on.” Kira sighed again. “The thing is that you guys aren’t wrong. There’s a plausible ‘whydunnit’ for a great many of you, so I can’t rely on that sort of thing. Nobody stands out to me. Humans can be understood, but not predicted. So. It may not be possible, but I’ll lend you whatever knowledge I can. You brats... Are like my precious children. I want you to find a day where all of this feels just like a long-ago dream. I’ll do anything to ensure that happens. And I am sorry, Nami. But I’m happy to have seen you again,”
“Anything?” Amai asked.

“Yes,” Kira said, tilting her head as she matched her eyes. “Anything at all. My goal of ending the Killing Games has already come to fruition. My only goal now is for you to escape this place and go on to lead happy lives.”

“Can we maybe… Touch back on the fact that all of us got roped into it because your ex-girlfriend wanted to get revenge on your girlfriend after her, who was by that point also your ex?” Kurou asked, “Why include the rest of us? And why would she be so vindictive that she’d publish so many names?”

“...Well, I have such a self-centered worldview that I didn’t even stop to think about that,” Kira admitted, “I have no clue. Frankly, publishing the fact that Nami is an Ultimate makes sense to me. The rest of you, I don’t know. I don’t think she had any particular reason to do that… And it doesn’t matter, either. She has nothing to do with the game itself.”

“We know that much is true,” Nami said, “But, yeah, it seems like overkill if her motivation is really just, connected to you. I only had connections to a few of these people, so it’s not like she tracked down some chain of people who all met me, or anything like that.”

“Self-centered as it might be, I honestly just don’t think it’s out of the question that woman would publish that entire list, however she acquired it, in an act of rage. She’s never once in her life cared about collateral damage on the path to her goal.” Kira’s glasses flashed as she pushed them up her nose, and smirked. “She was truly fascinating, I must admit! She’d watch the whole world burn, just to get revenge on one person! She considers herself noble, but won’t hesitate to affiliate herself with the bottom of the barrel to achieve her goals, as long as she somehow thinks that what she’s doing is right… Now, she and Nozomi would have got along, wouldn’t they?”

“So is that your input?” Sayaka wondered, “You think that Nozomi was the Mastermind?”

“I didn’t say that. They have similar perspectives, those two, but that doesn’t mean I think he was Ultimate Judgment. After all, his opinions… Don’t reflect at all in the rankings.”

“You. You can access the rankings?” Tsukasa asked, then took a step back. “Like. How good Ultimate Judgment thinks we are?”

“I do. I won’t show them to you, though. They don’t matter at this point. There won’t be a game next year to put bottom-rankers into. The top rank is still alive, so nobody will be returned to you as an Alter Ego.” A grin split her face. “Do you honestly think that Shinjiro Nozomi would have placed a single one of you as the most virtuous? No… He couldn’t stand any of you, the ones he met, anyway.”

“You’re right,” Nami said, “He was too openly judgmental, wasn’t he? As far as he was concerned, we were all sinners. He couldn’t make a decision that let all but one of us rank above ‘the worst’. Can’t you share the rankings, Kira? If I just knew that, I could figure out the whydunnit… And from there…”

“The ranking system exists primarily as a final way to hurt you,” Kira said, “For whatever bearing it might have on determining the Mastermind, it’s not worth making you see it. I’d really rather not. Don’t worry, again. I haven’t lied to you. There’s a way that you can get out of here without any
more of you dying. But… I’d like to see you puzzle it out. You’re all so smart, it’s so fun to watch you!”

“You did lie about one thing,” Nami said, “You said you weren’t suited to the role of Monokuma, but you absolutely were. You’re the only person I know who’s messed up enough to enjoy the process of a tragedy that you’re trying to prevent.”

“It’s a silver lining, jeeze. You don’t get up Goro’s ass when he says he likes seeing you use your talent. If I have to do this, can’t I at least get some purely scientific enjoyment watching it unfold?”

“Well. Fine, then. You first took over the role of Monokuma just a bit after Tomoe’s execution, right?” Tsumugi asked, to Nami’s surprise.

“Er, yes. How did you come to this realization?”

“What, like it’s hard?” Tsumugi asked, and adjusted her own glasses, producing that same glint. “The original Monokuma was the same one who moderated my game. It created the roof rule to spite Angie, expressed its anger at the one who created the elevator design… Rantaro, who was also in my game. And it’s the one which designed the ward traps, because Kokichi could always find a way into a lab which was meant to be locked. Then, you took over, and stopped making digs at my friends. A Monokuma, losing its grudge? No, it was you from that point on.”

“That’s true. In any case, it’s possible that the reason I can’t say that anyone had a particular standout motive, is because I never got to truly see inside the heads of two people. I was going to mention this myself, you know, I’m just melodramatic, I was taking my time to get there. Really, though. Yushu and Tomoe? I never ever got to know those two. I know a bit, from what you’ve said about them, what I’ve heard about them. Not enough, though. I know every inch of every one of you, it seems, but those two. So. Do with that what you will. It might just be possible for one of you to figure out the Mastermind after all?”

“Because…” Kurou realized, “Just because the evidence isn’t presented to all of us, as long as the detective is able to acquire the evidence, it’s still fair, right?”

“Mhm. And, I’m nothing if not fair. Hope wasn’t fair. But I am. So, I’m sharing everything that I can. Everything that I think might allow you to discover the Mastermind and get out of here.” She took another deep breath. “Maybe I’ve been stalling because I hoped you would realize your other option. The surefire option. The easy one. The one which doesn’t rely on the foolish idea that human behavior can be predicted. But here it is. If this proves anything, if you think you’ll determine Ultimate Judgment’s nature. I would start the Mastermind Trial for you. Here goes nothing.”

She took off her glasses and set them down in front of herself. Then… “The number one ‘good person’ rank in this Killing Game has held steady at Nami Kaguya.”

And Kira was right. The mystery put forth by Ultimate Hope wasn’t fair. It could be fair, to one person. To the person who had evidence which went beyond the context of the game, evidence that she could recall from much further back. The answer only she could realize.

Somebody whose head Kira never got to truly see inside, somebody who died before Kira was able to get a grasp on their personality. Somebody who would readily, when asked, become...

Ultimate Judgment.

The Mastermind who was supposed to influence the Killing Game from the inside and evaluate
their peers’ worth…

Of course.

That person had to be-

And Nami realized what Kira meant all this time. There was evidence to find the Mastermind. It was there, the entire time she said there wasn’t. The problem was that the evidence found two of them. Nami could say it was her sister who’d do anything at all to keep her safe, but a Tomoe with every memory, a Tomoe in Hokkaido, wouldn’t stoop that low for Nami anymore, would she? Nami could say it was Shinjiro, who died with every intention to set Rei and Nami free and may have actually been capable of ranking everybody. And Riko… Whose true face he may have seen, thus deciding to end her with his own hands, even as his plan didn’t work out… But they’d already determined that he couldn’t pull off a ranking system like that, before this?

Ultimate Judgement was a title that couldn’t be pinned on either of them at first knock. But for Nami. Nami could. Because she understood. And so.

The Mastermind Was...

A gunshot rang through the courtroom.

And Kira Kirara, who was not Ultimate Judgment.

Slumped over her podium, blood dripping down the front.

And the facility. Cheered. The death of its false queen.

“A body has been discovered! Please report to the courtroom! The Evil King Has Won!”
“What. What why why did you what-” Nami turned to face Amai, standing there with the gun still lifted. She was shaking. “Amai. I figured-”

“I figured it out!” Amai shouted over her, and opened her hands, letting the gun fall. “I figured it out I don’t know what you’re talking about Nami but I figured it out, she said that no more of us needed to die. She was excluding herself. She planned to die at the end of this thing anyway and what the, fuck, she was a bitch anyway! She was just a bitch who was playing with us at the end there and egging us on and I figured out what she wanted me to figure out so I did it, okay? I did it.”

Nami kept staring for a few moments. Amai wasn’t calm, at all. She was shaken up, she was freaked out, and Nami couldn’t say it to her. She couldn’t tell her that was an unnecessary act, she wouldn’t be able to handle that. So, instead.

“Did you wait for your stomachache?” She asked.

“It stopped.” Amai wrapped her arms around her own stomach. “It stopped. That’s why I had you pass me the gun. It wasn’t happening anymore. I… Didn’t want anybody else, thinking some other stomachache was, the thing, and shooting anybody and they’re dead for real. It stopped, though. That’s okay. Right? It’s fine. I did nothing wrong. I did nothing wrong. She was already dead to the rest of the world. Dead everywhere but here. So what if I killed her. She was already dead. Already. Dead.”

Amai didn’t seem reassured by her own words at all.

“She was,” Nami said, “She was already dead. And. Then she came back. I didn’t want to see her ever again. I thought I wouldn’t have to. But. I’m kind of… Glad. She got the chance to do some good things before she died for real?”

“She already died for real. She lived for fake, here,” Amai insisted, “And she. Mono, not Kira. Saved your lives once. And she did everything she could. To make our stay here, enjoyable. She did everything she could to be a good friend. Like she said. She was. But she was still a bad person. She didn’t make up for that. She just used her borrowed time to. Help us be better than she was?”

“That’s right, Amai. That’s exactly right,” Nami reassured her. Screens had already come down from the ceiling, reading ‘The Evil King Wins’ on them. The game had been won, but it seemed there was a grace period before they woke up from the Neo World Program. Everyone was quiet. Sayaka could probably tell what Nami had been about to say. Maybe some of the others could too, but nobody would say it. Amai didn’t need to hear it.

And, in spite of all she’d done for them, Kira was not the sort whose death would be immediately and severely mourned. Nami had already done all of her mourning, the first time Kira died. The others only really knew her as Mono. Goro looked a bit distraught; Understandable, Kira had, in the form of Mono, become his friend during the game. It wasn’t like Kira wouldn’t have a place in the list of those they’d grieve when life settled enough to confront those feelings; But it also wasn’t like anybody would be angry with Amai for killing her.

She was already dead to the world, and Amai had, they only now realized, been volunteering for an hour now to die permanently so the game would end and everybody could get out. Kira implied exactly the same thing to her, and she took the proffered chance to see the outside world once
Nobody wanted to think right now, or really speak. The game was over, they’d be out soon, everything was over now. It wasn’t time to think about the threat that was Mercury Mars, and it wasn’t time to worry about the fact they’d be splitting up in the future, some staying here, some taking off beyond the stars. Those times would certainly come, but now, was the time to be silent in body and mind. To just experience that wave of relief that the game was confirmed to be ending, no matter how they’d gotten here.

Then, Nami was done with it. Not done, but ready to keep moving. She stepped away from Amai to approach Kira instead. She’d taken Riko’s spot in the circle. There were plenty of options and she took that one. As if they were the same, Nami scoffed. Kira was overcompensating. Lowering herself more than she needed to, at least, not now. She’d made a good point about herself, and Nami agreed. People could be good in some ways and bad in others.

Kira Kirara had been the second most abusive person in Nami’s life. The first would be the teacher she’d murdered, and the third would probably be her father, not for what he did to her but for what he did to Tomoe. Tomoe, who could have gone on to become Ultimate Judgment and, in the end, get brutally executed, all because of what he said to her. All because of one sentence.

‘Make yourself useful once I’m gone and make sure Hiro grows up well’.

And he would have taken that back if he’d known who she was. She was sure of that. But he never hurt her directly. Kira did. Kira took her recovery and happiness and tore them up for her own fascination and pleasure, and Nami could never forgive her for that. Kira was a disgusting girlfriend. But she was a good friend. Always had been. Rei and Shinjiro, whose judgment may have been absolute, thought so, and she proved it even to Nami over the course of the game. She could be wonderful to anyone she didn’t feel she was entitled to.

That was the bottom line. Kira knew how to get what she wanted. But only when it came to certain relationships, and certain people, did she feel she could keep what she wanted without putting in the work, while actively sabotaging herself. She was cruel and rotten, and friendly, and fun to be around, and so idealistic that she planned to throw away her life for the sake of the world twice over.

So Nami pulled her from the podium, and set her back in that throne. She was Monokuma, after all. The most suited to play that role.
“Are you okay?” Sayaka asked, walking up behind Nami.

“I. Yeah,” Nami said.

“You don’t have to lie to me. You just confronted the fact that your abusive ex has been here this entire time, in the form of Monokuma, who we all accepted as our ally,” Sayaka deadpanned, “Had to see her again, hold a conversation where she dropped all pretense, heard she only saved us because of you, but also maybe all got put here because of her decision to date you, then she died. So. You’re probably not okay.”

“Hm. Now that you put it like that, probably not,” Nami admitted, then turned to face Sayaka. “Seeing her again does make me extra grateful to have you now, though. That’s an upside. And, the game’s over?”

“Yeah. It is.” She glanced around, then dropped to a whisper. “But she didn’t have to die, for it to be the end, right?”

“Well. No. I figured out the Mastermind. I did. But then, again,” Nami whispered back, “I have no idea what a future with Kira alive would have looked like. Even if she was trying to be better now, there’s no saying… I mean… Well, it doesn’t matter. She’s dead now, for real. I mourned her when she died the first time. She did the only other thing I ever would have wanted her to do.”

“I know you mean ‘do better by somebody other than you’, but, you know. I’m really glad that you wanted your ex to infiltrate a Killing Game and do her best to improve our general comfort level and likelihood of survival.”

“Shush, you.” Nami couldn’t help laughing. Some part of her felt bad for that, but on the other hand, it was good to be able to laugh during hard times. It was a reminder that no emotion was all-encompassing.

This was still a bad day, like she expected. But tomorrow? Tomorrow would be a very good day, and she could look forward to that, no matter the path they took to get there. Maybe it was cruel of her to think, but if somebody did need to die, Kira was already dead to the world. Better her than anybody else. But it didn’t need to be her. It could have been nobody. Because Nami discovered the truth. That was what made this a tragedy; It didn’t need to happen.

And Amai didn’t need to be hurt like that. Amai Oishi was somebody who was disgusted by the idea of murder. Even experiencing a Killing Game hadn’t changed that for her, and she had to be having a difficult time with what she’d just done. Her excuses were valid ones but didn’t mean much to her, she still ended a life, the way she never would have wanted to. And this was a certain death. Not like Madara, who had a chance at being alive.

“Hello everybody,” Dia said, her voice echoing strangely. Wait, Dia? Nami turned to see her standing in the doorway. Right, she would have been who needed to report to the courtroom; Somebody else being shot probably resolved her limbo and allowed her to stand back up. The hole was still in her forehead, and there wasn’t any light in her eyes… Which were pink now.

“Dia!” Goro cried out, his voice cracking even just on her name. He hopped back from his podium and sprinted over to her, and fell over as soon as he got there, though she caught him on her shoulder to hold him up. “It’s, Mono was, and she-”
“I am aware of everything that happened while I was incapacitated.” Dia lifted her arm that wasn’t occupied by Goro, holding a small bouquet of flowers. “I would have been here sooner, but I wanted to get these for her, and it’s awful slow going to try and walk around with a bullet in my brain, even as the crow flies. This is quite painful, so I hope it stops soon.”

“Ah, right, I’ll let you go give those to her then,” Goro said, and let go of her arm, dropping to sit on the floor. She looked down at him for a moment, then moved on. Wherever she stepped, a small circle of corruption would begin to form. It seemed that even though she was no longer caught between being alive and flagging the gun, the program still wasn’t fond of the fact that it was Dia Hamuko, and not Box Hako, who had been ‘killed’.

Arriving at the throne, Dia set the flowers in Kira’s arms, then crouched down, putting herself at eye level with the body. “She was my friend, you know.”

“I know,” Nami said.

“She was the only friend that I knew for as long as I knew her,” Dia clarified, “You guys are my friends. But she was my friend. She didn’t exist for me in all those times before. And now she’s gone. She’s dead.”

“I did love her once,” Nami said, “I loved her before. I didn’t want her dead.”

“I know,” Dia said.

They were both silent for a few moments, before Nami looked at the bouquet. She didn’t know much flower language, but she was sure that Dia would have kept that in mind when selecting them. “What are those for, Dia?”

“Blue hydrangeas like before, and white chrysanthemum,” Dia answered. “Thank you for understanding. The truth is, you were a wonderful friend.”

Nami thought about that for a few moments. “I thought that, too. I thought she was wonderful, when she didn’t want anything other than friendship from somebody. Which is fine. She didn’t have to be bad in every way to have been bad for me.”

“I thought you might say that.”

“She left this for me.” Nami pulled out the petal. “Well, the whole flower, but I only took part of it. She sent me one once before, too. After I broke up with her. Before she faked her death. I thought that she meant it as a threat when I looked it up back then, but now… I don’t know. Even now, I think she did try to get under my skin with certain things. She couldn’t just keep from hurting me at all, because that’s the only way she knew how to treat me. But since she did give me and Sayaka her blessing… This must be sincere. I guess she still loved me. I always knew she did, though. She loved me and that didn’t ever make it okay, what she did. And what she did doesn’t make it bad that she could be your friend. I guess I still didn’t understand her, not really.”

“It’s okay. Understanding people really? It’s overrated and I wouldn’t recommend it at all,” Dia said, “It makes you wanna hug people forever. And beat them over the head with a brick. And give them a lifetime supply of ice cream. And stick needles into their skin-”

“I get it,” Nami cut her off with a nervous chuckle. “Please don’t do any of those things, and that sounds like a you problem, but. Yes. Thank you, Dia.”

“I’m happy to remind you of the terrors of Knowing Others any time you like.” She stood up just to curtsy, then walked away from the throne. She stopped at Riko’s podium to take Kira’s glasses,
slipping them into a pocket on her skirt. A very temporary souvenir.
“Hello, hello? Yeah, can you hear me?” A familiar voice came from seemingly nowhere. Nami looked up at the ceiling.

“Megumi? Have you finally managed to become God?”

“As far as you’re currently concerned, yes, I have. Given that you’re trapped in a spaghetti program and I have a great many certifications in all sorts of code, including, begrudgingly, the spaghetti sort. For an Ultimate, that Enoshima’s such a sloppy coder.”

“Right, right. So I was right that you weakened the censor, and disabled the preprogrammed events?” Nami asked.

“Obviously. I was also responsible for the protocol which you spent this whole trial speculating about. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to make any additional contact from the outside. Those screens existed to be used in a motive, exactly once per game. Now that you’ve fulfilled a win condition, however, we can speak to you. Your friends were correct about the 18-42 distinction.”


“…Nevermind, I am putting you back in the Killing Game.”

“Megumi!” Another, less familiar voice chided her.

“Hashi, it’s a joke.” Megumi groaned before continuing. “Well, anyway. My protocol. The only way to stand a chance at saving any of you while you were still plugged in was this. For eighteen seconds out of each minute, the upper limit of what’s still save, your minds as contained in the Neo World were no longer connected to your bodies as existing in the real world.”

“What does that… What?” Amai asked.

“The reason you die in the real world if you die here is because of that connection. Your mind experiences death, and transfers that experience to your body. If you’re disconnected when you die, then your mind experiences death… Then just gets reconnected to a living body. A bit odd, sure, but it’s still impressive, isn’t it?”

“Uh. Yeah that’s impressive!” Nami exclaimed, “That’s super impressive, Megumi! You actually… I mean, eighteen whole seconds of the ability to revive?”

“Well, you’d have revived anyway, being number one in the rankings,” Megumi noted, “I met the boy who revived last year. A bit charming. A bit like soybeans given human form. You know the type. Anyway… Sorry about your ex, there. I had to disable the protocol as soon as it seemed like you may fulfill the win condition. Were you disconnected from your bodies at the moment the condition was fulfilled, you, er. Wouldn’t wake up. You’d need to fulfill another win condition to get out.”

“…Oh. Well, it’s a good thing, then,” Nami said, “That would have been a mess. Given that, finding out the Mastermind is impossible, and all.”
“Who are you two, anyway?” Randy, who had met neither woman before, asked.

“I’m Megumi Kirisame, your literal savior, though please. I’m just a golden genius among girls, not actually a deity. I did the things I just told you about.”

“I’m, er, Hashi. I programmed Dia and I’m here now.”

“Hey Mom,” Dia said, “I blame you for my long-running painful existence but you can probably make it up to me by brushing my hair, and making sure real-world me has hair to brush!”

“Ah! Well, yes, of course. I’ve made you a body to transfer into in reality. It’s P-Type, so once your consciousness is in it, it will take on the appearance that you already have… It’s defined as a replicant, and not a robot, so you won’t be bound by the laws of robotics either.”

“Good. It would just be absolutely tragic if I were not allowed to permit harm to come to humans through inaction.” Dia smiled, leaving those who could see her to wonder if she was sarcastic or serious.

“...So,” Nami wondered, “Who’s alive for real? Like, who made it through? Obviously Kira didn’t, but…”

“Riko Asahi is dead. Torimi Shinoe and Tsukune Madara were both killed during the right portion of the minute, and have already woken up here in Hope’s Vestige. Hm… We might be running out of space to house all of you, actually. Some of you may need to bunk up,” Megumi said, “I’m sure that won’t be a problem, though. As for anybody else… Unfortunately, I only arrived to implement my protocol after those deaths had already occurred. Okinawa to Towa is a slow trip, even on an express ticket, and I didn’t know to come until the first episode aired.”

“That’s understandable,” Tsukasa said, “So we’re in Towa… Knowing who organized this thing, that makes sense. Are you seriously apologizing for having no way of knowing that your protocol was needed until airing began?”

“Not apologizing, simply explaining. I fully acknowledge my own accomplishment with this protocol as both amazing and far beyond what most would be capable of, so I have nothing to apologize for. I could say, I’m so sorry that I didn’t implement my protocol in time to save more of you, but on the other hand, my protocol did save two of you, and nobody else could have done that,” Megumi said, “Now, it does seem a bit odd that you’re still here, but nothing’s gone wrong. The screens say that you’re experiencing a ‘memory transfer’ as we speak, so there must be some process to waking up under a win condition.”

“That makes sense,” Kurou noted, “Oh, by the way, hello Hashi! It’s me, Kurou Ueda, we met once.”

“Yes, I remember,” Hashi said, “Ah, I just remembered, your wife sent word. She’s going to be arriving in the city with your daughter in a few days, now that she’s found suitable accomodations. She must have some sort of connection in the city, to be able to rent a condo from the outside like that…”

“That’s my wife for you.” Kurou chuckled. “Ultimate Scout, remember? She’s resourceful in every way possible!”

“Ohh, you’ve got to let us meet her!” Nami exclaimed, “And Ayano, too! You’ve said so much about them, you won’t get away without introducing us, mister!”

“Come on, I was always planning on it. And…” It seemed to suddenly hit him. “Torimi too. Torimi
can meet her too.”

“...Thank you, Megumi,” Nami’s voice was barely loud enough to be heard, as she also took a moment to actually process that fact. Tsukune’s survival wasn’t as big a surprise, they’d been hoping for that based on what Amai said. But Torimi. Torimi was alive.
“I haven’t really spoken to her yet,” Megumi said, “Nobody much has, we’ve been giving them some space to adjust, so I’m not sure how they’re doing, but they are alive. They have met some of the others, the survivors from the fiftieth game arrived a short time ago.”

“Oh! That means that the Inoues might... Just how many people are there?” Sayaka asked.

“Yes, the Inoues are present,” Megumi said, “Not surprising that you know of them. Let’s see, as of right now... Well, how about this. I’ll just display a full list for you, so you know who you can expect to see when you awaken. Oh, and please, Sayaka. Don’t commit any murders. Everyone here is, to some degree, reformed, as far as I’ve heard.”

With that, a list of names appeared in the room before them, in alphabetical order by last name.

Rantaro Amami
Ruri Bessho
Chihiro Fujisaki
Akane Fujishiro
Ice Hako
Speak Hako
Daisuke Harada
Nate Harper
Miria Hayashi
The Inoue Family
Miu Iruma
Reiji Ittosai
Jataro Kemuri
Kyoko Kirigiri
Megumi Kirisame
Ryoma Kobayashi
Shoyu Kyosuke
Tsukune Madara
Blake Mirabeau
Wanda Morinaga
Makoto Naegi
Natsuki Nagata
Sonia Nevermind
Mondo Oowada
Kizuto Orihara
Kokichi Ouma
Shuichi Saihara
Iwako Same
Courtney Sempers
Ralph Sempers
Eriko Shigure
Torimi Shinoe
Mikan Tsumiki
Kotoko Utsugi
Akihiko Yamaguchi
Tokumei Yamaguchi
Sayaka took a step forward. “Tokumei is there!?”

“Whoever that is, I guess so. This list is automatically generated based on the identities of those who are currently in the facility, alive, and not in the NWP,” Megumi said, “I don’t know who they all are. I’ve been very focused on monitoring your situation to ensure that the protocol was switched off at the right time to allow for the win conditions.”

“That’s a lot of people,” Nami said, “I mean, it’s… We really have that many allies?”

“We don’t all share the same goals, of course,” Megumi said, “But generally speaking, we do all intend to work towards an improved future, one way or another. I’m sorry to say, Nami, but I’ll be returning to Okinawa myself.”

“Don’t worry! I mean, I bet you saw, I already had complete confidence in you to come up with a way for us to keep talking even once we split up what planets we’re on,” Nami said.

“Well, obviously. I’d be seriously taken aback if you didn’t have faith in me to do that much.” Nami could just imagine Megumi rolling her eyes from here.

“...Why in the world is Nate there?” Dia asked, frowning at the list from where she stood. “And… The Hakos… Wait, where did they go?”

“I told you, Nate’s trying to reform. He did everyone a solid and murdered Kiyoshi Matsubara, so at least he’s sort of trying,” Megumi said, “Maybe I’m being soft on him, who knows, whatever. Akane thinks she’s going to send him back to Okinawa with me. I’m still deciding if it’s worth the trouble. As for those two… Hm. You’re right, that’s really strange. They’ve just disappeared. I guess they went outside, but, this is supposed to be the only way in and out...”

“There has to be another,” Randy said, “Otherwise, how did Kira get in undetected? The way she talked, you guys didn’t know she was there, either.”

“Mm. She wasn’t in any of the main pods...” Hashi agreed, “But the NWP probably can’t be accessed remotely. Nothing in its code suggests that it could be, and if it was something Kirara could have figured out, Megumi absolutely would have on her way to Towa.”

“So there’s another way in and out of the building,” Dia said, “And I’m going to assume that Ice and Speak had no good intentions, exiting through a secret option. Or, maybe they’re afraid of me, and they wanted to book it before I could find them in real life! Now, them. Mom, I’m forgiving you much more graciously than should be expected of me. I won’t forgive those two.”

“I don’t think anybody was going to ask you to!” Hashi assured her.

“Excuse me?” Another voice suddenly sounded out; Somebody else was in the room.

“Whoa, whoa… Wanda?” Goro asked, apparently recognizing the voice. Now that he said it, Nami realized it too. She saw Wanda’s name there, but didn’t exactly expect to receive any communication from that girl.

“...Doctor Kirisame,” Wanda continued, seeming to ignore Goro. Well, they were probably just on
a screen with speakers out there anyway, and she seemed preoccupied. Her voice was just as empty as the last time Nami heard it, too. Maybe she had no interest in talking to Goro again. “It’s the right thing for me to inform somebody if I witnessed something untoward, yes?”

“I guess so? Unless the thing you’re considering untoward has something to do with ghosts.”

“I don’t think there were any ghosts involved. Just two humans and a corpse,” Wanda said.

What? Nami was now interested in hearing what this was and also a bit freaked out to hear something like that about the location that she was just about to be entering, hoping she’d be safe there, and now something like this was coming up?

“...Well you can’t just leave it at that, Morinaga,” Megumi said.

There was silence for a bit. “Nate told me not to tell anyone this.”

“Hey!” Nate suddenly spoke up, which led the participants to believe that he’d already been in the room for a while. “No, look, okay. If it’s relevant to whatever’s happening here... Wanda’s room had a pod in it. The pod that Kirara was using. Oh, also, hey Mizuho. Don’t worry, I came here with every intention of cucking your boyfriend but I’m not like that anymore.”

"...Good?" Tsukasa said.

“Yes. Precisely. The Hakos took her body and left through the hole in the wall,” Wanda explained, then there were footsteps as she walked away before even receiving a response.

“Uh. That’s. Okay, what? Excuse me, why would they take Kira? Why not Box?” Nami asked, “That doesn’t make any sense. There’s a hole in the wall?”

“...We’ll sort this out in a few minutes, okay, Nami?” Megumi said, then chuckled a bit. “That transfer I mentioned just has one percent left. I’ll see you in a few.”

So for the last time this Killing Game, Nami felt a wave of exhaustion come over her, and she passed out. She wasn’t alone. Everyone around her but Dia seemed to be falling over as well, in those moments of lucidity before the world around her was gone.
Epilogue: Day One (Reality Is A Lovely Place)

Chapter Notes

Transcription of the weird bit in the end chapter notes, if it doesn't appear or is too hard to read

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Location: Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 2108, September 27th
Time: 1600 Hours

Nami Kaguya woke up once again.

She took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and sat up. She was in a fairly boring room, sitting in what really could just be called a pod. A simple, somewhat comfortable bed, with a glass pane that had opened down the middle and folded out. There was cabling connected to the pod itself, but nothing attached to her. Even so, she didn’t feel any different, physically, than she had while in the game. No starvation, no muscle atrophy… How that was possible, she didn’t know, but she wasn’t about to complain.

She was dressed differently, though. Her clothing had been reset at the start of the game to match her memory erasure, then Goro made an outfit based on one of those he remembered her wearing to court, which was ‘professionally cute’. Her casual clothing was a cream colored thin turtleneck with a medium-sized bow on the chest, tucked over blue jeans, and sandals, at least, in this case. What she’d been wearing when she was kidnapped. She looked around.

Others were wearing their original outfits, if they’d changed or modified them. Sayaka was back in the button-up and vest with that scarf. Goro was in a sweater-vest again. And they were all here, too. They were all here in the real world finally.

“Good morning, Nami.” Megumi turned away from the monitor, and she wore a genuine smile. It was nowhere near as clear as her natural grins and smirks, but the softness was reassuring. “It’s good to see you again, in the flesh. I must say, though. I did imagine our next meeting to be over an excessively fancy lunch, not when I came to rescue you from a disaster that you should have been exempt from.”

“We have Mercury Mars to thank for that, of course…” Nami griped, “Like, seriously? This whole time, the reason we ended up in the game is because of my ex’s ex??”

“Er, yes, about that.” Hashi took a step forward. “In concept, that’s not very absurd to me, I have to admit. But that’s not what… Okay, just, here.” She held out a piece of paper.

Nami took it, and discovered that it was a sheet of cute stationery. Christmas themed, it looked like, with pink and green hearts around the border. There was a message written in fancy handwriting.

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\[ e o o \]
\[ ge o \]
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\[ e o \]
“...Well, this doesn’t seem like Mercury,” Nami said.

“W-Wait, really!? How can you…” Hashi trailed off again.

“I never met her, but I did read some of her counterfeits. She speaks more seriously than this by a large margin, and besides. It’s referring to her as a different person…” Nami groaned. “This is ridiculous. More mysteries? The game is over…”

“Well, unless the consequences come up quickly, don’t worry about it,” Megumi said, “Those of us who stay behind will manage those mysteries. Won’t we, Mizuho?”

“Uh, yeah! Definitely!” Tsukasa confirmed, currently climbing out of his pod. “We definitely don’t need to tackle that stuff, or Kira’s body getting stolen, right away. We all need some time to rest and recover.”

“That’s right, we-” Nami started to agree, but was tackled in a hug.

“Namineeeeee!” The girl who had committed the aforementioned tackle called out her telltale nickname, then looked up and smiled at her. “I was soooo worried about you…”

“You were worried about me? Come on, how worried do you think I was, Tori?” Nami asked, putting a hand on top of her friend’s head, but refraining from ruffling her hair. “Worried about me, seriously…”

“H-Hey, uh,” Goro spoke up from where he sat in his pod. “My wrist’s still? Broken? Why is that…?”

“You can blame me,” Nate said, raising a hand. “Somebody had to do it, nobody wanted to. There’s some serious problems that come up if you sustained an injury in the Neo World and your body doesn’t reflect it properly. Phantom pains that don’t respond to medication, muscle spasms, that sort of thing. It’s better to have the injury for real and let it heal than to deal with all of that for months after it would have healed.”

“That makes sense…” Tsumugi muttered, holding both hands at her throat. “S-Speaking of medication, er…”

“You get a larger-than-average does of whichever over the counter works best for you. Ibuprofen or Acetaminophen?” Iwako asked, having also walked into the room. It was getting crowded in here. “And one oxy pill. We can’t detox you cold turkey, of course. That would be cruel. But we are detoxing you, young lady. I wouldn’t want to put my fate in your hands, no offense, the way you currently are. We’re counting on you to get us off this planet, after all.”

“Of course… Ibuprofen. Excedrin specifically, if you’ve got it,” Tsumugi answered, hair hanging over her face. Nate had to be pretty skilled, to recreate her near-fatal injury this way. Though, speaking of such things…
“Why doesn’t Tori have any scars?” Kurou asked before Nami could. Well, she had whatever scars she may have had beforehand, like the small oval on her cheek where she’d once fallen on a pencil… But nothing resembling the injury that had killed her.

“Well, it wasn’t necessary, her body didn’t get the data about her death. She doesn’t remember dying,” Megumi said, “Actually, she…”

“I’m sorryyyy, sir,” Torimi cut in, turning to look at Kurou. “I’m afraaaaid I… Don’t know who you are, so why are you calling me Toriii?”

Chapter End Notes

Dearest Friends
An acquaintance of ours has managed to sniff out some of your precious Ultimates out in the world Whoopsy Daisy~! Wouldn't want that to become an example of your capabilities, now would we? Looks like she's sharing the names with the public, Ooh... We'd say that's a perfect opportunity to find participants for that game you've yet to collect on, but there's one little snag...

**NAMI KAGUYA CANNOT RECALL HER TALENT. YOUR GAME WILL FAIL IF SHE DOES.** That's our advice. Take it or leave it!
~Your Best Friend
Torimi and Madara had lost their memories of the entire Killing Game. All of the events from the
time they woke up to their deaths, it was missing. It wasn’t that much of a surprise, thinking about
it. The memory transfer was required to wake up after fulfilling a win condition, and they lacked
that. Their minds reconnected with their bodies, lacking in content from the past several weeks.
This was determined shortly, and Kurou went to be alone and grapple with the fact that somebody
he considered a precious friend didn’t recall having met him at all.

Sayaka watched as Nami talked with Megumi and Torimi. Three girls who were close friends,
through Nami. Torimi and Megumi didn’t know each other yet, but they could, Sayaka figured,
they could. Megumi had much more confidence than Nami did, after all, and Torimi could use
another mentor. Something about their shared identity seemed to have conversation flowing easily
between those three, so she decided to leave them to it. It was chilly in here, so her scarf and vest
remained. In the game, she’d shed down to the button-up and suspenders pretty quick, until Nami
helped her with a more interesting outfit.

This scarf was the real version of it. Not a Neo World copy, that had several more hanging in her
closet, trying to imitate something which was absolutely hers. Kaiba had given it to her. It was a
gift, purchased from a fancy department store along the way. It was a long drive home from
Kiyoteru’s mountain cabin, and she needed something to comfort her. So Kaiba stopped, and
bought her a scarf, and a new pair of shoes, and a teddy bear, all comfortable and lovely, all high
quality. The shoes became too small for her. She grew at least enough for that, but they still sat in
her room back home, as did the bear. And she carried this real scarf with her, almost always.

It smelled like… Home. Her old home, she would be leaving it behind but she’d take her reminders
with her into her new life. She was an adult now, growing up and leaving the nest, she always
knew it would happen. And, when she walked into the lounge, she saw them there. Another

Both of them, in suits. White ones, wearing red ties. She held her scarf to her face for a second,
stifling herself, but she couldn’t do it. She ran forward with her arms outstretched, ending up with
one arm each barely spanning their bodies. They weren’t exactly small men. Akihiko Yamaguchi,
Oyabun of the most important yakuza clan in the country. And Tokumei Yamaguchi, the Ultimate
Yakuza, who survived a Killing Game and who she’d only been able to get to know through
letters, because he’d already been isolated to Towa before she was even born. Her brother even
still.

“I sent him a letter right away,” Akihiko said, “I didn’t mention it when we spoke, I wanted to
surprise you when you got back. He arrived here along with other defectives from Ultimate Hope.”

“It’s nice to meet you in person, Sayaka,” Tokumei said, “You’re shorter than I thought you’d be.”

“...Kaiba was the tall one.” Sayaka took a step back, throttling the urge to yell about how she was
still a huge threat even as a small person. “Uh. Anyway. What are your plans?”

“I go wherever my leadership is needed,” Tokumei said, “I’ll go along to help set up the colony,
but one of us will need to return to Kobe eventually. Dad’s still going strong, but the clan needs an
heir, here on Earth.”

“I’d ask what makes you think you’re the one who needs to come back, but you’re right. I plan on
staying wherever we end up,” Sayaka said, “I mean, I’ll probably still have responsibilities related
to my talent, but. I’ve realized something about myself. I want to have a quiet life with a beautiful wife! That’s all I really want! I wanna feel like a normal girl for once in my life!”

“Of course,” Akihiko said, “That makes perfect sense. Coming to this conclusion, I assume that means you figured out what I said and asked out that girl?”

“Well, what you said did turn out to be a lie, but you had no way of knowing it. Turns out they broke up a while ago anyway. So. Yes. Nami is my girlfriend now.” Sayaka made a face as she looked away. “I really like her and I might end up marrying her? I dunno? If nothing changes for the worse between us, then, yeah. I will.”

“So romantic,” Nami joked from the doorway.

“Bwahh! Nami! You were, busy, talking!” Sayaka blustered, waving her hands around. “This is my dad don’t be weird!”

“Shouldn’t I be maximum weird in front of your dad so he can properly judge that I’m good for you even at my absolute strangest?” Nami wondered, then took a step forward and made a small bow. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mister Yamaguchi. I’m Nami Kaguya, I’m considered the Ultimate Attorney, and I love your daughter.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Akihiko said.

“Wh- You are??” Nami asked, straightening up immediately.

“I’m not one of those fathers who’ll automatically assume anybody who dates my daughter has bad intentions. I failed to notice and protect her from somebody whose intentions really were bad, once. That wasn’t just a mistake on my part, but also puts things into perspective. You seem like a nice young woman. You’re the right age for her. And, while I did my best to respect your privacy and not watch the footage from the game, I caught a bit of it. She needs somebody in her life who can make her flustered in a good way, like you seem to.”

“Thank you for saying that, sir,” Nami said.

“You’re really trying to understand me lately, huh?” Sayaka shifted where she stood. “It’s… Nice. Thanks Dad.”

“I just never considered… I’ve got quite the traditional upbringing, after all. Paying attention to you and your emotions, connecting with you on your problems, that didn’t seem like the sort of thing that was my job as your father. All the same, I… Well, you never had a mother, so I should have stepped up sooner. Especially given what happened to you. I never reached out to help you with your trauma.”

“And I wasn’t even there,” Tokumei said, “To step up. Only Kaiba was, right? And then, that demon hunting game… I swear, that wasn’t Ultimate Hope. We were recruited early enough they couldn’t hide the truth from us, about the games. And Hope never did a game which wasn’t trial-based, not since the Streets of Despair game, which was even before the one I was in.”

“It’s… Come on, you guys, I’m alright! You don’t have to feel bad about it. If I really wanted you to be there for me, I would have asked,” Sayaka said, “But, well. Maybe that’s on me, too, for not saying things when I should’ve. Like. Dad, the fact I wear my hair like this? And don’t shampoo properly, near often enough? It’s, well, sort of a big trigger. I wore my hair down all the time back then, and seeing myself like that, it just feels like I’m back there.”

“...Well, in that case, why not dye your hair?” Akihiko offered, “I don’t think you’ve ever tried that
“Wait- Huh. Oh. That might work. And if it doesn’t help, I can still go back to keeping my hair up… I really should’ve said this sooner, Dad! You’re helpful! What the heck!”

“You could become a redhead,” Nami offered, putting her hands on her hips. “You’d be able to tell how cute you are, that way.”

“Oh! Shut! Up!” She protested, hiding in her scarf again.
Epilogue: Day One (A Second Lease)

6:00 PM / 1800 Hours

Amai Oishi didn’t have anywhere to go, not really. She’d go to space with the others, of course, but there wasn’t anyone who’d just want to have her around, with them, in their house. Not right now, anyway. She felt… Pretty alone, despite the fact she felt close to everybody she escaped the game with. Maybe it was because they were mostly tied to each other, and she just had to be there. Kurou had a family. Sayaka and Nami planned to adopt Goro, Randy and Tsukasa were together… And she doubted that Dia or Tsumugi would actually want to be around her that much at this point.

As for Madara, she didn’t know how to feel about that. He forgot her. He didn’t remember who she, or anybody, was anymore. Anybody but Nate, who apparently had met him before, a long time ago, but he knew him by a different name and probably represented a bad part of his life, so he wouldn’t want to spend time with him anyhow. That wasn’t abandonment, from Nate. That was a surprising gesture of kindness given the context. Even still.

That left Madara even more alone here than Amai was, didn’t it? But maybe it was a good thing. Maybe, she thought, it was okay. He didn’t improve through the Killing Game, all that the entire game did for him was assure him of the false idea that he wasn’t good enough. And to her own detriment, Amai hadn’t exactly helped with that either. She really hadn’t helped. But, he wouldn’t remember that fact now either, would he?

So, she walked out of the front doors, to the garden there. It all seemed to be fast-growing plants… Natsuki had been busy, she assumed. That Ultimate Botanist. Had she been on the Ultimate List? If she was, why was she spared? Whatever. Amai didn’t need to care about that. It would just upset her. It didn’t matter why anybody else got to escape. She didn’t. That was all that mattered. She didn’t.

And here was the sun. It was close to setting, but not quite there. She hadn’t been without it, consciously, nearly as long as the others. But it had been eighteen days since she last saw it. That was undeniable. Eighteen days indoors. She didn’t comprehend that until now, when she stepped outside again. Then, she saw him. The man she’d just been thinking about, sitting on the ground against the wall of the building. She looked to him, then sat down about a foot away.

“Hi, Madara,” She said, “You don’t remember… Anything from the Killing Game?”

“No, none of it,” Madara confirmed, “And I don’t want to watch the episodes back, or anything, so it’s mostly going to stay that way. I’ve dealt with enough shit, I don’t need this kicking around my memory too.”

“I understand,” Amai said, “But is it okay if I tell you a few things about it? Not anything big that happened, or if you got to know anybody who died, or anything like that. Just some things I want you to know?”

“…Sure.” Madara nodded. “All I know right now is that I died. So I guess something more positive would be good to hear.”

“We became friends,” Amai said, “Really good friends, actually. That’s because, you didn’t have to worry. I’d never need you to be anybody other than Madara, I’d never get a crush on you or anything, I prefer girls. And I know you’re not a girl and I know you don’t like people that way and I totally understand it. So, we got to being friends. Best friends.”
“If we were best friends, why did you kill me?” Madara wondered, raising an eyebrow in her direction. “Sorry, I lied. They did tell me that much.”

“Well, you heard about how you didn’t die, right?” Amai asked, and he nodded, so she continued, “I was protecting you. Making sure that you died at the time when it was possible you could survive. Cause… Otherwise, you wouldn’t have.”

“Oh. I was really gonna fucking do it, huh?” Madara asked.

“Um… Yeah.” Amai looked away. “You were. You’re not thinking about doing that again, are you? Cause then you’d really be a dumbass.”

“Not right now, anyway! Look, I might still feel the same. But I got spared my death in a Killing Game, and spared the memories that led me there, too. So I got a second chance. I’m not gonna toss it out the window, I’ll give it a shot,” Madara said.

“I’ll be right there with you,” Amai said, turning to smile at him again. “I didn’t die or anything, but I feel like I’m on my second chance, too. I totally lost faith in humanity and everything, and I wasn’t even trying to be nice to anybody… But when I barked, you barked back. That’s the sort of friends we ended up being. Kinda loud and annoying, and fighting a lot, but it was always well-meaning. Under it all, we loved each other. It’s like you’re my stupid little brother or something!”

“I think I’d like that,” Madara said, “Having an annoying, bitchy big sister around. Assuming you stick around, that is. Though.” He raised a finger as Amai opened her mouth. “I’m not, either, going to make some sudden conclusion that I’m just utterly incapable of connecting with anybody, if you end up deciding you’re sick of me? I don’t wanna put that kind of pressure on you, so… For your sake, I’d only kill myself if two more people abandon me after you do. Or groups of people, anyway. If I’m left totally alone twice more.”

“What? Dipshit.” Amai pouted. “Even if I went away somehow… If I did ‘get sick of you’ and leave, or if I just died or something. That wouldn’t even be leaving you totally alone once. You tried to be a loner and keep to yourself, but, you know. Everyone from in the game considers you a friend. Even without your memories. They’ll want you to get to know them all over again… Huh. Yeah, I guess that. I’m kinda starting to understand how Dia would feel, about the others. It’s weird. Not having you remember me, but I remember so much about you. Stuff happened that you just don’t even know about, involving you…”

“Nothing weird, hopefully,” Madara said.

“You’re weird, so of course everything involving you was weird some way or another! You threatened to commit arson against the building if you were given anything even remotely strong enough to do so!”

“That’s not weird. Don’t you know, trans people can and should do arson?” Madara chuckled. “That’s it, that’s the one historical meme that I can remember. Actually, Nate said it… When…”

“When, what?” Amai wondered, tilting her head.

He groaned, and dipped his head. “Well, when I came out to him. It was almost okay, actually. Did I tell you this story before?”

“You literally did not once mention that you had met Nate Harper, the probable archnemesis of your friend who died and you were the only one who cared he was dead,” Amai said, “Sorry. We hate Kanoshi Kyosuke in this house. He’s pretty gross!”
“I… Well, I guess you can explain why he’s gross. Some other time. It’s not that surprising to hear, though. As for Nate, thing is, like I said. It was almost okay. He was weirdly supportive, for being a despair who murders people and has probably been at least an accessory to sexual assault. But, well. Being a guy made me somebody he’d be attracted to, and so I left. We were just friends the whole time I was with him. But it’s girls who he’s got a soft spot for. It was just a week till I got scared he might pull something, and ran away on my own.”

“So he didn’t even fucking abandon you?? That undermines your entire fucking angst, my dude!”

“Excuse you! I have like, twenty abandonment issues to every one ‘I ran away’. And I have trangst on my side, too. Like so much trangst.” Madara held a hand to his chest in mock disgust. “I can’t believe you’d try to invalidate my *trauma*, Onee-chan.”

Madara was a lot more fun, when she admitted that she wanted to get along with him. Maybe it was built on a lie, but this ease, this talk between them felt natural, and good. And she’d do it right, this time. She’d do right by Tsukune Madara this time, because the first time nearly killed him. And she really didn’t want him gone. It was no tragedy for him, that his memory was gone. It seemed to be, for Torimi. But not for Madara.

Madara got a second chance at life, and Amai got a second chance at saving it.
The door was right there.

The fact that the game was ending was something which hadn't really been announced to the whole facility. Just a few people, whoever happened to be in the room or watching along with the raw footage. That left the participants their own time to think and decide to go and find those who'd been waiting for them to wake up. There were plenty. Parents, siblings, friends, all waiting to see if their particular loved one would be lucky enough to wake from that nightmare. And those who were waiting for Tsumugi…

Well, they were really waiting for Kaede, weren't they?

Because. Because as far as those people knew and cared, Tsumugi was the one with the rotten core. She killed somebody. She killed Kirumi Tojo who could never come back because of her. Kirumi probably would have had somebody waiting to see her too, if this sort of situation happened in the previous game. Tsumugi ruined that with her own hands and it didn't matter what else she did or what else happened. She could never change that fact. She could never change it.

Kaede was the shining detective who helped them survive every single trial and make it out of the game, only to be wrapped up in a second game.

Tsumugi was the fourth worst person in the game who killed Kirumi Tojo. She escaped her confinement to talk to her stepbrother, but they thought it was to look for drugs. She tried to convince Kokichi to take them with her, and it was only his refusal to go along that kept her from relapsing then. And she'd relapsed now. Tsumugi Shirogane was the rotten junkie murderer and what did she ever do to give them a single good thing to think about her anyway? Her passion for her talent was far from unique to her. There was hardly anything good about her at all. Maybe they thought that and maybe they were right about it.

She did know the real Kaede, though. Kaede who she loved so much, but the rose-tinted glasses Tsumugi used didn't seem to work very well when it came to hindsight. It wasn't like she'd ever, in her whole life, stop loving Kaede Akamatsu. But Kaede was also the second worst person in their Killing Game. Worse than Tsumugi, so Angie said. Blood on her hands from cooperation. Blood on her hands from the premature Mastermind trial. Kaede who said that they should isolate themselves for safety. Kaede who got killed because she never let anyone close enough to trust her but still cared enough to help with something as trivial as a lost workbook. Kaede who told Tsumugi that anything negative she said about her own awful actions was fishing for sympathy, so she didn't say it anymore. She thought it over and over again and let herself fall apart.

Kaede held Tsumugi together. Kaede hurt Tsumugi. These were both true. And all along, Tsumugi wondered. Would her friends ever understand that? Or would it always be… Why did Kaede even like somebody like Tsumugi?

God. Why did Tsumugi even like somebody like Kaede? Must have been the Killing Game. Yeah. They weren't good people. They were girls who liked girls and they lived long enough to seek each other out. They were no good for each other. Different wavelengths. They loved each other but never understood each other.

Tsumugi did have good traits. She did, she told herself, she did. She had a good memory. She kept her promises. She loved with all her heart. Let's be open, for once, okay? Don't just crack your pages when someone asks to see. Nami, Amai, Tsukasa… She needed to be ready to share with
them, and too, with. Those people. Why don't you meet me for real. Why don't I prove to you that I deserved to make it just as much as Kaede did. I'm the one who's here now. Let me show you how to love me too.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. There was a long hallway, and she practically floated down it in light steps. Confident and quiet. There was the common area, and she rounded the corner, standing by it. She saw them there, sitting at a table together, eating and chatting as they always would back in the game. Maki was looking cute, she thought, with that Replicant body. Smoother and more human than her robot one, though she kept the lines on her cheeks, likely as a reminder of what once was. It was Miu, however, who noticed her there first.

"Tsumugi!" She exclaimed and jumped up from the table, running over to tackle her in a hug. Well, she wasn't expecting that.

"Oh, Miu. Whatever happened to 'I wouldn't want to call ourselves something related to her', hm?" Maki asked, smirking as she leaned her cheek in her palm.

"I… Shut up! That was a year ago, okay?" She protested, then let go and took a step back to look Tsumugi over. "Well! You're a teeny bit worse for wear… But you're alive. That's what matters. I'll admit, we weren't your biggest fans right after the game, still. But, all things considered, well. We forgave the others. Not forgiving you just cause you lived, that's… Cruelish? Plus, you've been punished plenty by now!"

"Yeah, I'd say. Somebody I considered a friend did try to slit my throat and all." Tsumugi fidgeted where she stood. "Along with, everything else that happened. I mean, uh. I have trauma now? That's cool, in a, you know. Crying alone in your room over a pill bottle kind of way." She dipped her head. "Doctor Same is going to help me detox, though, so you don't have to intervene or anything. I… Well, I got addicted the first time because I was too obsessed with my job to take proper care of myself so. Can you blame me for relapsing on my second Killing Game in a row?"

"Nobody's going to blame you for anything, Tsumugi," Shuichi said from the table.

"Shuichi!" She exclaimed, and approached. She furrowed her brow to see the cane set against the table next to him. "What happened to you? Did… Did Ultimate Hope do it?"

"Oh, no." He shook his head. "It's an injury from some of the time that we forgot for the game, that's all. Er, anyway. I wanted to tell you. It's kind of… Sweet? That you tried to avenge me, I guess. I wouldn't have wanted you to. But we won't hold it again you either. It was a difficult time for all of us, and, well. I haven't been in that situation, but I can't say that I wouldn't have done the same if you were murdered, Kokichi was a suspect, and a long-lost stepbrother told me it was possible to save him if I also killed someone."

"...If you put it that way, well, I'd forgive me too," Tsumugi said, and adjusted her glasses. "Er, maybe I'm just soft now. My new friends are very forgiving people!"

"Hm, well," Rantaro spoke up, "A lot of them are old enough to know better. People are way more complicated than just good or bad. I mean, forgiving you right away? I couldn't do that now either, a year older. What you did was really bad, but you deserve the chance to move forward. We should focus on condemning people like my dad, who have real power and no interest in getting any better. Not people like you. You were our friend and you made a mistake."

"I was the first person here to forgive you, though!" Kokichi raised his hand with a sweet smile. "That's no lie. Cause, all along, I woulda done the same if I knew Tojo was an accomplice in the crime. Killing Games… Make people do things they never would in normal life. That's the whole
point of them. It's why both groups liked them! Hope gets to weed out the 'weak links' who aren't good enough people to join them, and Despair gets to show off how even us 'beacons of hope' can do awful stuff. It's designed that way, though... That kinda stress proves nothing, anybody can be pushed into awful actions and the games do everything they can to encourage that!

"...If you put it that way, it's a good point," Tsumugi said, "I... Wish everybody could be here. I wish everyone could have a chance to be better with me. Our friends. My friends. Everybody."

Everybody. She thought about them as she took a seat with her friends who wanted to see her become a good person. She had a ways to go, but she could make it. She knew she could.

Korekiyo had his memories altered, otherwise he would have continued only killing Despairs.

Maki's programmers sent her an update that required her to kill somebody due to the Laws of Robotics, something she would never again be subject to in a Replicant body.

Kiibo, too, wasn't allowed to remember the true state of the world, and read normal trauma reactions as Despair Fever.

Tenko did remember the true state of the world, and honestly believed that she'd be committing a mercy killing if she made sure everybody died.

Angie honestly believed in judgment until she believed in her friends instead.

Tomoe knew full well what killing somebody would do to her. She understood the Killing Game and she wanted to die, and a 'parasite' didn't hesitate to take somebody down with her.

Shinjiro saw his abuser every time he looked at Yuuri Ruka, and decided to take judgment into his own hands to send those he decided were worthy back to the world.

...Tsumugi admittedly couldn't think of any way to explain Kanoshi. He already committed one selfish murder before the game, though, so maybe he was just kind of bad.

Goro was defending himself from physical attack while already in the midst of a breakdown. That could have happened in normal life for somebody like him, but it would be just as understandable there.

Riko had been told that she only had worth to her family if, were she to enter a Killing Game, she won it.

And Tsumugi was trying to save a girl who'd die anyway, and avenge a friend who'd live anyway. Perhaps her motives were the most worthless of all. But it didn't matter now. It didn't.

The Killing Game wouldn't take these kinds of victims again. It wouldn't take any. And it was time, for people like Tsumugi and Goro, to do enough good in this world to erase those sins.
Dia Hamuko didn’t think she liked being alone.

Alone, and really, very, tired. After all, unlike the others, there was no body hooked into the system for her to begin with. She’d been promised one. She would receive one. The win condition had absolutely been fulfilled and, unlike the organics, she existed only here. The fact that she won the game wouldn’t be lost in translation with her mind disconnected from a body, because she never had one to begin with. The fact that she’d won was stored right here. She could be retrieved whenever her body in the real world was ready for her.

But the facility’s integrity was gone. She’d been here, she figured, three days since the game finished. She knew she’d get out eventually, of course. Her data was on its own. She couldn’t be corrupted. Somehow, she knew inherently, she had no reason to be afraid that she could be erased or lost, even as eventually, everything was gone. The Neo World Hospital disappeared around her. She was really hungry. And her head hurt. The corruption made her tired, too, so no matter how much she slept, she was exhausted. And lonely. She thought she would have liked some time alone for real. Without everybody. Without all of them. She didn’t.

Maybe it was just because she was only alive at all right now through another glitch. And with the facility in this state, overrun, the glitch couldn’t resolve itself. Even if she tried another way to die for real, it had no capacity to absorb her data. Good, she wouldn’t want it to. But she did want to stop lying around with a bullet stuck in her head and nothing to eat. If she wasn’t so interminably sleepy, she’d be throwing a tantrum about this. Stomping her feet and throwing herself at the ground and everything. Instead, she was doing her best to angrily nap. It didn’t carry the emotion very well.

Stupid Mom! Get me out of this place already, or you’ll have to do a lot more than I said to get me to forgive you for my creation.

It was almost like the threat of one of her children actually hating her was enough to kick Hashi into gear, because it wasn’t long after Dia thought that, she woke from her next nap in somewhere distinctly not composed of exclusively black and red glitch-textures.

Location: Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
Date: 2108, October 1st
Time: 1000 Hours

“Oh. This is reality?” Dia asked, staring up at the ceiling. Then, she sat up without waiting for an answer, pulling her arms around to look at them. Her scars were visible…

“Yes, it is. Forgive me for prying, but, you do appear a bit different from the way you did within the program,” A woman said, and Dia recognized her voice as being Hashi’s. “The Replicant bodies take on subconscious traits naturally; Children may develop to look like their parents, or take on other facets of their appearances to, er, well. I haven’t observed yet, the reason somebody might end up changing over time… But what I’m saying, basically, is that this body is taking on what we’d call your ‘true form’.”

“Mm. Looking different from this took effort, in the NWP,” Dia said, “I guess I can’t get away with that anymore, can I? But. It’s a little different from that, even now, huh?”

It was. Her eyes were pink, though she wouldn’t be able to see that herself. Also out of sight until
she could get to a mirror would be the slight difference in her facial structure, not enough to shock her when she would see it, but enough that she probably wouldn’t be mistaken for Box Hako by anyone anymore, when combined with the other differences.

Aside from the scar tissue, what remained of her normal skin was softer. She was even a bit skinner now than she had been; Further distancing herself from Box Hako, who had been just a bit on the plump side before her depressive spiral kicked into full gear. Her hands were particularly nice. Really, it seemed that the body she’d been granted picked up on the absolutely true fact that she was a delicate flower.

“Mhm. I’m very pretty, aren’t I?” Dia asked, then pressed one of those perfect fingers to her temple. “It’s nice to finally kick that headache, too. That was real fuckin’ annoying. Brand new. Never had a bullet in my head before that one! I’d like never to experience a new type of pain again, thank you very much.”

“That’s where we differ,” Hashi muttered, then turned red as if she hadn’t meant to blurt something of that nature. “Ah, anyway! I am, your mother, technically. I made you. Certainly made you more than Speak Hako made you. She just, uh. Paid me to make you. And obviously I didn’t do a very good job at meeting her specifications or of giving you a shot at a good life, and, well—”

“Shut up.” Dia glared at her, letting her glasses fall down the bridge of her nose. “I know all that. I’m the one who had to suffer for it. And I said I would forgive you if you brush my hair. You continuing to beat yourself up over it to me is in fact, more likely to keep you in my bad graces at this point.”

“O-Oh! Sorry…” Hashi pushed her fingers together and looked down. “It’s just… I do have an ethical responsibility as a scientist. And I seem to keep failing at it. With everyone.”

“Who besides me have you gotten stuck in a seemingly unending circle of death and murder?” Dia wondered with a serious tilt of her head.

Hashi seemed taken aback for a second. Staring at her. Then, she sighed. “…I haven’t. But I could have done better. Could have made sure you had the same personality as Box Hako, but I’m just not good enough to develop something so specific. And Maki. My coworkers made her kill somebody, too. But. Uh, permanently.”

“...I actually do not care about your angst right now,” Dia said.

“Ah… Sor…ry?”

Dia climbed out of the pod. So the transfer had to be done through here from the NWP even with her type of body… Well. She was here, and alive. And she had something that she wanted to see with her own two eyes so much more than she wanted to listen to yet another Ultimate’s self-deprecation. Really, why the hell should she hear anybody else’s problems? That was her entire problem this whole time and it wasn’t her problem anymore. Simply put, she had decided, fuck that noise. And she went to meet with her desire.

For the first time in her life, Dia Hamuko stepped outdoors. Really outdoors, not the grey void outside of the hospital she’d occasionally found herself in, and not the fake garden inserted within the hospital either. This was it. She looked up to the sky, and took a deep breath. Yeah, she’d leave this planet behind. As long as the new one had something even a little bit like this. Now that she’d seen it for herself, with her own eyes and not Box’s, she didn’t really ever want to lose it. Greenery. Fresh air. Everything so vibrant and alive.
“You’re that new replicant girl, right?” A girl who Dia had never met asked from the doorway, “How’re you liking my garden?”
11:00 am / 1100 Hours

“Your garden?” Dia asked, turning to see her there.

“Mhm. Mine. I’m Natsuki Nagata, Ultimate Botanist.” She held out her organic hand. “It’s nice to meetcha… Hamuko?”

“Yes, that’s me. Dia Hamuko.” Dia shook her hand, then Natsuki didn’t let go.

“Your hands are… Super nice,” Natsuki observed, then looked up and met her eyes. “Or maybe just your right hand is, I dunno. Only my right hand is nice, so, I can’t assume these things. That all together sounds weird. I promise, I’m not into hands. Not in a weird way, anyhow. Like I won’t steal your hands, or anything. I’m talking too much.”
“No, no. You can be sure of it, both of my hands are very nice.” Dia chuckled. “I used to wear gloves, you know. While I was still sort of trying to be a different person. I guess I needed my hands to be nice enough to share with the world?”

“But I was talking too much?” Natsuki asked.

“Yes. You were. The fact you felt the need to clarify that you wouldn’t steal my hands makes me a bit scared you actually will,” Dia said.

“I promise I won’t. I had my hand stolen.” Natsuki lifted her other arm. “Which is why I only have the one nice one, see. I wouldn’t steal someone else’s hand.”

“Now that I think about it. I’m a replicant, right? As long as there are more of the particles that make up my body, I could have my hands stolen, over and over,” Dia said, and stuck a finger on her chin as she looked at the sky again. “I wouldn’t like that, though. That would probably also be a new type of pain. I wouldn’t like to have any more of those.”

“There’s always gonna be new types of pain,” Natsuki said, “The world’s pretty mean like that.”

“I spent seven years repeating the Killing Game. How many more types of pain than that can there be?”

“Oh, believe me. There’s plenty more.” Natsuki reached up to twirl one of her pigtails. “Always more. Cause, let’s see. Bet you haven’t… Frozen to death yet, right? Didn’t seem like that game had a walk-in.”

“...Cold can kill you? What the. What the fuck?” Dia questioned, then immediately wrapped her arms around herself. “No, I suppose I haven’t done that! Don’t tell me these things! Ah, how much does it have to be? Box got really cold plenty of times-”

“More than that.” Natsuki put a hand on her shoulder. “It takes pretty low temperatures for a pretty long time. As long as you have the means to live comfortably, and don’t go out climbing mountains or anything, you shouldn’t ever have to deal with that.”

“I want to live beyond comfortably.” Dia pouted, balling up her hands. “I wanna be comfy all the time. And not be cold. And not get hurt, ever! I’m a fragile flower, goddammit!”

“Oh, I bet you are,” Natsuki said, “And you really like flowers too, right? Well, wherever we end up. I’m going to make sure it’s just as green and bright as Earth. It’s the least I can do with my talent. So, you’ll come along, right?”

“Certainly,” Dia said, “I haven’t a place on this planet, first of all. Moving on. Have you spoken with Nami Kaguya yet?”

“Kaguya? Nahh.” Natsuki crossed her arms. “Well, I guess it’s stupid. You probably have even more of an idea of who I am from my friends than she would.”

“That might be true. But really, I don’t think they wanted to share too much about you. The most I know is that you won’t be too upset if I admit that I didn’t particularly like them.” She shifted her weight. “Rei was fine. She was nice, she… Probably knew, at least in some timelines, about me. She tried to take care of me. But the other two…”

“You don’t have to like them. That’s my job,” Natsuki said, “Literally. I’m gonna write a book about what happened to us. And what they were actually like. And that’s all there needs to be. So I don’t really care if they didn’t make a good impression on you, they never had to.”
“Good. Cause, they didn’t. I mean, I can’t really hold it against them personally since just about everyone had some hand in this, but they kinda traumatized me? In. You know. Fake versions. Uhh, why am I telling you this?”

“Good question. It’s not like I didn’t watch the game. I know these things. Sort of.” Natsuki frowned. “What did they… Specifically… Do to you?”

“Why are you asking?”

“I just want to see if you’ll lie to me,” Natsuki said, “And say that they were just awful to you.”

“Sometimes they killed me. Shinjiro more than Etsuko. And sometimes, they dated me. Etsuko more than Shinjiro,” Dia explained, “And that’s it, really. Nothing so awful. The Killing Game on one part. The fact I wasn’t me, on the other. I can’t really blame them, it isn’t like Box would have turned them down. Not their fault that she was bisexual while I only like women. Not anyone’s fault.”

“They were idiots,” Natsuki said, smirking. “I won’t deny that much. Can’t hold it against them, really. Or maybe you can. They’re dead, after all. If you ‘can’ hold it against anyone, make it the dead. Cause, like you said. They all hurt you. Bet that’s not an easy deal.”

“It’s not!” Dia whined, and stomped her foot once. “It’s not fair I can’t hold it against anybody cause I also love them and they’re my friends and I know why they did the stuff they did!”

“I dunno how to sort out something that specific. But I kinda know how it feels to be mad at people you’re not allowed to be mad at. Or who never gave you the chance, to show them how mad you are. So why don’t we give something a shot?”

“Huhh?”

“There’s so much space out here. I saw you trying it out, inside,” Natsuki said, “But that didn’t work, yeah? I do it all the time, though. It’s better out here. Come on.”

She reached out and grabbed Dia by the hand, grinning. Dia stared for just a second before she realized what Natsuki was referring to, and gave one resolute nod.

The two girls, each with a poisonous anger in their veins, released a long, frustrated scream into the midday sky. And it helped. This time, it helped.
Everybody kept mostly to themselves for a few days. Nami, for example, hadn’t actually left her room much at all. She’d gone outside, returned in, and shared her room with Sayaka, spending the next few days basically just sleeping. The Killing Game was an exhausting event, and this was the first time in weeks she was able to truly sleep without being on edge at all. She didn’t feel like she was in danger anymore, and her body was reacting to this fact. She ate when she needed to, but mostly slept.

Slept and stayed in bed and let her grief begin to process. It would take a long time. She even still had to deal with some extent of grief over Torimi, and she was alive. Nami still thought for several days that her best friend was dead. (And for that matter, another best friend was dead, forever.) It wasn’t an easy thing to process, for her brain to wrap itself around. So for several days, Nami, and everybody else, just themselves be consumed with mourning.

This was the day that Nami felt like she could face the outside world again, in some amount. Like she’d processed enough of the emotions she’d been holding back, that she could once more function, so she did. She climbed out of bed and walked out of her room and actually sat down in the cafeteria to eat. At another table were the ‘Failed Ultimates’, those who had survived the previous game. She wasn’t going to actually approach them, but by eating in the cafeteria instead of her room, she was opening herself up to be approached.

None of them bothered, but it wasn’t long before Torimi came to get breakfast herself, and upon spotting Nami, slid in across from her. Torimi, who was alive and well and didn’t need to remember the Killing Game… Or didn’t get to remember it. While it seemed to help Madara, Nami couldn’t help feeling like becoming friends with Kurou had been a positive influence in Torimi’s life, and that same friendship might not be able to form again. That, and Torimi’s approval of Sayaka…

“Namineee… You finally came out of your room.” Torimi waved a hand in front of her face. “Three whooooole days, you know. That’s not a lot, but I guess time seeeems slower in a game like that. So it is a lot. Right?”

“What makes you think that?” Nami asked.

“Wellll… If two weeks is normally enough time for youuu to fall in love,” Torimi said, “I’ll correct myself. Buuuut… That’s usually myyyy bit.”

“…You’re right,” Nami said, “Two weeks usually isn’t enough. But maybe it would have been enough with Sayaka anyway? We’re really good for each other. I mean. Sure, the Killing Game was a contributing factor to how we fell so hard so fast. But. I don’t think…”

“I’m pulling your leeeeeeeg. We only got to talk a liiiiiittle, but I approooove.”

“Oh! Oh, that’s nice,” Nami said, “I was worried. You approved of her in the game, but, I was afraid that we’d need to get you to approve all over again. I guess I need to remind you, you’ll be my maid of honor if we get married.”

“I doooo approve. I mean, you are gonna have to approve myyyyy potential future boyfriend.”
“Excuse me your what?”

“You… Well, we would date already, but.” She pressed her fingers together and looked away. “Some of the others say, my brain’s too mushy to decide that sorta thing right now. Sooo. I guess we’re betrothed to be boyfriend-girlfrieeeend? If things actually go well between us once I’m not as, muuuushy?”

“I’m pretty sure getting into a relationship will just make you more mushy, but-” Nami did a double take. “Hey, wait, this guy’s actually cool with that situation?”

“Mhmmmm. Can you believe it?” Torimi asked, folding her hands under her chin. “And he’s onlyyy four years older than me.”

“That’s still not great, but, given your track record… It kind of is,” Nami admitted, “And you met this guy right when you woke up here?”

“Well, just a little after I woke up,” Torimi said, “It was just after Madaraaawoke up here. We were hanging out in the other room and heard the commotion in the main room, so we went and said hello.”

“Oh, that makes sense. So it’s another member of the ‘Failed Ultimates’, right?” Nami asked, looking up at the ceiling. “I think that I have all the groups sorted out now… In the other wing there’s the True Radicals, who figured out Kira’s Ultimate Plan and decided to follow it, and recruited our friends and family. And in this wing, there’s the ‘Failed Ultimates’, who survived Killing Games and initially joined with Ultimate Hope, but defected from them. Right?”

“Yesss, that’s right,” Torimi said, “You’re so clever, Naminee. Of course you’d have it figured out that easy.”

“Some people don’t count as either faction, though. Like Megumi. She’s just here to help,” Nami said.

“Since you wooke up, I talked to her. She’s suuuper nice.”

“Super nice? I’m not sure I’d use those words to describe her. Golden genius, sure.”

“I asked her how she ever got so preeeetty. She told me that I’m also pretty but I’d be prettier iiiif I took better care of myself. She said it’s her responsibilityyyy to let me know that.”

“Oh, that’s reasonable. That makes sense. Why’d you never listen to me when I told you that?”

“Till I wasn’t ready to heeer it, then.”

“…Yeah, I can understand that. Well, moving on. Do you think that I can meet this guy of yours? If you’re going to be trying to date for real, then I have to vet him, obviously. Given I’m your best friend and all.”

“Of course, of course, I think you’ll like him though.” Torimi smirked, then got up from her seat to walk over to one of the other tables where some people Nami hadn’t become acquainted with yet were eating. “Oh, Didi, would you be sooo kind as to come meet my best friend Naminee?”

Holy shit she already had an affectionate nickname for him. Nami had a moment of concern that Torimi was coming onto this guy too strong and would be let down, but then he stood up so quickly that his chair clattered to the ground and Nami’s concerns immediately shifted instead to
does she seriously have this guy she’s not even officially dating yet, whipped?

So, he approached the table, and spoke, “Uh, hey there. I’m Daisuke Harada. Ultimate Brewmaster. Torimi just started flirting with me out of nowhere which was, incredibly surprising? Not the sort of thing that usually happens to me. Which is why it’s questionable to my friends if her brain has actually recovered from that Neo World thing?”

“Oh, it’s recovered. Actually, as far as I can tell so far, you’re the least ill-advised fliration she’s had yet,” Nami said, “But, I do need to determine that with more certainty. I’ll say something and you say the first thing that comes to mind, okay?”

“Oh… Okay?” Daisuke obviously had no idea where Nami was going with this.

“Girls.”

“Respect women juice?”

“Torimi.”

“Confusing siren?”

“That’s fair, okay… Space?”

“Welcome to the Space Olympics?” Daisuke blurted, then turned a bit red. “Hey, this game is tough! How are my answers supposed to be any good on the spot like this?”

“Well, that’s the point, it has to be true because you don’t have time to think up a lie. And what I’m getting from this is… You are a fellow scholar of the historical art of ‘memery.’” Nami leaned forward, narrowing her eyes. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you… But you’ve got my approval for now, pretty much.”

“Oh! I uh. I do? Did she tell you how old I am?” Daisuke asked.

“Her standing record for youngest man she slept with was still ten years older than her.” Nami waved it off. “If it was anyone but Torimi, yeah, I’d call weird on it. This isn’t that big a deal, though… You’re on hold to date for real anyway, right? Give it a bit till she’s actually an adult, at least?”

“Heeeey!” Torimi protested.

“Yes ma’am,” Daisuke agreed with a stiff nod, clearly just the smallest bit more scared of Nami than he was attracted to Torimi. Good. All boys should fear their girlfriend’s best friend, at least in the beginning.
12:00 PM / 1200 Hours

Just as Nami Kaguya hadn’t left her room to do anything but fetch food for several days, neither had Tsukasa Mizuho. Randy Sempers, it turned out, didn’t even do that much. His boyfriend brought food back to the room for him as he grappled with what he’d once called a ‘future him’ problem, now very much a ‘present him’ problem. The number of people who’d died. The number of people he couldn’t protect. Even people who he got to know well enough to call his friend, like Kaede. He was strong, right? Strong and virtuous but all the same. He’d failed them. He failed all those people.

Nine. No, ten, let’s make it ten. Kira was a person too. No matter how anybody felt about the fact she’d been involved, he could have protected Kira too, if he was better. If he was better than this. If he was as good as he claimed to be. He just wasn’t enough. And it took him several days to handle this even enough to pretend to be a person again. He still felt awful when Tsukasa finally dragged him out, but he knew it had to happen. He needed some fresh air, and…

Well, there they were. Tsukasa had been able to face the world, with nobody waiting to see him. But Randy had two, and they waited outside. Courtney and Ralph Sempers. His sister and his dad. Some part of his brain was screaming that he didn’t deserve to see his family, with the number of failures weighing on him, but he smiled when he saw them anyway. His father, who he had only fond memories of, and Courtney, who he’d never met until she contacted him in the middle of the game to say she’d been searching ever since he disappeared.

“...Randy,” Ralph said, then crossed his arms. “Nice name, though it’s a little bit ridiculous to introduce us both now, isn’t it? Hey I’m Ralph, this is my son Randy?”

And Randy couldn’t help but laugh. “Fuck, yeah, that does sound pretty stupid… I didn’t even think about that, I just went the idiot route of ‘what’s the gayest male form of my deadname’ and landed on this one.”

“Really gotta wear it on your sleeve, huh? Wasn’t the dude prostitute in Trailer Park Boys named Randy…?” Courtney asked, both hands on her hips. “Not like it matters, but, that’s pretty lame of you. Not innovative at all. Me and Dad could’ve come up with a better guy name, you know.”

“Well, I mean.” Randy scratched the back of his head. “I was kind of still too hung up on the whole ‘I let myself get conned into being left alone in another country’ shame to even begin to think about coming out if I contacted you at all. Which I didn’t.”

“We noticed,” Ralph said.

“I… Can’t even try to excuse it as some noble cause, like not wanting you to worry, or anything. I just didn’t want you to know I fucked up. Like it was better you thought somebody murdered me, than knowing it was my own fault-”

“Can it, stinkface!” Courtney exclaimed, lunging forward to grab both of Randy’s hands in her own. “Calling something like that your fault? Come on. Sure, it’s your fault you never called to let us know you were alive, but it ain’t your fault we doubted that in the first place!”

“If anything,” Ralph said, “I should take the blame, for not keeping a better eye on you. You were still a kid, back then. Just because you were capable, doesn’t mean you knew everything, and I
became kinda lax as a parent…”

“I think it was a good thing in the long run, though…” Randy looked away. “Not, leaving you guys. But I mean, I met Tsukasa here. I figured out who I was. Even this Killing Game… I made friends I never would have met otherwise? I have to look on the bright side of this stuff.”

“We already discussed certain things,” Tsukasa chimed in, “Courtney and Ralph don’t really have anything to go back to in the states anyhow. I’ll gladly give them a place to live… Separate from us, of course. And fund Japanese lessons so that they can exist more easily in this country. They’re your family, it’s kind of my responsibility to put them up…”

“Your responsibility?” Randy asked, chuckling. “Well, I don’t know about that, but it’s really nice of you… Having my family around in the same city should be nice. As long as you’re careful!” Randy directed this bit at those family members again. “It isn’t the nicest city around, we’re gonna do our best to clean it up and make it a better place to live, but right now there’s still a bunch of Despairs!”

“We can take care of ourselves!” Courtney assured him, “And, come on! If we didn’t fall into despair while you were missing, we’re not about to do it now. We’ve got the spirits of warriors!”

“You are all… Very loud,” Tsukasa muttered to himself, in Japanese so as not to actually be heard voicing his observation.

“Damn right you do!” Randy agreed, and there was honest enthusiasm there. So, sure, he was a failure in many, many ways. His family loved him anyway, even with all the extra mistakes he’d made when it came to them, and so far it seemed like they still got along too. It seemed to be a genetic trait, that near-untouchable optimism. Even when his own took a hit, the people around him were ready with more of it to wrap him up in. It was good for him, to actually leave his room and get this reality check.

The only one who considered it Randy’s responsibility to protect his peers, was him. He failed in his own eyes and nobody else’s. That was a bit hard to understand, but he would. On his own, he’d spend some time mourning again. He had to. He hadn’t even begun to properly mourn during the game, and like he was warned about, he experienced some emotional whiplash on that front. But when he was finished grieving, he had these people waiting for him. His people. The ones that he could still protect.
Epilogue: Day Four (New "Brother")

4:00 PM / 1600 Hours

Goro understood why he hadn’t seen Nami or Sayaka in a few days now. He understood it. That didn’t mean that he liked it, though. He had a room to himself. Temporarily. Dia was going to be roomed with him tonight, now that she was awake. He hadn’t seen her either but he heard that she was awake. They were friends, so of course they could be roommates. They practically already were before, in the quarantine room back then. He hadn’t seen her, though. He was fine with seeing people, but he hadn’t really seen anyone. He wasn’t fine with seeing certain people, admittedly. He did what he could to avoid them. Kokichi, Wanda, and Ryouma. It would be difficult to talk to them about this. Difficult to talk through the fact that their mutual tormentor was dead, and here they were, they were alive and fine now. Alive and able to seek the future they never expected to have.

And Goro had been the favorite. For all the complicated feelings he had, it was undeniable, he gave in to Kiyoshi in a different way from the rest. Because ‘pretending to be in love makes it hurt less’. Because he was alone in the world from the day he signed with Kiyoshi. Because he wanted somebody to want him no matter how much it tore him apart, and for that… The others probably never understood him very well. He didn’t understand himself very well, let’s be real, let’s be honest. Goro was included, when Ryouma shared her unhealthy coping mechanisms, when those scars grew on all of them, matching, near identical but for the volume based on just how long they’d been caught up in that particular hell. He was included then, but all the same. Looking in on him, it almost could have seemed like he wanted to be there.

He was pretty sure they knew. His reasoning. Why he acted that way, because they weren’t looking in, they were in it right there next to him. Even so. He was sure he was the only one who felt, to his own disdain, just a little bit sad that Kiyoshi was dead. It wasn’t like he wished Kiyoshi was still alive. But amongst his grief was a small seed that wept for him, in with the rest of the people Goro lost. For as awful as that period in his life had been, well, Kiyoshi was his only meaningful human contact during it, stretching the word human as that may be.

“Hey, you!” An unfamiliar voice snapped Goro out of his thoughts, because of course he’d been having this breakdown in a public space, that being outside. He wasn’t aware of it, but he’d just barely missed Dia when he came out here. It wasn’t Dia who was talking to him right now, though. He looked up. “You seem pretty sad, but sorry, I’m here to ruin your day more. Kizuto Orihara, I’m the other guy that Nami Kaguya promised to play onee-san to.”

“...She didn’t promise to play onee-san to me, she promised to play Mom,” Goro answered, not even taking a moment to process the absurdity of the conversation which had just now begun.

“I mean either way she promised both of us that she’d play a nurturing feminine role in our lives.” Kizuto shrugged. “Therefore, by association, we’re kind of related now. Right?”

“I guess that would be how it works,” Goro said, “I mean, it’s very strange. But not that confusing. It makes perfect sense if you put it that way, though, I didn’t really expect to acquire a little brother?”

“I don’t have to be your little brother. I could be the big brother. We’re already fucking up traditional family dynamics this much, why not take it a step further?”

“You’re fourteen.”
“Our ‘moms’ are twenty and nineteen.”

“Good point… I guess you can be the big brother,” Goro said, “That makes it so that I don’t suddenly feel responsible for your well-being or anything. What do brothers talk about anyway?”

“I dunno. Haven’t had one before. Make fun of each other for the girls they like?”

“I’m gay, but we can work with that. Make fun of me for my best friend who happens to be a girl, Dia Hamuko.”

“Wow, you couldn’t make friends with a regular human so you had to get a friend made for you?”

“Nooooo, she was made before I met her. For totally different reasons. Bad reasons. If she was made to be my friend that might’ve been better, actually… Well, anyway. What girl do you like?”

“Akane Fujishiro is pretty cute…” Kizuto said, scratching his chin. “I don’t think she even really knows I exist, though. She ignores me every time I try to talk to her.”

“Have you considered maybe she just doesn’t have time for that sort of thing right now?” Goro asked, “Wait, I take it back. Fujishiro? If she’s anything like her brother, if you had a chance, she’d have asked you out already. So you probably don’t.”

“That’s a little bit harsh, for teasing…”

“Oh, sorry, I should’ve clarified. I wasn’t teasing you there, that was just my honest opinion. I guess I’m not very good at this.”

“You’re really not. But, that’s okay. We’ll have plenty of time to figure it out, after all,” Kizuto said, “It doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“Not if it doesn’t bother you,” Goro said, “I’m not surprised I’m not the only one. Nami’s a really nurturing person, I’d be more surprised if she never offered to Mom anybody else. I mean, she’s been Torimi’s mom friend for years already…”

“I heard a lot of good things about her, from her sister,” Kizuto said, “That’s why she offered it to me, I should explain. I talked to her when she was in the game. I was here for Tomoe, but… She died before we were able to get into the game, and all. I talked to Nami instead, and I told her about how, Tomoe took time out of her busy schedule to look after me, and she got me out of a really bad situation, and. Nami said that she wanted to do the same for me now that Tomoe’s gone.”

“…I tried to kill Tomoe once,” Goro admitted.

“Not because of her, though.”

“Yeah. I thought I was gonna die, and I wanted to see Nami at her… Full power? Again. I dunno. Saying it now sounds pretty dumb, but. I didn’t think I could possibly make it through, and this woman who gave me the only hope I felt in years was suddenly right here, but she didn’t even know it. And… I did get to experience it eventually. She remembered her talent and took me down and I regretted all of it.”

“I understand,” Kizuto said, “If I was in a Killing Game… I probably would have let myself be in danger, plenty of times, just to see if Tomoe would come and save me again. Different from what you did, but kinda the same concept. The Kaguyas… Really leave an impact.”
“Yeah. They really do.”

“I’m glad that, at least, one of them made it out of there.”
Epilogue: Day Five (Ueda)

10:00 AM / 1000 Hours

Several people arrived on the fifth day. The fifth day back in reality, that was, and Kurou knew a few of these people. The ones he didn’t know were Doctor Kirisame’s boyfriend, arriving along with Yui Asahi from Okinawa. The ones he did know were Sakura and Miyuki Fujishiro, bringing along an infant he did not know named Hikari Ruka... And of course Ayu Ueda, bringing an infant he did know, his five-month-old baby daughter Ayano.

He hadn’t even been able to really get in touch with her; Contact from within Towa City was a complicated thing, and while Megumi could have gotten him hooked up, he admitted that she had more important things on her plate then allowing a man to speak with his wife who he’d be seeing in person in a few days anyhow. He was selfless like that, wasn’t he? Well, maybe Ayu would be a bit annoyed to hear he’d made that decision, but she’d understand if he explained. She wasn’t exactly selfish, herself.

He met her in a coffee shop in Towa City proper. After all, everybody was much too concerned with the general upheaval of several high-ranking officials suddenly abandoning their posts to be on the lookout for a recent Killing Game survivor. That had been planned by the True Radicals; Timing the public turncoat of the Ultimate Hope members so that it would overshadow everything else going on. Some of them were very strategic. Iwako was, certainly, though Kurou knew that well before now.

Akihiko, of course, too; Ryouma seemed clever, but the real surprising thing was Shoyu Kyosuke. Kurou only knew Kanoshi for a short time, and could understand the concept of him being more conniving than he let on, but Shoyu seemed at first knock like every anxious trait of Kanoshi’s dialed up to eleven, then dialed back down to nine through the art of social niceties. Behind that, apparently lay a good enough intelligence that he’d actually been the one to decipher a good chunk of the Ultimate Plan when Ryouma reached out to him.

What mattered was that it all led to him sitting at a table, with the first latte he’d had in weeks, his wife across from him, and his daughter strapped into a high chair on the left edge of the table, poking at bits of straw wrapping with a blank look on her face. That didn’t worry him, she’d always been that way.

“Sooo.” Ayu settled in her seat, one hand on her own cup of chai tea. “Two weeks in Hell, babe. But you made it through!”

“I did, somehow…” Kurou sighed. “Please tell me you weren’t watching, though. There’s some really pathetic stuff in there.”

“Hard to believe you were pathetic at all.”

“So you didn’t watch it, good.”

“I didn’t want to see it. I don’t watch them when it’s people I don’t care about. Why would I watch the one with you and Fujishiro both in it?” Ayu tapped her cheek. “Well, to keep tabs, I guess. But no. I read entertainment news to find out who died, that’s it… I dunno. Maybe it’s cause I didn’t want to have a shot at the torture of watching you become a killer. I’d be able to tell immediately, after all.”
“Do you think I would?” Kurou asked.

“I mean, you didn’t. But given the situation, it was possible. It’s possible for anybody. Not to mention, you married me.” She took a sip of her drink. “Given how we met. It wouldn’t have surprised me, if you were hit with the right motive.”

“The right motive would have needed to be something to do with you two,” Kurou said, “Nothing else could possibly convince me.”

“That seems fair. But, consider. Would you have killed somebody if we were being threatened, even if there wasn’t any proof that we were actually in any danger?”

“...Well, maybe so,” Kurou admitted, “I don’t think that I would take the chance of waiting on proof. If somebody said ‘we’ll kill your family unless you commit a murder’, then it could happen. Lucky enough, this game wasn’t exactly being manually propelled that way.”

“Very lucky. To think… You manage to get wrapped up in a Killing Game years after it makes sense for you to, but then that game also turns out to be the last one.” She glanced away. “Well, I certainly hope it’s the last one. There can’t honestly be a way for it to continue now…”

“Not right away, at least. I mean, as far as the True Radicals have told me. Despair will be without organized leadership now that Naegi and Kirigiri abandoned them. Everyone who knew how Ultimate Hope ran the games is either dead, on our side now, or never had enough power to do anything either. The Cult of N is still trying to recover from the Future Foundation raids eight years ago. Nobody’s going to bother.”

“Put it that way. I’m not sure whether to be glad that you’re right, or disappointed by the number of different groups who’ve actually done these things.” Ayu dipped her head. “Even a group I’ve been associated with. It’s so… Disgusting. How many different people thought it was a good idea.”

“Good idea? I doubt that,” Kurou said, “No, it seems to me more like they thought there wasn’t any other option. Nobody would have thought this was a good idea.”

“...Yeah, you’re right,” Ayu said, “Even Despair probably wouldn’t have done it if there wasn’t a precedent. It takes a… Really twisted brain, to start the Killing Games.”

“Don’t even know what brain that was,” Kurou said, “I asked around, nobody actually seems to know. Some adult in the Future Foundation, back when the Tragedy was first beginning? Heh. Ayu, promise me something?”

“Yes, dear?”

“We won’t screw over the next generation the way everyone always seems to, yeah?”

“Of course not.” Ayu set her chai down, then smiled at Ayano. “It does seem that way, doesn’t it? Our parents build a certain society, and we’re the ones who need to cope with it. We… Will be creating another society from the ground up. But I do hope we’ll listen. I want to build something that doesn’t need to be coped with.”

“I do too. Exactly. So we’ll make that promise, to her, and anyone else. We’ll listen.”
Akane couldn’t believe that the Hakos left.

Well, she could believe it, they were terrified of her, but they left out of a gap in the other wing of Hope’s Vestige, bringing with them Kira Kirara’s Body? She couldn’t quite understand that. But, nobody heard anything from them. And Megumi assured her that before they took Kira out, she was already, certainly dead. Even if she hadn’t been, the act of extracting her early like that would have, at best, left her without her memories. Akane didn’t understand. She thought she should understand the people she hated. But she didn’t. Didn’t understand, at all, not even a little bit.

But somebody might.

She’d woken up yesterday, but Akane didn’t want to confront her with her questions quite yet. That could wait for the second day, now, when Akane went and found Dia Hamuko in the Failed Ultimates common area.

“Hamuko? I’m very sorry to do this, but you do still have all of Box Hako’s memories, don’t you?” Akane asked, hands clasped innocently.

“What’s it to you?” Dia asked, frowning up at her from where she sat.

“Well, I’m Mitsuru’s little sister. Akane. And, I hate Ice and Speak Hako. A lot. I think it’s unforgivable, when a parent ruins their own child. They ruined Box Hako, and then they tried to wrap you up in it and ruin you too. So.” She dropped the innocent act, crossing her arms instead. “I want to know why the Hell they took Kirara’s body, instead of their daughter’s. You would have the memories to understand them better, right?”

“I have no clue, but please, tell me more about how much you hate the people who absolutely fucked up my life?” Dia giggled.

“...Yeah, I figured. They probably did everything they could to hide anything actually sinister from Box, right?”

“They were great parents. From the outside. They did everything right, by the book. Parents are supposed to encourage their kids to do great things. They just did it to the extreme...” Dia said, “And then they made Hashi make me. Which was also a big mistake. That’s awful. I didn’t want to be made. I super didn’t want to have the memories which led a girl to suicide.”

“Fuck them, honestly.”

“Language!”

“I am, strictly speaking, older than you are,” Akane said, “I’ve lived twice as many years as you’ve personally experienced. And you’re allowed to say fuck.”

“I was born into this world with eighteen years of experience and a matching body,” Dia said, “Obviously I can legally say Fuck.”

“Well technically you were born without a body and all. And by the time you got the body you had... Twenty-five years of experience?” Akane looked up at the ceiling. “You don’t have an age.
This is my decision. Sorry to say, you just don’t have one.”

“Even though I don’t have an age, can I still have a birthday? I mean, really, a day where everybody focuses on me and pays attention to me and gives me things and I eat cake… I need it. Really, that should be every day, but I’m not so unreasonable to demand it.”

“I guess you can have a birthday. If I can say fuck,” Akane said, then wandered over to grab one of the other chairs. “And if you think I actually have the authority to give you permission to have a birthday. I am just a kid after all. I have no importance.”

“You have the importance of being you?” Dia said, “I’m not sure what that means, exactly, but I do mean it. Anyway, yes, I’ll take a birthday. Let’s find out when everyone else’s birthdays are so that I don’t have to share mine. And it definitely can’t be February 29th. It must be an annual birthday.”

“Oh, of course. Since you want a birthday specifically for the ‘paying attention’ part, you can’t share it, and it can’t be that day, and it can’t be on a holiday, either. Unless it’s a holiday which nobody cares about. Or you really make your presence known. Some people can rock the Christmas-Eve birthday! Buuuut, it takes a lot of work.”

“I don’t wanna do any work ever. Especially not with my own birthday.” Dia pouted. “Ughhh! But! I gotta do some work at least to make sure I don’t share it, right? That’s dumb. Dumb, very dumb.”

“You could take my birthday. I don’t think I share it with anybody here, and it doesn’t matter very much to me...” Akane offered, “So I could give it to you.”

“Out of pity for being victimized by the Hakos?”

“Yes, exactly.” Akane nodded. “Glad to see you understand.”

“Mm. Yeah, I’ll take that. Pity is the next best thing after adoration, anyway!”

“You’re a weirdo. But, that’s pretty cool. Do you wanna be my friend? If we’ll be sharing a birthday, then we might as well get along.”

“Good point! Hm... Well I can’t say that you’d be my first friend I made on my own, you know. Without Box memories. But you’re probably the second!”

“Only the second? Hm... I know you had memories of Oishi too, so which of the other three who weren’t in the false games gets the lucky friendship title?”

“I didn’t really make it there with any of them. I could. Didn’t yet. Kurou got close, buuuut, don’t really want another parent figure at this point in my life. Nah, the first one’s Nagata. The botanist? I got to know her yesterday when I went outside.”

“Brutal,” Akane said, chuckling a bit. “So basically... You made friends with both of the teen girls who snuck into Towa City without prompting from anybody but ourselves.”

“Clearly, I am able to discern who are the coolest people here at a glance.” Dia raised both hands to her sides. “Hm... Well, some of the others seem cool, but not so much my style? You’re blunt and stuff. And you pitied me. And you hate the same people I hate. So, I like you.”

“I can think of no better concepts to build a friendship on, frankly. Hating the same people most of all. Give me the salt.”
Dia brought a hand to her mouth and giggled. “Yes, yes. I do think we’ll have a lovely time complaining together.”
3:00 PM / 1500 Hours

“Inoue. You’re in here, aren’t you?” Sayaka asked an empty room.

“Er. Yes? How could you tell?” A chair answered. Well, not the chair itself, obviously. That was what Sayaka had been getting at. Really, it was the one that many referred to as ‘Chi’ affectionately, hiding very effectively underneath the chair.

“I’m Yamaguchi. Of course I could tell.” Sayaka crossed her arms. “And I wanted to make sure you’re the same Inoue that I’ve met before. Figures that you’d end up here, after everything. You don’t need to come out from the chair, but could we talk a bit?”

“I guess so. What do you need?”

“Who says I need anything? I’m just… Curious. You and I, our positions. They’re similar, but in the end, still really different. I’m a ‘little sister’. I work on the ground, I’m a high-ranking enforcer. But you… Never had to do any of that stuff. Even though we’re almost the same. Even though you seem pretty tough yourself. We’re not. So. I guess I’m wondering, if you wanted to walk away from all of it, would it be easy for you?”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“Well. I think. Even though it’s my talent, I don’t think I want to be ‘yakuza’ all my life. I’m not sure I ever did, even when I built my whole identity around that stuff. I have this selfish want to live a quiet life and give up everything I built for myself, all of my talents, and the status. It makes me feel guilty. So. If I were like you, would it be easy for you?”

“I’ve never really bothered with thinking that way to begin with. Even though we’re pretty similar in position, like you say, well. I don’t need to do anything. But I can’t walk away either. Whatever I do with my life, I’ll still be considered ‘yakuza’. It’s not something I’d be allowed to turn my back on, but I don’t have a huge responsibility to it either.”

“What you’re saying is that I have the luxury of retirement, being considered a goon, but you don’t because you’re just family?”

“I guess so. But like I said, it isn’t as if there’s anything particular to be retiring from. I’ll just always be ‘an Inoue’.”

“Huh. I mean, not necessarily. Part of my retirement means not being a Yamaguchi anymore. If things don’t go the way I hope, I’ll still start using a fake surname, I think. But I’ll probably be a Kaguya. Couldn’t you be a Hayashi, instead? Who says you need to be an Inoue forever?”

“E-Excuse you!” If chairs could blush. “Just because… I mean… We’ve never actually talked about getting married. I’m not sure if-”

“I have known your girlfriend for basically one day. I have barely spoken to her. And I can tell that she’d want to,” Sayaka said, “And it kinda seems to me like you do, too, based on that.”

“Fair point. But on another hand, I’m not sure she’d want me taking her name. She already considers my family to be her family, so…”
“So she’d want to marry into that family, not the other way around. Mm, makes sense, makes sense. I guess I didn’t talk to Nami about the fact that I want to take her name yet… I _hope_ she doesn’t wanna take mine, though. Nami Yamaguchi doesn’t have a good ring to it.”

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As Sayaka was befriending a daughter of the Inoue family, her father was making a friend of his own. Akihiko Yamaguchi had been much too concerned with his daughter being in a Killing Game to pay much mind to his supposed comrades; And while he’d had a few conversations with Satoshi Inoue, out of business courtesy, it was high time that he actually turned his focus to some of the people he’d actually been spending weeks with, without getting to know them at all.

And he was very curious about one Shoyu Kyosuke. So, he joined him at the dinner table and folded his hands in front of himself. “I must say, Kyosuke. It’s quite a surprise that you and I never met, before any of this started happening. Given that our children were acquainted, after all.”

“…Yeah, it is a little surprising, isn’t it? But, also. Well. Coming here to this place is the most I’ve left my house in years?”

“Oh. Are you agoraphobic?” Akihiko wondered.

“Er, a bit, I guess. It’s not that I ever thought I was afraid. But I worked from home, and I always got groceries delivered, and Kanoshi could walk to school, and he was always doing well enough there that his teachers never asked to meet me. It just never made sense for me to go outside, so I never did.”

“That’s interesting to hear. Hm, even if you did, though. I _was_ still living in Kobe at that time, so we wouldn’t run into each other. You were in Tokyo, yes?”

“Not downtown, but in one of the outer districts. Not the same one that the Uedas were living in, we already compared, but not too far apart either. Their daughter would have eventually gone to the same middle school that Kanoshi did, if they weren’t, uh. Moving to space.”

“This is fair. Are you moving to space?” Akihiko wondered.

“I couldn’t do that! I’m not adventurous enough to do that, at all…” Shoyu shook his head. “I mean. Some part of me thinks that I ought to. I did decipher a lot of that Ultimate Plan… My job was just as a database programmer, but I’m pretty smart? They’ll need teachers there. But I just. I don’t think that I could handle it.”

“That’s completely understandable. So you’ll go back to Tokyo?”

“I… Ugh.” Shoyu brought his arms up to cover his head. “No, no. That can’t work either. I can’t go back there… It just wouldn’t. I mean, if I was in that house. I’d always be waiting for Kanoshi to come home. Even though I know he’s dead… I’d always be thinking he could come back.”

“Of course. I’ve experienced the same feelings, but it’s part of my own responsibilities to let that roll off my back. So, here’s my offer. You could come to Kobe. We can put you up in a small apartment, and once you get back on your feet working, you can pay cost in rent. A change in scenery could help, couldn’t it?”

“Why… Would you do that for me?” Shoyu asked.

“Because I _am_ a kind person, despite appearances,” Akihiko said, “That’s all, really. I’ve been where you are, losing a child. Losing a child to a Killing Game, even. Every so often, I ought to do
something selfless.”

“...Thank you.”
Epilogue: Day Five (Starship)

9:00 PM / 2100 Hours

It had been a rough few days for one Tsumugi Shirogane, with plenty more on the way. A few factors helped, of course. A few factors softened the series of blows that she seemed eternally subject to—No, that’s a bit too nihilistic, Tsumugi, please. Things were looking up, even if she was still getting punched right now. These blows were softened by the relative forgiveness from her friends. By Iwako’s care in making sure that her sobering up wasn’t as difficult as it could be. By the fact that she was no longer in a Killing Game.

Still, there were difficult things. Actually trying to put her best self forward with those friends was an emotional drain. Sobering up was, no matter how kind a doctor she had, a physical drain. The Killing Games themselves served the role of a mental drain, too. Tsumugi lost a lot of time. In between games, she and Kaede were permitted to exist together in another NWP, knowing their eventual fate but having forgotten their original one. It was during this time they’d planned the ill-fated strategy. But it was also time spent all in one place, all with one… Two people.

There was still a Monokuma there, but unlike Kira, it wasn’t very interested in being friends. It was just there to monitor them, really, so in the end. Tsumugi lost a year of her life to the Killing Game, for being stuck as an Ultimate Survivor. If this game was still being run normally, would the same thing have happened to her again? Would she have still been bad enough? Then again, Ryoma was bad enough twice. Her own stepbrother was bad enough twice, in their eyes, where he never could have been in her eyes. So it didn’t matter if she would have been good enough to get out. She was out anyway and their opinions meant nothing.

With the rough days tackled, though, she was beginning to get back on her feet and figure these things out. In fact, she had a schematic drawn up now. Armed with the information that Junko and Mukuro had been hoarding for who knows how long, on how to travel faster than the speed of light, Tsumugi had already designed a ship which could absolutely handle that travel. And, the number of people who’d need to come along for the ride. And other requirements. Lots of requirements.

There was a section with a great number of bedrooms, with two bunk beds (bolted to the walls) per room. The ship could transport up to seven hundred people at once, and hopefully, it would be fast enough that multiple trips could be taken. There was a large cargo hold for any personal belongings and other resources that needed to be transported, as well as a ‘farming’ section which primarily maintained various plants to use in terraforming the planet, but could also support livestock if the planet didn’t have suitable creatures of its own. There was so much more of the galaxy available with the post-light drive than anybody had ever explored, so they had to be ready for any possibility.

It was exciting. What was less exciting and more anxiety-inducing, on the flip side, was unveiling this plan to everybody else. It wasn’t like they’d be in a position to criticize her, really. She was the Ultimate Astronaut, none of them could make schematics that even began to rival hers. This was absolutely true. Couldn’t be disputed. Even so, there were other concerns. Did she make it too big for them to reasonably make with the resources that they could acquire? Was it too much to ask four people to room together for a week?

Her mind ran a mile a minute with all the ways that things could go wrong, but she tried to grind that to a halt and instead, gathered her schematics and went to the main room. As soon as she
opened the door, she was shocked to finally see, all in one place, just how many people there were. How many people were on the same side as her, where she once felt like she and her few friends were the only ones to stand against the tide. This many people who looked up, saw injustice, and decided that they had to do something about it even if all they wanted was to live their own happy life. Even those who planned to return home were still here to help right now.

And so, emboldened, Tsumugi shared her schematics.

“I don’t know about you guys,” Rantaro was the first to comment, “But that seems about the best we can do!”

“It’s not too big, or too complicated?” Tsumugi fidgeted where she stood, pressing her fingers together.

“I mean, I’ll be helping to build it,” Rantaro said, “A bunch of us will. And now that it’s become a pseudo-public thing, we’ll be able to access Towa City’s resources… Right?”

“Right!” Eriko confirmed. “We could only take a little, before, but when the dust settles… Mhm. Pretty much everyone who knew the truth already turncoated, and the rest. Well, I’m sure a bunch of them will wanna stay and fix up Towa! But knowing the truth, they’ll let us take what we need, too.”

“That’s… Really great to hear,” Tsumugi said, then turned to look at Kyoko and Makoto in the back. “As for who else is coming with us. What’s this I hear about a code?”

“Oh, that.” Kyoko stepped forward just a couple of steps, a hand on her hip. “Kirisame’s boyfriend has already volunteered the service of himself and his buddies to man a phone-line for us. The code needed to be something that wasn’t terribly difficult, but was also only evident to those who were willing to see your hearts. So, we asked the others here what they thought the code was, as if we’d already planted it. Almost everybody answered ‘Hydrangea Chrysanthemum’, or one of those. So we’ll make the code those flowers. Either of them. The final hidden message left for Kira Kirara… And for everybody else.”

“...Yes, that seems about right,” Tsumugi said, “Our hearts were ones of a certain forgiveness, after all. What better way to show that, than the fact we were able to see Kirara as a friend despite knowing that she wasn’t a good person? And… For that matter, my final proposal for the spaceship is something like that, too. Its name.”

“What were you thinking?” Shuichi asked.

“Well, it would have to be… The Starship Akamatsu.”
Progress was being made, and there was a chill in the air. Nothing was going wrong, really, it was a literal chill. Because it was November. Dia didn’t think that she liked November much at all. It wasn’t warm, and plants got sad in November. They got prettier than usual through October, but now that it was November, lots of things were brown. Brown all over the place.

“Natsuki,” Dia complained, “I want you to do this for me someday. Do this someday, specifically for me, but also for the sake of scientific advancement, I guess. Make plants that stay green year round. I’d prefer that, I think.”

“Oh, they already exist. There just aren’t any right here,” Natsuki said, “They’re named in a super self-explanatory way. Evergreens. They’re a type of tree that grows in a triangle shape. People use them for christmas trees.”

“Christmas trees do turn brown.”

“Not if you leave them in the soil,” Natsuki clarified, “Everything turns brown if you pick it or cut it down, eventually. It’s just not even getting nutrients anymore. Plant starvation.”

“Oh. Like how humans turn wrinkly.” Dia nodded sagely. “I never will. Turn wrinkly, I mean. I can do that. I have the power. Scars are all the imperfections that I want to have.”

“Well, unless you date another replicant, your partner will turn wrinkly someday… Will you still like them when they do?”

“Any wife of mine will be radiant, even when she gets wrinkly. Also, the wrinklier she gets, the more people will look at her and think that she has got to be totally amazing to land a youthful babe like me,” Dia said, “So it’s really a win-win situation.”

“Hm. Good point. You’re like the ultimate trophy-wife to be, aren’t you?”

“Yes because I’m beautiful and I wanna be pampered,” Dia confirmed.

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Aww, Nagata, you think I’m beautiful?”

“What sort of a… You literally generated your own body to be a cute princess! Of course you’re beautiful. Like, universally.” Natsuki crossed her arms. “Sometimes I don’t even know why you bother hanging around me.”

“What? I hang around you because I like to. Because we’re friends. Aren’t we, Nagata? Aren’t we friends?”

“Yeah. We’re friends,” Natsuki said, “Seems like I always just end up with those.”
“What do you mean with those neckbeard words?” Dia asked, tilting her head to one side. “Rei was very in love with you and you were just oblivious to it. For one thing.”

“...Sure.” Natsuki looked away. “Wasn’t in love with me enough to actually tell me. She’d know I wouldn’t be able to notice it. She’d know.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Dia asked, freezing where she stood to stare at Natsuki, like a questioning statue. Something about that made Natsuki somehow want to tell her the truth.

“It’s because of... The way that the Cult of N stuff happened. My friends, and everyone else I heard from. I was the only one who wasn’t… Used for gratification. I just got cut up. And if that was the norm, for what these people did. I must be pretty fucking ugly, huh?” She covered her stomach with both arms, hair hanging in her face. “That I wasn’t even desirable to a sick fuck like that. All he thought I was good for was to get rid of me. One piece at a ti-”

“Don’t go falling apart on me,” Dia deadpanned, “It’s your confidence I find most attractive, after all. That and your physical appearance.”

“H-... What?” Natsuki asked, tilting her head sideways to meet Dia’s gaze.

“I just told you. Outright. I find you desirable. Sorry that I’m also a sick fuck, but that’s got to be worth something, right?” Dia asked, then giggled. “Wow, look at that! You even got some honesty about my nature out of me! That’s soo rare.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“Come on and take charge already, before I change my mind. I make it painfully obvious I’m a pillow princess, it’s a huge courtesy for me to make the first move like this!”

“Uh! Oh! Well you’re. I just, you know. Somebody as perfect as you, and somebody as. This? As me?”

“Flatter me more~”

“I. Gladly! On one condition! Be my girlfriend, Dia Hamuko!”

“Will you pamper me and make sure I’m always looked after?”

“Obviously, I will. If you actually want me to date you, I’ll do anything you want for you, anytime!”

“Good! Then, yes. I will certainly be your girlfriend.”

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7:00 PM / 1900 Hours

“Iwakooo!” Ryouma called out into the True Radicals section of the building. “There’s somebody here to see you!”

Iwako looked up from her tea. At such a rude interruption, she’d usually roll her eyes, but she was waiting on somebody. And for Ryouma to say it like that, it wouldn’t be somebody that she knew herself. So it was... Probably...

She stood and walked into the lobby area.
“Iwa-taan!” Sasane Ikimura cried and threw herself at her girlfriend immediately, arms wrapped thoroughly around her in mere moments. “Ohh, oh, I’m so sorry this took me so long! I came right away as soon as I could, and, I’m here now! I’m here now. And I’m going to be here. I won’t. Separate again.”

“You… Heard, right?” Iwako asked.

“About Mitsuru… Mm.” Sasane pulled away nod, then furrowed her brow. “I wanna be mad. But I can’t. Cause, I know he had a good reason. And we would have done the same, in our own game, if we needed to. If there was a reason to.”

“...It’s true, but come on,” Iwako said, “I don’t want to hear that right now. It’s bad enough that I knew he’d do it.”

“Well, we aren’t ever going to be in a Killing Game again,” Sasane said, “So, it doesn’t really matter now, if we would have died to save somebody. We’re good now. Well. Safe, now.”

“We are good now, too.” Iwako pulled Sasane back in. “Even though we got together because we both liked Mitsuru… I missed you so much. I do love you. And I know he wouldn’t want us to break up, or mope around or anything, just because he died. He’d want us to do what we have been doing. Change the world.”

“I think so too,” Sasane agreed, “He did something really good. So we’ll keep doing what good we can, too.”
Epilogue: Year In Interim

Hope’s Vestige, Towa City, Japan
2109, September 12th
1600 Hours

Nearly a year had now passed from the end of the Killing Game, and everything had gone, honestly, quite well. After everything that had happened, it was well-deserved to avoid any further roadblocks. The resources to build the ship were acquired without much conflict, the act of building was perfectly fine, things were finally just going smoothly. The Ultimate Foreman turned out to have been living there, and her supervision (though she had no intention of coming along!) was incredibly helpful to realizing Tsumugi’s schematics as well. Overall, things just went so much more smoothly than they even could have dreamed.

It was finished now. It took less than a year to build this ship, thanks to the lack of hiccups in the process and the number of people who were willing to help. Anyone who did help was of course, offered to come along, but most people living in Towa City didn’t have much motivation to do so. Just as Megumi had no reason to leave Okinawa, certain areas were simply untouched by the consequences of the Quiet War, and this managed to lead even normal citizens to feel some responsibility to keep it that way, and maybe even spread that influence.

The Failed Ultimates coordinated with those who remained in Ultimate Hope to smooth things over with the general public, creating an explanation which implied that only Junko and Mukuro were responsible for the Killing Games, acting out their absolute judgment in secret from all other members of Ultimate Hope, and now that they had died, everything was fine. Kotoko was especially reluctant to defer the blame rather than take responsibility for her own mistakes, but it was understood that the average person would prefer there were only two corrupt members of the organization they had trusted with their lives.

It had become simpler, after that, as well. Hope’s Vestige only had so much space, so once their space program and everything associated with it was made public, several of the members were able to use empty homes in the city for the interim year. Some stayed in the Vestige, mostly those who needed to be actively working on and discussing things. Nami wasn’t one of those; She, Sayaka, Goro, and Kizuto ended up using one of the houses, and she liked that quite a bit. It was exactly the same setup that they intended when they reached the new planet, so it was good to have a test run, to make sure the four of them could actually cohabitate.

It was actually pretty great, Nami thought. Once they were living there, it really was like she and Sayaka were acting as parents to those boys, and they bickered exactly the amount that she figured siblings ought to.

For a few weeks in the middle there, it was just her and the boys. Sayaka had some things she needed to do, after all, and Dia went along for the ride. Yui Asahi admitted that she’d already killed Doctor Kobayashi, to get revenge for what he’d done to Riko. Sayaka still had dibs on Asahi himself, that rotten father. And she had to uphold her promise, too. She had said it in front of Yuuri, Mitsuru, and Shinjiro; She would kill Tatsuya Minami. And while she was at it, Nami heard, Nate tagged along just in case Tanaka made an appearance. Sayaka might not be able to kill him, but Nate certainly could.

All the loose ends here on Earth had been tied up, as far as she could tell. Nothing further had yet come of the Hakos’ theft of Kira's body, or Mercury Mars, or that note; But that wouldn't matter to
those who left these mysteries behind. Megumi had of course developed a communication link able to transmit video and audio over incredibly long distances, secure between terminals so it couldn’t just be used by anyone. It had been tested at the same time as Tsumugi’s faster-than-lightspeed engine, as well as the renewable biofuel that Natsuki helped develop. One of the video terminals was just rocketed out into space, and the link remained functional for two months, after which it finally got out of range.

“Well, just make sure you find a new planet before you get two months away from here,” Megumi had said, sounding a bit discouraged that her invention had a chance of not doing what it needed to. Everyone assured her that there would be something very wrong if they didn’t find a planet viable for terraforming within that distance, and she blustered that she wasn’t at all concerned and she didn’t need their reassurances, she was a genius through and through and don’t forget it.

Nami always found it entertaining when something actually got under Megumi’s skin like that; In a friendly, teasing sort of way. Obviously she didn’t mean things that actually brought up old traumas or anything, but the tsundere nature made Megumi, perhaps, Nami’s most charming friend.

Over the course of the past, most-of-a-year, Nami had a lot to think about. Lots of things that weighed on her, which she needed to breathe in, then let go. The fact that Kira made it back into her life where she never wanted her to. The fact that she couldn’t muster up the energy to mourn Kira a second time, for that matter, and how she could hardly even feel grateful that she saved their lives during the game.

The fact that she knew who the Mastermind had been, that she realized the truth… Or at least, thought she did. “A method that doesn’t rely on believing that humans are predictable”. That was what it took to decide between the options. Nami believing that she understood both of the suspects enough to figure out which of them would… Or rather, which of them wouldn’t do it. But she did, and still. In spite of that, her heart hurt more for Amai’s reaction to killing Kira, than she did for Kira herself.

She lost a sister, and one best friend. Her other best friend lost something which couldn’t be replaced, memories which weren’t good, but certainly had meaning. Not that she’d say so to Sayaka, who considered Torimi lucky for that particular amnesia. Nami wasn’t afraid of fighting with Sayaka, but the idea that trauma could have a silver lining was one they’d never agree on and it just wasn’t worth the effort.

And they did fight, sometimes. Outside of the scenario of adrenaline, there was ample time to figure out what things they didn’t like about each other. Sayaka would, for example, occasionally smoke a cigarette if there was something to celebrate. Understandable, with how she grew up, but a point of contention until they’d found the compromise of opening the large bay window in the living room, so the smell wouldn’t linger but she wouldn’t have to go outside. On the flip side, Nami’s picky diet which hadn’t seemed like it would be a problem during the game did rub Sayaka the wrong way every so often, when she started to plan a complicated dinner and it turned out that Nami had no intention of eating it for just one or two ingredients.

Those were small things to fight about, of course. Small and easy to resolve, and good that they could work these things out, for that matter. If anything, it improved their relationship to be able to sort it out like this. Nami was still just as in love, if not more, than she had been during the Killing Game.

And so was Sayaka. After all, just three weeks before the spaceship was finished being built and two months after Tsukasa and Randy’s own small but entertaining wedding, she bought an engagement ring. Silver, with a topaz stud, and she proposed. It wasn’t a huge spectacle or
anything, just the two of them alone in their room. She held the ring out in her palm, showing it to
Nami, and quietly asked if it was alright to say it now.

That Nami Kaguya and Sayaka Yamaguchi were going to get married.
Epilogue: Dome City

2109, September 21st
1200 Hours

“I found it! I’ve!” Hashi was squealing loudly, then caught herself and lowered her voice to a more normal range. “We’ve just been traveling a week, and I think I’ve found the perfect planet…”

“Oh?” Dia asked, looking over her ‘mother’s’ shoulder. “What defines a perfect planet?”

“Well, primarily, an environment which can be relatively easily modified to support human life, but… With your girlfriend’s capabilities, that actually becomes just about any planet with real soil. What I was looking for particularly was a planet that also had the resources necessary to synthesize P-particles. You know, in case I needed to give one of you a new body… Or, well. There’s been talk of how P-Type replicants would be a good way for people to have ‘biological’ children where they otherwise couldn’t.”

“Oh! Oh like if, three people were dating, a replicant could look like all three of them, right?” Dia asked.

“That’s exactly right. And of course, the particles have some other uses too. This planet, though… It seems to have a semi-toxic atmosphere, but there are plenty of natural resources available even before terraforming,” Hashi explained, “Really, it is perfect.”

“Except for that toxic atmosphere,” Dia clarified.

“Well, yes, but that’s why we brought the materials we did. We’re fully equipped to make, well, I guess the best thing to call it would be a biodome.”

And so, they did. Make a biodome, that was. The group calculated just how large the dome could be with the amount of materials they brought along, and as expected, it was of a similar size to Towa City itself, larger than a normal city but smaller than a prefecture once it was established. It was a task which could be done from the ship, of course. They’d accounted for everything, after all.

Once the dome was built, Natsuki took a spacesuit and started to plant her ultra-hearty plants within so that they could begin the process of turning this atmosphere into oxygen under cover of the dome. Analysis showed that the toxic elements could be processed by plants, despite nothing like them existing on earth, they were analogous enough to CO2. The native plants were already doing some of the work themselves, but there weren’t enough of them to make the dome liveable as quickly as Natsuki’s specialty plants could. It seemed that the toxins were actually a result of this solar system’s sun, and that was the extent to which they understood it.

The point was, the toxins weren’t created by the plants, the soil, or the water, but from outside of the planet itself. Meaning that within the massive dome, an Earth-like environment could be created, not just plausibly, but with relative ease. It only took another week and a half from the time that the ship docked in orbit, for the dome to be established and for the air to hit a breathable, if a bit unpleasant, state.

The dome being built so quickly was a product of the ship being built so slowly in comparison; The ship itself took a lot of effort, sure, but there were many aspects which played in as well.
Natsuki needed to breed efficient enough plants which could handle the journey and the new environment, the ability of the ship to remotely build the dome had to be built into it, the tools with which to analyze new planets needed to be developed to work at range. There were many, many aspects of preparation to make this final step as painless as possible. Luckily, since it was all done in collaboration, the technologies developed for this purpose would be made available on Earth as well.

Dia was designated the first person to walk in the dome without a spacesuit. Leftover toxins in the air wouldn’t kill a replicant, but would be very uncomfortable, and Dia was picky enough to notice the clarity of the air that she breathed. When she gave the tentative okay, that the air had hit levels that were similar to the quality within Earth cities, though not as nice as Earth countryside, it was cleared. The first batch of people disboarded the ship and brought with them their personal belongings and the other resources they’d stuffed on the ship aside from the Biodome materials.

The Akamatsu would return to Earth to pick up more people who’d figured out the code and wanted to join them, meanwhile, those who were already here would start building. Households were primarily responsible for their own homes, with help from people who knew how to build things, of course. There were tents with which to claim property and to live until proper homes were constructed. Once the air improved just a bit more, Natsuki would transplant plenty more plants from the next trip, and after that, livestock may be brought along. The farming area onboard the ship could also maintain livestock in it separate from any who were cared for on the planet’s surface. The Failed Ultimates, True Radicals, and everybody else planned ahead as much as they could for the idea of settling another planet.

And it was all going smoothly, it really was.

Before they began work on their homes, though, before anybody did anything else, it was understood that something else needed to be built first. It wasn’t a necessary structure for a civilization, but it was a necessary structure for the citizens themselves. So, together, they built it. And by the end of the day (which was a tiny bit longer here, than on Earth.), by the first sunset in this new world, it was built. The first structure on a previously untouched planet, belonging to everybody who contributed.

It was a memorial. A simple building on its own, but there were wooden signs hung up all over it, with names written down in all sorts of handwriting, all sorts of names for that matter. It wasn’t only people from Japan who came along. And plenty more empty signs, for everyone who came in the future. Sasane didn’t need to translate anything for this to be built. It was innate, everyone knew just what to do because everybody had a deep desire to have this here. A memory of everyone that they’d lost to the Quiet War. Everyone that the state of the Earth had taken from them. Killing Game victims, those who fell to Despair, those who were caught up in Future Foundation raids, anything.

Let’s never forget the people who couldn’t be here.

And those who led this charge, who created the possibility of this future. The Failed Ultimates, who were expected to die or to wither away, who were promised no future whatsoever… Finally had one, and they built it for themselves.

And for everyone who needed it.
Final Epilogue

Dome City
April 23rd, 2110

This was it, the big day, the best day of Nami Kaguya’s life. She knew, right now, that nothing could rival it. This would be the peak. It wasn’t that things would be downhill from here, though. She was having no such crisis, nothing like that at all. There would be plenty of wonderful days to come, plenty more, so many, many more, all set in motion by this one, wonderful day. She looked herself in the face, in the mirror. She looked lovely, she thought. Sayaka would look lovelier, but Nami looked lovely. She wore a black gown, no shoulders, shorter in the front by her knees and longer in the back to a full train. Gloves, and a lacy veil.

It was the true start of the rest of her life. And everyone would be there to witness it.

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The first time that Akane made this voyage, she thought that it was really boring. She was fourteen, after all, and it was just a week-long road trip, basically. She hadn’t quite overcome the childish desire to ask ‘Are we there yet?’ back then. Now, she was fifteen, nearly sixteen. In about a month, she and Dia would have their shared birthday for the second time. This time, she wasn’t bored at all to be making the trip, though.

Especially the trip out. It was always fun to have most of the ship to herself, after all, and now that livestock were maintained in the farm area consistently, there was actually something to keep busy with for that week. She wasn’t the only one, either. A girl whose entire family figured out the passcode together, Honoka Tosaka, was especially fond of caring for the goats. They often came up to work with the animals even while the ship was docked, though the purpose of this journey was different from usual at the same time.

This time, Akane had the incredibly important mission of retrieving guests for an event three weeks from now. One week to get to Earth, one week to get back, and another week for anyone involved in planning, to, well, plan. This was also part of why Akane was sent on this errand. Plenty of others back home were involved in planning too much to run off for two weeks. Her grandmother was the pilot, but her mom stayed back. Hikari was two years old now, after all. Toddlers were a handful. Maybe that was also part of why Akane didn’t mind making this trip… Getting away from her baby ‘sister’ was compelling stuff.

And after a week of caring for farm animals, mild flirting, and some goddamn peace and quiet, the SS Akamatsu arrived in orbit of Earth. It could only actually dock within atmosphere in Towa City without causing problems, but they had bays of shuttles to solve this issue; Spacebuses, basically. They had no capability to travel beyond lightspeed on their own the way that the Starship could, but they could travel between orbit and a location on-planet within two to twelve hours, depending on where.

Akane’s particular target location was one that had a very important person, and also somebody that she personally cared quite a bit about. These were not the same person. Oh, sure, she liked Megumi and her husband, but when it came to Okinawa… There was nobody there who had more of a place in her heart than Nate Harper. Yes, the reformed Despair. He often said that what she told him when they were in Hope’s Vestige was the real push he needed to actually shape up his attitude on top of his actions, and create a version of himself who might even be called a good person, and could definitely be called her friend.
“It’s only been, what, five months since you saw me last?” Nate asked, half-hugging her back with one arm. “How are you ever going to manage it when the space programs catch on and ban the Akamatsu from Earth?”

“Video calls every week, no exceptions, you stop being a lame friend and actually keep that up.” Akane pulled away from the hug with one finger held up. “But we don’t have to worry about that just yet, do we? It takes forever for big world stuff like that to happen.”

“So, when’s the big day?” Nate asked. Akane looked over her shoulder. “Ah, yes. That’s a very cynical outlook on being a bridesmaid, you know.” She adjusted her glasses. She didn’t have those before Akane left the planet, did she? “Besides, I’ll get my payback on that front. I’ll certainly be having my own wedding before your ship gets banned from the planet, and then Nami gets to be the one who helps me plan only to be overshadowed.”

“Wait. Was I… Actually invited to this thing?” Nate wondered.

“You weren’t, but I’m bringing you anyway because I want to,” Akane said, “I am a wild child. Nothing can restrain me or prohibit me from doing whatever I want, whenever I want.”

“What about the law?” Nate asked.

“Fuck da police,” Akane said, “And I’m almost sixteen, now. So any doubt there might have been about me being allowed to say fuck, is no longer valid. I’d say fuck even if I wasn’t allowed, of course. But I am.”

“Nobody here is going to tell a fifteen year old not to say fuck. Worry not.” Nate waved a dismissive hand. “Well, then. If everyone’s ready, we should get going, right? We have a whole week to sit around talking, on the way back.”

“Well, we’ll be some of the first ones back. You’re not the only Earth citizens who’ve got to be picked up,” Akane said, “Tokumei is fetching the father of the bride in Kobe, of course. And those dumb boys in Tottori.”

“There will be more stops on the return trip, I’m sure,” Megumi said, “This is the perfect marker, after all. Anybody who decided to return to this planet ‘after things settle down’, I mean. Things do seem to have sorted out quite swiftly, up there.”

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“Right, right. Yeah, some people will probably go back with you,” Akane confirmed, “Actually, I think there’s a few more people than we expected when we left.”

“Ohhh?” Megumi questioned, a smirk splitting her face. “I see, I see. Some of those kids made up their minds, right?”

“Yeah. Dia and Hashi are kind of upset that they’re being ‘abandoned’ by their family. Maki
doesn’t care, though!” Akane pressed her hands together. “Good for those three. It’s not a very
adventurous life in Dome City, and as long as we are able to make trips, they’d always be welcome
back.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t even have that sort of restriction, honestly,” Megumi said, “As long as I live,
it’s not hard to transfer data between the planets. It’s convenient enough to bring along their
physical bodies right now, but honestly. Of any kids to let loose to find themselves, these ones are
the easiest to get back home if they so decide.”

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“Which. Uh, which tie should I wear?” A young man wondered aloud in front of a public bathroom
mirror. He had skin that was of a naturally tan tone, but pallid. Freckles. Bright orange eyes… And
brown hair. His name was Kai Aya, and he was related to Tatsuya Minami. The child of his
younger sister, that was. Eyes like his always seemed to trace back to that man somehow, and Kai
was no exception. Sayaka Yamaguchi killed his uncle, and he’d been living there at the time. The
details were unimportant, but that’s how he ended up here.

“I… Gotta say, what’s the difference between those two anyway?” Goro asked, squinting at the
options from Kai’s left side.

“What! Come on!”

“You forget. Just because I can sew doesn’t mean I understand anything about legitimate fashion.
And neither of them do, either…”

“This one is longer, and made of silk. The other is shorter, and made of cotton. Usually a longer tie
is a more casual look, but the type of fabric might actually make it weigh out… Ugh! Why don’t I
have enough black ties??”

“Just put one of them in a bowtie. Duhh.” Goro poked the side of Kai’s forehead. “The silk one, I
guess? That gets rid of the length issue, doesn’t it?”

“Heh. The length issue.”

“How crude!” Goro teased, “But, come on. They’re gonna love you. And then you can live in our
house.”

“You really think I just like you because I want to live in your house??” Kai questioned, then
avoided his eyes. “I just. You know, I’ve met them both plenty of times, but this is… The first
impression that I’ve made as your boyfriend. And it’s at their rehearsal dinner?? Ughghh I’m not.
I’m not sure this is a good idea, Goro, I-”

“Hey now!” Goro grabbed him by both shoulders. “It’ll be fine. And, I’m serious. Don’t you want
to get ready for their actual wedding in a real house’s bathroom, and not the bathroom of a nail and
hair salon?”

“A nail and hair salon. Like I’m not the idiot who decided that I’d rather use my property for a
creative venture than for a place to live.” Kai rolled his eyes, then fixed his glasses. “Stupid, that’s
what it was. Everyone else figured out floorplans that left them an apartment space in the building.
I just thought, hey, it’s fine. I’d rather have more space for my business, I can sleep on a futon
behind the cash.”

“ Heard this all before, only thing stupid is you listing your ‘mistakes’ every time you get nervous
like this.” Goro gave him a small shake. “Look. I already told them that I’m dating, quote, a cute
“I know!” Kai protested. “And that! Is why! I need to wear the right tie! I have to actually be cute!”

“...Dumbass. You’re always cute. That’s the real answer to the problem.” Goro let go of his shoulders, smiling. “I mean, we’ve got a trump card.”

“What’s that?” Kai asked.

“Well, just gotta make sure they’re looking, and you hug me, like this!” Goro reached for Kai’s wrists this time, and brought them up to hug around his neck. “They’re my moms, they know what this means. That I trust you enough. That this doesn’t hurt me, with you.”

Kai blushed, and rather than stammer out some awkward reply, just leaned in to kiss Goro instead.

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It was nice to have some time to themselves, wherever they could find it. In this case, it was because Akane was away. Why, exactly, did that give the Uedas time to themselves? Well, Miyuki and Sakura were particularly prone to empty nest syndrome since Mitsuru’s death. Hikari, a child who was only a few months older than Ayano, was able to be a ‘second child’ most of the time. With Akane away, the gap started to form again, and that was when the grown Fujishiros offered for Ayano to come over to play with Hikari.

Two year olds didn’t really have a concept of friends, but it was good to interact with others their age anyway. And, it let Ayu and Kurou have some time alone.

“It’s weird… I never really thought,” Ayu said, “That we’d leave Japan at all. I thought, this is it. We’re adults now, we have a daughter, we’re settled down. Then everything… Changed.”

“Mm. I got kidnapped.” Kurou nodded. “And, everything else that led to. I wasn’t exactly expecting it either. But, I kind of think… This was a good path for us. Don’t you?”

“Lemme think… Well, see. You experienced extra traumas, then we came and settled down like a normal adult couple but on a different planet this time. I don’t know if I’d call it good. Acceptable, though!”

“Yeah, definitely acceptable. Since I made it through, and all. Besides, wasn’t it a nice adventure to end up here?”

“I guess so, yeah. Once you were safe, it was nice to have another adventure. But… I don’t really mind if things stay calm for us, from now on.” She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. “I’ve had enough adventure for a lifetime, really. I’d rather you be safe. I really would. And I do like it here in Dome City… But, you know, we’re smart. Maybe we could have figured out the code ourselves, if you’d never been in that game. I was so worried. I still have nightmares, you know.”

“You have nightmares about it?”

“In them, you’re back in the game, and you’ve committed a murder. Just like what I said when we first met back up, I can tell… And it’s awful,” Ayu said, “But it’s not just those. Sometimes, I worry… That Ayano is in one. Like they’re going to continue. Like it could happen again.”

“I can’t just say that’s ridiculous and it won’t happen. That’s what I thought about me ending up in one, after all. But I think I can say… I think she’d make it through, if she did end up there. We’ll
teach her well.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

“I… Don’t know,” Kurou admitted, “I don’t want to even think about the possibility, after all. But then, Doctor Kirisame’s protocol was able to save two lives which would have otherwise been lost. So there’s the possibility, even if it somehow happened, even if she somehow didn’t survive, she might live through it anyway? That’s the best comfort I can offer.”

“I’ll take it as the best comfort I can get.”

And so, the pair of them let their worries float free. They were the first among their friends to have been married, but were coming upon such a time that they’d see plenty of the others tying the knot. That, too, was something which helped them to feel as if they’d been able to seize upon a normal life. An ideal family.

And hope, against hope, that it would stay that way this time.

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It was the day of her wedding, and Sayaka Yamaguchi; Soon to be Sayaka Kaguya, had never in her life actually been this emotional. She was, often, emotional, of course. She burned with angry outbursts, stumbled her way through embarrassing ones, and generally just ‘had no chill’. She’d cried tears of joy the first time she’d dyed her hair and could stand to wear it down again, and the much more mature look this fact gave her. But still, it didn’t compare to this.

There was so much about it that had her this overwhelmed; All in a good way, but she was only four-foot-one! There was only so much emotion that a girl of her size could contain! Her dress was beyond beautiful, her soon-to-be wife was even beyond that and she hadn’t even seen her in her own dress yet and she was getting married, and her own father was officiating the ceremony and it was all just a lot! A whole lot of good but still a lot!

She hadn’t ever imagined that she might be able to feel this way, someday. Even as recently as three years ago, it had seemed like her life was determined and set in stone. She was the Ultimate Little Sister. She was the vigilante, Red. She was doing the things she was good at, doing things only she could do, and living with trauma hanging over her head, scared of being hurt again at every turn from a man she’d thought she killed. She hadn’t been happy, but she’d been used to it.

She had some friends. Yuuri Ruka, who had nobody for her to kill. Amai Oishi, who wanted to teach her to cook in repayment for killing somebody on her behalf. She still had one and the other was dead. Maybe if not for the Killing Game, she thought, Yuuri could have been here, could have been her best man.

Amai had received an offer to be a bridesmaid, but said that she’d be too busy with the catering to have those duties too. That didn’t mean Sayaka didn’t have any bridesmaids of her own. Nami had Torimi and Megumi, Sayaka had Chi. After their initial awkward conversation about their yakuza positions, they’d actually managed to talk more and become quite close over the course of the last year. She’d taught Sayaka how to curl her hair, something which she’d taken to doing quite often, and absolutely had done for today. It framed her face well, as did the glasses she started wearing. They had plastic lenses, she didn’t need them to see, but it was another factor that helped her actually look her age. If she ever did allow herself to think, before, that she might get married… She always thought of herself in a darker dress, or even a suit, because that was what
matched her personality, right? But with Nami, she was able to understand herself and what she wanted so much better than she ever did before.

She probably would have, eventually, realized it. Figured herself out as time went on, she couldn’t give all of the credit to Nami Kaguya. A relationship didn’t fix somebody. But, a good partner could certainly help, and that was the credit Sayaka felt was due. It also helped that Nami had always believed it was plausible, what Sayaka had denied herself for all that time. Well, Nami had even been proposed to before…

Ugh. Sayaka really didn’t want to think about *Kira Kirara* on her wedding day. She was terrible for Nami and she was dead now and that was all there needed to be about that. Sayaka got the girl. Case closed.

Moving on!

Sayaka took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down just a bit. She was too excited to function right now, probably! And that was not a great way to be! So, she took some time. And, just when her brother came to walk her down the aisle (as her father had a different role), was when she had overcome her bout of too gay to exist. Perfect timing.

Unfortunately, Sayaka did immediately become too gay to exist once again when she saw Nami waiting at the altar. Her bridesmaids stood to the side of her, while Sayaka’s singular bridesmaid was actually hiding behind a pillar of the altar, which was fine. She promised to come out from behind it long enough for a picture, and that was more than enough to ask of her.

The rest of the ceremony was an absolute blur for Sayaka, too caught up in being stunned by Nami to really process the event itself. She was pretty sure they got a good picture and she was pretty sure that she said her vows properly, but it really was a haze. The good kind of haze but she *could not stop staring at Nami the whole way through* because she was an overexuberant disaster.

When the reception began, that was when Sayaka finally began to function again. For about five minutes before remembering that *Nami was her wife now* and then she needed another twenty minutes to collect herself once more. After she did, though, she had a wonderful time. Amai’s catering was of course, top notch. And everyone was there; Everyone that Sayaka or Nami had ever called friend made it out here, for one night of raucous partying in celebration of their love.

The end of the night was a bit bittersweet. It had been wonderful, but it marked the end as well. There would be a few days of preparation, then a return trip to Earth would be made. Several of their friends would be going back. They’d see them again, hopefully, but there was no telling when physical transport between the planets would become impossible. So even if an opportunity would arise again in a few months.

It was just a difficult goodbye to kick off the Kaguyas’ new beginning.

That didn’t make this beginning any less spectacular.

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Towa City Underground
September 10th, 2112
0700 Hours

Four years ago today, the fity-fourth and final Killing Game began. Four years and a week ago, the
Ultimate List had been published through a reputable Hokkaido newspaper. That much was Mercury’s own doing. She was failing to see the trees for the forest, or maybe it was the other way around, the point was that she published that list for exactly one reason. That reason had been to get back at Nami Kaguya. All she wanted to do was shake up that woman’s life. Put her in some danger from Despairs, if they deemed her worthy of attacking.

It was somebody else who pulled the strings to get that list entered in as a possibility for the Killing Game. It put Mercury at risk, too. She was just lucky that of the thirty names on her list, she wasn’t one of the twenty selected. She had a one in three chance of escaping, and it seemed that the one responsible for it was banking on that chance.

Foolish. The title of ‘Ultimate Luck’ hadn’t been assigned in decades, so why did she think that she could rely on something like that? All Mercury could give her credit for was that the note did basically guarantee Nami Kaguya’s participation in the game. Would have been better if Nami had died. Then, Kira wouldn’t have.

Somehow, Nami Kaguya, the disgusting piece of slime who stole away Kira’s heart only to break it into a million pieces, achieved first place, achieved the promise of survival even if she were killed. And then she wasn’t. Didn’t even have to suffer the pain of dying, and moved on with a new girl, too. Mercury was angrier now than she’d been when she made the list. Why was it that a recipe for suffering rolled right off of somebody so obviously deserving of it?

Like… Who did that? Who made somebody fall for them just to turn around and hate them? She couldn’t understand. She wouldn’t understand. When she and Kira broke up, she understood it. When Nami broke up with Kira? She could have understood. She could have, maybe, except she couldn’t. Kira broke up with people. Kira was perfect. So who would leave that behind? If it was amicable, that’s how she could have understood.

But she heard all about how Kira was so, so in love, and had her heart broken which Mercury never would have done to her and then she was dead.

It didn’t matter, that it was fake that time and somebody else pulled the trigger for real. From where Mercury Mars stood, it was Nami Kaguya who killed the love of her life. And everything she tried… Couldn’t bring her back.

Ice Hako had done her a wonderful service. He and his wife stole the body and he froze it for her. She didn’t ask them to do that. But they knew her. She’d counterfeited plenty of things for them before, they owed her when they realized that the woman she loved more than life itself was there in the same facility as them. Their daughter never learned of Mercury’s forgeries, of how the girl who was five years older invented even more credentials to boost her status.

It was the sort of work that couldn’t be done with virtue. Mercury was a good person once, she thought, surely. She had to be. But when her biggest skill was something so rotten at its core, if she wanted to survive, she had to give in and let it corrupt her. Somewhere along the line, she’d effectively lost her mind. But that was a story for another day.

She had a version of Kira. But this version wished nothing to do with her, and complained each time she told it to try and look like Kira. Just as Dia was provided with memories recovered from Box Hako’s corpse, the memories from Kira’s corpse found a home in the Neo World Program. Mercury had connections. Nobody who could improve on the idea of Dia, or even make something similar. But there was an existing AI that Kira’s memories could be mapped onto without creating too much disconnect.

Even so, that was no suitable Kira for Mercury. Nothing could bring her back, not really. But
Mercury wasn’t somebody who would quit. Revenge? Well, Nami Kaguya was well out of reach, and by the time that Mercury could ever find her again she would have wholly forgotten the sin she’d need to be punished for. That wouldn’t be satisfying at all. It wouldn’t.

There was a one year old baby boy in the other room. It had taken this long for Mercury to build enough trust with the Cult of N to be provided with her very own kidnapping victim. She had avenues. Methods. Ideas. She wasn’t sure quite yet, what her plan was going to be, but she knew that she’d have one. A plan. To do something. Yes, something.

Kira Kirara wished more than anything else to see the end of Killing Games, but…

Well, Mercury knew much better, better than anybody else, what Kira would consider a satisfying end. Maybe then, the Kira she’d created for herself, could fall in love again. Maybe so, maybe so.

And soon enough, she’d have another substitute to tide her over until that fateful day.

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**The Mastermind’s Tea Party**

“Well, well. Look who’s finally decided to visit again.” Tomoe chuckled. “What, Akamatsu? Finally get bored playing happy family life?”

“No, no. Everything there is fine,” Kaede said, “And I’m certainly not here to apologize to you. I refuse to accept responsibility for that. I just… I’ve been trying to figure it out for a long time now, and I can’t. I need to know. Which one of you actually was Ultimate Judgment?”

“It was me,” Tomoe said.

“Or maybe it was me,” Shinjiro said.

“I know that much. I want to know the truth,” Kaede said.

“The truth depends on who you want to ask.” Shinjiro crossed his arms. “The Mastermind, Ultimate Judgment. I guess we can tell you the story, though. It can’t do any harm for you to find out what happened. Really, it might be fun. The Great Detective can’t even get her head around this truth…”

"My statements will be green," Shinjiro said.


"When we speak in tandem, our words will be red," Both said.

“I was approached before the game by a mysterious woman. Her name was…”

“Sonia.”

"Evangeline.”

"She made me an offer-”

"To keep my sister safe.”
“To rid the world of some of its rot.”

“If I agreed, I would retain my memories upon entering the Killing Game. All of them. All I had to do was…”

“Test out some technology.”

“Become the ‘Mastermind’, Ultimate Judgment, who decided who was worthy within a Killing Game.”

“...So that’s the answer,” Kaede said, “But I still don’t completely understand what happened.”

“Evangeline provided me with a bracelet. I wore it under my coat. It was inconspicuous, but it protected me from having my mind wiped upon entry to the Neo World Program. Everything… Except for the nature of Nami’s talent. Losing that information was the key difference, and what led me to make the mistakes that I did.”

“In Tomoe’s presence, I slipped up and mentioned the Ultimate List. A collection of failures. There was only one reason for somebody to recall its existence, and that was if I were Ultimate Judgment. So, she made me her own offer.”

“Put Nami at first place. Put her there so that she can live. Trust me on this, please, she deserves to make it out of here. She probably isn’t really an Ultimate. It’s a mistake.”

“And if I do this for you? What? Why should I listen to trash like you?”

“Because. If you’ll do this for me, if you promise me you’ll spare her, then I’ll make sure of something for you. Trash like me out of your life. And Yushu, too. Right? Isn’t that what you want? It’s bound to be misery here, if he keeps calling you that name this whole time. I’ll take care of it. If you take care of her.”

“So that was the agreement we came to. She was right, that I wished Yushu would die early. The plan was for everyone to end up dead at some point, that much was true. I concluded everybody was a sinner, with no true salvation for anybody. But I had a promise, and I still intended to keep it. And I had sentiment. So when I decided that Asahi should die as suddenly yet painfully as the first victim’s own victim, it was those two I intended to spare. Nami and Rei. If anyone could improve, I supposed, they might.”

“The key is in the ‘why’, of course. Many different whys. Why would somebody agree to be Judgment. Why would I have taken such a role just for Nami’s sake when I was used to existing without her, on the outside? This was the whydunnit that only she could know. I intended to protect her, yes, but it was never going to be at the cost of a life... Until some of the brainwashing slipped through my little trinket and left me as useless as ever.”

“Why would I plan to kill Asahi? At the time, it was said, she was an easy target. That’s all the reason somebody like me needs, right? But I was right about her in the end. She wasn’t so obviously rotten I should cite her as somebody who shouldn’t survive when it was over. It was obvious only to me. And why would I set Nami free when I had previously disliked her so much? Because it’s in my virtue to keep promises.”

“Why would I kill Etsuko Yushu? I knew the entire time, what deepest desire we shared. He had never met Nami. Of course it had no connection to Nami. But I loved her, and hated myself, so much… I put on quite the show, didn’t I? And it was still for her sake. Always for her sake. Just not the way it might have seemed. So, it’s funny. The only real judgment passed in that game, in
the end, was my own. So who was really the mastermind in the end?”

"Here’s a bit more truth for your troubles. Evangeline Carroll is the Ultimate Cyberbiologist, and she was also on the list. Had Kira given the note that ‘Etsuko Yushu is not First Place’ when discussing the rankings, Nami would have been just as capable of realizing the truth. That is a boy who would have set himself in that position, and Rei Akabane would put somebody who was already dead, to ensure that the first place position utilized its function, and one of her friends was dead by then. Also, there’s more than meets the eye to Mercury’s new scheme.”

"This is the mystery of the fifty-fourth killing game put to rest, just as we all have been. Dead. Finished. We and this game will be left behind and forgotten by the world at large, right? But if we consider that those people ran from their problems rather than facing them... All we can really say is…”

"That's how it should have been.”

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Final Notes (These were too long to fit in the Chapter Notes so here we are.)
KIRA: Heh. Well, as expected, I am the victor, with 56 votes.
NAMI: What? Fuck you that isn’t true. I need to see this for myself.
KIRA: I mean, it was a foregone conclusion. Me being so likeable and all. I got 36 votes as Mono, and I even got 20 as myself! My two selves net me a ~Landslide~! ~Victory~!
SAYAKA: That doesn’t count, actually. And since it doesn’t count, I win, actually.
KIRA: What?? That can’t be right. Your height makes you waifu bait, but your attitude makes you an Unpleasant Woman!
SAYAKA: Oh, screw you, I’m the greatest and this is proof. 39 votes for me and for Nami!
NAMI: Oh! We both came in first?
SAYAKA: Obviously we did, we’re the biggest power couple in the universe!
DIA: I am here to represent the Unfair Gang.
NAMI: Unfair gang?
DIA: I was introduced properly far too late to receive the best girl votes that I so evidently, righteously deserve! And Amai’s first impression was so bad. She was almost unanimously voted worst girl even though that title should have gone to Riko…
NAMI: Or to Kira!
KIRA: I wasn’t revealed to be a major character till the final act, so I didn’t have a worst category! So there.
RANDY: ...Nobody’s going to dispute that I’m best boy, right?
TSUKASA: No way, babe.
SHINJIRO: And I have an undisputed title as the worst boy, myself. It seems things are just a bit more cut and dry amongst the cruder sex.
GORO: Why are you proud of that?
SHINJIRO: Being the best at being the worst is still being the best at something, is it not?
KANOSHI: Ruka and I were almost tied for second worst, and we still don’t even get close to you!
YUURI: I don’t understand that. It’s not like I did anything hateable. And you got more ‘best’ votes than me? How?
KANOSHI: I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just a poor anxious boy pining after the cool leather tough guy who’d rather rape the weirdo than sleep with me. Seems pretty hateable.
YUURI: Don’t say it like that! He literally asked me to.
GORO: My brain is too broken, dude, should’ve known better, I guess? Don’t hurt a runner-up best boy like me, the universal son!

(Game Over will begin on November 3rd, 2019)
MERCURY: Speaking of which, it’s 2128! Do you know where your children are?
KIRA: Oh, great. It’s the woman so gross that I think she’s awful.
NAMI: So you do admit it? You admit you are record levels of disgusting?
KIRA: I can’t hold a record if my ex already holds it.
NAMI: What a shitty ex chain. Why you gotta be like that, Kira?
KIRA: Because I’m Kira Kirara, and life is a fucking nightmare?
SAYAKA: It’s literally not, though. We got a happy ending and everything.
RANDY: Mhm! A promising end with just the bitter touch of losing our ability to hang out together in physical space at some undetermined point in the future!
TSUMUGI: We’re finally happy. And no matter what happens…
TORIMI: No matter whaaaat challenges there may be, in 2128?
KUROU: It’s still twenty years of happiness and contentment.
NAMI: Two entire decades.
MADARA: And absolutely nothing could ever...
AMAI: Take that away from us!
DIA: It’s still a happy ending!
GORO: In spite of a rotten world’s best efforts, we’re happy.
TSUKASA: And someday we’ll help that world to smile again, too.

Thank You From… *(images with VK spoilers will be links rather than embeds)*

The "Future Hangover" Bar and Pub

The Dome City Prime Research Lab
Kobe

**Okinawa**

**Tottori**

**Towa City**

**Tokyo**

Your Up-And-Coming Villains, Mysterious and Otherwise.

Eventually, I'll post some nice fluff chapters (including with afterlife characters) under a separate fic titled "Sparkling Future Project". No schedule, just whenever I feel like writing them. So for now.

**Thank you for reading. The 54th Killing Game is now, officially, a matter of History.**
Don't be a stranger; Get special mmmm sneak peeks, dumb 3d renderings and art, discuss theories, and more in Everyone's Brand New And Improved Discord Server. Spoiler channels specially designed to keep you safe from anything you don't want to know! Let's all watch the 54th Annual Killing Game together. https://discord.gg/KbWpxN2

Or answer the Popularity Poll here: https://goo.gl/forms/4ROyVJLwrf4WwJ1c2 The poll is still open for new readers, but keep in mind that the final segment was written when there were 58 responses!

Finally, here's the Additional Media Content document! Here's where you'll find art and videos relating to mmmm! https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Wi2QgoKF7IwLJyac_I4tYL72NJ3ie4Qap0tn6Hm44rw/edit?usp=sharing Last updated: 7/12/2019. Make sure to check back whenever that date changes!

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