Danganronpa: A Stormy Last Hurrah

by PKRS

Summary

A class: sixteen students, each one a prodigy in their chosen field.
Two birds: white and black, kind and cruel, their origins concealed.
An mansion: crumbling at its cornerstones, with more secrets than meets the eye.
An ultimatum: if a student succeeds in killing another, the rest of the class is to die.

Chiyo Kumoshita wakes up in a mansion with no memory of how she got there. You've heard the rest before.

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A script-format, semi-illustrated fangan with original mascots and an original class of students. Based somewhat thematically upon the Shakespeare play "The Tempest".

[STATUS - CHAPTER 3: WHAT I'D DO NOT TO WORRY LIKE YOU]
Updates alternate Thursdays! | NEXT: January 23 2020

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Welcome to DR:ASLH! This is a script format fangan based in... one of the DR game settings. Which one? It’s a mystery for now. I highly recommend being at least familiar with the format and endgames of each main series game just for the sake of not getting spoiled on accident, but even if you don’t know anything about DR I’ll make sure to explain important things as they come up! I haven't played any of the canon games, so everything I know about DR was absorbed by osmosis or from reading the wikia. So I’ve been there.

If you’re unfamiliar with script format, it’s exactly what it sounds like: lines are written as if the story were a play script! Actions taken during speech are in brackets. Like so:

Chiyo: Cool! I’m saying things with my mouth!

Chiyo: [waving arms] Hi, reader!

In addition, bolded text denotes the protagonist’s narration, or in some cases just regular narration and description. It’s interchangeable.

Furthermore, I couldn’t have gotten so far without the support of my friends! Thank you especially to Missy, Alca, Wyn, and Robin, who listened to me while I was banging my head against a wall trying to come up with this story. Please check out DR: Humanity’s Universal Divide (when it comes out), Alca Ronpa, Kill The Joker: Survival Game, and UDR: Supernova At Sea respectively! They’re all fantastic works and heavily inspire me, and I hope they do the same for you. Big shoutout to my beta and gamma readers as well! Sorry for tormenting you constantly!

And last of all, thank you to all of you reading this right now. Whether you’ve been aware of ASLH since I started publicly working on it, whether you follow me on Twitter or Tumblr or deviantART, whether you just found this a solid “most of the way into ch4” (assuming I get there)... Thank you. Not only is this the first story I’ve been consistently determined to write for, it’s also the first to feature exclusively my own characters, which I am notoriously unconfident in. I’ve been working on ASLH for well over a year and a half, and I hope you’re just as excited for it as I am.

Enjoy!
“What are your plans after graduation?”

???: Oh, haha, I don’t know. There’s not much work for someone like me these days, and I mean that in a lot of different ways. Maybe I’ll go to college or something. Dunno for what.

“Wouldn’t [XXX] be your specialty? Given your track record and everything.”

???: Eh, I guess. I don’t really care. I’d be pretty good at it, but some things just have to stay in high school. Gossip. Drama. [XXX], too. So… I guess that’s that on that. Heh.

???: It’s a little embarrassing that I don’t have anything to talk about. I probably should have thought of something years ago, back in first year or something, but that never worked out.

???: ... And now it’s the month before graduation. Whoops.

???: So yeah, I’ve got nothing. Sorry about that.

“Oh, it’s fine, but… Nothing? Nothing at all? Not even the first thing you’re going to do with all that free time?”

???: ...
“Woah, really? What do you have planned?”

“Can’t really talk about it, haha. It’s a bit of a need to know basis, you know the type. Sorry!”

“But I guarantee that if it works out, you’ll know. It’s pretty big. I’m excited for it.

“I’m sure it’ll turn out great, whatever it is! I’m looking forward to it.”

“Ha. Yeah, I’d bet.

“Anyway, nice talking to you. There’s graduation practice tomorrow, see you then?”

“Of course.”
How many ways can the same story be told? Probably an infinite number, considering how similar so many plots are when boiled down. Just look at any of the shoujo on the shelves these days. Their characters are interchangeable and equally forgettable. Literature standards have never fallen so far.

It's the same with real life. Any number of people have stories of suffering, deprivation, *death* … The only things making people different from each other are our exact circumstances and
the specific details, but even that blurs together eventually. Yet when you analyze each story, no two are the same, and no two people are the same in reacting to them.

Sometimes the same stories are just changed by a matter of perspective. A politician might say that they’re the most powerful person in the world and point to their accomplishments, and their critics would mutter something about the ten thousand other things they didn’t accomplish or else did very terribly. Or a person thinks that they’re the hero, when they’ve been blinded to their own villainous actions...

But sometimes, there’s a story that only few people would know about, let alone empathize with. Which I'd know a lot about! Not to brag or anything, but knowing about stories is sort of my domain at this point. After all- oh! I haven't even introduced myself!

[ CHIYO KUMOSHITA || SHSL CELLPHONE NOVELIST ]

I guess my story is one of those more unique ones. Although, to be fair, most students who attend Hope’s Peak Academy have very different reasons for making it so far. Since I’m just a cellphone novelist, it's safe to say that mine are fairly mundane. I promise this was an accident, and I can't really believe it either. Me, a HPA student? Quite honestly, I don't know who let me get this far in life, not that I’m complaining.
Truth be told, I'm not exactly excited to leave my old school and all my friends. Having to find a new group to be with and honing my talent as a cellphone novelist, on top of maintaining my grades, sounds... really scary. And intimidating. At the same time, it IS exciting! So few people get to have this opportunity, I’m sure any stories I make there will be worth telling later.

(...Both the literal written kind and the anecdotal kind. Yeah.)

So any day now, I'll be off headed into the great unknown! For now, morning.

It’s kind of amazing that my alarm hasn't gone off yet. Normally I don't get to ruminate quite as much. Or at all. Usually I just wake up and that’s that. I’m pretty sure that’s how most people deal with mornings?

I yawn and roll over, pressing my face against the embroidery on the... cushion. Seat cushion. As in, a couch.

My eyes snap open.

... This isn't my bed.

I sit up quickly and look at the pristine room around me, from the tasteful off-white couch and sleek, filled bookshelves to the blindingly white walls.

Chiyo: Huh...?

...

...

... THIS ISN’T MY HOUSE?!
Okay, okay, stay calm. Maybe this is a hotel or something - it certainly seems clean enough. Maybe I fell asleep at Onii-chan’s house? That'd make sense. I have no idea what kind of furniture he’s into lately. Or maybe I'm just forgetting something obvious? Think, think!

I carefully edge off the couch and tiptoe around the room. It's... strangely sterile. There's not a speck of dust on the glass coffee table, and each strand in the rug is unnaturally even. It's quiet, too, except for the sound of a deep and steady breathing.

It takes me a moment to realize that it isn't my own. And then another moment to notice that there is, in fact, another person lying on the other side of the couch I was on.

Chiyo: …

On the one hand, they look pretty peaceful, wrapped in a sweater and their glasses digging into their face. And they might be upset if I wake them up. On the other... they might be the only person who knows anything about this situation. Also, I'm pretty sure I've never seen them before, so that disproves the Onii-chan theory.

I take a deep breath, reach over, and gently shake their shoulder.

Chiyo: [whispering] Hey, wake up!

???: Hm...?

They react almost immediately and sit bolt upright, confusion clouding their expression, and I yank my arm back quickly. At the motion, they turn sharply to look at me. Their eyes narrow as they inspect my face.

Oh god this was already a terrible idea.

???: Where am I? What do you want with me?
Chiyo: Excuse me, ma’am? Please remain calm, I just woke up too!

The person blinks at me, taken aback.

???: I’m, uh, not a ma’am.

Shit. So much for being polite.

Chiyo: Crap. I’m sorry. What would you like me to call you?

???: [automatically] Male terms are fine, though I’d very much prefer gender neutral language, but- [shakes head] Forget it. This isn’t important right now. Who are you?

Chiyo: Chiyo Kumoshita! Also, thank you. I’ll keep that in mind. I can do that.

Their mouth twists in a weird mix between a smile and an attempt at neutrality.

???: I appreciate it. So Chiyo Kumoshita, huh...

They frown, processing my name. Oh god if they turn out to be like a fan or something I’m never going to live down that first interaction. I start fidgeting with my gloves.

Chiyo: [nervously] Yes? That’s me. I, uh, wrote a cell phone novel called “In The World That You Left Behind”, you might know me from that.

???: I can’t say I do. I just thought I heard your name before, but I don’t think I have. Sorry if I concerned you.

Chiyo: Oh! No, it’s okay, don’t worry!

???: Noted. [adjusts hat] Still, nice to meet you, I think. But what does your cell phone novel have
to do with any of this?

... Good question, actually.

Chiyo: W-well. I was thinking, why would someone want to kidnap me and put me in a weird room with someone I don’t know? And the only semi-remarkable thing I’ve ever done is that work, so it’s what came to mind.

???: Is that so.

Chiyo: And I’m also a student at Hope’s Peak Academy! As the SHSL Cellphone Novelist.

???: [nods] Now we’re getting somewhere. I’m a student at Hope’s Peak as well. At least, I think I was going to be. And since you shared your identity with me, I see no reason not to do the same.

???: Amal Khalaf. SHSL Journalist.

[ AMAL KHALAF || SHSL JOURNALIST ]
I can’t say I’ve ever heard of them before, but maybe that’s just because I don’t read much news as a whole. Today’s political climate is scary, and frankly it gets exhausting to read so much about it every single day.

Still, Khalaf seems friendly enough, if understandably paranoid from the situation, and I extend a hand to them. They take it hesitantly.

Chiyo: It’s nice to meet you, Khalaf-san!

Khalaf: Likewise. But back to business…

Khalaf: You’re absolutely certain that you know nothing about this situation? Withholding anything could be dangerous.

Chiyo: [nods] I’m positive. I woke up only a few minutes before you did, and I woke YOU up hoping that YOU would know something.
Khalaf: Evidently not. [narrows eyes] And you don’t happen to be associated with whoever set us up here, do you?

Chiyo: What?! No, of course not!

Khalaf: [narrows eyes further] You’re certain.

Chiyo: Yes, I’m certain! Anyway, I could be saying the same about you, you know! Maybe YOU’RE the person who set us up here!

Khalaf: [blinks] But… I’m not.

Chiyo: And neither am I. [folds arms] So you’ll just have to take my word for it. I don’t mean you any harm.

Khalaf: …

They seem poised to argue, but instead let out a breath I didn’t realize they were holding.

Khalaf: I guess that’s as good of confirmation as I can get. Thank you, Kumoshita-san. So… where exactly are we?

Chiyo: Near as I can tell, some kind of mansion. I thought this was my brother’s apartment at first.

Khalaf: [raises an eyebrow] Is he rich or something?

Chiyo: Not really. He just has an “eclectic design taste”. His words, not mine.

Khalaf: He sounds pretty odd. I don’t know why you’d want a room in various shades of white and light grey, this decor is going to burn my eyes out.
Chiyo: Agreed. This room is so bright, I don’t know how I slept as long as I did.

Khalaf: Have you gone outside yet?

Chiyo: Like I said, I just woke up. So, no.

**Khalaf stands up abruptly. I follow them to the door as they place a hand on the knob.**

Khalaf: Well, now’s a good time to start. Let’s just hope that the rest of the house isn’t as bright as in here.

Chiyo: You don’t mind if I come with you, right?

Khalaf: Go for it. I’d rather not explore an unknown building by myself, anyway. And I’m sure you wouldn’t, either. Which is why you’re asking. [mumbles] … Yeah.

Chiyo: [smiles] Don’t worry! I’ll be here.

They still don’t look directly at me when they do that half-smile thing, but their voice seems a lot less strained when they reply.

Khalaf: Thanks. I appreciate it.

They open the door and we step out of the room.

The hallway isn’t much different, aside from being decked sparsely in shades of grey in addition to the pure, almost blinding white of the room that Khalaf and I woke up in. Barely any furniture is in the hall, but each wall has a few pieces of abstract art framed in that same smoky grey.

Doors and doorways dot the corridor with shining metal nameplates attached to a few, a quick inspection at the room I just left reveals that it lacks a nameplate. Interesting.
Ahead of me, Khalaf takes exactly three steps forward before a voice calls from just down the hall.

???: Hey, you!

Chiyo: Eep!

I duck quickly behind Khalaf, who seems more startled than anything by the motion.

Quick footsteps approach, and I turn to see a tall, tan boy with a long black coat and earbuds wrapped around his neck. He runs a hand through his bleached hair as he surveys Khalaf and me with narrow, beady eyes.

???: So you’re finally awake, huh.

Khalaf: What do you mean by that, exactly?

???: Ah, most of us have been up for, what, an hour? Two hours? I was starting to wonder if anyone else was still asleep. But I guess you two are late risers, ahaha.

Khalaf: It’s not like we have much of a choice when we’ve been drugged and left all over some strange building.

???: Wait, we were what?

Chiyo: But you said you didn’t know anything about the situation!

Khalaf: I don’t, but it only makes sense, right? Would someone kidnap us while we were asleep?

???: Ugh, geez, I’d hope not. Though knowing how fans can get, I wouldn’t put it past them…
Eugh. They’d probably drug me, too, though I don’t see how YOU two would have gotten involved. Unless you’re collaborating with them?!

Chiyo: What? No! We don’t have any idea of what’s going on, either!

Khalaf: [mutters] I don’t see how someone like you can get fans, anyway.

The boy’s eye twitches, but he seems to act like he didn’t hear. Such confidence… or maybe he’s just used to fame.

Something he said clicks in my mind.

Chiyo: Fans, huh… So that means you must be an Ultimate, too?

???: Oh! [perks up] I mean, duh. Surely you’ve recognized me by now, anyway. I promise you, I’m much more well-known for my skills than just being a Hope’s Peak student.

Bates: After all, Claudius Bates, SHSL Violinist, has over 5 million YouTube subscribers and counting! A huge step forward for classical EDM, I’d say.

[ CLAUDIUS BATES || SHSL VIOLINIST ]
Bates: You can just call me Claude! Everyone does, ahaha.

Khalaf: We’re speaking Japanese. I’d assume to call you Bates-san, by the conventions of the language.

Chiyo: But we can call you Claude-san if you’d prefer!

A wide beam splits Bates’ face, revealing pointed canines. Kind of weird that a boy would go for yaeba, but perhaps it makes him cuter to his fans. Though, they look more natural than any I’ve seen before… so maybe it’s not a fashion statement?

Point is, he’s starting to look a bit like a snake.

Bates: Thanks so much! I really appreciate it. So liiike. Surely you recognize me NOW, right?

Chiyo: I’m afraid I don’t, either. I’m really sorry!

Bates: [deflates] … Ah.

Chiyo: B-but!! I’m sure you’re really talented, especially if you got into Hope’s Peak! That’s incredible! There must be thousands of high school violinists out there, and considering that you’re one of the best, that’s amazing!

**Bates brightens again at the praise, even taking a dramatic bow. It’s like flicking a switch with him.**

Bates: Goodness gracious, that’s so KIND of you to say! Thank you! Once we get out of here, I’ll be sure to show you what I can do.

Chiyo: I’d love that, thank you!

Bates: Ah, please, it’s the least I can do for someone who appreciates me. [grins at Khalaf] Unlike SOME people.

Khalaf: I’ve never been a fan of violinists. They tend to be too whiny and nasal.

Bates: S-surely you mean the instrument…?

Khalaf: [folds arms] You heard what I said.

I’m starting to get the feeling that I should probably defuse this situation before either Khalaf or Bates rips the other’s throat out.

Chiyo: Well! [claps hands together] Claude-san, you mentioned other people. How many do you think are in this building?
Bates: Huh? Lemme think… [tugs on earbuds] Counting the three of us, I think there’s sixteen.

Chiyo: Sixteen?! An entire class of students?!

Bates: [pouts] And none of you have heard of me. Come on, you guys.

Chiyo: No, forget that, someone kidnapped an entire class! How does someone even do that?

Bates: Fans are scary like that.

Chiyo: I mean, yeah, I feel that, but that’s ridiculous!

Khalaf: Not to mention incredibly questionable. Why would someone do that?

Bates: I dunno, man. I’m just here for a good time.

Khalaf: [dryly] I’m well aware.

Bates: Ahaha, I know.

Khalaf: [mutters] Then you should stop saying *dumb things* -

**TIME TO DEFUSE THE SITUATION A LITTLE MORE HAHA YES.**

Chiyo: Hey, so!! I feel like Khalaf-san and I still have a lot to look at, since we just woke up and everything.

Bates: Ah, of course. So I’ll be seeing you two around, then?
Chiyo: Mhm! We’ll be headed down the hall, probably.

Bates: Gotcha. I’m headed the other way. Take care, yeah?

Bates nods to himself, barely even looking at either Khalaf or myself as he breezes past. He waves a hand at both of us.

Bates: Ciao for now!

And just like that, he’s down the hall and barely out of sight, his coattails the only indication of our conversation.

Also just like that, Khalaf is turning in the other direction, approaching the door at the other end of the hallway. It takes me a second to catch up to them - when I do, they’re fidgeting with their hat with a scowl on their face. Clearly, Bates has not left a good impression.

Chiyo: Y’know, I don’t think he even asked for our names.

Khalaf: Add it to the list. Whiny, nasal, and self-absorbed.

Before I can say anything in response, we’ve reached the end of the hall. Without hesitating, Khalaf opens the door and steps into the room, leaving me to follow again.

The door leads to an atrium with what seem to be frosted glass windows and several rows of planters. Two girls - one with light brown hair dyed pink at the tips and wearing a jacket with star patterns, and one with what appears to be a modified pilot’s uniform and a burgundy kerchief around her neck - stand talking to each other, completely ignoring the figure with a mask and flowing cape T-posing by an open window.

Khalaf and I barely walk into the room before the girls stop their conversation. Kerchief girl waves at us enthusiastically.

Kerchief: Hey!! New people!!!
In a blink, both girls bound over to us, though Star follows at a slower pace. Both proceed to pepper us with questions.

Star: Hiya! Did you just wake up?

Kerchief: What are your names?

Star: Oh!! And your talents!

Kerchief: Nah, nah, forget those. Music taste.

Star: Or favorite foods? That might be important if we’re stuck here forever.

Kerchief: [winces] “Forever” is a little harsh, don’t you think?

Star: [nods] Yeah, you right. I’d hope we aren’t stuck here forever. But food is important, right?

Kerchief: Who knows if we even HAVE food?? Maybe it’s all cheap crackers.

Star: That would probably be worse than staying here forever.

They’re poised to keep talking, now to each other instead of with us, when Khalaf coughs lightly. Both girls immediately stop talking and patiently wait for their response.

Khalaf: Well, in approximately whatever order you just said… [adjusts glasses] Yes, Amal Khalaf, SHSL Journalist, uh… 80’s American rock? Get back to me on that.

Kerchief: Boo. Booooo your music taste is trash. Listen to R3BELS.
Chiyo: R3BELS? What’s that?

If she had glasses, Kerchief would probably adjust them as they glow ominously. As it is, a manic light seems to flare in her eyes.

Kerchief: Only the BEST all-female punk group in Japan, duh! They’ve got like, a pop/metal kind of feel? The kind you can’t help but dance to when you hear? Y’know??

Chiyo: I can’t say I’ve heard of them.

Kerchief: No, I’m sure you have. Confident. Maybe you heard one of their songs in passing before?

Chiyo: I, uh…

Kerchief looks expectantly at me, as if she’s expecting me to rip off my shirt to reveal that I am in fact Japan’s #1 R3BELS fan. In the background, Khalaf is exchanging looks with Star, who looks far less energetic than she was a second ago.

Khalaf: [whispers] Not to be rude, but is she always like this?

Star: [whispers] I’ve only known her about an hour, but… I’d assume so.

Kerchief: Hey! I heard that!

Star: Chisaki-san, maybe it’d be a good idea to introduce yourself before scaring this poor girl any more.

Chisaki?: Ugh. I guess you’re right.

The kerchief girl, Chisaki, turns to me and strikes a pose. Somehow, the jacket around her shoulders doesn’t fall off.
Chisaki: I’m Tsukino Chisaki! The one and only SHSL Flight Student! Remember the name or suffer the consequences!

[ TSUKINO CHISA KI || SHSL FLIGHT STUDENT ]

Chisaki: And you are?

Chiy: Chiy Chiyoshita, SHSL Cellphone Novelist! Pleased to make your acquaintance!

Chisaki stops abruptly, eyes wide. I fidget with my gloves again, face slowly heating up.

Chisaki: Oh my god.

Chiy: Huh?
Chisaki: Kumoshita-chan.

Chiyo: Is something wrong?

Chisaki: You’re…

Chisaki: You’re adorable.

Chiyo: O-oh?

Out of everything she could have said, that’s one of the last things I would have expected.

Chiyo: That’s. Thank you. That’s really, really kind of you to say…

Maybe noticing the expression on my face, Star interrupts to save me from my embarrassment.

Star: She’s said that to every girl she’s met so far.

Chisaki: It’s true though! It’s always true!

Still, I appreciated it.

Khalaf: [to Star] I don’t suppose you have a name?

Star: Oh, right. I guess I forgot to introduce myself too. [laughs] My bad!

Everett: My name’s Aster Everett. And my talent is…
Chisaki: Being amazing. Putting up with me. Having bad music taste.

Everett: … Yeah, one of those, probably.

Khalaf: So, judging by Chisaki-san’s introduction, you all are Hope’s Peak students as well.

Everett: Mhm. Although I’m not really sure what I did to get here…

Khalaf pauses, concern creeping across their expression.

Khalaf: I’m sorry?

Everett: [deadpan] It’s not your fault.

Khalaf: … I meant, what do you mean?

Everett: It’s strange, I’ll admit. I don’t remember anything before waking up here.

Chiyo: As in… *anything*, anything?

Everett: [nods] I’m afraid so. But everyone else I’ve met so far has a talent, and I know that means I must have one, too… But nothing comes to mind.

Chisaki: Maybe you’re the SHSL ???.

Khalaf: How did you just make that noise with your mouth.

Chisaki: Oh, easy! See, you just kind of-
Khalaf: *Nevermind.*

Everett: I guess that works. So until further notice, SHSL… *that,* it is!

[ASTER EVERETT || SHSL ???]

Everett: But I must ask, how did you guys figure out your talents when you woke up?

Khalaf: I just remember my past and what I did before… This. [gestures to the room] So once Kumoshita-san mentioned Hope’s Peak, it was a pretty easy conclusion to make.

Chiyo: Same. And I remember getting a letter of invitation to Hope’s Peak, so there’s that too.

Chisaki: I got “SHSL Flight Student” tattooed on my wrist. All I had to do was look at it and it all came back to me.

*Everett and Khalaf immediately pause and shoot Chisaki with dual concerned glares.*
They’ve already perfected their synchronization.

Chisaki: … Relax, I’m *joking*. It’s more like what Kumoshita-chan said.

Everett: ...Hm.

Khalaf: Did you have hobbies or anything? Something you could tie your talent back to?

Everett: Mm… I guess. Nothing big comes to mind, though…

**Her expression falls eerily still. Just as quickly, her frown vanishes, and she smiles widely.**

Everett: But I’m sure it’ll come back to me eventually! Anyway, it’s not like it matters whether I have a talent or not.

Khalaf: Really?

Everett: Sure. After all, unless we happen to have a SHSL Escape Artist or something similar, I doubt any of us will be leaving this building anytime soon, regardless of our talents. [shrugs] So, like, it’s whatever.

Chisaki: That’s a dark way of looking at things.

Khalaf: But realistic.

Chiyo: Everett-san, you said everyone else has a talent, right?

Everett: Yup! At least, everyone I’ve met so far.

Chiyo: So would that include… that guy?
I point to the masked individual, and everyone follows my gaze. He hasn’t moved at all since we entered the room. Everett and Chisaki exchange meaningful looks.

Everett: Well, yes, but… he’s sort of… interesting.

Khalaf: [dryly] I can tell.

Chisaki: He’d be my kind of person under any other circumstances. Not this one.

Chiyo: So do you mean he’s, um… mean?

Chisaki: Nah, it’s not like he’s evil or anything. As far as I know. Just… weird. So be prepared.

Khalaf: Alright, noted. Thanks.

Everett: Anytime. I think it’s about time we go look at other stuff, anyway.

Chisaki: There’s a library at the other end of the hall, by the way!

Khalaf: Really? That could be useful to figure out our situation.

Chisaki: Yeah, maybe there’s gonna be a book called “The Creepy Old Mansion In The Middle Of Nowhere With A Bunch Of Hope’s Peak Students”!

*Everett coughs uncomfortably. Khalaf processes this.*

Khalaf: Uh… are you… mocking me?

Chisaki: What? No. I’m dead serious. It’d be crazy to hope for, but dang do I hope it exists and that
we have it.

Khalaf: I see.

Aster: We’d better go. C’mon, Chisaki-san.

**Everett grabs Chisaki by the hand and heads towards the door. Chisaki waves enthusiastically again.**

Chisaki: Bye guuuys!!

Chiyo: See you soon!

Khalaf: Yeah, later.

Chiyo: So…

**The masked figure finally speaks up with a thick accent. Surprisingly, his dialect is incredibly formal despite his casual language, and he seems to pick each word carefully.**

???: I heard everything you said.

Chiyo: Oh. Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.

???: It’s whatever. Could you be so kind as to come here?

Khalaf: Why? Can’t you come over here? That can’t be comfortable.

???: I want to see you. And no.
Khalaf: … And why not?

???: Birds.

Khalaf: What?

???: You heard me.

Chiyo: I think he means that if he stands like that with the doors open, birds will come in and perch on him or something like that.

???: Something like that, yes. Come here.

Khalaf and I cautiously approach the figure and stand in front of him. His mask is cracked on his right side, allowing a single eye and not much else to be visible. As he surveys us, his expression doesn’t seem to change - not like I can tell with the mask.

???: … Hm.

Chiyo: I’m Chiyo, by the way.

???: I know. I heard you introducing yourselves to Aster and Tsukino.

Chiyo: First names already?

???: It’s how I operate. Sorry.

Chiyo: ...I see.

He’s clearly not from Japan. Very, very clearly.
Khalaf: Alright, so you know us. Great. And you are?

???: …


**[ ALEXEI ILYICH BAZHANOV || SHSL BIRDWATCHER ]**

Bazhanov: Any combination of those names is fine. I don’t mind much either way.

Chiyo: So you’re a foreigner, too?

Bazhanov: [shrugs] Russian. What’s it to you?

Chiyo: What? [blinks] Oh, gosh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to assume-
Khalaf: It’s fine. It’s just that it seems weird that so many foreigners were invited to this Hope’s Peak class, right?

Chiyo: Yeah, exactly.

Bazhanov: If it means anything, I currently reside in Tokyo. At least, most of the time. [pause] As in, not now, because it seems that I reside wherever this building is for the time being. I can’t say about the rest of you.

Khalaf: I don’t really have a home base. I wasn’t even aware that my work is read in Japan.

Bazhanov: Hm.

Chiyo: Hm?

Bazhanov: Hm…

He closes his eyes. Eye? At least, the one visible outside of his mask.

Bazhanov: If there are birds here, I might be able to identify where we are. Certain species are native to certain places and such.

Khalaf: Seriously?

Bazhanov: No. It was a joke. I don’t actually know much about ornithology. I just like birds.

Khalaf: Oh. That’s a shame.

Bazhanov: Mm. Truly. It would have been a much better method than going to the library and finding a book entitled “The Creepy Old Mansion In The Middle Of Nowhere With A Bunch Of Hope’s Peak Students” or something similar.
Bazhanov: Yes, that was a joke also. In all seriousness, I would like to go to the library soon to find identification books. Perhaps those could be of assistance. Or perhaps they're just bird books. Those are good too.

Chiyo: You really like birds, huh?

Bazhanov: Don’t you like writing?

Chiyo: Eh? I never really thought about it…

Bazhanov: I don’t either. They’re just a topic I enjoy.

Khalaf: [awkward] Right. Okay then.

Bazhanov doesn’t seem too disappointed by the fading attempts at conversation, and instead turns his gaze back out the window.

Bazhanov: As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I don’t have anything else to say.

Khalaf: So you won’t mind if we leave?

Bazhanov: I’m fine either way. If I’m correct in my assumption, you two were the last to wake. You ought to explore, anyway.

Chiyo: Okay, if you’re sure.
Khalaf: Bye.

Bazhanov: See you.

The last I see of him as Khalaf and I leave the room is his unchanging pose, still patiently waiting for a bird to fly in through the open window.

We walk back into the hallway, where a different girl with purple hair and a muted but fashionable outfit is now standing. She leans against the sole table in the corridor, closely inspecting one of the abstract paintings.

???: Hm…

Chiyo: Hello?

???: The swirls of smoke seem to symbolize a nebulous view of humanity, while the lack of color indicates disinterest and gloom. The composition seems to draw the viewer’s eye to the largest cloud - perhaps a metaphor for the greys of our morality?

Chiyo: Um…

???: Note, though, that no pure black or white is present in the entire image. It’s all various shades of grey. Truly a measure of middle grounds in the world as a whole. But is it a question? Or an answer?

Khalaf: So what’s your overall interpretation of its meaning?

???: I think…

She squints at the painting, then turns to us. Her eyes are a startling, almost luminescent yellow.
???: [bluntly] I think it’s a load of shit.

Khalaf: Excuse me?

Ignoring us, she turns to call over her shoulder.

???: Ekyou-san, are you about done?

Ekyou?: Coming!

The door nearest the girl opens, revealing another girl, Ekyou, with darker hair, a purple hapi coat, and an impressive scowl. The kind of scowl to make babies cry. It’s more than a little bit terrifying. She doesn’t acknowledge Khalaf or myself at all and immediately focuses her attention on the other girl, speaking with no venom despite her glare.

Ekyou?: My room has two changes of clothes identical to the set I’m wearing, some pajamas, and various toiletries laid out on the bed. I didn’t find any medication like you did, but I don’t have a need for it.


Medication? Geez, I didn’t even think of that, but it’s a good thing that we probably have what we need. But if our captors are kind enough to fill my testosterone blockers, they evidently plan to keep us a while.

The first girl turns back to Khalaf and I, frowning slightly.

???: Anyway. I assume you’re Hope’s Peak students as well, as am I. Before you try, please do not make guesses about my talent, I don’t appreciate it.

Khalaf: Wasn’t planning on it.
Kashizaki: And you are?

We quickly introduce ourselves. Kashizaki simply frowns when she hears my name.

Kashizaki: Odd. I’ve been reading cellphone novels for years, now, but I’ve never even heard of you. What did you say your screen name was, again?

Chiyo: daybreak • dreamer. [hangs head] I, um, thought it was cool at the time.

Ririka: Hm. Did you reveal your identity on purpose for the fame?

Chiyo: No! No no no! I, uh… was outing.
Ririka: [winces] Ugh. I feel that. I’m really sorry to hear.

Chiyo: No, don’t be, it’s fine! I mean, it led to us being here now!

Ekyou?: I wouldn’t call that a good thing.

Until this point, Ekyou had seemed to be preoccupied with staring at the floor, but she speaks now with a flat frankness. Her death glare maintains its strength, however.

Ekyou?: We don’t even know where we are, aside from the obvious “mansion in the middle of nowhere”.

Khalaf: So I’ve heard.

Chiyo: Bazhanov-san claims he can identify where we are based on the wildlife!

Khalaf: That’s assuming he finds any.

Ekyou?: Really? I’d be surprised.

Kashizaki: Same here. I can barely see outside the windows with how foggy it is.

Khalaf: Not frosted glass?

Kashizaki: Nope. Just bad weather. If it clears up, we might have an easier time identifying where we are just looking at the landscape. Without birds.

Khalaf: That’s a fair point.
Ekyou?: I wouldn’t mind looking at some scenery. The lack of natural light is making me claustrophobic.

Even though her expression hasn’t changed, Ekyou seems a lot less stern than I thought she would be. Although her voice isn’t all that expressive, either.

Kashizaki: By the way, Ekyou-san, you should really introduce yourself already.

Ekyou?: Yes. I guess you’re right.

Ekyou: I’m… E- Ekyou. Hirono Ekyou, the SHSL Ōendan.

[ HIRONO EKYOU || SHSL ŌENDAN ]

Did Ekyou hesitate on her own surname? That seems odd, considering how put-together she seems. Khalaf seems to have noticed, too, though they don’t say anything about it either. They frown a bit at her talent, though.
Khalaf: An… ōendan? I’m not familiar with the term.

Ekyou: You’re not the first. Or second. Or third, fourth, or fifth. There would be a sixth, but I think that’s because Valdez-san was too polite to ask.

Ekyou: In short terms, an ōendan is… somewhat similar to your Western cheerleaders.

Khalaf: [frowns] So… gymnastics and so forth?

Ekyou: No. Mostly the yelling. Cheering. With more enthusiasm and less smiling.

Khalaf: … I see.

Judging from their expression, they don’t actually get it. Ekyou just shrugs.

Ekyou: You and the five others. Six counting Valdez-san.

Kashizaki: Really, do none of you do research on the countries you travel to?

Khalaf: I don’t do research on every incidental occupation that a high schooler could hold, no. I had enough trouble learning Japanese as it is.

Chiyo: That’s okay! You’re doing really well with the language!

Instead of looking reassured, Khalaf simply pulls their hat down and frowns.

Khalaf: [mutters] That’s puzzling me too.

Kashizaki: Still, you should have received a roster. You could have looked up talents for people
you don’t know.

Khalaf: You got a roster, too. Yet you don’t seem to recognize Kumoshita-san nor myself.

Kashizaki: … That’s a good point.

They lapse into silence, both looking unsettled by their respective revelations. Ekyou turns to me.

Ekyou: Incidentally, I’d advise looking at your rooms if you have the time to make sure everything is there. Kashizaki-san says that any medication you need should have a three month prescription in the bedside table. Your room has a nameplate next to it.

Three months?! Whoever’s keeping us here really wants us to be comfortable.

Chiyo: I’ll remember that, thank you.

Khalaf: I don’t see my room here.

Kashizaki: I think you’re in the other hall. Just walk toward the library and turn left.

Khalaf: [nods] Alright. I think we’re done here, then. Thank you.

Kashizaki: Anytime.

We part ways, Ekyou still scowling throughout the whole conversation. Despite her expression, I don’t think she dislikes us at all. Khalaf and I finally head toward the library, which turns out to be a simple door at the hallway junction with a simple plaque, much like the bedroom nameplates, reading “LIBRARY”.

Khalaf has instinctively placed their hand on the doorknob, but they hesitate before withdrawing it and shaking their head.
Khalaf: No. This can wait.

Chiyo: Agreed. We don’t have to check everything just yet-

A single, distraught wail rises up from inside the library. Fear rises in my throat. I push past Khalaf and reach for the doorknob.

Khalaf: What are you-

Chiyo: Nevermind. We’re going in.

Without another word, I open the door and walk into the library. Khalaf follows just a step behind.

The library is a lot smaller than I expected after everything that people kept saying about it. Though there aren’t many shelves, they’re full to bursting, and don’t seem to be organized by any sort of system I’m familiar with. My head hurts just thinking about sorting through each of these to find information.

The wail came from the back of the room. I walk quickly, Khalaf just a step behind, to find two people sitting by what appears to be a bunch of poetry books. A broad-shouldered boy with blue hair and a two-pronged scar on his face looks up when we approach, concern written across his expression, but quickly glances back to his companion when she sniffs again.

Next to the boy sits the culprit, a short, bespectacled girl wearing a grey, rumpled sweater. She’s the very definition of awkward cute, save for the long hair that she’s clutching. Though it may once have been luxurious, it seems to be dyed an odd, dirty yellow color, except for the roots growing in. It’s somewhat obvious what she’s distressed about.

I rush over to the pair and kneel next to the girl.
Chiyo: Are you two okay?!

Girl: I just don’t know how this HAPPENED!

Boy: [pats her sympathetically] There, there, Sumitama-chan. I’m sure we’ll get to the bottom of this.

Khalaf: What’s wrong?

Sumitama?: My parents are going to kill me, that’s what’s wrong!

Boy: Sumitama-chan doesn’t know why her hair is bleached.

Sumitama?: What will I do?? Once they see this, I’ll have to cut it all off…

Sumitama sobs loudly. The boy winces at the noise and resumes patting her back, which Sumitama doesn’t seem to register.

Boy: Admittedly, I have no idea what I’m doing. Could you please help?

Chiyo: Uh, I can try…

I sit down on Sumitama’s other side. Despite all the noise, it doesn’t seem that she’s crying so much as making a lot of distressed wails. Still, it’s really concerning.

Chiyo: Hey, um… Sumitama-san? Is that your name?

Sumitama: Y-yes. I’m Iris Sumitama, the SHSL Honors Student. Not that it really matters, since I’m never going to be able to leave my house after this…

[ IRIS SUMITAMA || SHSL HONORS STUDENT ]
Sumitama: This is what happens when I’m not 100% devoted to my studies, I guess…

Chiyo: Hey, let’s not worry about that! Do you remember the last time it wasn’t bleached?

Sumitama: Right before I left for Hope’s Peak. And then I woke up and it was like this! I don’t get it at all!

Chiyo: Well, then… Doesn’t that mean that you bleached it between then and now?

Sumitama: O-or maybe whoever brought us here did!

Khalaf: That would make no sense. Why would our captors take the trouble to dye your hair?

Sumitama: But it’s the only solution I can think of! I surely wouldn’t do this! Oh, this is awful…
Sumitama buries her face in her hands. It’s… a little off-putting that she’s so much more concerned with her hair instead of the gravity of the situation that we’re in. But I guess I see why she’d be concerned. If I woke up one day to find my hair cut off, I’d be pretty distressed, too.

Chiyo: Sumitama-san, um… I really don’t know what would have caused this.

Chiyo: But if it’s any consolation, I think you look really cute? In, um…

I’m about to say “in a nerdy sort of way”, but somehow I don’t think that’s kind to say in this situation. Sumitama’s shoulders still relax, and she looks up from her hands.

Chiyo: Of course! I wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true!

Without a second’s hesitation, Sumitama hugs me so tightly that she almost knocks me over. It takes a second to register that she’s babbling into my shirt.

Chiyo: O-oh! [awkwardly pats her] It’s no problem, really!

Boy: [sighs] That’s a relief. Thanks, um…

Chiyo: Chiyo Kumoshita. SHSL Cellphone Novelist.

Khalaf: I’m Amal Khalaf, SHSL Journalist. Even though I did nothing here.
Boy: It’s alright, more than what I could do. We appreciate it. Thanks.

Shionaga: Kanemori Shionaga, by the way. SHSL Football Player.

[ KANEMORI SHIONAGA || SHSL FOOTBALL PLAYER ]

Immediately after introducing himself, Shionaga winces apologetically.

Shionaga: I know, I know, the Kanemori Shionaga. It’s nothing to me, really.

Khalaf: Quite honestly, I haven’t heard of you before.

Shionaga: [shrugs] Fair enough. I haven’t heard of either of you before, either. Or any of the other students here.

Chiyo: But you’re famous, right? You’re an athlete, and a football player, no less.
Shionaga: Eheh, yeah… [scratches scar] I’m the youngest player on Japan’s national team, but it’s more of an honorary position than anything.

Chiyo: Woooah. That’s really cool! [pats Sumitama] Sumitama-san, what do you do?

Sumitama: [muffled] Study.

Khalaf: And…?

Sumitama: [muffled] All I really do is study. I’m very boring.

Shionaga: No, you’re not. What about gardening?

Sumitama lifts herself off of my side and sits back. She pushes hair out of her face and sighs.

Sumitama: I guess… [perks up] Have you two seen the atrium yet? If we get the time, I want to plant some flowers!

Shionaga: See, that’s pretty neat! You’re a cool person, Sumitama-chan.

Sumitama: If you say so, geheh…

Khalaf: So what are you two doing in the library?

Shionaga: I kind of figured, if she’s an honors student, maybe books would help calm her down.

Shionaga places an arm around Sumitama’s shoulders reassuringly - she stiffens a little at the contact, but quickly relaxes into the touch. For his part, Shionaga continues the conversation, as if nothing had happened. Clearly, they’re already closer than anyone else here. Maybe they knew each other before?
Sumitama: I appreciate it, thanks.

Shionaga: No problem!

**He flashes a victory sign and turns to Khalaf and myself.**

Shionaga: I think we’re going to be in here for a while, if you need us. But seriously, thanks so much for helping out.

Chiyo: Anytime! Take care, you two!

Sumitama: Bye!

**We leave them be and head back out into the hallway. Before we move forward again, Khalaf tugs at my bag, and I pause in my step.**

Chiyo: What’s wrong?

Khalaf: I wanted to say, before we went any further. Thanks for handling that so well. That was really kind of you.

Chiyo: Oh, it’s nothing. Anyone would do the same.

Khalaf: No, not just anyone. I wouldn’t have.

**They pull their hat down quickly after making the statement, as if to disguise their blush.**

Khalaf: So, um. I really respect that. Thank you.
Judging from their reaction, I don’t think that these are words that Khalaf says very often. But really, it’s nothing - it’s just ordinary kindness. In any other situation, I'd argue this point and defer, but now I just smile warmly.

Chiyo: You’re welcome.

They don’t respond, but a smile - a real smile, not the weird mock-neutral twist they’ve been doing up until this point - tugs at their mouth.

Khalaf: Come on, let’s keep going. You can lead.

Chiyo: No, we’ll go together!


We continue down the hallway, side by side.

The second bedroom hallway is extremely similar to the first; if not for the fact that we just left the first hallway, I would assume this is the same one. Not even the paintings look any different.

Before we walk much further, however, Khalaf nearly collides head-on with someone walking out of one of the rooms. The person adjusts the white-and-red mask on their face, scrutinizes us both, and then turns to leave.

???: Sorry.

Chiyo: Hey-
Don’t bother talking to me. I don’t have anything useful to say.

Khalaf: How about your name?

That’s not all that useful either, to be honest. But fair enough.

Harai: Tatsumaru Harai. SHSL Kabuki Actor.

Wow. They’re... pretty blunt. Unlike with Ekyou, I feel like Harai might genuinely dislike us, even though we’ve just met. Or maybe they’re just harried...?

Chiyo: Kabuki? Aren’t masks from Noh theatre?

Harai: I’m well aware. I’d just... prefer not to be recognized off the stage.
Khalaf: You wouldn’t be recognized. None of us in this building know each other for some reason, no matter how adjacent our hobbies and talents are.

Harai: …

Harai runs their fingers along the edge of their mask, almost subconsciously.

Harai: I’m not worried about the people in this building. Speaking of, who are you two?

Khalaf and I quickly introduce ourselves. Harai doesn’t respond for a long moment, rubbing at their face under the mask again. I catch a glimpse of something red on their cheek, but they let the mask snap back in place before I can really look at it.

Harai: I wouldn’t suppose either of you have any information about our situation.

Khalaf: No. Do you?

Harai: I thought not. No one claims they know anything about the building or the other people in it.

They totally ignored the latter half of Khalaf’s question…

Harai: Well, with some exception. You’re not totally correct in your assumption that none of us know each other.

Chiyo: Such as?

Harai: You’ll find out. If you haven’t already.

Khalaf: So what are you doing here?
Harai: Checking on my room. Khalaf-shi, your room is next to mine, by the way.

Khalaf: Right. Thank you.

Harai: You’re welcome.

For some reason, Khalaf doesn’t seem all that pleased by the news, though if Harai can tell, they don’t show it. They move so little that if I didn’t know better, I would probably mistake them for a statue. The mask really isn’t helping - both with helping my impression of them as a statue and for judging their feelings about anything.

Perhaps sensing a potential end to the conversation, Harai speaks again, not unkindly.

Harai: You’d better go. There are more interesting people to talk to.

Khalaf: You seem pretty interesting yourself-

Harai: Go.

Khalaf: Alright. If you’re sure.

Harai moves aside for us to go forward, but I pause for a moment.

Chiyo: Harai-san… I don’t mean to be rude, but what are you going to do once we leave?

Harai: I don’t know. Explore, probably.

Chiyo: Then would you like to come with us? You seem kind of lonely.
Khalaf looks at me as if I’ve grown a second head, but Harai seems to seriously ponder this. There’s an audible inhale as they hesitate on the reply.

Harai: I…

They shake their head, the moment gone. When they speak again, their tone is blunt.

Harai: No. I’m fine.

Chiyo: Are you sure? We-

Harai: I said I’m fine.

With that, they brush past Khalaf and me as if we weren’t even there. In seconds, they’ve turned the corner towards the atrium. I wave, somewhat belatedly.

Chiyo: Bye?

???: Oh, sweetie, save your kindness.

I turn to see two people walking towards us, a boy with a patched red jacket and heavy-looking gloves and a girl with elegant spectacles and… woah, that’s a LOT of jewelry. Both look a bit like they’ve walked out of a light steampunk novel.

The girl extends her hand to me and introduces herself with a confident air.


[ TIANA MURDOCK || SHSL WATCHMAKER ]
Khalaf and I introduce ourselves and each shake hands with Murdock, though Khalaf takes her hand gingerly. She waits patiently for them to finish before speaking again.

Murdock: I’m afraid Harai-san seems to be… difficult to socialize with. They were like that when we tried to talk to them as well. I’m sure they’ll warm up to the rest of us as we get to know each other.

Khalaf: You speak as if you know them.

Murdock: Oh, no, but it’s just… [waves hand dismissively] They have that sort of aura around them, you know. They just don’t seem friendly. Though I would hate to make generalizations. I’m sure they appreciated your offer, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: Yeah, I guess so…

I bite my lip. They seemed poised to accept the offer, but they seemed to reject it at the last moment. Maybe they really are just lonely.
Murdock leans forward, a gleam in her eye.

Murdock: So tell me about yourselves! What makes you tick, and why you wake up in the morning. Or your greatest, deepest fears. Either or, both are fine.

Murdock: All anyone’s been talking about is their talent, it’s really quite dull. I like to think that we’re more than our skills. We’re people, after all.

We just met not five minutes ago, and already Murdock wants to talk as if we’ve known each other for years. I’ll admit, the familiarity with which she treats people is refreshing after some of our previous encounters, but is there such a thing as too much??

Chiyo: U-uh??

Murdock: [hums] That’s not quite the response I was expecting. I’m just asking for a little in-depth conversation, that’s not too much to ask for. Wouldn’t you agree, Valdez?

The boy, Valdez, looks up quickly and shoves the metal bits he was fiddling with back into his toolbelt. He picks at his gloves for a second before responding.

Valdez: U-um, yes, Murdock-san. As in, no it’s not. Although you might be scaring them both with that kind of talk. You’ve only just met them.

Murdock: [frowns] I’ve never been one to, as they say, make small talk on the first date.

Valdez: Yeah, like that. That’s, um, kind of intimidating. Sorry.

Murdock: … [sighs] Don’t be sorry. It was my error.

She doesn’t look too happy about the correction, but she turns to Khalaf and me and bows slightly.
Murdock: Apologies for that.

Khalaf: [nods] It’s fine, I understand what you mean.

Murdock: Is that so?

Khalaf: At least, I think so. These days, it feels as if too many people are preoccupied with small details. The world isn’t affected by such trivial things as ice cream flavors or favorite movies.

Valdez: Actually, a case could be argued either way, with how overwhelming life is already -

Murdock: [snaps fingers] That’s exactly what I’m getting at! Khalaf-san, I feel we’ll get along well.

Khalaf: I’m glad to hear.

Valdez: … Um. Alright.

Though Murdock just talked over Valdez, he shrugs it off quickly. He’s pulling more scraps out of his toolbelt before Murdock notices and intervenes.

Murdock: [to Valdez] See, they’re not scared.

Valdez: I don’t know. Kumoshita-san looks pretty out of it.

Chiyo: What? Me?? Ehehe, no, I’m fine!!

I expect a lecture, but Murdock just laughs. She waves a hand at Valdez.
Murdock: Why don’t you introduce yourself, then? To make her feel more comfortable.

Valdez: I guess that’s a good idea, yeah.

Murdock: I know.

Valdez: I’m Brendan Valdez, the SHSL Mechanical Engineer. And, um, contrary to how Murdock-san acts, I only just met her.

[ BRENDAN VALDEZ || SHSL MECHANICAL ENGINEER ]

Chiyo: I was wondering about that, actually. Why do you drop honorifics for Valdez-san, if you don’t mind me asking?


Valdez: [mumbles] I did.
Murdock: But you don’t mind, Valdez, do you? After all, you’re from America as well.

Valdez: I guess not. It just makes more sense to use honorifics for the language. [mumbles again] Plus, you don’t do that for anyone else… Except McRae-san, I guess.

Murdock: What was that last part?

Valdez: Nothing.

Khalaf: McRae-san?

Murdock: My cousin. Tristan. He’s in the living room, if you’d like to talk to him.

Khalaf: He’s one of the people we haven’t met yet, so I think we will soon.

Chiyo: We might as well go now. I think we’ve met almost everyone.

Khalaf seems poised to argue - in fact, I’m expecting them to, with how well they seem to get along with Murdock. To my surprise, though, they nod sharply and defer.

Khalaf: Yeah, might as well. [to Murdock and Valdez] So if you’ll excuse us...

Murdock: What? Leaving so soon?

Khalaf: We still have a lot to see.

Chiyo: It was nice to meet you, though!

Murdock: Likewise. If you need either of us, we’ll be here.
Valdez: See you around!

As we walk past Murdock, Valdez catches my eye and mouths something that looks like “please send help”. I smile apologetically at him, but honestly I’m just relieved I’m not the only one put off by Murdock’s behavior. Khalaf, though, seems refreshed by the exchange.

Chiyo: What did you think of them?

Khalaf: They seem nice enough. Murdock seems efficient, and I think we’ll get along.

Chiyo: … Mm…

Khalaf: Are you okay?

Chiyo: Huh? Yeah, I’m fine.

They side-eye me for a moment, trying to gauge my expression, before brushing it off and moving on.

Khalaf: If you’re sure.

We reach the end of the hallway and walk into the living room. It’s not so much a living room as a living dome - it’s far bigger than any of the other rooms we’ve been in previously. Huge windows stretch from floor to ceiling, overlooking an expanse of what appears right now to be fog, as Kashizaki mentioned earlier. Scattered across the space are several couches and tables, almost as if this were a business lounge instead of a living room. Indeed, it’s incredibly formal, with the same white-and-grey color scheme as the rest of the building.

The main attraction in the room, however, is a huge column in the center of the room made of carefully placed brickwork - and the crackling fireplace within. Though it may have made any other space feel homely, here it just emphasizes the starkness of the rest of the room.
Directly in front of us, behind the column, is another corridor, and to my right is a door to a closed-off space. On the door is a pair of utensil cutouts. The kitchen, presumably.

Two boys sit on the couches - one with a sweater and vest with a green ribbon holding his hair back, and another with an actual sweater vest and brown tuxedo jacket sprawled across two or three whole seat cushions. A third boy with a green headset and hoodie sits a distance back, drawing something on his hand with a pen. The two sitting closer together seem easier to talk to, so I approach them first.

Ribbon: So I don’t know, I just think it’s sort of weird that we’re all here. I mean, what are the odds of that? Sixteen students, all attending Hope’s Peak. An entire class. And I think we’re all the same age, so we’re in the same class. Y’know?

Tuxedo: Meh.

Ribbon: I, for one, think it’s a prank. I mean, there’s no way anything could actually happen to us. We’re “the future of humanity” or whatever it is people keep saying about us. Our teacher’s probably going to show up any minute now and bail us out.

Tuxedo: Mm.

Ribbon: Yeah, you’re right. I don’t think anyone would go through the trouble of putting us all in a mansion in the middle of nowhere just for a prank. Maybe it’s like, really intensive worst-case scenario training. Though that makes no sense because of the accommodations. [eyes widen] Or a camp! Yeah, a camp where we have to live together on our own and bond with our new classmates! That’s gotta be it.

Tuxedo: Why don’t you bond with these new people who just showed up.

Ribbon: Oh. [looks over] Yeah, I guess.

He turns to Khalaf and me and shrugs, a victim of Tuxedo’s callousness. He doesn’t seem too put-out by the dismissal, though.

Ribbon: Hello.
Khalaf: Hi. Amal Khalaf, SHSL Journalist.

Chiyo: And I’m Chiyo Kumoshita! SHSL Cellphone Novelist!

Ribbon acknowledges both of our introductions with a nod and brushes back his hair. He sits up straight when listening to us, though Tuxedo retains his terrible posture and total disregard for whatever Ribbon does.

Atsui: Ryouji Atsui, SHSL Caterer. And this here is-

Tuxedo: I can introduce myself, thank you very much.

Atsui doesn’t seem too concerned with Tuxedo’s attitude, merely shrugging and accepting his snappiness. If only I were that patient. I wish I were that patient. Maybe I should ask Atsui
Khalaf: Catering? Catering what?

Atsui: High schoolers. [grimaces] Apparently I’m hip with the times and I charge low prices, so most of my jobs are for high school parties or individual meals. Sometimes I just help my family cook things and I do the bulk of their work when they get large orders.

Khalaf: Your family cooks, too?

Atsui: Oh, yeah. Everyone - literally everyone - in my extended family either cooks or has cooked for a living at some point. It’s very intimidating, but hey, I’m happy to carry the torch.

Chiyo: Woah. I almost blew up a microwave once.

Atsui: Don’t worry, I’ve done the same several times. And then actually did blow it up once.

**The boy with the headset from the other couch speaks up, evidently paying more attention to the conversation than even Tuxedo.**

Headset: Was it everything you thought it would be?

Atsui: So much more. I had to wash dishes for a month.

**Headset doesn’t seem too impressed, going back to doodling as if nothing happened.**

Headset: Huh.

Chiyo: So who are you two?

Tuxedo: If I tell you, will you leave?
Khalaf: Going to be honest, probably not. We’re having conversations with the other people here.

Tuxedo: Ugh, fine.

Sekisada: SHSL Seat Filler. Sentarou Sekisada. Yes, I know that sounds fake. It’s a real thing, and I’m the best of our age, whatever. Don’t ask.

Like Sekisada implied, I don’t really know what a seat filler is, but I don’t want to look dumb by asking. Fortunately, I don’t have to.

Atsui: [brightly] So what’s a seat filler?

Sekisada: I hate you.
Sekisada sighs and turns to Khalaf and me. Behind his back, Atsui pulls a face, but if Sekisada noticed, he probably doesn’t care. Sekisada puts on a mocking singsong that sounds sort of like a kids’ show that’s trying to teach about colors.

He really hates us, huh.

Sekisada: You know how on TV challenge shows and stuff, how the studio is always full of adoring people who applaud wildly for whatever stupid thing happens?

Chiyo: Oh, yeah! I always wondered how they pick people to watch those.

Sekisada: [normal voice] They don’t. They hire people to fill seats and sit there for hours at a time to spectate and feign interest. I’m one of those people and I can tell you now that it sucks ass, don’t ever do it.

Chiyo: …

He really hates everything, huh.

Khalaf: … Well then.

Sekisada: That’s what I thought.

Khalaf: Why do you do it if you hate it so much?

Sekisada: Money. It’s not a lot of money, but I’m so useless that I can’t pick up anything else, so I fill seats. Call me superficial.

Atsui: You don’t have to be good at something to do it, especially if you’re a high school student. I’m sure you could find employment, or just, y’know, do something else you actually want to do.
Sekisada: Don’t know. Don’t care.

I kind of feel bad for Atsui - maybe that’s why I finally speak up to Sekisada.

Chiyo: That’s, uh, not a very positive outlook to have…

Sekisada: So what? Life isn’t positive.

Chiyo: I guess, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have to be.

Sekisada: Mm.

It doesn’t seem like he’s listening, anyway. So much for that.

I turn to Headset, who’s still doodling on his own hand.

Chiyo: What are you drawing?

Headset: Uh…

He holds up his hand, which he’s drawn on until it resembles intricate armor. Upon showing it to me, he immediately goes back to work.

Chiyo: Wow, that’s really cool! What’s it for?

Headset: Thanks. It’s just something I’m working on.

Chiyo: Like…?
Headset: Video game concept. I’ve been stuck on ideas lately. I’m thinking about making a battle system based on ink, so you can draw your own armor and then give it various spells and buffs to actually increase its power. The more you draw in the system, the more spells become available to you. So in theory, you would be able to become a better artist just through playing the game frequently… Or, you could make armor out of really lewd shapes. Basically, it functions as both a party game and a serious quest.

Chiyo: … Wow!

The amount of words that just came out of his mouth is even MORE impressive than both the art or his game concept, considering how disinterested he was in everything just a moment before. And his expertise in the subject must mean…

Chiyo: So you’re a game designer or something?

Headset: [nods] The SHSL, in fact.

McRae: I’m Tristan McRae, the SHSL Video Game Designer. If you met Tiana already, she’s my cousin.

[ TRISTAN MCRAE || SHSL VIDEO GAME DESIGNER ]
Khalaf: And that’s everyone.

Chiyo: Wait, really?

Khalaf… Bates… Chisaki, Everett, Bazhanov… Kashizaki and Ekyou, Shionaga and Sumitama… Harai, Murdock, Valdez… Then Atsui, Sekisada, and then McRae. That’s only fifteen.

… Wait, I forgot to count myself! That makes sixteen.

Chiyo: I think you’re right, actually!

Atsui: [whistles] Dang. You might be the only ones who actively went to go find everyone else.

Sekisada: Congratulations. You get a prize.
Khalaf: Seriously?

Sekisada: Yeah. The prize is “you can stop talking to me now”. I know, I know, don’t get too excited.

McRae: I’m never excited.

Sekisada: Unless it’s about video games, apparently.

McRae: [shrugs] You got me.

Atsui: McRae-san, you should probably stop drawing on your hand. You can get ink poisoning.

McRae: Fair enough.

He proceeds to keep drawing, having apparently completely ignored what Atsui just said. Atsui gives him a strange look and decides to act as if the exchange didn’t happen.

Atsui: So what are you guys up to?

Chiyo: Now that we’ve met everyone… I’m not all that sure.

Khalaf: I guess we can always go check on our rooms like people have been telling us to do.

Atsui: Oh, eugh. They’re just rooms.

Khalaf: [stiffly] I need to make sure I have everything I need.

Chiyo: Same here. There’s some things I’m curious about.
Atsui: Alright, that’s a good point. But I’m just telling you upfront, they’re pretty boring rooms. I don’t get why people are making such a fuss about them.

Sekisada: Because if they’re sensible people, for example myself, they’ll be spending a lot of time in their room ignoring everyone else.

McRae: Why don’t you go do that now, then?

Sekisada: Finally, a reasonable idea from you people. [stands up] Took you long enough.

As soon as he takes a step toward the door, though, the sound of microphone static punches through the air. All five of us look up in alarm. A pair of eerie, almost autotuned-sounding voices come on over the intercom, one soft and one harsh.


Harsh: Judging from all of your reactions, you can definitely hear us, heheheh. Nice going, you in the library.

Soft: I’m sure you all have questions.

Harsh: Ones we’re not gonna answer.

Soft: M… Maybe so. Still.

Soft: Everyone, please report to the living room within the next ten minutes! That should be plenty of time to reach it, no matter where you are in the building. Don’t be late. You don’t want to be late.

Harsh: And since this is the only way we’re going to get some of you over here…

The harsh voice pauses, then continues sardonically.
Harsh: *There will be birds.*

Soft: So, um, see you in ten minutes! We can’t wait to meet you all, kuhuhu.

*Though the soft voice may have meant to sound reassuring, their statement just makes the two seem more ominous than ever. The intercom - wherever it is - shuts off with another screech of static. Sekisada sits back down, rather abruptly, and resumes his slouched posture.*

Sekisada: God, I *really* hate everything going on today.

Atsui: You and me both.

Sekisada: Don’t talk to me.

*Without another word, Atsui nods and falls silent.*

*From then, we sit in silence, waiting for the rest of the class to arrive.*

And waiting, perhaps, for answers as well.
Chapter Summary

Questions are answered, while others are raised.

It doesn’t take long for people to trickle in - definitely not all of the 10 minutes that were allotted to us. Murdock walks in first, immediately taking a seat next to McRae. She idly ruffles his hair as he continues to draw. Valdez follows her, but ultimately perches a distance away from the two. No one speaks until Chisaki bounds in, dragging both Kashizaki and Ekyou close behind.

Chisaki: Hey hey! We came as fast as we could!

Ekyou: By which she means not actually that fast. Half of you are here already.

Murdock: [stands] Welcome! Make yourselves at home.

Chisaki: Haha, nice! Now I’m authorized to set something on fire! Thanks a ton, Murdock-chan!!

The blood swiftly drains from Murdock’s expression and her expression stiffens into something resembling concealed horror. I feel kind of bad for her, doubly so considering Chisaki’s response - she cackles when she sees the look on Murdock’s face and crashes down next to her. The couch visibly buckles, leading Murdock to wince and move slightly away from Chisaki. If Chisaki notices, she doesn’t acknowledge it.

Chisaki: I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Geez, Murdock-chan, you’re acting like I just killed someone.

Murdock: [stiffly] It’s Murdock- san. And don’t speak so lightly. For all I know, you very well may have.

Chisaki: Oh, c’mon, it was a joke. What’s a little arson between friends, right?
Valdez: … Still arson.

Ekyou: Burning things together can be pretty therapeutic.

**Burning things?! Murder?!** These classmates are a lot more violent than I anticipated. Valdez gives Ekyou a weird look, but invites her to take a seat on the couch anyway, which she accepts. Kashizaki, on the other hand, remains standing, but she drifts over to where Atsui, Sekisada, Khalaf, and I are. She nods to Khalaf and me in greeting, them turns her attention to Atsui and Sekisada.

Kashizaki: Ririka Kashizaki. Pleased to meet you.

Atsui: Ryouji Atsui, likewise.

Sekisada: I’m-

Kashizaki: [wrinkles nose] Eugh, not you. Ekyou-san told me about you. Keep your whining to yourself.

Eyes widening for a fraction of a second, Sekisada shrugs and stays quiet. I may have only known her for about an hour, but I already have so much respect for Kashizaki because of this one singular action. If only the rest of us had that kind of authority over Sekisada.

**Kashizaki nods in satisfaction, then turns to the rest of us.**

Kashizaki: What were you guys doing before the announcement, anyway?

Sekisada: Sitting here.

Atsui: Awkwardly.

Sekisada: Only because of Atsui-san.
Kashizaki: [ignores that] Nice. I’ll join you.

She delicately takes a seat next to Atsui on the couch just as Everett enters the room, shortly followed by Bazhanov. Everett immediately gravitates to Chisaki, while Bazhanov hovers awkwardly by the side of McRae’s couch.

Chisaki: Rett-chan! You’ve returned!!

**Murdock looks up in surprise when Everett walks in, but just as quickly recovers and offers a hand in greeting.**


Everett: Aster Everett. SHSL… Chisaki-san, what did you say it was again?

Chisaki: Oh!! Yeah!! She’s the SHSL ???.

Murdock: [blinks] Um…

Everett: Yeah, that. [smiles at Chisaki] Thanks.

Chisaki: No problem!

Everett: [to Murdock] I don’t remember my talent. So we’re using whatever it is that just came out of Chisaki-san’s mouth as a placeholder.

Murdock: That’s… lovely. I’m sorry to hear about your talent, though.

Everett: [shrugs] It’s whatever. I don’t know why people are making such a big deal about it.
Murdock: Hm. Do you like philosophy?

Next thing I know, the two are going off - something about Plato and caves. I sigh. At least they’re getting along okay. It’s good that there isn’t too much conflict in the class, save for whatever’s going on between Sekisada and Atsui… or, maybe more accurately, Sekisada and the rest of the world.

Across the room, Bazhanov seems to be looking over at McRae, who’s still drawing despite Atsui’s concern. Neither of them seem to be talking, which seems to suit them both just fine. Valdez watches them without a word while Ekyou folds her arms and closes her eyes.

She opens them when Sumitama and Shionaga walk in with Bates, though Bates seems more like a third wheel to Sumitama and Shionaga’s back-and-forth conversation.

Shionaga: See, that’s the rest of the class. They’re not that bad!

Sumitama: I don’t know, I’d rather just stay here with you.

Shionaga: Go! Make friends!

Bates: He’s totally right! A girl as cute as you can’t just stay with one person all the time. You need to put yourself out there!

Sumitama: [blushes] O-oh! Thank you, and I’ll try! I’m just really worried that no one will like me, I’m quite dull.

Shionaga: I can go with you if you want!

Bates: Same here!

Sumitama: Bates-san-
Sumitama: Claude-san, I really appreciate the offer, but I’d rather stick with Shionaga-san for the time being.

Instead of getting or even looking offended, Bates shrugs it off and flashes a pointed grin. Shionaga instinctively steps a bit closer to Sumitama at the confession, but Bates just waves it off.

Bates: No worries! Plenty of other people to hang out with, ahaha. Take care, okay?

Without waiting for a reply, he disengages from the pair and joins the cluster I’m at. He turns to face Khalaf and me and smiles again, this time seeming almost apologetic.

Bates: Hiya! I know we met when you just woke up.

Chiyo: Oh! U-um, yeah, we did.

Sekisada: At last. She speaks.

I’m going to ignore that. So does Bates, which I appreciate.

Bates: And like, I realize this is suuuper dumb of me, but I don’t think I ever got your names! So who are you two?

Chiyo: I’m Chiyo Kumoshita, SHSL Cellphone Novelist! And this is…

I wait for Khalaf to respond, but they don’t seem at all inclined to. By which I mean they’re glaring at Bates with the force of a thousand suns, which he in turn is coldly grinning back at.

These two are going to worry me to death.
Chiyo: … This is Amal Khalaf! SHSL Journalist.

Bates: It’s nice to meet you, Kumoshita-chan! You don’t mind if I call you that, do you?

Chiyo: Huh?! I guess not…

Khalaf: [incredulous] Are you serious?

Chiyo: I mean…

On the one hand, it’s a little offensive that Bates feels that he’s comfortable enough to use such honorifics casually. Chisaki does it too, but she’s much more casual and evidently doesn’t mean anything by it. Same with Bazhanov, since he addresses everyone by first names, seemingly whether they like it or not. Which is also kind of off-putting, admittedly.

But then honorifics can be kind of controlling, too. Although Valdez and Murdock are both foreigners, even Valdez noted the power imbalance in her dropping his honorific. It’s sort of a faux intimacy.

… Yet on the other hand, boy does it feel validating to be called -chan.

Oh, why am I even overthinking this?! It’s just an honorific!! It really doesn’t mean anything!!!

Chiyo: Yes, I’m serious. Why wouldn’t I be?


I glance quickly at Khalaf, whose shoulders drop with the acquiescence. Other than that, they don’t react at all. At least they’re not going for Bates’ throat.
Kashizaki: Mhm. Don’t you think it’s getting a little crowded in this particular area?

Sekisada: You can always leave.

Bates: Ah, there’s no need for that. I wanted to go and talk to some other people, anyway.

Sekisada: Do you really.

Bates: Ahaha… I don’t know! Maybe!

**He stands up anyway and saunters off without so much as a good-bye. Sekisada rolls his eyes.**

Sekisada: Even when they have the potential to be interesting people, they go and fuck it up.

Atsui: Haven’t you met Harai-san yet?

Sekisada: They’re no exception. They’re far too standoffish to hold a conversation with any real meaning. Hence, fucked it up.

Kashizaki: [mutters] Hypocrite, much?

**Atsui wordlessly offers her a high-five. Sekisada doesn’t seem all that bothered that they seem to be bonding over their mutual hatred of him; he just rolls his eyes again.**

**In all the movement, Khalaf remains still, frowning slightly. The exchange with Bates must have bothered them more than they want to admit…**

Chiyo: You okay?
Khalaf: Hm? [shakes head] I’m alright. Thanks.

They don’t seem all that settled, but they move on quickly and survey the room.

Khalaf: It looks like everyone is here, right? So when do we get answers? Or do we have to wait all ten minutes?

Chiyo: I don’t know… I feel like we’re missing someone.

Khalaf: No…? I counted fifteen, and then including myself… [eyes narrow] Wait. I think I counted myself in the fifteen.

I scan the room myself, mentally tallying everyone up. Khalaf is right - there’s only fifteen of us in the room. So then that leaves…

Right on cue, Harai slips into the room. They quickly move to the back so as to avoid attention, but their quick movement draws people’s eyes anyway.

Chisaki: Hey, who’s that?

Valdez: Oh, Harai-san! Welcome back! ...Sort of.

Kashizaki: Harai-san…? I don’t believe we’ve met.

Shionaga: Hey-

Harai: Please leave me alone.

Although their posture doesn’t change, their voice sounds strained - panicked, even. It’s evident that they don’t want to be here, even more so that they don’t want the attention their late arrival has brought. They probably didn’t want to be with other people when they came in, but they also don’t seem to have anticipated this amount of attention. The least I can do is
offer them a way out, so...

Chiyo: Do you want to sit down?

Harai: No.

Without a further word, they spin on their heel and walk to the back of the room. As they pass by the couch I’m sitting on, their gait seems to falter, but it picks up again until they’re stationed by the back, arms folded. People continue to stare at them, but they don’t react further - perfect timing for Murdock to stand up and clap her hands loudly, drawing all eyes back to her.

Murdock: [loudly] Alright, everyone. Now that we’re all here, let’s go around the room and introduce ourselves. We can start putting together what we know after.

The introductions are slow, at first, but eventually the pace picks up. I hurriedly introduce Harai after I introduce myself, to save them the agony of being focused on yet again. People look at me oddly, but it’s better that I stand out than them… right? Right.

After the introductions, Murdock nods sharply to herself and continues talking. Even though she’s kind of strident, I have to admit she’s pretty good at taking control of the situation.

Murdock: It’s a pleasure to meet you all, and I look forward to whatever relationships we may develop here. First things first. [adjusts glasses] As you all know, we woke up in this building-

Kashizaki: Mansion.

Murdock: [pauses] Excuse me?

Kashizaki: It’s pretty obviously a mansion. If you haven’t guessed already.

Murdock narrows her eyes, in that moment a jaguar deciding how best to gut her prey. Before I can think to worry about Kashizaki’s reaction, the moment passes and Murdock
Murdock: We woke up in this *mansion*, then, with no knowledge of how we got here. We don’t know where this mansion is situated, nor who our captors are or could possibly be.

Murdock: Furthermore, we all seem to be students poised to enter Hope’s Peak Academy, with each of us having a Super High School Level talent… or, in theory, anyway.

Everett: You got me there.

Murdock: Clearly, there’s something significant in our being gathered here today. And, perhaps, something sinister. Now, I apologize in advance for the bluntness of what I’m about to say, but before we go any further, I’d like everyone to answer this honestly.

Murdock: *Does anyone know anything about this situation?*

**Silence reigns after her question, as if the living room were a classroom. Murdock’s careful grin becomes somewhat strained.**

Murdock: Please. This is vital to our well-being, and possibly even our survivals. If anyone knows anything, now’s the time to speak up.

Sekisada: I don’t know anything. But if I were to guess, and I’m just saying, Harai-shi looks incredibly suspicious.

**All eyes, once again, turn back to Harai.**

Harai: What.

Valdez: I agree. What?

Murdock: Valdez?
Valdez: No, no, really. If they actually have anything to do with this, wouldn’t it be a bad idea for them to stand out so much?

Shionaga: Are you siding with them?

Valdez: N-not necessarily, no. [pulls at gloves] But I’m just saying, maybe we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. And, um, maybe we should-

Murdock: Valdez. Evidence clearly points to the contrary, although I’m sure Harai-san is very flattered by your defense.

Shionaga: I agree with Murdock-chan. They’re pretty sketchy.

Atsui: Yeah. Sorry, Harai-san, but you seem pretty weird and you’re not doing much to defend yourself.

Harai: I’m not part of whatever’s going on.

Bates: Technically, aren’t we all part of whatever’s going on? Technically speaking. Because we’re all in this mansion.

McRae: Not helping.

Harai: It’s like what Valdez-shi said. Do I even LOOK like the kind of person who would run something on this scale?

Bates: Lowkey yeah.

Harai: Well, there you go. Why would I intentionally look so suspicious if I were really behind all of this?
Sumitama: If I may? Harai-san, it’s possible that it’s a reverse psychology trick in which you make yourself look so obviously special that it deflects suspicion.

Ekyou: I don’t think we should be throwing around accusations so quickly. “They look suspicious” isn’t a basis for their being the puppetmaster.

Chisaki: Well, we’re not getting anything else done just sitting around here! We need to start figuring everything out, and we might as well start here! Who cares if Harai-san’s the puppetmaster or not, we gotta do SOMETHING.

Shionaga: But they probably are, aren’t they?

I should speak up. There’s no reason I shouldn’t speak up. But…

My mouth feels glued shut, and all I can do is watch one person give input, then another. No one seems inclined to believe Harai, no matter what they say. And, admittedly, the arguments against them are questionable at best. Ekyou’s right - if any one of us had been the last one into the room and as standoffish as Harai is, then they - whoever it is - would surely have been vilified just as quickly, and I should say that. There’s nothing stopping me. Nothing. And yet…

Before I can say anything, Everett speaks up in a loud, clear voice, cutting through the rest of the conversation.

Everett: I think we should ask them ourselves.

Sekisada: They’re obviously going to say-

Abruptly, Sekisada stops talking. He glances at Everett’s serene expression, then continues in a gentler tone.

Sekisada: Sorry for the tone. They’re obviously going to say no.
Wait, Sekisada can be nice sometimes?! Evidently, Everett has some skills the rest of us know nothing about. If this is out of the ordinary for her, she doesn’t comment on it and simply turns to Harai.

Everett: Harai-san, what do you think?

Harai: [quickly] I’m not- I’m just *not*, okay?

They run their fingers across their mask, and for a second it looks like they’re about to pull it off in frustration. Instead, they settle for balling their hands into fists, looking as if they’re going to run away at any moment.

Harai: I’m just as confused as you are. I don’t know how to make you stop believing that I’m the villain or anything like that. You all seem intent on misjudging me, and I don’t understand why, of everyone, you chose me to latch onto.

Harai: So I’m not. Just trust me.

Murdock stares at them for a moment, then shakes her head, closing her eyes.

Murdock: I’m afraid we can’t accept that.

Harai: …

Murdock: If we’ve reached our consensus, we can start preparing an interrogation…?

A voice cuts through the air - one so obviously other that the commotion rippling in the room stops.

Bazhanov: Excuse me.

Bazhanov, who hasn’t moved an inch since he took his place next to McRae’s couch, politely
clears his throat and repeats himself.

Bazhanov: Excuse me. Tiana.


Bazhanov: Noted and ignored. Forgive my bluntness.

Murdock: Gh-?!

Bazhanov: You resemble neither voice on the intercom… and you’re not a bird. What kind of authority do you hold over us? Why are YOU in charge?

Bazhanov: For that matter, where are the ones who summoned us here in the first place?

Actually, that’s a good point. It’s definitely been well past the ten minutes that we had to assemble, and neither voice has been present in the entire discussion. And what was that said about birds, anyway?

For once, everyone is silent, contemplating the gravity of what Bazhanov just said. No one else seems to notice when something shifts in the light and a weight settles on the couch next to me. When I look over, Harai sits next to me as if they had never stood at all.

The silence doesn’t last for long, though, when that same harsh voice cuts through the air. Unlike last time, it’s not over the intercom - rather, the voices seem to be coming from nearby.

Harsh: Well, it took you kids long enough.

Soft: I wouldn’t be so callous. It’s been ten minutes on the dot. If anything, WE’RE the ones who are late, kuhuhu…
Murdock: [checks watch] It’s been twelve minutes. And thirty-four seconds. Thirty-five. Thirty-six.

Harsh: Kehehe?! So pedantic. Ariel, I told you we shouldn’t have kidnapped a watchmaker.

Ariel?: You know as well as I do that we had no say in the decision.

Harsh: Fair enough. I suppose the pedantic part is with no regard to the watchmaker part, anyway.

Murdock: Should I be offended?

Ariel?: Don’t worry. Caliban is, erm, how do you say…. “Just like that”.

Murdock: … I see.

Caliban?: Bah. For the record, we’re fashionably on time, thank you very much. We make the rules here.

Everett: Uh…

Khalaf: Who are you. And where.

Caliban?: Oh, how very rude of us. It seems we haven’t properly introduced ourselves. I suppose we have to rectify that.

A greyish blur flits near the column and hits the ground with a thud. Valdez yelps in surprise while McRae simply looks up at the blob that appears to have fallen out of the chimney. The chimney of the very much still on fire fireplace. The blob - one half white and one half black - picks itself up and separates into…

… As promised.
Two birds.

The white bird hops to its feet quickly and flits to the nearest couch, forcing Chisaki to make room. It settles quickly onto its perch and bows (?) to Chisaki. It seems to be modeled after a dove, though its white feathers are interfiled with ones in various shades of red and it wears a strange red halfmask on its right side. Blinking its slit eyes benignly, when it speaks, it’s clear that it was programmed with the softer voice.

Ariel?: Apologies, miss.

Chisaki: Oh, uh… no problem?

The black bird seems to have problems flying, and merely jumps onto Atsui’s couch. It hides its beak with one wing, which is outfitted with golden feathers the same way the other is fitted with red ones. Like the white bird, it wears a grey half mask, and weirdly enough, it has a hat. A very stylish hat, but... a hat??
Unlike the white bird, it wastes no time with apologies and immediately turns to the rest of the class, speaking with the same sardonic, grating voice that it used on the intercom.

Caliban: Welcome, one and all, to the fantastic Mansion Milan. I’m one of your lovely hosts, Caliban.

Ariel: And I’m Ariel! The, um, other one. I would say that I’m charmed, but I don’t feel you all would reciprocate.

Valdez: [wide-eyed] Whoa. Are you two completely autonomous and sapient?

Ariel: I suppose you could say that, kuhu.

Caliban: We’re not allowed to speak about it, dummy! [to Valdez] Maybe we are, maybe we aren’t. What’s it to you?

Valdez: Oh, nothing. But if you’re able to operate independently and make your own decisions about what actions to take, and if you’re able to use depth perception to not hit anything when you fly, the applications for those kinds of mechanisms are endless! It could be applied to self-driving cars, obviously, but also to drones that can decide what kind of path to take for irrigation or to spacecraft that can pick the most effective path with the least collisions… [reverent] I’d love to take one of you apart and see how you work.

Caliban: I’m flattered. I’ll have to pass.

Valdez: Of course, if this technology is to be replicated, I could do without the personalities.

Ariel: H-hey.

Sekisada: Forget the machinery, I don’t care. What I want to know is, what the hell kind of names are those? Ariel? Caliban? That’s dumb.

Caliban: And so’s YOUR name, so eat it! Really, now, your name is seven whole syllables!
McRae: [points to Bazhanov] His is eight.

Caliban: See! So don’t talk to me about stupid names. Talk to Ariel, he’d know.

Ariel: Hey!!


Ariel: Heavens, no! Have you any culture?


Khalaf: Stop being dumb.

Bates: You first!

Khalaf: You-

Sumitama: [interrupts] It’s Shakespeare, isn’t it? Ariel and Caliban are characters from *The Tempest*. That would explain Mansion Milan, too.

**Oh, that would make sense.** Not like I know anything about Shakespeare, considering that the one time we studied *Hamlet* in Literature, the translation was near-indecipherable… Still, that’s a pretty pretentious theme. And worrisome. At least I’m pretty sure *The Tempest* isn’t a tragedy, so maybe that’ll reflect in our situation.

Sekisada: Of course the nerd knows.

Sumitama: [turns up nose] I’m- I’m proud of it.
Caliban: And she’s right. Congratulations. Your prize is… some information, I suppose.

Sumitama: R-really?!

Caliban: I’m not happy about this, either.

Ariel: BUT, I’m sure this may help to make things clearer!

Caliban: We’re obligated to tell you this. This has nothing to do with my own wants.

As Caliban clears his (nonexistent??) throat, Ariel seems to roll his eyes. They’re a lot like an old married couple, if the couple seemed at once menacing and comical. So, like, the rich American dramas my brother shows me sometimes.

Caliban: As you may have noticed, each and every one of you has recently graduated from Hope’s Peak Academy. Well done on completing your curriculum. That’s no small feat.

I frown, and several others turn to look at each other similarly. Recently graduated? That can’t be right. I just got the letter a few months ago, I couldn’t possibly have graduated-

Ariel: For those of you wondering, you should all be eighteen right now!

My heart stops.

Ah.

Eighteen. I’m eighteen. If I had gotten my Hope’s Peak acceptance letter when I was fifteen, that means…. Three years of my life are gone. Three years of laughter, tears, and memories. Of triumphs, failures, personal growth. Three years of friendship with the people in the room with me…
And I can’t remember a thing.

Khalaf: Three whole years…? How come I can’t remember any of it?

Chiyo: We. How come we can’t remember any of it.

Caliban: Well, ain’t that the cinch. Just another mystery to explore in this mysterious, mysterious mansion.

Ariel: [hurriedly] Though, if you’re looking for a more immediate answer, your memories of that period were erased. For the sake of your situation.

Chisaki: You can do that?! Just erase someone’s memory?!

Bates: So like, that’s totally reassuring and not unsettling at all.

Ariel: [absently] Yes, we do our best.

Everett: Our situation? What does that have to do with anything?

Caliban: Well, I suppose that to talk about that would be to talk about Miss Glasses’ other fabulous prize.


Caliban: Your other prize, dearest, is that you get to stay here, in this mansion. Forever.

Ariel: I wouldn’t say “forever”, how about-

Caliban: The rest of your lives.
As if the revelation about the past three years wasn’t enough, Caliban’s statement weighs on the room like the thick fog on the countryside. It’s only broken by Sumitama’s voice - once eager and curious, now timid, edging on frightened.

Sumitama: … Excuse me?

Caliban: You heard me! Until further notice, there’s no way that any of you are leaving these grounds.

Ekyou: … That’s dumb.

Sekisada: For once, I agree with someone. That’s really dumb.

Atsui: No way? None? Really?

Chisaki: No way! There’s gotta be at least one way out of here!

There’s a flash of gold as Caliban turns his beady eyes towards Chisaki. He almost sounds like he’s smiling when he speaks again.

Caliban: Now that you mention it...

Ariel: You really don’t want to know.

Caliban: There is, in fact, a way to escape the grounds.

Ariel: [hastily] Though I don’t see why you’d want to. It’s fully furnished with all accommodations and good company!

Kashizaki: You’re making it out to sound so serious. It’s not murder.
Caliban: Well.

Caliban: You said it, not me.

...

Wait.

Wait wait wait wait no no no nonono-

Kashizaki: … WHAT?!

Shionaga: Y-you’re kidding?!

Sumitama: [hands over mouth] Oh my god...

Caliban: That’s right! In order to escape, you’ll have to kill one of your dear classmates!

Ariel: I told you, you wouldn’t like it. I’m sorry.

I’m going to be sick.


Sekisada: [bored] That’s it? That’s all we have to do to get out?

Bates: S-someone’s bloodthirsty. [laughs nervously]
Caliban: All the better for our little game here! But of course, it wouldn’t be that simple. After all, if it were, I’m sure someone would turn up dead as soon as dawn breaks tomorrow!

Atsui: [pale] Yeah, mental note to lock my door tonight.

Ekyou: [whispers] If you jiggle the lock, it unlocks.

Atsui: [grows paler] ...Mental note to barricade my room tonight.

Caliban: ‘Ey! I’m talking here!

Ariel: What he means is that… Kuu. I’m so sorry about this. All of this. None of you deserve it.

Valdez: Then what’s the point of doing it at all??

Ariel: … I can’t answer that. But it wasn’t my idea.

Khalaf: Thanks for nothing.

Caliban: I quite agree with the students. If you’re gonna steal my thunder about the killing game we have set up, at least act like you want to be here.

Ariel: At least I’m acting polite.

Caliban: [eyes flash] Get on with it.

Ariel: R-right...

Ariel: After a body has been discovered, a period of time will be allotted for the rest of the class to find evidence for the case. A trial will then be held to determine the identity of the killer - the blackened. At the conclusion of the trial, a class vote will be held to identify the killer.
Ariel: If the blackened fails to deceive the class, they will be executed.

Everett: As in, also killed.

Ariel: [bows head] An eye for an eye. After all, they did kill someone.

Chisaki: B-but that’s not fair all the time! What if the blackened killed someone on accident or something like that?

Ariel: My apologies, miss, but rules are rules.

Khalaf: So if the blackened is discovered, they’re executed. What happens if they aren’t?

Ariel: If the blackened succeeds…

Ariel doesn’t finish his statement.

Caliban: Then they walk free, obviously. The rest of the class will be executed in their stead.

This can’t be happening. This cannot be happening. I can’t- I can’t think, can’t form a coherent thought, save for one realization.

We’re going to die here. We’re all going to die here and no one is going to care.

Maybe people are talking about what Caliban just said, but I don’t know and I don’t care. All I want is to go home, back to my room where the stupid furniture isn’t blinding my eyes out so I can go to sleep and wake up to the smell of breakfast and safety and warmth, damn it, I didn’t realize how cold this room is until now. It’s almost as if the fireplace isn’t even there.

It takes a moment to realize that people are staring.
Caliban: Miss Kumoshita. Do you want me to repeat myself again? I don’t have all day.

Ariel: Better yet, I know all of that was confusing. So I’ve put together some gifts for all of you!

Whatever “gift” this robot has for us, I don’t want it. A compartment materializes in Ariel’s chest anyway, packed to the brim with what appear to be cell phones. Khalaf stands up wordlessly and takes long strides to Ariel, gets two devices, and then passes one to me. A few people cast glances in our direction, maybe remembering my talent...

... Right. I have a talent. That exists.

On closer inspection, the devices don’t seem to be phones - rather than being equipped with cameras or audio outputs, they merely have a power button and what may be a home button. I run my fingers along the glass screen anyway, heartbeat already slowing. Finally, something familiar.

Ariel: These are your Parchments. You can use them to keep in touch with your classmates throughout the mansion! And there’s some information on them that I’ll keep updated as much as I can. I spent a lot of time working on these, so please take care of them.

I click what seems to be the power button; the screen turns on with a soft grey glow. There appear to be only three app icons - one with a speech bubble, one with a pencil, and one with a magnifying glass. Clicking the magnifying glass icon leads to another screen with three more sections. The first seems to be locked, but at the rate today is going, I don’t want to know what could possibly be hidden there. The second, labeled “Report Cards”, seems to contain information about the class. I hover over it for a moment...

Sekisada: Bates-shi, how do you dislike classical music? You’re a violinist.

Bates: It’s just stupid.

Khalaf: [defensively] I like classical music.
… and decide not to look at those just yet.

The third section, “Rules and Announcements”, is marked with an exclamation point. I tap it to pull up a new post.

WELCOME TO MANSION MILAN!

「 CHIYO KUMOSHITA \| SHSL CELLPHONE NOVELIST 」

For your own sake and for those of everyone else in the mansion, please heed these housekeeping rules!

RULE #1: All students are required to stay on the grounds until the killing game ends.

RULE #2: When a death occurs, time will be granted for students to investigate. All areas currently available will be accessible during the investigation period.

RULE #3: If the blackened is correctly identified during the class trial, only they will be executed.

RULE #4: If the blackened is incorrectly identified during the class trial, everyone but the blackened will be executed. The blackened will then be free to leave the grounds, and the killing game will be concluded.

RULE #5: When at least three innocent students discover a body, the Body Discovery Announcement will play.

RULE #6: No more than three victims per killer.

RULE #7: In the event that there are multiple killers and multiple victims, only the first killer is regarded as the blackened, regardless of discovery order.

RULE #8: Participation in class trials is MANDATORY. Exceptions may be granted on a case-by-case basis, mostly in regards to health situations - i.e., a bystander was seriously injured in a failed murder attempt when the blackened already had three victims.

RULE #9: Nighttime hours are considered from 10 pm to 8 am. While students are not required to stay in their personal rooms at these hours, it is strongly recommended that they do so and exercise caution.

RULE #10: Trespassing into unopened areas of Mansion Milan is strictly prohibited.

RULE #11: Violence against either of your lovely and talented hosts is also strictly prohibited.

RULE #12: Failure to comply with any of the aforementioned rules will result in punishment.

RULE #13: These rules may be amended at any time.
I guess I shouldn’t have hoped for this to be a dream. This is worse than any nightmare I could have imagined. That nagging thought that we’ll all die here pipes up again, and this time I think other people are becoming aware of its gravity, too.

They said we should try to get out of here, but being realistic? None of us are getting out alive.

Valdez: … This is… A lot to take in. And process. I’m gonna need some time.

Ekyou: I think we all need some time.

Caliban: Luckily, you’ll have plenty of that. You’re here forever, after all.

Harai: Or at least until someone kills.

Caliban: You sound so excited. It warms my fickle, nonexistent heart.

Harai: No I don’t.

Caliban: Well, good. As previously mentioned my heart is nonexistent, and in all seriousness, if it did heat up I would explode.

McRae: [mutters] Maybe it would be better that way…

Caliban: Oh? What was that? Why don’t I just add a rule about insolence! Maybe you lot will be kinder to me then!

Ariel: Respect obtained through threat of punishment isn’t truly respect.
Caliban: [snorts] What do you know about respect?

Murdock: Are you about done here? Clearly, you have nothing left of importance to tell us. Or do you?

Caliban: Keh? See, I told you we should put in a rule about insolence.

Ariel: I would argue that their behavior is justified, given the situation they’ve been put in.

Murdock: [impatient] Hello? Is there anything else you need to tell us?

Ariel: I suppose not. In any case, it was a pleasure to meet all of you, and I hope to establish a good relationship with each of you in the coming days.

Caliban: What was it you just said about the situation they were put in? Hypocrite.

Ariel: At least I don’t resort to name-calling, unlike some.


Ariel: [stiffens] We will discuss this at a later time.

With that, the two birds leave the same way they came, flying up the chimney nearly simultaneously. It takes Caliban a few tries, but soon he’s out of sight, though clearly not out of mind.

It’s silent again - no one seems to want to make eye contact. The only one who’s even looking around is Murdock, whose head is on a swivel. She opens her mouth to say something, but is interrupted when a soft snuffle rises from the other side of the room, followed by a quaking voice.
Sumitama: I’m sorry.

Ekyou: You didn’t do anything.

Sumitama: Y-yes, I did. I was too eager to answer that question that- that THING posed us, and now…! [buries head in hands] I’m a failure. I let you all down. I’m so, so sorry.

Shionaga: Sumitama-chan, that wasn’t your fault at all. I think, erm, Caliban…? I feel like they would have announced our situation regardless of what any of us said. There’s nothing we could have done.

Sumitama: [sniffles] Yes, but…

Sekisada: Come on, are we seriously going to believe whatever horseshit they told us? There’s no way this “killing game” or whatever is for real.

Atsui: [mutters] You’re the one who was taking it so seriously…

Sekisada: Do you actually think I’m going to kill someone? I don’t wanna die if I fuck something up, which I inevitably will. It’s not worth it. Not like it matters, since this killing game can’t be legitimate. It’s just ridiculous.

Chisaki: Yeah! We can wake up tomorrow and just figure out a way to coexist. Nothing’s stopping us.

Valdez: But what if it’s like you said? With an accidental killing…

Chisaki: [rolls eyes] Oh, please, how would you accidentally kill someone. We’re responsible teenagers!

Valdez: Weren’t you joking about casual arson just a few minutes ago?

Chisaki: That’s different. That’s intentional. This? This is disgusting and also totally not an option.
No one’s gonna kill anyone, right?

Chiyo: ... Of course not. Of COURSE not. We’re just… We’re all just kids. We can’t, we’re not going to…

That came out a lot softer than I thought it would be, but then, what else is there to say? What else can I say? It’s a small miracle I haven’t cried yet, but between all this judgement and the state of my throat it’s only a matter of time. Atsui stares with genuine concern at the blush certainly spreading across my cheeks before all focus is broken when Bates coughs.

Bates: I mean, technically, we’re eighteen, so-

Khalaf: Not helping.

They turn to look me in the eye as if the rest of the room doesn’t exist. When they speak, they’re soft and serious and totally assured in themselves.

Khalaf: Kumoshita-san, I swear that no one is going to be killed. Okay?

I wish I could believe that.

Chiyo: ...Okay.

They nod sharply, then turn back to the group as a whole.

Khalaf: No one kills. We all need to enforce each other on this. There is no need for anyone in this room to kill another. Understood?

Murmurs of agreement drift around the room. Chisaki flashes an embarrassed thumbs-up, apparently satisfied with the response, and sits back down. Khalaf just sighs, tension flooding out of their posture with the air.
With that in order, Murdock opens her mouth again.. and is swiftly beaten to the punch by Atsui. A frown flickers across her face, but she lets it go.

Atsui: So… What now? Should we just wait it out until people find us?

Everett: That’s assuming that people are even looking for us. I don’t think anyone is coming, and judging from what those birds said, we’re probably set up to stay here forever anyway.

Shionaga: [shakes head] There’s bound to be people looking for me. For any of us. We’re Ultimates.

McRae: Forget Ultimates, we have our families back home. People are definitely looking for us.

Ekyou: Easy for you to say. Not everyone has a great home life, you know.

Kashizaki: Besides, don’t you have your cousin here?

McRae: ... Mm, good point.

Bates: [tapping his Parchment] These things probably operate on cellular networks in order to allow us to send instant messages to each other! I’m sure I could hook this thing up to the Internet and send out a distress call!

Khalaf: That might be the smartest thing I’ve ever heard you say.

Bates: Get used to it, Amal.

Khalaf: [stiffens] Excuse me?

Oh my god please don’t start arguing- no, there goes Khalaf opening their mouth. I cut in quickly before they can speak.

Chiyo: I think what Chisaki-san said earlier made the most sense. About just figuring out a way to peacefully coexist and wait for rescue.

Atsui: [nods] Yeah. And it wouldn’t even be hard? Just pretend we’re on a class bonding trip or something like that. We’re all friends here.

Sekisada: I beg your pardon.

Judging from the fact that I have to interrupt Khalaf and Bates every few seconds, I have to agree. Except it’s Sekisada, so do I really want to? I guess I can acknowledge a good point….

Murdock: I believe that takes care of our most pressing concerns, so moving on. This situation, in and of itself, seems… loaded.

Shionaga: Mm, yeah. Between the Hope’s Peak stuff and the staying here forever stuff…

Murdock: I was more referring to the fact that our memories were tampered with.

Chisaki: Yeah!! That’s a THING??

Murdock: It IS quite unsettling, I have to agree.

Sumitama: [sighs] But I guess that answers the question of whatever happened to my hair. I guess that whatever it was happened in those three years, which is why the roots are like that. [gestures to hair]

Kashizaki: You know, if your roots are bothering you, I’m sure I could help touch them up-

Sumitama: [loudly] NO. [hides face in hands] That was so loud. I’m sorry. Thank you, I appreciate
it, but this is super ugly already and I’d really prefer not to.

Kashizaki: [shrugs] Whatever. If you need help, just let me know.

Sumitama: Thank you.

Murdock: But moving back to the topic at hand, the situation itself…

Kashizaki: Yeah, can I just say what we’re all thinking? There’s pretty obviously someone behind this. Someone who might be one of us.

Murdock: [stiffens] I would like to believe that isn’t the case.

Kashizaki: Yeah, me too, but unfortunately life isn’t all sunshine and rainbows and so forth. People suck sometimes. So hear me out.

Kashizaki: I suppose I’m going to sound facetious, especially because of all that’s just been said about how Harai is such an innocent martyr and obvious scapegoat, but I need to point something out. Doesn’t everything revealed so far seem to point to a certain someone?

Khalaf: ...I don’t catch.

Kashizaki: Isn’t it obvious? The bird theme, the Western media, the half masks. I mean this in the kindest way, but Bazhanov-san, are you SURE you know nothing about the situation?

Bazhanov: … Russia isn’t Western.

Kashizaki: Okay, my bad, but my point stands. You’re pretty suspicious. What are you gonna do about it?

Bazhanov doesn’t argue, or even say a word in his own defense. Instead, he pulls himself into the perfect image of an aristocrat, spine ramrod-straight and hands clasped in front of him.
The only indicator of any unease is the sudden glaze of his eyes, as if he were a thousand miles away from this room in this instant.

Murdock: Well? We’re all waiting.

Bazhanov: …

Murdock: I’m talking to you. Please reply.

Bazhanov: …

… He’s trembling.

Bazhanov: [eerily calm] I apologize. I must take my leave.

And so he does, with quick, professional steps, letting his cape trail behind him as he retreats down the hallway. All things considered, there’s no way that Kashizaki is right, right? Surely Bazhanov of all people wouldn’t be behind this. Though between the masks and the bird motifs, his involvement IS pretty concerning...

It’s another few moments before the faintest of clicks indicate that he’s retired to his room. As the noise fades, Sekisada stands up abruptly as well.


Atsui: None taken.

Sekisada: [to Atsui] I was going to tell you to shut up but I don’t have time for this.

McRae: “Shut up” is two syllables. Whatever you just said is more than that.
Sekisada: [to McRae] You shut up too. [to everyone] Maybe consider that none of us even care enough to run an entire killing game and stop accusing people out of the blue. That’s how you make people not want to be friends with you.

Murdock: And I suppose you know a lot about that.

Sekisada: Plenty, actually, and I prefer it that way. So if you’ll excuse me.

With that, he turns to go. From that instant, with Sekisada’s departure of all things, the spell over the room is broken. People mutter about having places to be or wanting to rest, filling out of the room by themselves or in pairs. In the middle of it all, I catch a glimpse of Murdock, looking somewhat lost after Sekisada’s declaration. I should really go back and help her, but somehow the idea is tying my stomach in knots.

Another blur of grey catches my eye - are Ariel and Caliban back so soon? I look over as Harai heads purposefully towards the hallway and raise a hand in… greeting? Attention-grabbing? I don’t know.

Chiyo: Hey-

But it’s too late, and they’re gone. There’s a slight hum at my side, and Khalaf places a hand on my shoulder, worry etched in their expression.

Khalaf: Are you alright? You seem tense.

Chiyo: I mean… [drops hand and blows out a breath] Yeah, I guess I’m okay. And tense. It’s just a lot to take in.

Khalaf: Honestly, between you and me, I think Ariel and Caliban are bluffing.

Chiyo: Seriously?

Khalaf: [nods] I mean, think about it. We’re the best and brightest of our age. Why would you
want to lose valuable talent by forcing them to kill each other? And like Shionaga-san said, we’re all at least moderately well-known. There’s bound to be people looking for us. I’m sure if we just get along and live peacefully, we’ll be rescued eventually.

Chiyo: I guess…

*If only I could believe that.*

Khalaf: I think I’ll have to talk more with Murdock-san about this. Maybe tomorrow.

Chiyo: Why- Why tomorrow? Why not today?

Tooootally wasn’t going to ask “why her” instead. I wince internally at the blunder, but Khalaf seems to take the stutter in stride.

Khalaf: Because, put simply, I’m tired. [shrugs] It happens to everyone. Do you still have energy?

Something on my face must indicate otherwise, because Khalaf presses their lips together and offers to take me back to my room. Despite my protests that “it’s really not that hard to find my room”, “I’m not tired enough that I need help”, and “seriously, you’ll have to backtrack to get back to your room”, Khalaf doesn’t take their hand off my shoulder until we reach the nondescript white door. I thank them and bid them goodnight, then close the door behind me. True to what Ekyou said, shaking the lock seems to dislodge it easily, and I briefly consider dragging something over to block it before concluding that I haven’t made any enemies yet and even Murdock probably doesn’t hate me that much. So it… *should* be fine for the night. Add that to the list of things that I’m still unsure about.

The room is nice enough, in a hotel kind of way. While it’s not as harsh or modernist as the rest of the mansion, and the bed is comfortable enough, the room is still far from cozy. A quick search of the nightstand proves that there is, in fact, several weeks’ worth of my hormone medication, and relief floods through me. At least if I’m stuck here with no knowledge of whether I’ll live to the next day, I’ll be stuck here presenting closer to who I am.

There doesn’t seem to be a bathroom attached, but Khalaf and I passed some communal restrooms multiple times in the hallway. A bitter, almost maniacal laugh dies in my throat - I
guess, despite our every other accommodation, we still aren’t given the luxury of our own bathrooms. Such is high school.

I click on my Parchment. It’s early evening, according to the clock, which is surprising. I guess I just assumed that we woke up in the morning, but all things considered, we probably didn’t regain consciousness until late morning, with Khalaf and myself being asleep even longer.

And that’s still puzzling. Why would someone kidnap us? Erase our memories? Monitor us with robots?

...Force us to kill each other?

I bite back the sinking feeling in my stomach. There’s no way any of us will murder each other, we’ve already established that none of us have intent to kill. But the certainty with which Caliban described the situation is still nothing short of unsettling.

Y’know, maybe it would help to write some things down.

After several minutes, I end up closing the notes application. The blank screen is far too intimidating. Besides, who knows who else would be able to read what I write? Ariel doesn’t seem too bad, but I feel like Caliban would make fun of anything I put to paper.

For a moment, I hover over the profiles, but eventually put my Parchment aside. Today’s been overwhelming as it is. Everything still feels like a dream, and I’m still holding out for the realization that I’ll fall asleep here then wake up in my bed with the smell of red miso curling into my room. Each passing moment, though, confirms that I’m living a life worse than any nightmare I could have imagined. What was it I said about shoujo and the same stories being told so many different ways? I take it back. I take it all back. I would trade a cliche romance for this situation in a heartbeat.

I lie on the bed, feeling hollower than ever, and drape a hand over my eyes to block out the harsh lights. I only meant to close my eyes for a moment, but I fall asleep in seconds.

I can only hope that I don’t wake up here in the morning.
DANGANRONPA: A STORMY LAST HURRAH

PROLOGUE: COMPLETE

> REMAINING: 16/16 <
0-X: Profiles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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CHIYO KUMOSHITA

Also known by her alias and screen name “daybreak • dreamer”, Chiyo Kumoshita is none other than the underground sensation that recently swept online forums off their feet with her hit cellphone novel “In the World That You Left Behind”! A stirring master of emotion through verse and lyrical snippets of prose, the pure emotion and talent that she incorporates into her work is nothing short of sublime. Her family was somewhat well-known before her exposure as the owners of Kumoshita Mortuary, though in interviews, Chiyo claims that she’s “just a somebody from
A writer who seemingly popped up out of nowhere shortly following a deadly attack on a makeshift hospital, Amal Khalaf became known for self-publishing several electrifying articles on the horrors of war through online forums, later featured in Time Magazine and newspapers the world over. Their work has been translated into dozens of languages, each column a scathing and bitter reflection on how conflict only divides the human race. Yet Amal themselves is a bit of a recluse, remaining largely anonymous and, in interviews, seemingly as bitter as their writing would
suggest. Though a divisive figure, their writing and the stunning photographs that accompany each piece have influenced several top diplomats to make greater strides toward peace, proving their success undeniable.

> MORE ON AMAL <
coworkers seem to have seen their face before. As with most kabuki actors, Tatsumaru’s name was most likely taken from a mentor’s and isn’t their own, though the identity of this mentor is hard to discern as they’re extremely private about their personal life. Doubtless, however, is that the mystery and fame surrounding Tatsumaru and their identity is what led to their acceptance to Hope’s Peak Academy.

MORE ON TATSUMARU

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SENTAROU SEKISADA

NAME: Sentarou Sekisada
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 1/12/20XX]
HEIGHT: 168 cm [5’6’’]
WEIGHT: 64kg [140 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: B+
LIKES: Hard candy, instrumental tracks
DISLIKES: Attention, makeup

Seat fillers aren’t normally well-known, to the benefit of their careers - by virtue, they need to remain another anonymous face in the crowd. Sentarou Sekisada, however, is reputable for the sheer number of connections he’s made due to his line of work. He’s brushed shoulders with pop
idols, voice actors, viral video stars…? The point is, name an occupation, and Sentarou has sat in on an interview with one and probably knows them personally as well. In everyday life, he seems to be humble enough, if tired and irritable when pressed about his talent. Yet in the perspective of Hope’s Peak, the amount of success he’s sat in on and knows personally is unparalleled in comparison to other seat fillers… that, and there’s not many other teenage seat fillers to speak of.

> MORE ON SENTAROU <
> MORE ON SEAT FILLERS <

IRIS SUMITAMA

NAME: Iris Sumitama
PRONOUNS: she/her
AGE: 18 [DoB 9/1/20XX]
HEIGHT: 152 cm [5’0”]
WEIGHT: 63kg [139 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: A+
LIKES: Jasmine tea, gardening
DISLIKES: Copycats, instant ramen

Although any number of students hold high grades, Iris Sumitama became particularly notable due to her extreme dedication to studying. Mousy, quiet, and the picture of a model student, she’s well-
known for her curiosity and eventual expertise in just about any subject taught in schools to the point where she won a scholarship to a prestigious international school by sheer basis of her high marks. Though she’s a high-ranking student, she’s not very well-rounded in the realm of social situations, and as such Hope’s Peak seeks to aid her in this department.

> MORE ON IRIS <

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ASTER EVERETT

NAME: Aster Everett
PRONOUNS: she/her
AGE: 18 [DoB 9/26/20XX]
HEIGHT: 175 cm [5’9”]
WEIGHT: 73kg [160 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: O+
LIKES: Board games, strawberries
DISLIKES: Archery, silence

Aster Everett... Who IS she, anyway? Looking up her name does turn up a number of photographs containing her visage, but very little actual information. Though the content of the photos vary from talk shows to outdoors hiking, Aster looks uncomfortable in every one. She certainly can’t remember enough to clarify what might be her true talent, either. With this amount of apparent
fame, it makes sense that she would be accepted to Hope's Peak, but the question of what she did to acquire that fame remains.

> MORE ON ASTER <

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CLAUDIUS “CLAUDE” BATES

NAME: Claudius “Claude” Bates
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 6/4/20XX]
HEIGHT: 183 cm [6’0”]
WEIGHT: 67kg [147 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: B+
LIKES: Chocolate, snakes
DISLIKES: Classical music, coffee

Unlike most violinists, Claude Bates is a viral video star! He specializes in electric violin compositions akin to EDM, having created a sizable social media following devoted to his music. Despite his proficiency at violin and adoring fans, he doesn’t make many personal videos, but when he does, he’s just as charming as the music that he plays. In person, however, fans have reported Claude to be somewhat overwhelming and almost irritating in how self-centered he can be. Interestingly, his social media page reports that he used to belong in a traditional orchestra,
but got bored with the people within it.

> MORE ON CLAUD <

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**HIRONO EKYOU**

NAME: Hirono Ekyou  
PRONOUNS: she/her  
AGE: 18 [DoB 8/5/20XX]  
HEIGHT: 178 cm [5'8”]  
WEIGHT: 68kg [150 lbs]  
BLOOD TYPE: AB+  
LIKES: Butterflies, fashion  
DISLIKES: Tabloids, cars

At first glance, Hirono Ekyou doesn’t seem like much of an ōendan. In fact, it’s a little difficult to think of her getting excited for anything, let alone to the point of screaming and banging drums. However, despite her resting death glare, Hirono is surprisingly quick to smile - and those at her school that she attends report that they would “die a thousand deaths for that smile”. Aside from that apparent highly effective motivator, Hirono dedicates herself to her cheering and choreographs her team’s performances herself, going from stony expression to solemn screaming in an instant. Notably, ever since she started practicing ōendan, her school’s sports teams have
never lost a match. Coincidence? Most likely, but her skills more than qualify her for Hope’s Peak regardless.

> MORE ON HIRONO <
> MORE ON ŌENDAN <

ALEXEI ILYICH BAZHANOV

NAME: Alexei Ilyich Bazhanov
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 10/9/20XX]
HEIGHT: 180 cm [5’11’’]
WEIGHT: 62kg [136 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: B-
LIKES: Silk, caramel
DISLIKES: Bread, cold weather

An interesting case in that he hasn’t added much of note to ornithology, Alexei Bazhanov is best-known for doing absolutely crazy things in the name of birdwatching. From squatting in strange places with his signature pair of binoculars to releasing a flock of pigeons into a store to straight-up T-posing with a dozen crows perching on his arms, he can best be described as a being of chaos. And this shows in the rest of his life as well - no one is quite sure where he came from, when
he got to Tokyo, or why he’s there at all. Just as mysterious is the mask that he wears every day, as well as the clipped way in which he speaks. His antics, however, have grabbed the attention of the public and practically demanded a scholarship for Hope’s Peak.

> MORE ON ALEXEI <

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RIRIKA KASHIZAKI

Better known as “sunset.sunrise.nails” on Instagram, Ririka Kashizaki has spent the better part of the past five years building up a massive social media presence based around her nail art designs. Specializing in fake nails and vibrant, harmonious colors, she aims to redefine just what the use of makeup means to today’s youth. Although she isn’t well-known within Japan, she’s widely followed by foreign teenagers (especially American girls) and is something of a trendsetter across the globe,
a fact that she’s well aware of. Being a nail artist, after all, requires a certain type of effortless cool - a quality that Ririka has in spades.

> MORE ON RIRIKA <

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TSUKINO CHISAKI

NAME: Tsukino Chisaki
PRONOUNS: she/her
AGE: 18  [DoB 11/17/20XX]
HEIGHT: 163 cm [5’4”]
WEIGHT: 57kg [125 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: B-
LIKES: Space, punk rock
DISLIKES: Storms, puns

Although Tsukino Chisaki isn’t the best of students, she managed to turn her fading focus to stellar performance in a program at the US-sponsored International Flight School! Though still a novice, she’s more than capable of performing top-level air stunts and the like. Whether she actually cares enough to obey aviation rules, however, is a different story. Tsukino tends to take people off guard by just how capricious she is in regards to the law, as she has a penchant for just… taking off and not explaining her methods, usually yelling something about punk in the process. Regardless,
Tsukino does her best to be warm and full of heart, and her skill in handling aircraft is undeniable.

MORE ON TSUKINO

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BRENDAN VALDEZ

NAME: Brendan Valdez
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 10/22/20XX]
HEIGHT: 175 cm [5'9'']
WEIGHT: 64kg [142 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: O-
LIKES: Architecture, ferrets
DISLIKES: Rust, drawing

Upon moving to Tokyo from the US, Brendan Valdez immediately became one of most renowned engineers of his time - an impressive feat considering that he’s still a teenager. Though inexperienced, he’s an incredibly diligent and meticulous worker who rarely, if ever, misses details in his plans. The most notable contribution that he’s made to mechanical engineering as a field were a number of improvements to the efficiency of wind turbines, which sounds pretty dull but is actually pretty impressive given that these same improvements have been implemented in the offshore wind farms off the Fukushima coast. In person, he holds nothing but optimism for the
future of both engineering and humanity as a whole, and aims to unite these two subjects as much as possible.

> MORE ON BRENDAN <

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TIANA MURDOCK

Hailing from a family of antique dealers and museum curators, Tiana Murdock carries on her family’s legacy of craftsmanship. Instead of simply restoring pieces, though, she creates entirely new watches and pendulums. She takes an enormous amount of pride in her work, and rightfully so - each watch is delicately engraved and embossed by hand, whether they’re weighted pocket watches or simple wrist pieces. Though her ego may be off-putting, Tiana does her best to be accommodating and friendly to everyone that she interacts with, and is known to describe herself

NAME: Tiana Murdock
PRONOUNS: she/her
AGE: 18 [DoB 3/30/20XX]
HEIGHT: 168 cm [5’6”]
WEIGHT: 58kg [129 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: A+
LIKES: Punctuality, shortbread
DISLIKES: Wood polish, humidity
as the “mom friend” of her group.

> MORE ON TIANA <


RYOUJI ATSUI

NAME: Ryouji Atsui
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 2/15/20XX]
HEIGHT: 163 cm [5'4”]
WEIGHT: 60kg [133 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: AB-
LIKES: Fried chicken, scented candles
DISLIKES: Video games, competitions

Given his family history of pastry chefs, restaurateurs, and other grand aspirations, it’s a little disappointing to him personally that, as a caterer, Ryouji Atsui does not lead a glamorous life. He’s usually hired for school functions due to his awareness of trends in food and relatively inexpensive costs, and as a result somewhat resents the jobs that he’s hired for. On the flip side, however, his family history and tutelage has equipped him with a vast repertoire of cooking skills and experience in anything from galettes to sekihan, and his ability to whip up crowd-pleasing dishes on a budget and in a short time frame are incredibly impressive.
In this day and age of self-made programmers, aspiring video game designers are a dime a dozen. A deeper look into Tristan McRae’s past, however, quickly reveals his dedication to game creation; he’s developed two beta games in his short career to significant online reception, especially surrounding the second, an RPG with a rhythm-based attack system and high fantasy setting. Recently, he’s joined together with other notable teenage developers to form King’s Rock Productions, which has only become more prolific with his acceptance to HPA. As expected, Tristan is incredibly enthusiastic about video games, and outside of the studio can most concisely be described as “easygoing”, though others with more pointed opinions would use the word “apathetic”.

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NAME: Tristan McRae
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 2/27/20XX]
HEIGHT: 163 cm [5’4”]
WEIGHT: 67kg [149 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: O+
LIKES: Cities, lo-fi beats
DISLIKES: Handling finances, triviality
NAME: Kanemori Shionaga
PRONOUNS: he/him
AGE: 18 [DoB 5/8/20XX]
HEIGHT: 180 cm [5’11”]
WEIGHT: 78kg [171 lbs]
BLOOD TYPE: O+
LIKES: Sunny days, eggs
DISLIKES: Moths, reading

Of all of Japan’s football players, Kanemori Shionaga must be one of the most beloved. The son of rival volleyball stars, Kanemori was training in all sorts of athletic activities since he could walk, and has dominated sports-related headlines ever since. Due to his upbringing, he’s skilled in a number of athletic categories, but largely specializes in football (American soccer) and excels in a signature powerful kick that tends to cinch the win for any team he’s playing for at the time.

Although pressure builds up quickly when it comes to sports, Kanemori prides himself on maintaining a positive attitude no matter what and does his best to encourage his teammates to do their best. After all, there’s no “i” in team, and he holds to this whether he’s playing for his school team or as a guest and youngest player on the national team.
ARIEL

NAME: Ariel
CALIBAN

NAME: Caliban
PRONOUNS: he/they/it
LIKES: ???
DISLIKES: anemone flowers
Such a shame that the good die so young.

Such a shame that none of them could ever have been good.

...I suppose it's time to get to work.
Now’s probably a good time to announce that none of the CGs from here on out are actually going to be in DR style, reasoning being "I really hate lineart". I’m planning on doing some wacky stuff though, so look out for that!
Chapter Summary

The game is afoot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darkness.

...

...Something shifts.

(???): ...Huh.

[???): Huh?

(???): I was thinking this would be a lot harder.

[???): Harder. Harder? Are you kidding me?? This is already really hard.

(???): No, it’s not.

[???): Yes it is! Listen, I really, really don’t think you understand what you’re saying. What you’re doing. What we’re doing. It’s difficult.

(???): From a logical standpoint, we got this far with minimal hardships.

[???): Okay, fine, but from a moral standpoint?
(?: Oh, right. I'm sure you know better than anyone about morals, with your occupation that
you're sooo proud of.

[???]: That's... It's different. It's not like I want to be doing any of... You know.

[???]: [mutters] It's just also that I don't have a choice in it.

(?: It's a little late to be second-guessing this, though, huh? You sure as hell had a choice here.
[laughs] But sure, sure, whatever you say. Whatever helps you sleep at night.

(?: It's not like we can stop now, anyway.

[???]: …

(?: … [softer] Besides, it all gets easier from here.

A pause.

(?: Hey, I think she’s waking up. You gonna do the honors, or?

[???]: … Yeah. Yeah, whatever.

I open my eyes.

There’s a light, and if I can just reach out to it everything will be okay. Just a little further…

Instead, my vision is flooded by a blinding pink flash, so bright that even if I squeeze my eyes
tight, I can see it through my eyelids.
And then everything is dark again.

CHAPTER 1

AS THERE ARE TONGUES, ARE HANDS, ARE ACCIDENTS

I open my eyes to see the morning sun breaking through the windows.

Wait, morning already? I could have sworn that I had just fallen asleep. In fact, did I ever fall asleep? And where am I? I don’t recognize the room…

A phone buzzes on my nightstand and I grab it on instinct to turn off the alarm. Instead, I find a jingle and a little automated message.
Ariel: Good morning! The time is 8:00 am and nighttime hours have ended. Rise and shine, and please enjoy your day!

Ah. Right.

I drop the Parchment back on the nightstand and pull the covers up over my head. I guess I may as well abandon all hope that the past day was just a dream, huh? Why am I even here? Why are any of us even here?

No matter how hard I try, though, moping isn’t going to do anything about our situation. I mean, there’s really only one solution for “doing anything about our situation”, but it’s not like anyone’s actually going to do that. We’re just kids. Or technically adults? I don’t feel much like an adult, and honestly, I doubt anyone else here does, either. Anyway.

As long as no one actually kills, WHICH AGAIN I HIGHLY DOUBT WILL HAPPEN, we can just pretend the killing game isn’t happening, right? So everything will be fine. And we can just live our lives peacefully until someone rescues us.

Or forever. Whichever comes first.

Man, being a teen is hard in this day and age.

I roll over to open the nightstand drawer and dig around for my pills. No matter what this stupid mansion and these stupid birds do to us, I’m going to do my damnedest to maintain some sense of normalcy.

The bedroom hallways are remarkably deserted, considering the fact that the morning announcement went off not five minutes ago. In fact, it doesn’t seem like anyone’s awake at all. I guess I should have expected that. Morning people are so hard to come by these days.

What’s weirder, though, is I don’t run into anyone on my way to the kitchen. Or even in the kitchen. Maybe I should make some food for people, because I’m not sure what kinds of food we have available or if anyone’s eaten breakfast; judging by the half-filled dishwasher and the scent of cheese, though, someone already baked something this morning. Even though it’s 8:00 am.
Maybe I was wrong. Maybe there exist people who are even more of morning people than I am. That’s kind of terrifying.

I’m in the middle of opening my third cabinet to look for cups when Kashizaki walks into the kitchen, looking groggy. She holds one hand in the righteous fist of someone holding a pill they don’t want anyone to know about, then glances surreptitiously at my own.

Chiyo: Good morning!

Kashizaki: … Morning.

Kashizaki crosses the room and opens the cabinet next to my head, pulling out a glass. She fills it at the sink and hands it to me.

Chiyo: Oh, thanks!

Kashizaki: [waves distractedly] Don’t mention it.

As I take a seat at the counter, she fills her own glass, then sits down across from me. She raises her cup in complete seriousness.

Kashizaki: Here’s to life or whatever. Cheers.

She doesn’t wait for a response and downs her water with the pill. In a moment, I do the same. Almost immediately after she finishes the glass, Kashizaki stands up to leave.

Chiyo: Wait, wait, don’t you want breakfast? I can make sandwiches or something!

Kashizaki: Don’t bother. It’s too early for this. I’m going back to bed.
Chiyo: Already? The 8:00 alarm just went off…

Kashizaki: No one’s around to judge me for sleeping in. I’m taking advantage of it.

Chiyo: Ah, I see.

Kashizaki: [side-eyes] Right.

_She stares into her cup before placing it in the sink. For a moment, there’s no sound but the rush of water as she washes it out._


Chiyo: Huh?

Kashizaki: It’s kind of obvious that you’re a nice person. Like, REALLY nice. And I know it must help you a lot at home, or whatever.

…HUH????

Kashizaki: And I’m just saying, but in this kind of environment…

_Kashizaki doesn’t finish her sentence and turns off the faucet. She places the glass onto the drying rack, then keeps talking, voice low._

Kashizaki: In this kind of environment, people can and will mistake kindness for weakness. Not everyone is as well-meaning as you are. So watch your back, okay?

Chiyo: …That’s a pretty heavy thing to drop, considering it’s only 8 a.m.

Kashizaki: [shrugs] Had to say it eventually. See you around.
With that, she leaves the room and shuffles away.

… Again. **HUH??**

I mean, I guess it makes sense, in that people take advantage of kindness, especially in the world that we live in. And I totally get that and everything, but it’s not like I’m going to just stand by and let people be upset! If there’s something I can do to help them then I should help them! That’s just how the world should work!!

Unless she meant, like, as in death. And being an easy target.

Yeah, that’s probably what she meant.

That all said, Kashizaki is kind of right. It IS way too early for this. Except I mean it as “pondering morality and overthinking everything” and she probably means “dealing with the world as a whole”. At least I’m awake enough to read things. Reading is cool.

I’m halfway through reading Bazhanov’s profile when my Parchment buzzes. Seems like I have a message.

[8:15] A. KHALAF:

Hey, Kumoshita-san.

Do you want to join myself and Murdock-san for breakfast?

In all honesty? No. No I don’t. I like Khalaf a lot and I would be happy to spend all day with them, but Murdock? Seriously?

Then again, it’s not like I have any other plans.

[8:17] C. KUMOSHITA:
Go to the room we woke up in? McRae-san made egg pastry things. They’re surprisingly good.

Ughhh. I’m really not looking forward to this. At least I can get to know Murdock better, maybe?? I really don’t get why Khalaf can stand her, let alone like her. McRae seems to like
her too, but that’s probably because they’re cousins. Oh well. It’s not like everyone here adores each other, anyway. Besides, Murdock hasn’t done anything wrong, so there’s no reason to be mean to her.

I walk into the room to find a small group of people sitting at the coffee table, dwarfed by the mountain of books from the library and papers around them. Thankfully for my fears of getting stuck in a room with only Murdock and Khalaf, Valdez and McRae are sitting at the couches as well, though Valdez seems like he’s even more half asleep than Kashizaki.

Khalaf looks up when I walk in and scoots over so I can sit down.

Chiyo: Good morning!

Khalaf: Morning.

Murdock simply nods in my direction for a greeting. Like clockwork, McRae passes me some kind of puffy bread, then turns back to whatever it is he’s drawing on a book.

Chiyo: Thanks.

McRae: Don’t mention it.

Murdock: Now that everyone’s here, I think we should assess what we’ve learned so far about our situation.

Valdez: [yawns] Shouldn’t we be having this meeting when everyone else is here?

Murdock: We’ve gone over this. Most of our peers can be unreasonable at times, as we’ve learned just in the past day. [shudders] I don’t want to think about what kind of chaos we would have if everyone showed up.

Valdez: … Mm…
Murdock: And as it stands, I don’t think the five of us have much input to give on the situation already. But I thought that it would be a good idea to review what we do know. Right, Tristan?

McRae: Huh? [barely glancing over] I guess. But none of us know anything else other than what we learned yesterday.

Khalaf: Well, like Murdock-san said, we can always review what we learned. So what do we know?

Chiyo: We’re in a building. A mansion. Mansion… what was it, Mansion Milan?


Khalaf: All of this is from the Shakespeare play “The Tempest”. I don’t know how relevant that is.

Valdez: Doesn’t that take place in Italy? Or, uh, the characters are from Italy. [yawns again] I think. Everything in Shakespeare is Italian.

Chiyo: [half-joking] Maybe the person behind all of this is Italian, too?

Murdock pauses and simply regards me. My cheeks heat up involuntarily under her gaze. Did I say something wrong?

Murdock: … I’m Italian.

Chiyo: Oh. Oh, I’m sorry.

Murdock: It’s…

She looks like she’s searching for a word. My heart sinks into my stomach.
Murdock: … Fine.

That is totally, absolutely, very, 100% not what she was going to say. McRae sneezes, breaking the silence, but Murdock’s glare still weighs heavy.

Khalaf: Well.

Chiyo: Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.

Murdock: It’s okay. I understand. It’s a difficult time, in which we all want to jump to conclusions. [pushes up glasses] Still…

I messed up. Ohhh my gosh I messed up. I look down at the seams of my gloves and prepare to zone out for the rest of the conversation and mentally beat myself up.

About two minutes in, a quiet “excuse me” breaks my train of thought; I glance up to see Valdez moving around McRae and standing up.

Valdez: I think I’m too tired for this conversation. I just can’t follow. Sorry, Murdock-san. Kumoshita-san, do you want to come with me?

Chiyo: Oh! Y-yeah, sure.

Murdock: Where are you two off to?

Valdez: Have you seen the gachapon machine yet?

Chiyo: The what?

McRae: [looks up] There’s a gachapon machine? I want to go.
Murdock: Could you please stay?

McRae: You’re not the boss of me.

To my surprise, Murdock actually sticks her tongue out at McRae. He punches her in the shoulder, but it doesn’t seem like he’s going to get up.

I pick up the bread that McRae made and turn to follow Valdez. Before I can take a step, Khalaf reaches out to my arm, stopping just before making contact.

Khalaf: Hey.

Chiyo: Yeah?

Khalaf: Stay safe.


Valdez and I walk toward the living room in silence. It’s just as awkward as the room we just left, only with less passive aggression. I think. But in all honesty, it’s probably just for the best that we got out of there… though as much as I’d like to thank Valdez, he keeps ducking his head and avoiding my gaze. Despite his bailing me out, he seems determined to not keep up a conversation.

And that’s why somewhere between my room and the library, I end up eating the rest of the bread. Like Khalaf said, it’s got a whole egg and some cheese cooked into it somehow. It may or may not be the best thing I’ve ever eaten for breakfast at any point.

Chiyo: … This is really good bread.

Valdez: Oh! Oh, yeah, it is. McRae-san got up at 6 to make it. He said he learned it from a
Chiyo: What, really? Did he want to make it?

Valdez: As far as I know, yeah.

Chiyo: Huh. That’s kind of surprising.

Valdez: Yeah, he doesn’t, um. Seem like he would be very motivated. So that was a surprise for me, too…

He tugs at his gloves, almost absentmindedly. There’s grease stains on the fabric from the bread. Does he ever take them off?

Valdez: I’ll be upfront. I don’t like Murdock-san much, either.

Chiyo: Oh thank god I’m not the only one.

Valdez: [laughs] I’m not even sure why she wants me to hang out with her. I think she thinks that we have shared interests or something like that?

Chiyo: I think she only puts up with me because Khalaf-san and I are friends. How did you start talking to her, anyway?

Valdez: Um, I’m not sure. Why are you and Khalaf-san friends? [hastily] In a “how did you first meet” way, not a “I’m questioning the basis of your friendship” way. I mean it nicely.

Chiyo: Oh, uh… [twirls hair] We just woke up in the same room. I assume that’s the same with you and Murdock-san?

Valdez: Pretty much, yeah. I think she values politeness. Which is why she started telling me what to do... [shudders] It… It’s kind of weird.
Chiyo: Yeah, no kidding. I kind of hope this doesn’t keep up all week.

Honestly, I wouldn’t mind that much if we got to hang out more. Valdez is surprisingly easy to keep up a conversation with… and of course, it helps that we don’t like the same people. Or rather, the same person.

Valdez: If it does, I’ll be happy to bail you out again. If- if that’s okay with you.

Chiyo: Oh! Yeah, of course, I’d love that. Although I don’t know what we’d talk about.

Valdez: I suppose there’s your talent…

Chiyo: Just mine? You’re a mechanical engineer! I’m sure you have plenty of stories to talk about!

Valdez: That’s not what I- [catches self] Ah, sorry. I mean, I could talk about that too!

I start to deflect back to his talent, but pause. Something doesn’t seem right about his saying that. It doesn’t seem so much like he wants to actually know about what I did so much as he sounds curious. Didn’t Ekyou say something before about explaining doing ōendan to five different people, and that Valdez was too polite to inquire?

Let’s hope I don’t mess up my judgement again.

Chiyo: Are you wondering what a cellphone novelist is?

Valdez: Ah, yeah! If it’s not too much trouble. I’m sorry, I didn’t want to be rude.

Chiyo: Don’t worry, it’s no problem! Just give me a moment to think about it…

Valdez just nods and stays silent. I guess it’s something of a niche talent if you don’t use the
Internet much, no matter where you’re from. Still, I do my best to explain.

Chiyo: Cellphone novelists are usually anonymous writers that compose their work in text messages. They’re short chapters because of the format and end up pretty similar to poetry, actually. Most people end up posting online under a screen name on Internet forums. And I guess I’m pretty good at it?

Valdez: Woah, that’s really impressive!

Chiyo: It’s not that big a deal! Plenty of people do it, too!

Valdez: Maybe so, but if you’re the Hope’s Peak representative of cellphone novelists, you must be incredibly talented.

I bury my face in my hands before I can start blushing again.

Chiyo: You’re too kind, oh my gosh. Thank you.

Valdez: Kumoshita-san, I assure you, I am just the right amount of kind. Please take pride in your work! You deserve the praise!

Valdez: But, if I may… you mentioned being “usually anonymous”? Did you reveal yourself on purpose?

Chiyo: Eheh… About that. [wincses]

Now that I think about it, the story behind that is probably a perfect example of what Kashizaki meant about being too kind. Or at least, being too naive… which isn’t the same thing, anyway, so I don’t know why I’m so worried. Still. It’s embarrassing. Luckily, Valdez seems to pick up on the cue - or maybe he’s just taken a look at what’s ahead of us before we run straight into it.

Valdez: Oh, looks like we’re here.
We seem to have arrived at the far side of the living room behind the kitchen. This side of the living room seems to have a sizable wooden structure blocking a large stretch of the floor; unfortunately, it seems to be nailed to the ground, and it doesn’t seem like any of us would be able to move it. Like the opposite side of the living room, there’s a hallway not unlike the bedroom corridor, but about 10 feet in, it seems to be blocked by a metal fence of some sort.

I reach out to run my hand along the barrier. It looks flimsy, so it shouldn’t be that hard to break, right?

Valdez: Wait, no-

?????: DON’T TOUCH THAT!

Chiyo: AH??

I yank my hand back and turn around to see Ekyou making quick strides towards me, concern written across her usually stony expression. Kashizaki follows behind at a distance, looking overall bored yet somewhat interested in the proceedings. Valdez simply looks shocked, but moves to stand a little closer to me.

He is quickly displaced by Ekyou straight up lifting him off the ground (eliciting a quiet yelp) and moving him to the side, then bustling over to grab my arm.

Valdez: Hey-

Ekyou: Kumoshita-san, you could have gotten seriously injured. Don’t go grabbing random things impulsively, do you hear me?

Kashizaki: Yeah. The barrier’s electrocuted. If you didn’t notice.

Chiyo: It is?
Valdez: Yeah. It’s, um, why I told you… yeah.

Kashizaki: [bluntly] Valdez-san, you barely said anything.

Valdez: [sighs] I’m aware.

Ekyou: Are you alright, Kumoshita-san?

Chiyo: Yeah. Thanks to all of you. [laughs] I’m, uh… Not that observant this early in the morning.

Kashizaki: Word to that.

Ekyou: Still, what are you two doing all the way over here?

Valdez: I was just going to show her the gachapon machine.

I… totally forgot about that, didn’t I.

Kashizaki: Well, lucky you, there’s not much to see.

She gestures at the aforementioned gachapon machine. It’s a lot sadder and lonelier than I thought it would be, a garish, red contraption almost comically out of place against the rest of the professional and bland mansion. Ekyou pokes it with her foot to no avail.

Kashizaki: Unless any of you have money, none of us can even use this. So much for that.

Ekyou: We could always try to break it.

Kashizaki: Hell no, do you see how rusty the damn thing is? If any of us tried attacking it with our bare hands, we would contract tetanus.
Ekyou: No one said we have to use our bare hands. I don’t think any of us could do that.

Valdez: [rubbing sides] But if anyone could, it would be you.

Ekyou: Thanks. [to Kashizaki] I’m sure if we found a paperweight or even a really heavy book, we could break it.

Kashizaki: You could break it.

Ekyou: Okay. I could break it.

Valdez: So… what now? To the library?

Ekyou: Seems like it. We should take Kumoshita-san with us so she doesn’t get hurt.

Chiyo: I can take care of myself!

Ekyou: The barrier is *humming*, Kumoshita-san. How did you miss that?

Valdez: I’m not sure if I should come along.

Kashizaki: No one is making you go if you don’t want to be here.

**Valdez’s expression falls, then hardens.**

Valdez: I guess not, then. I’m sorry to intrude.

Kashizaki: [eyes widen] Wait, that’s not what I meant.
Valdez: No, no, it’s fine. I can go.

Chiyo: Valdez-san-

Valdez: See you, Kumoshita-san. Sorry about this.

He spins on his heel and turns away. In seconds, he’s across the room, walking much more quickly than he was when we had come here initially.

It hits me that he was intentionally walking slowly to talk with me longer, and just like that, whatever camaraderie we had was dissolved by Kashizaki’s statement.

Ekyou: … Wow.

Kashizaki: [rubs eyes] Shit.

Ekyou: I can go get him if you want?

Kashizaki closes her eyes and sighs deeply. In that moment, she seems to age three years, and even I can tell that she didn’t mean to come across as harsh as she did.

Kashizaki: No, don’t bother. I’ll sort it out later. Kumoshita-san, are you still coming?

Chiyo: Uh, yeah! Sure!

We head off to the library, Kashizaki and Ekyou always two steps ahead of me. Our walk is mostly punctuated by their tossing idle conversation about their lives. They’re in the middle of a discussion about their favorite idol gacha games, a conversation I actually start to participate in, when we finally reach our destination.
The library is already occupied, with Sekisada and Atsui sitting smack in the middle of the largest corridor. They don’t seem to be talking to each other at all, but Atsui looks up when we walk in.

Atsui: Oh hey.

Sekisada: Oh thank god. People who I can talk to- [expression withers] Oookay nevermind this still sucks.

Kashizaki: Good to see you too. What are… what are either of you even doing?

This is a particularly apt question, because Sekisada seems to be going through several stacks of books, having built a moderately sized fort around himself constructed mostly of thin volumes. Atsui, on the other hand, holds just one novel. He appears to be really into it, considering the colorful bookmarks he’s constructed of… Are those magazine pages? Geez.

But it’s a voice from the next corridor that floats over to answer Kashizaki’s question. Sumitama appears at the other end of the aisle and wanders over to join us. Sekisada seems to die a little more inside.

Sumitama: We’re studying. [sits down and pulls a book off of Sekisada’s stack]

Ekyou: Studying? We’re not in school right now. Or, according to some sources, anymore.

Sumitama: Maybe so, but it’s still better than doing nothing. Or reading garbage. [flips through the book] Celebrities? Really?

Sekisada: I need to have some hobbies. Give that back.

Sumitama blushes and does so. Heavy footsteps approach, and I look up to watch Shionaga stagger over from the next aisle. He drops a stack of books that rivals Sekisada’s in volume, which proceed to tumble on the floor and topple the book fort. Sekisada heaves a sigh and gives up. Shionaga, oblivious, delicately picks a book from the top of the stack and opens it.
Shionaga: Hey.

Sumitama: Oh, thanks, Shionaga-kun.

Shionaga: Yeah, it’s no problem. What are we doing?

Ekyou: Studying…?

Shionaga: That’s just Sumitama-chan. And these two, I guess.

Atsui: Thanks.

Shionaga: You’re welcome?

Sekisada: I’m not doing anything useful. Don’t rope me into this.

Shionaga: Same. I’m just here for Sumitama-chan.

Sekisada: You’ve been here all day. You can’t seriously mean you haven’t been studying with your lovebird.

Shionaga: [glumly] My name is Kanemori, I’m 18 years old, and I never learned how to read.

Sumitama: Have too! You’ve been reading that for two hours!

Shionaga: I haven’t turned a page in the past 10 minutes. Just accept it, I’m illiterate. Leave me be.

Kashizaki: What are you even studying?
Shionaga: Good question.

Sumitama: Biochemistry.

Ekyou: Huh. Are you planning to go into that field?

Sumitama: I guess… [pushes back hair] I’m not good at a lot of things, but I like biology, I think. Or the zoology aspect.

Ekyou: [nods] You sound like my sister.

Sumitama: Really? What’s she like?

At the inquiry, Ekyou’s expression, previously so stony and harsh, completely melts into the purest expression of joy I’ve ever seen. Her eyes light up with pure delight, her posture relaxes entirely… It’s the kind of expression to completely restore faith in humanity as a whole.

The profiles really weren’t kidding. I, too, would die a thousand deaths for that smile.

Ekyou: She’s super dedicated and super smart! She got into the University of Tokyo on an early acceptance program when she was 17, and she’s top of her class there too! And she studies butterflies and insects.

Sumitama: You mean lepidoptery? That sounds like it could be fun.

Ekyou: Yeah! Yeah, like that!

Sumitama beams at the validation - miraculously, so does everyone else watching. Even a smirk tugs at Sekisada’s mouth. Ekyou’s enthusiasm is infectious.

Sumitama: I’ll be sure to look into that! I’m sure we have nothing but time.
Ekyou: Oh, oh! I can help you find books for it! I’m sure there’s one somewhere…

Sumitama: Huh?! I’d love that, thank you!

Ekyou: No problem! Let’s go now!!

Shionaga: I think I saw some biology books that way-

Ekyou: [grabs Sumitama’s hand] Okay! Show us the way!

Kashizaki: Wait a minute-

Without even waiting for Shionaga, Ekyou runs off, pulling Sumitama along with her. Shionaga, evidently confused, shrugs and follows them at a slower pace. He smiles hesitantly and waves a goodbye as he rounds the corner. Kashizaki watches the whole group, looking slightly betrayed, before shaking her head and looking back to the rest of us.

Kashizaki: So what are you reading?

Atsui: The Tempest. I can’t believe it didn’t occur to anyone else to read the play.

Kashizaki: Hm. That’s surprising. Find anything interesting?

Atsui: Uh…. no?

Sekisada: He’s just mad that there isn’t a Sparknotes translation in the library.

Atsui: I am also illiterate.
Sekisada: Given everything I know about you, that makes sense.

Kashizaki: Don’t be mean. Japanese Shakespeare translations are intimidating. Atsui-san, do you need help?

Atsui: … Yeah, y’know what? Please.

Kashizaki takes a seat next to Atsui and pulls the book closer to her. She picks up her pen and starts to scribble in the margins. Sekisada seems content to ignore everything else going on and continues to read the same book.

Seeing as I don’t have a book myself, this is immensely awkward.

Chiyo: So what are you reading, Sekisada-san?

Kashizaki: More celebrity gossip? A romance novel?

Sekisada: What? [quickly closes book and tosses it aside] No. Why would it be that?

I pick up the book that he just dropped. While the title isn’t immediately obvious, the cover is embossed with flowers. The only one I recognize is a lily.

Kashizaki makes grabby hands and I pass her the book. She flips through the volume and wrinkles her nose.

Kashizaki: Sure looks like a romance novel.

Sekisada: It is not a romance novel.

Kashizaki: [hands the book back to me] Here, take it.
I take the book back and examine it more closely. I open it to the page and finally get a glimpse of its title - “The Account of Tokyo Bloom”, written in blocky, contemporary calligraphy.

Chiyo: “Tokyo Bloom”…?

Sekisada: Yeah. As in, the serial killer?

The book slips through my suddenly shaking hands.

Chiyo: W-why are you even reading about that??

Atsui: You don’t seem like someone who’d be into true crime stuff.

Sekisada: Listen, there’s nothing else to do and I’m bored out of my mind. Sue me for reading about something dark.

Sekisada: Besides, shouldn’t it be good to understand why someone would kill someone else? Given the environment and all?

Atsui: I don’t think we have any serial killers in this building.

Sekisada: Of course you would think that. It’s not like someone would just tell you that they’re a serial killer on the day you meet them.

I’m about to protest, but he picks up the book and opens it again, dismissing the complaint dying on my lips. Argh!! Why is he being so disagreeable?? Would it be so difficult to at least pretend to like us??

Sekisada: Why do you care so much anyway? Can’t I just read something because it’s interesting?

Chiyo: That shouldn’t be interesting! That’s horrifying!!
Kashizaki: Yeah, honestly? I kind of wish you were reading a romance novel instead.

Sekisada: What? Why?

Kashizaki: Then I could make fun of you for it.

Atsui: You could still call him a nerd.

Kashizaki: Fair enough. [to Sekisada] You’re a nerd.

Sekisada: Fuck off.

Chiyo: Ugh…

Atsui: Did you find anything interesting?

Sekisada: Not really. [taps book] Tokyo Bloom is a vigilante. They shove criminals off tall buildings and whatnot.

Kashizaki: Well, that’s dumb. Wouldn’t they get caught if they’re in a city pushing people like that?

Sekisada: They don’t kill in the city, obviously. They kidnap their victims and then take them to suburban areas. They’re called that because their victims all live in Tokyo.

Atsui: How do they make sure the people they kill are actually criminals?

Sekisada: Fuck, I don’t know, do you think I can just ring them up and ask them how they kill people? They just do! I literally started reading about this today, what do you want from me?
All this casual talk of murder is tying my stomach into knots. Don’t they realize that there are more tasteful things to discuss, considering our situation? There’s no way I’m going to survive more than a week in this setting.

Atsui: Kumoshita-san, are you okay? You’re really pale.

Chiyo: I think I need to go.

Sekisada: What, you can’t handle even a casual mention of death? Aren’t you the mortuary princess?

Kashizaki: [warning] Sekisada-san.

Sekisada: I’m not wrong. It’s all in the report cards -

Kashizaki: Sekisada-san, kindly shut the fuck up.

His expression doesn’t change at all. He just shrugs it off and drops the book with a resounding thud.

Sekisada: Fine. I know when I’m not wanted. Have fun with your illiteracy.

Sekisada stands up and starts towards the door. Before he reaches the end of the shelf, he stops in his tracks and spins on his heel to look at us again. When he speaks, he’s a little less acerbic.

Sekisada: By the way, the entire library is nonfiction. So it’s not like I could read a romance novel if I even wanted to.

He turns to leave, but hardly takes a step before pausing again. All the tension floods out of his posture, and for a moment, he almost looks ashamed.
Sekisada: Also, sorry.

Third time is the charm. He’s finally gone. Atsui and Kashizaki watch his back as he retreating, standing in front of me like two guardian angels, not to be overdramatic or anything.

When the library doors click shut, Atsui turns to Kashizaki.

Atsui: … I mean, some fiction anthologies are classified as nonfiction under the Nippon Decimal Classification. So there could be romance novels in here.

Kashizaki: Why do you know this?

Atsui: My cousin is a librarian.

Kashizaki: Nerd.

Atsui: Hey??

Though Sekisada left and that thread of conversation ended, my discomfort must still show; Atsui frowns when he sees my face.

Atsui: Are you alright?

Chiyo: In a very loose sense of the word, yes…?

Kashizaki: [nods] Sekisada-san is a jerk. I hate him too.

Atsui: Same. He’s pretentious.

Kashizaki: And so insensitive.
Today is just a day full of forming friendships based around mutual hatred, huh. Somehow I don’t feel like I should really be celebrating that. Still, it’s reassuring that Atsui and Kashizaki are willing to look out for me, and it’s reassuring that Valdez did too, wherever he went. Before I can thank them properly, though, Kashizaki drags me down to sit on the floor with them.

Kashizaki: C’mon. Sorry if you’re having a crisis, but if we have to suffer through Shakespeare, so do you.

Chiyo: I’m actually okay with that.

Kashizaki: Shit. [to Atsui] She’s okay with that. I was making a threat.

Atsui: Oh, spare me.

I end up reading through a copy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream while Atsui and Kashizaki argue the finer points of Ariel and Caliban’s characterizations and their possible relevance to our confinement. Kashizaki is scarily good at analysis, just like when she was looking at the wall paintings when I met her. Even though she insisted it was all bullshit throughout the afternoon, it’s obviously very convincing bullshit. Her literature teachers probably love her.

By the time I get to Act V and the riveting antics of Nick Bottom, Atsui stands up and puts the book down.

Atsui: I’ve decided I’m going to run away to America and never have to read ever again.

Kashizaki: Come on, it’s not that bad.

Atsui: Is too. I’m a fool in man’s shoes. Anyway. [stretches] It’s getting late, I should head to the kitchen.

Chiyo: Why would you need to do that?
My stomach chooses that moment to complain loudly. It may or may not have occurred to me that I haven’t eaten since McRae’s egg bread. Atsui raises an eyebrow.

Atsui: Because that, mostly. I figure no one really wants to cook, and I like doing it.

Atsui: [mutters] Besides, if we have as many resources as we need to keep us here forever, I’m sure I can afford to mess up a few times.

Kashizaki: You won’t mess up. You’re an Ultimate. You worked to get here.

Atsui: You’d be surprised. I blew up a microwave once.

Chiyo: I almost did that, too!

Kashizaki: [sighs] Then, given our company, I guess you really do have to cook. Mind if I join you? I have to agree that I don’t want to stare at books any longer.

Atsui: Yeah, sure. Kumoshita-san, do you want this?

He offers me The Tempest, which I take quickly. Looks like I’ll have to become the resident Shakespeare non-enthusiast.

Chiyo: Thanks!

Atsui: You won’t be thanking me in fifteen minutes.

Chiyo: … Unthanks?

Kashizaki: [snorts] You’re adorable. See you later.
They leave, walking side by side. I finally track down Ekyou’s group and mentally replay the afternoon while I take a seat next to Shionaga. Today’s been… a day.

I spend the rest of the afternoon sitting with Shionaga as Sumitama and Ekyou take turns chattering excitedly. It’s incredible how excited Ekyou can be, but it’s a little sad to see that only Sumitama has caused that so far. If only I could be able to make her that happy-

… Oh, gosh, the profiles ARE right. Sheer desire for Ekyou’s happiness IS a viable motivation.

As for the book itself, The Tempest is a bit better than I was expecting, but all I can think of is the immediacy of its plot. Or if it even has anything to do with our situation at all. English has never been my strong suit, and even with Kashizaki’s notes, I’m having problems figuring out the greater meaning behind any of this. At least no one dies.

Just as I finish the volume, my Parchment buzzes with a message.

[18:01] R. ATSUI:
Dinner is ready, come by the kitchen whenever you have time.
Holy shit I am so tired of trying to type out this every single time, Kumoshita-san text messages are literally your talent, how do I make this shorter

[18:01] C. KUMOSHITA:
Thank you Atsui-san!!!
And uh….
Copy/paste?

[18:01] R. ATSUI:
Fuck
Shit
Damn it
Why didn’t I think of that???
After I send my reply, Ekyou, Shionaga, and then Sumitama's Parchments each light up with their own notifications inviting them to dinner. By some unspoken agreement, we quickly tidy up our area and depart for the kitchen. We've done way too much reading for today. Even Sumitama seems tired out by the sheer volume of literature she's consumed, but Ekyou still seems full of energy.

When we get to the kitchen, individual bentos are laid out on the table filled with rice, fried fish, and vegetables. There's also a veritable pyramid of the same egg bread from that McRae made this morning stacked on a platter. Atsui and McRae are still in the kitchen, though Atsui washes dishes while McRae types something on the Parchment. He occasionally makes moves towards the sink, but Atsui hisses at him before he can take even a step. Either he genuinely enjoys doing the dishes, or he's just very territorial about the kitchen. Kashizaki is nowhere to be found, but one of the bentos is missing - I can only assume she grabbed one and left.

Before any of us four can take another step forward, the kitchen door opens behind us. Chisaki and Everett step through the door. As soon as Chisaki sees me-

Chisaki: KUMO-CHAN!!!~

-she flies at me and nearly knocks me to the floor in an enthusiastic tackle hug that turns somewhere down the line into an overdramatic tango dip. Heat creeps up my neck and I'm PRETTY SURE I'm blushing, but she pulls me back up before I can fall... and then hugs me again.

Chisaki: Oh, it’s been so long since we’ve last met!!

Chiyo: Good to see you too?

Chisaki: How I’ve missed your sweet and lovely face.
Chiyo: M-me??

Chisaki: Who else but my dear and wonderful Kumo-chan?

She winks at me and pulls me in for yet another hug. Before I can protest or question the sudden surname abbreviation, she leans down and whispers urgently in my ear.

Chisaki: I’ve been stuck in a room with Bates-san like literally all day so your face is now synonymous with mercy itself and I love you.

Chiyo: Oh, uh… You don’t like him?

Chisaki: When you’re stuck in a room with anyone for 8 hours while they prattle on about their career you wouldn’t like them by the end of it.

Chiyo: [pulls back] Eight entire hours?

Chisaki: I know, I didn't think it was possible either.

Chisaki spins in place and plants her hands on her hips, totally as if she’s forgotten all her complaints. She points skywards in the kind of pose someone would adopt in a dramatic still for a shonen series.

Chisaki: BUT ENOUGH OF THAT!!! My dear, sweet, precious Kumo-chan is here!! All will be well soon enough!!

… Guh.

Shionaga: Is Chisaki-chan, um, always like this…?
Everett: Well, I’ve known her about a day. And the answer is increasingly seeming to be “yes”.

Atsui: Stop messing around in my kitchen or so help me I’ll be forced to cut you with this knife in my hands and not only will you be very sad and possibly get an infection, but I’ll be put on trial for murder, so maybe don’t.

Chisaki: WOW that got dark really fast! Have you been stuck with Bates-san all day too, Atsui-san?

Atsui: I’ve been stuck with Sekisada-san so that’s close enough.

Chisaki: [mutters] Okay, that’s fair.

McRae: … Isn’t it a community kitchen?

Atsui: I lease it to people like you who can actually cook. Anyway, why are you all just standing there? Eat!


Atsui: If you don’t want it, you’re welcome to cook something else.

Ekyou: [covers Sumitama’s ears] Don’t be mean.

Ekyou has immediately reverted back to her stoic death glaring, this time focusing the full weight of her disappointment on Atsui. Atsui, for his part, is remarkably unaffected.

Atsui: Listen, I didn’t spend the past 3 hours cooking individually portioned fish, AND rice, AND vegetables, for you to disrespect fried fish in my house.

Everett: It’s, uh, not really your house.
Atsui: [breathes deeply] I’m well aware.

McRae: But it IS his kitchen. Allegedly.

The conversation falls to an uncomfortable silence, broken by Shionaga grabbing a bento and waving cheerily to Atsui.

Shionaga: Well, thanks for the food, Atsui-kun!

Atsui: Yeah, it’s whatever.

With that, everyone else starts to get their food. Atsui finishes the dishes and just sits down next to McRae, watching us warily as we each thank him politely. He does crack a smile when I pass by, though.

After getting their food, Sumitama and Shionaga bid the rest of us farewell. Ekyou bounces after them happily, though somewhat slower. I end up sitting outside in the living room with Everett and Chisaki, who toss banter back and forth. I mostly end up watching the fireplace.

Someone taps my shoulder. I look up to see Khalaf, awkwardly holding a bento themselves. They cough.

Khalaf: … Am I interrupting something?

It’s… awkward immediately. Everett stands up quickly.

Everett: I think I’m gonna go look at the gachapon machine. Maybe I can break into it. Chisaki-chan…?

Chisaki: Oh! [stands up] I’ll come with you!

Khalaf: There’s no need to leave-
Chisaki: Yeah, no, there’s gotta be a reason you weren’t with Kumo-chan. All. Day.

Chiyo: W-w-wh- how would you know that?!

Chisaki: [shrugs] Cuz. How you’re reacting. Have fun resolving everything! Bye now!!

Chisaki drags Everett away, even though Everett was the one who brought up leaving in the first place. That doesn't matter because they left me in my hour of need. How dare they.

With Chisaki and Everett gone, it seems that Khalaf is just going to awkwardly stand here. Seeming to consider this, Khalaf takes a seat across from me... So now it looks like we're going to awkwardly sit here.

Chiyo: Hey, um...

Khalaf: ...

Khalaf: Missed you today.

Chiyo: Oh! Yeah, me too. With uh, missing you. Not missing me.

Khalaf: Yeah.

I feel like I did something wrong.

Chiyo: Is everything alright? With Murdock-san and... everything.

Khalaf: Yes, everything's fine. We got into an extended discussion about ethics. You know.
Chiyo: Wow, um. She really wasn't kidding when she said she hates small talk.

Khalaf: She pretty much went off on a tangent for most of it.

Chiyo: Shouldn't she be the SHSL Philosopher or something?

Khalaf: [shrugs] Beats me. I'm sure you can ask her to take apart a watch if you're THAT concerned.

Chiyo: I guess.

Khalaf: And then she tried to get McRae-san into the discussion, but then he left to help Atsui-san to make dinner. So that was my day.

Chiyo: Well, that explains the egg bread.

Khalaf: It really is good egg bread.

Chiyo: Yeah.

Again, another awkward silence. Maybe if I didn't disagree with Murdock so much, we would be able to hang out more. But maybe the fact that I only want to get along with Murdock so I can talk to Khalaf is why I can't get along with them. Doesn't that make me selfish?

Well, screw that, I want to hang out with my friend.

Chiyo: So I was wondering-

Khalaf: By the way- wait, you go first.
Chiyo: No, no, you go.

Khalaf: If you're sure. By the way, what did YOU do all day?

Chiyo: Not much. [tugs at gloves] I spent a lot of time in the library.

Khalaf: Ah. [nods awkwardly] So... how did that go?

Chiyo: Um...


Chiyo: ...It went well.

Khalaf: That's good to hear. What were you going to say?

I don't even know if I want to ask it anymore. Whatever camaraderie Khalaf and I had yesterday seems to be completely gone.

Chiyo: Do you want to hang out tomorrow?

Khalaf: Of course I do. There's only so much discussion with Murdock I can handle.

Chiyo: Wait, really? I thought you two were attached at the hip.

Khalaf: [rolls eyes] She's not THAT great. Besides, her opinions are shit.

I shouldn't be as delighted as I am about this. My expression must betray me, though, and Khalaf cracks a smile.
Khalaf: Do you want to hear about it?

Chiyo: Yes, PLEASE.

We spend the rest of the hour talking shit - or, more accurately, Khalaf talks shit while I eat my dinner. Apparently, they're very adamantly against Murdock's views of sacrifices being for the greater good. For that matter, they're against most of Murdock's views in general, because they are apparently "completely unethical and self-centered". The amount of vindication I get from this declaration is possibly too satisfying for my own good.

Eventually, we finish dinner and go back to the now vacant kitchen to wash out our bento containers. Khalaf asks if I want to keep talking, but they yawn so much that fifteen minutes in it's altogether too evident that they're getting tired and I force them to go back to their room. Having run out of things to do, I do the same.

I lie on the bed for a moment, reflecting on the day. Thinking back, it really... hurts? In a sense? To reflect on everything. I'm starting to realize how close we became in only one day, and I can't even imagine all of the experiences we must have lost from the past three years.

I'm probably too tired to think about this too much. I turn on my Parchment and finally return to leafing through profiles. Midway through Murdock’s profile, it strikes me that it's probably really invasive to read so deeply into everyone's histories and stuff so small as likes and dislikes... But really, all of this information is just out there, for everyone to see, and there's no reason not to take advantage of what's there. Sekisada, for one, started reading through everyone's profiles from the get-go. I'm only using accessing the information that's available to all of us, anyway.

At least I’ve learned that Valdez also uses gender-neutral pronouns. Better file that one away for future reference.

Flicking through the profiles reminds me that I haven't actually seen a few people since the meeting yesterday. The area available to us is so small, it's almost hard to imagine not seeing just a few people. Chisaki mentioned hanging out with Bates for a solid eight hours, which sounds painful, to say the least. Then there's Bazhanov, who apparently just... hasn't been around. I don't blame him, given how everyone reacted to him yesterday. Admittedly, I don't really know if I want to talk to him. I don't know what I would say. And then Harai...
I still feel bad for both Harai and Bazhanov. I didn't do anything to help them yesterday, and that bothers me. Like, a lot. I can't tell if either of them don't want to engage or if they're actually just lonely or anything of the sort. I think I should get to the bottom of this.

I open the messenger application and send identical messages to Bazhanov and Harai.

[20:01] C. KUMOSHITA:
Hey! ^-^

The bait has been laid. It's out of my hands now.

It's getting late and I really don't feel like going out, so I open the notes app to write. I stare at the blank page for a moment, but eventually I start typing an account of everything that's happened today. It's no cellphone novel, but it's better than nothing.

I must have lost track of time, because a cheery popup on the screen cuts my focus.

Ariel: Attention please! It is now 10:00 pm and nighttime hours have begun. Please exercise caution in these hours, and rest well!

Nighttime hours already? I still don't have a response from Harai or Bazhanov. Oh well. It doesn't take me long to get ready for bed, but as I lie on the (uncomfortably comfortable) mattress I can almost find myself getting used to this. Maybe this situation isn't all terrible - I have friends here. But...

The threat of our situation still looms over us.

I fall into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found here.
Interested in making your very own egg bread? Check out Maangchi's video for gyeran-ppang here!

... Yes, I like food a lot.
I wake up to a phone buzzing in my ear and a cheerful automated announcement. It’s morning already? Why??

(And so begins day three of our confinement.)

Geez, I don’t even know what I’m going to do today. I’ve pretty much seen everything there is to see with the area of the mansion that’s open to us, and there’s the whole day ahead of me. Maybe this is just another incentive Ariel and Caliban have for us to participate in… that.

That said, it’s been two days and no one seems inclined to try and escape. Maybe things will work out after all.

One thing remains constant, though: morning medication. Which means a trip to the kitchen.

The walk over is quiet, just like yesterday. Most of the morning people seem to be early morning people who get up before the announcement even plays, while most of the less-morning people seem to ignore the announcement and sleep in. Or maybe everyone just happens to conveniently be at a different place than I am at this given time. Either way, I don’t run into anyone until I reach the kitchen and open the door.

To my surprise, the refrigerator door is open. The person nosing around in it stands up quickly when I walk in, and to my greater surprise, it’s… Bazhanov?

Bazhanov: … Good morning.
Chiyo: Morning!

Relief floods through me. I didn’t think he would be dead or anything like that, but it’s good to see that he’s alright. Mostly because he didn’t answer my message last night. Not that I expected him to, but… Y’know.

I proceed to the sink and fill a glass of water, then quickly take my meds. When I come back to the table, Bazhanov is inspecting one of McRae’s egg breads from yesterday. He doesn’t seem inclined to eat it, simply rolling it back and forth in his hands.

Chiyo: Are you okay?

I wince immediately because oh my gosh that was super upfront. Bazhanov merely raises an eyebrow before settling back into his stiff posture.

Bazhanov: I’m well enough, I suppose. But I don’t think that’s what you meant. [holds out bread] What’s this?

Chiyo: That? McRae-san made it yesterday, it’s bread with an egg and cheese in it-

Bazhanov: Well, I would hope it has at least one egg in it. It’s bread, after all.

Chiyo: I, um… don’t know much about cooking.

Bazhanov: Me neither. But bread usually has eggs, does it not?

Chiyo: … I think? You can ask Atsui-san if you’re curious, I’m sure he knows!

Bazhanov: ...It’s a joke, Chiyo.
... Am I supposed to be laughing?

Bazhanov: Do you want this? I’m not going to eat it.

Chiyo: You’re not-? Oh, that’s right. You don’t like bread. I’ll take it, thank you.

He hands it to me and I take a bite. I’m never going to get over this egg bread.

Bazhanov: So I assume you read the profiles.

Chiyo: Yeah…

Bazhanov: Well, if we’re going to go into our personal lives now, what’s wrong with goldfish?

Chiyo: Nothing, really. I just, uh…

He stares at me. I don’t feel like I’m being judged (I think??), but it’s still very disconcerting to have someone in a mask facing me and presumably hanging onto my every word.

Chiyo: I feel bad.


Chiyo: No, I mean, for the goldfish. A lot of the time, really ignorant people keep goldfish in bad living conditions, and don’t pay attention to their needs. Sure, they feed them, but they don’t have any filtration systems or anything like that.

I outline my usual points in regards to fish care - the lack of space provided to them, the irresponsible living conditions, and the ultimately shortened lifespan due to the owners’ irresponsibility. As I talk, Bazhanov nods at my points, remaining silent the whole time. By the end of my spiel, he seems completely engrossed.
Chiyo: So I don’t dislike goldfish. I just dislike the people that own them.

*Bazhanov blinks quickly, as if he’s snapped out of a trance. On second thought, instead of being interested, he might have just been zoning out. He leans back in his chair, polite posture strangely abandoned.*

Bazhanov: Well. Whenever we get out of here, I’d better relay all of that to Iri.

Chiyo: Iri…?

Bazhanov: Oh. Yes, not Iris. She’s someone I know back home.

Chiyo: That’s a strange name. What does it mean?

Bazhanov: Names may have been changed for the sake of privacy. [shrugs] In other words, she gave it to herself. I don’t know. But she has a betta at home in a bowl.

Chiyo: Oh, ew.

I don’t mean to come off as contemptuous as I probably sound, but Bazhanov seems to frown. At least, from what I can tell.

Bazhanov: I’ll let her know about what you said. Thank you for telling me this.

Chiyo: Please don’t tell her I said “ew”?

*Bazhanov exhales quickly, the same kind of laugh my brother makes when he’s amused but in a situation where he isn’t allowed to burst into guffaws.*

Bazhanov: I won’t.
I sip at my now lukewarm water, grateful after my spiel. For his part, Bazhanov seems content to let the conversation lapse into silence. Now that I said that whole thing, he seems a lot more comfortable. Yet I can’t shake the feeling that this “Iri” sounds… pretty suspicious, actually. I’m pretty sure that’s not a name anywhere. But I really can’t judge people on what names they choose for themselves, so it’s probably better not to pry.

Since I have the opportunity to ask, though…

Chiyo: Bazhanov-san.

Bazhanov: Hm?

Chiyo: I was, um, wondering…

He turns to look at me, seeming deeply unimpressed by the mere declaration that I want to ask about his life. Honestly, I was going to ask if he REALLY has nothing to do with this situation or something like that, but that’s… really rude. So instead I say the first thing that comes to mind.

Chiyo: What’s with the mask?

… I realize that I never promised that the first thing that comes to mind was not also rude.

Bazhanov: My mask?

His eye widens, hands immediately rising to it. I bite down on my tongue. CLEARLY that was super invasive and not good to ask! Why did I do that! Guess I’ll die!!

Rather than seeming offended, though, he just seems… contemplative. He runs his fingers along the edges of its surface, lingering for a moment on the feathers.
Bazhanov: Hm…

Bazhanov closes his visible eye. Maybe he’s got Phantom of the Opera scarring? Oh my gosh I really shouldn’t have asked. What if he’s offended. What if he’s going to kill me in my sleep because I asked this. What if he never wants to speak to me again. Maybe-

Bazhanov: I just like the drama.

Oh.

Well, that’s… An answer.

Bazhanov: That wasn’t the answer you were looking for.

Chiyo: No! No, it’s fine. It’s your life! You can do what you like-

Bazhanov: I also don’t have a left eye.

…

Chiyo: EXCUSE?? ME???

Bazhanov: Do you want to see?

Chiyo: N-no?? That’s kind of weird???


Chiyo: Oh my gosh, that was really insensitive of me to say. I’m going about this all wrong, I’m so sorry-
Bazhanov: What, did you stab it out yourself? You’d better be sorry.

**I think he’s laughing at me.**

Chiyo: I mean- That’s not what I mean.

Bazhanov: I understand. And it’s alright. Really, don’t worry about it. It was a long time ago.

Chiyo: What happened?

Bazhanov: That’s for me to know. By the way, I have a question for you as well. Or rather, a request.

Chiyo: Oh! Of course, what’s wrong?

Bazhanov seems to weigh his options, but eventually his expression (or what I can make of it) settles back on that determinedly blank one from the meeting two days ago.

Bazhanov: Don’t talk to me anymore.

His cape billows behind him as he leaves. I press my lips together, but ultimately resist the urge to call after him.

Did I say something wrong? No, he said himself that he wasn’t bothered by the question. And he seemed like he was having an okay time before his last words. Maybe his intent was protection, that he thinks that people would be suspicious of me for associating with him? But that’s dumb, of course he isn’t-!

Y’know what? I think I just need to stop having such confusing conversations in the morning. If he wants to talk to me again after this, I’ll be happy to do so. Until then, I guess it’s better to keep my distance.
As soon as I finish eating the rest of the bread, I hear a soft scuffling noise from behind me. I turn quickly to see a face - or rather, half a face - I didn’t really want to see again.

Ariel: Kuu… I just missed him, didn’t I?

Chiyo: Yes. You did.

Ariel: … Ah.

He seems taken aback by my sharp tone, and for a second I feel almost guilty. Unlike Caliban, Ariel at least seems to be trying to be nice… but in all seriousness, I’m not sure how I feel about a robot trying to be nice about encouraging us to kill each other.

I could probably stand to be nicer myself, though. This morning has already been sort of a train wreck.

Chiyo: Um, did you need anything?

Ariel: Well, I was planning on announcing this to the class, but it seems that none of you like to stay in one place. [sighs] I would think that you would start breakfast meetings by this point. Wouldn’t that be the logical course of action? It would double as a roll call, after all.

Chiyo: I, um…

… hadn’t considered that, actually. It makes sense, and it’s a thoughtful suggestion, but I don’t really trust like that. Does Ariel have an ulterior motive for saying this? Aside from wanting us to kill each other.

Chiyo: Do you want me to bring that up? I can message the class if you want me to.

Ariel: No, no… It’ll be fine. You really are too kind, Miss Kumoshita. But I appreciate it.
Chiyo: Thanks, I guess.

I’m getting really tired of hearing that. I certainly don’t feel very kind right now.

Chiyo: What did you need everyone for?

Ariel: Oh. About that.

A panel slides outwards in Ariel’s chest, and out falls what appears to be a veritable deluge of round black and white tokens. I try not to stare.

Ariel: I wanted to make the Monomachine more accessible, so I brought all of these tokens to distribute to the class. But it seems you’re the only one here, kuu…

Chiyo: The mono-what?

Ariel: Ah. The… gachapon machine? Is that the term? I’m afraid I’m not that familiar.

Chiyo: Oh, do you mean the machine by the barrier?

Ariel: Yes, that one. Thank you, kuhuhu.

The tinny mechanical laugh seems like it’s meant to be reassuring, but it just makes him sound slightly menacing. All it does is make Ariel seem even more foreign - that is, more foreign than a robot bird named after a Shakespeare character who also uses Western conventions for pretty much everything. So on second thought, this doesn’t really affect anything. Good job, me!

… Also, seriously, the gachapon machine is so special that it gets its own tokens?
Ariel: I suppose I’ll have to track everyone down myself…

Chiyo: I can hand them out for you if you’d like! I’m going to spend the day with everyone, anyway.

**Ariel’s feathers ruffle as he considers the offer. After a moment, he lifts his head, voice chipper.**

Ariel: Thank you, miss, that would indeed be much appreciated. But only if you’re sure?

Chiyo: Yeah, of course! It’s no trouble at all!

Ariel: Oh, thank you so much! I’ll find a way to reward you if I can.

Chiyo: I-if you’re sure?!

I probably shouldn’t have accepted that. Ariel doesn’t seem to notice the gravity of what he just offered, being the possibly omnipotent robot in charge of the house, and passes off the tokens to me… somehow. I don’t think he even has hands. Nevertheless, they all make it into my bag. Also somehow.

**Ariel ruffles his wings and nods to himself. For a robot, he’s surprisingly expressive.**

Ariel: Well, if that’s all, I suppose I can get back to work. Thank you, miss.

Chiyo: R-right! No problem!

And with that, he flies out of the kitchen. After a moment, I slide off my chair and leave the room, too.

I take exactly three steps towards the hallway before almost colliding head-on with Bates.
Chiyo: S-sorry!!

Bates: Mmh…?

Bates doesn’t seem at all bothered by the near-accident. In fact, he looks dead on his feet and barely awake. It apparently takes him a moment to even register that I’m standing in front of him.

Bates: Kumoshita-chaaaaan.

Chiyo: Good morning, Claude-san!

Bates: Mmph…

He closes his eyes, swaying where he stands. For a moment, it looks like he’s about to fall over; before I can reach out, he rights himself, eyes still shut.

Bates: I’m tired.

Chiyo: I can tell. Do you want to go back to your room? We’ve got plenty of time to do whatever we want!

Bates: [shakes head] Can’t go back to sleep.

Chiyo: Uh… why not?

Bates: It’s how I roll. It’s what I do. I wake up at 6… and I can’t go back to sleep. And I’m tired.

Chiyo: Oh. That… sucks?
Bates: It dooooes.

I really don’t know what to say in response to all of this. Bates seriously looks like he needs more sleep or... something. Tea, maybe.

Actually, no, I kind of don’t want to see what a caffeinated Bates would look like.

Chiyo: Have you tried napping?

Bates: Naps don’t work for me. I’m a sad, sad man.

Chiyo: Huh. I mean they don’t for me either, so that’s kind of interesting?

Bates: [sways again] So basically I’m doomed. I gotta... I gotta stay up. I’m a martyr, Kumoshita-chan. I have to take the fall for humanity as a whole. I’m too good for this world or something like that.

Chiyo: Oh, um... Cool?

Bates makes a noise somewhere in between a trombone and a dying swan. I somewhat successfully resist the urge to grimace.

Bates: Why are YOU up so early, anyway?

Chiyo: I guess I’m just a morning person! And also Ariel’s announcement and everything.


Chiyo: Agreed. I want to go home.

Disagreed? What does he mean by that? Somehow, it’s hard to believe that Bates might somehow have a less-than-stellar home life, though I guess anything is possible. I’ve heard horror stories from my friends who got pressured to play instruments. Heck, I nearly lived one before I managed to pop all the keys off a clarinet and my parents let me quit.

... Now that I think about it, I could probably have used a little more supervision as a child.

Bates seems absent, though, as if he didn’t even register my lack of response. I really shouldn’t judge him too harshly, especially considering whatever rough life he had that he’s not talking about.

Chiyo: Well, speaking of Ariel…

I tell him about the Monomachine and the tokens that Ariel gave me. His eyes light up at the suggestion, and the fatigue falls from his frame as if he were an animated mascot and his franchise just got a budget boost.

Bates: Seriously? That’ll solve like half our problems!

Chiyo: Problems? Wait, what problems?

Bates: Ahaha, boredom, mostly. [shrugs] This zone has like five communal rooms for things to do and I’ve already seen all of them. Not counting the hallways, but like, I don’t think those count as rooms according to housing regulations. And stuff.

Chiyo: [frowns] But I don’t get how that gachapon machine would help us. Wouldn’t it just have the same five figurines or something?

Bates: Do you seriously think this weird mansion would have a normal gachapon machine? Like, hello, why don’t we trap a bunch of high schoolers in a mansion and it has normal mansion rooms like a library and shit. But wait! We’ll put a gachapon machine in it! But here’s the kicker: it’s a normal gachapon machine.
Chiyo: … What?

Bates: So what I’m saying is that there’s no way it’s just a normal gachapon, you know. I’m sure it’s funky and interesting BECAUSE it’s a really funky and interesting thing to just throw into a mansion. It would make no sense for it to be a normal one with figurines or whatever!

He’s bouncing on his feet, completely as if he wasn’t just dying thirty seconds ago. Despite his height, he reminds me of the little kids who don’t really register that their loved ones passed away.

Chiyo: Shouldn’t it be interesting enough to have a gachapon machine in the building regardless of what’s actually in it?

Bates: Kumoshita-chaaan!! Aren’t you curious? You’ve gotta be curious.

Chiyo: Well, now that you mention it… It IS kinda weird that that would be there. And I guess I’m sort of wondering what’s in there, myself…

Bates spins in place and grabs my hand, grinning from ear to ear.

Bates: EXACTLY!!! So come on come on come on LET’S GO.

Chiyo: D-Don’t you want to eat something first??

Bates: [quickly] I ate a sandwich after I woke up, I’m fine, hurry up!!

He all but drags me to the gachapon - the Monomachine - at the end of the room. The electrical barrier still crackles ominously, but he doesn’t pay any mind to it. I guess he’s got the common sense to not touch it… or maybe he just doesn’t care.

As soon as we get to the machine itself (still sad and rusty), he turns to me, a pleading expression on his face. I stifle a sigh and pull out a handful of tokens.
Chiyo: Okay, but we can only take two each.

Bates: Whaaaat? Then what’s the point of having so many tokens?

Chiyo: I’m supposed to give them to everyone else.

Bates pouts, but ultimately accepts the two tokens I give to him. By the time I pull two more out of my bag, he’s already taking a pair of capsules from the machine. He opens the first one and makes a face.

Bates: Ugh, origami paper. I don’t know how to fold.

Chiyo: I can teach you if you want-

Bates: Nah, whatever. Do you want it?

Chiyo: … Yeah, sure.

Bates: Great! Here you go.

He places the paper in my hands and grins widely. I’m starting to get kind of annoyed. How on earth did Chisaki do this for eight hours yesterday? And hey, while we’re at it, how did that paper even fit in a capsule?

Chiyo: Oh, um, thanks?

Bates: Yeah, no problem. Aren’t you gonna get one too?

Chiyo: Huh? Oh, yeah…
One thing is for sure: I shouldn’t expect anything normal from this machine. I put two tokens into the machine anyway and twist the knob. Two large red capsules drop out of the machine.

I open the first one to find…

Bates: What are those?

Chiyo: Flower seeds?

I turn over the package. These don’t seem too special - they’re myosotis seeds. Or, in other words:

Chiyo: Forget-me-nots.

Bates: Ahh. [tilts head] Do you know how to garden?

Chiyo: I think Sumitama-san does. We can go find her after this!

Bates’ expression seems to crumple, which he quickly contorts to something resembling neutrality. He’s not doing a very good job of it.

Bates: I dunno. If we run into her, I guess. [brightens] Ah, but we still have our second gachapons to open! On three?

All I can do is nod. What more can you do when faced with the force of nature that is Claude Bates but agree?

Bates: Okay. [holds up capsule] One… two… three!

We both pop open our capsules. Mine seems to be a cheap makeup palette. Bates, for his part, holds up a wad of paper. He unfolds it and makes a face.
Bates: Ew, sheet music. I don’t want this?

**Some violinist. I fiddle with the palette for a moment, popping it open and shut.**

Chiyo: I got a eyeshadow palette.

Bates: Mm. Is it any good?

Chiyo: It’s from a gachapon machine, how good can it be?

Bates: Ahaha… [winces] Yeah, that looks cheap. Maybe don’t put it by your eyes.

Chiyo: That’s probably for the best.

Bates: Hm? Probably.

Chiyo: Yeah.

Bates: Yep!

**Before this conversation can get any further derailed with noncommittal statements, something buzzes. Bates wrinkles his nose and fishes his Parchment out of a pocket to check. He must indeed have a message; his brow furrows and he starts typing. His tongue sticks out a little when he’s concentrating.**

I find myself shifting awkwardly as he snickers under his breath, texting back and forth with whoever it is. Maybe I should be messaging people too, like-

**Khalaf! That’s who I forgot about! If only I could ask them to come over now… But also, if I did that, they’d probably strangle Bates with their bare hands.**
Fortunately, this issue seems to be resolved for me, as Bates puts his Parchment away and turns to me apologetically.

Bates: So sorry, Kumoshita-chan, but it seems I’m requested elsewhere. McRae-san says he wanted to ask about some composition things.

Chiyo: McRae-san…? That’s kind of... interesting.

Interesting in that McRae barely seems attentive to anything besides whatever he’s doing himself. If he’s asking Bates about something, he must seriously be considering that something. Firstly because it’s McRae, secondly because it’s Bates. Bates himself doesn’t look all that surprised, raking a hand through his hair so that it sticks up even more.

Bates: Ah, didn’t you read about his game? That, uh, rhythm based fighting one. Apparently he was wondering about music for soundtracks, so he wanted to ask me some stuff. [shrugs] It’s no big deal.

Chiyo: That would be a really cool collaboration to see! Especially since you’re both at the Ultimate level. I’m sure whatever comes of it will be fantastic!

Bates: Ah?

He ducks his head quickly, but he’s grinning ear to ear.

Bates: I hope so. Assuming whatever we make even gets published, ahaha.

Chiyo: Even if it doesn’t, it’ll definitely be great!

Bates: You overpraise me, Kumoshita-chan. I can’t speak for McRae-san, of course, but I appreciate it.

Bates: And, uh, I’m really sorry to do this to you, buuut. I kinda gotta go. I don’t want to keep
McRae-san waiting.

Chiyo: Oh! Of course! Take care!

Bates: Mhm! You too!

With a flick of a finger gun, Bates walks away. I glance at the floor to realize he’s dropped the wad of sheet music, which leaves him with a grand total of zero prizes. So much for his excitement over the gachapon.

(I end up stuffing the sheet music in my bag too.)

I head in the opposite direction. Who am I when I’m not being talked to? Am I even a person? I’d better find someone to hang out with soon so that I don’t end up reading Shakespeare again.

Though I haven’t seen Khalaf all day, there’s no answer when I knock on their door. I pace for a solid minute before giving up and heading further down the hallway. There go my afternoon plans.

Eventually, I find myself in the atrium, where Ekyou, Sumitama, and Shionaga seem to be looking for… something. Judging from the fact that Shionaga is just kicking idly at a planter instead of doing anything, I’m not sure if they’re successful.

Ekyou spots me first, expression barely changing when she looks up and nods in my direction.

Ekyou: Hey.

Shionaga: Hi, Kumoshita-chan!

Chiyo: Hey! What are you guys doing?
Shionaga: Looking for stuff.

Chiyo: What kind of stuff?

Shionaga: … Important stuff!

Ekyou: He doesn’t know.

Shionaga: Neither do you!

Ekyou: [shrugs] Guilty as charged. [leans over and calls out] Sumitama-chan, what are we looking for?

Sumitama sits back from the cabinet she was half-buried in and wipes her brow with the back of her hand. She frowns for a moment before turning to us.

Sumitama: It’s nothing. I can’t find it, anyway.

Ekyou: Aw… I’m sure there’s some in this mansion somewhere!

Sumitama: [shakes head] If it’s not here, then I don’t think it would be anywhere else. Except maybe the kitchen…

Shionaga: Do you want me to message Atsui-kun? I’m sure he’d be happy to help! Or I could talk to McRae-kun?

Sumitama: No, no, it’s fine. I’ll live. [smiles] Thank you, though.

Shionaga: Hey, it’s no problem!
Ekyou: Of course. If there’s anything we can help with, don’t be afraid to ask!

Dang, it’s only been two days and these three are already super close. I’m a bit jealous. Ekyou turns back to me and smiles warmly.

Ekyou: So how have you been?

Chiyo: Uh. About that?

I tell them about my morning, glossing over Bazhanov’s conversation as much as possible. Something tells me that he would rather not have any conversation with him made public, especially with that last bit about not wanting me to talk to him. When I get to the part with the Monomachine, Shionaga perks up.

Shionaga: The gachapon machine actually works? No way, I wanna see!

Chiyo: I have tokens, actually! Let me just get them…

In my rush to get the tokens out of my bag, I almost drop some of the prizes that Bates and I had won. Upon seeing the assortment of paper packets, Sumitama and Ekyou’s expressions both light up.

Sumitama: T-those!!

Chiyo: The flower seeds, right?

Sumitama: [nods] I was looking for some! May I please have them?

Chiyo: Of course! I thought of you when I saw them, too.

Sumitama: Oh…! Thank you!
I give the seeds to her. She bustles back to the cabinet, pulling out a pair of gloves and a trowel before getting to work. A smile tugs at Ekyou’s lips as she watches Sumitama work, and again I have to wonder what it takes to keep Ekyou happy forever because oh my god, if I could, I totally would.

Chiyo: Um, Ekyou-san, did you want something?

Ekyou: Huh? Wait, that’s right! May I please have the origami paper?

Chiyo: Yeah, sure!

Shionaga: Can I have some too? I’m clueless about gardening.

Ekyou: We can fold our own flowers! What kinds do you know how to make?

Chiyo: I haven’t folded origami since I was a little kid. And those were always stuff like boats and animals…

Shionaga: Same. Except I just didn’t do that at all, so it’s not really the same. [shrugs] Ma and Pa didn’t want me doing soft things.

We’ve already taken a seat on the floor, but Ekyou frowns at the statement.

Ekyou: Soft… things? What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?

Shionaga turns red and drops his paper. He scrambles to pick it up, stammering all the while.

Shionaga: I mean! I don’t mean that origami is for, uh, for sissies or anything like that. Poor word choice. My bad. My parents, just, uh.
Shionaga: They didn’t want me… doing that.

Ekyou wordlessly drops her first flower and starts folding a second one. She must still be pissed about Shionaga’s choice of words - she presses her lips together in a barely disguised scowl, which leaves it to me to save Shionaga’s dignity.

Chiyo: Why not?

Shionaga: Eh, y’know. [shrugs] You know my parents? Hitoshi Shionaga and Ryo Koizumi?

Chiyo: Um, no.

Ekyou: Yes. [to Chiyo] Volleyball stars. About your parents’ age. They were rivals.

Shionaga: Mhm… They’re pretty…

He falters, actually looking uncomfortable, before finally making a single crease in his paper. I fiddle with my own paper, as I’ve apparently forgotten how to fold a crane. Ekyou starts on another flower, ignoring either of our plights in favor of the conversation.

Ekyou: Harsh?

Shionaga: Huh? Oh, nah, they’re okay. They just wanted me to do sports stuff. [frowns and looks to Ekyou] How are you doing that?

Ekyou: Here, pass it.

Ekyou trades her half-done flower for Shionaga’s crumpled mess. He frowns and pulls it apart before starting to replicate the folds. I finally finish the crane and place it on the planter next to Ekyou’s flowers.

Chiyo: Were they, um, mad…? That you’re doing football now.
Shionaga: I was doing football in the off season for volleyball anyway. I don’t think they cared as long as I upheld their athletic legacy. I mean, uh, I kind of hurt myself doing volleyball, so that let me quit.

Ekyou: Is that how you got your scar? [taps her own face]

Shionaga: [mirrors action] Yeah.

Ekyou: How did you get it?

Shionaga: …

Shionaga: I tripped.

After making that simple statement, he starts flicking his eyes back and forth. I don’t think he’s being truthful, but Ekyou just shrugs it off and accepts it. She drops the flower she was working on and looks at the now-crumpled heap in Shionaga’s hand that may once have been the beginnings of a flower.

Ekyou: Do you need help?

By the time Sumitama wanders over to us, Shionaga has finally made three (somewhat crooked) flowers, which he twirls together in his hands, looking mildly impressed with himself. Ekyou teaches Sumitama to make her flowers, then claims her Monomachine tokens and excuses herself for a moment. She returns with a black and red sewing kit, which she uses to string ten of her flowers together. As she sews, she explains that it’s meant to be a hydrangea when placed together, which sounds pretty neat. I don’t actually know enough about flowers to verify this.

Eventually, I get hungry and bid the others farewell, then meander back to the kitchen. Since I left it this morning, the room’s gotten a lot livelier and a lot more full of dirty dishes. Atsui, the culprit himself, looks over when I enter the room and simply nods a greeting before returning his attention to something simmering on the stovetop. Whatever it is, it smells… surprisingly mediocre. I guess I shouldn’t judge it until it’s actually done, though.
Lunch is very uneventful, and I spend the next half hour or so typing up an account of the day so far on my Parchment. A ping comes up, and I realize I’ve gotten a text message from - McRae?!

[13:36] T. MCRAE:

yo can you come to the meeting room

or w/e it is you call that one room with no nameplate on it

everett is killing me at scrabble and i need backup

Not to say that I don’t want to go or anything, but… since when does McRae talk to me? Does this mean Murdock will be there? I don’t want to spend another day dying of embarrassment under her gaze.

Nevertheless, I head over to the meeting room (is that what it is?) to find the peculiar sight of McRae, Khalaf, and Everett crowded around a Scrabble board, the latter smirking while the former two wear expressions of varying levels of hopelessness. Outside of this battlefield, Valdez peers over Khalaf’s shoulder while Chisaki perches on the couch, chanting and pumping her fists.

Murdock isn’t here.

Thank god.

Chisaki: Rett-chan! Rett-chan! Rett-chan!

Chiyo: What…?

Chisaki is the first to notice my arrival, immediately standing up and pointing directly at me.

Chisaki: Kumo-chan!
McRae: Oh, good. My moral support is here.

Chisaki: Everyone look! It’s my emotional support wife!!

Everett: Chisaki-chan, you said *I* was your emotional support wife.

Chisaki: … Fair point! Kumo-chan! You can be Khalaf-kun’s emotional support wife!

Chiyo: GUH??

**Khalaf turns bright red but otherwise does not respond, instead frowning with narrowed eyes at the board before them.**

Khalaf: Come sit. We’re all losing to Everett-san.

Everett: You’re making it easy. Take your turn already. [winks] Gotta impress your emotional support wife.

Khalaf: … Fine.

I take a seat next to them as we mutually and silently decide not to say anything about what Everett just said. They scan the board with a deer in the headlights expression for several moments and hesitantly place two tiles on the board.

Khalaf: I play, um… “car”. That’s, uh.

**They flip their tiles, frantic eyes searching for a score multiplier. There are none to be found.**

Khalaf: That’s two points. Because that C is a blank tile.
Everett: And you’re a journalist. [shakes head] For shame.

Khalaf: I don’t use fancy words in journalism! I use understandable ones!

Everett: [points to board] Like “it” and “here”.

Khalaf: I’m doing my best!!

Chiyo: [pats Khalaf] I think you’re doing pretty good!

Khalaf mumbles something about this game being rigged. Now that I can see the board, I can survey the vast expanse of simple four letter words and some real crazy shit. Judging by the text that McRae sent and by the play that Khalaf just made, it’s fairly obvious whose words were played by who.

McRae: Khalaf-san, please stop stealing Kumoshita-san. I texted her to come here so she could help me.

Khalaf: [deflates] Oh. Is that what she’s here for.

Chiyo: Um, yeah. [tugs gloves] Sorry.

McRae: Please, Kumoshita-san. You’re my only hope. You can write things and know things about words.

Valdez: To be entirely fair, so does Khalaf-san and they’re not doing terribly great. No offense.

Khalaf: None taken. Doesn’t that mean I should keep Kumoshita-chan on my side, then?

Chisaki: Yeah! McRae-san, you can’t just take their emotional support wife!
Khalaf: Will you stop calling her that??

McRae: [sighs] I guess some exceptions need to be made. You win this round, Khalaf-san.

Khalaf: Thank you.

They seem more relieved to have me on their side than McRae is disappointed not to have me on his, but I cast a guilty glance at him anyway.

Chiyo: If it’s any consolation, I’m very bad at English. You probably don’t want me on your side.

McRae: Eh, don’t worry about it. I’m okay either way.

True to his word, he really doesn’t seem bothered. In my place, Valdez migrates to lean over McRae’s shoulder, apparently the new designated support. Since the custody battle is over, Everett claps her hands together.

Everett: Well! Not like it matters right now, because it’s my turn!

Without waiting for a reply, she places down a handful of tiles. They click as she slides each one into place.

Everett: “Quantum”. Eighteen points, and the Q is on a triple letter score box, so that’s… Uh, Chisaki-chan?

Chisaki: I can’t do math. I’m gay.

Valdez raises his hand helpfully.

Valdez: 38 points.

Valdez: And, er, Chisaki-san… I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m gay too, so you really have no excuse.

Chisaki: Boo! I’m too busy flying planes and being super totally awesome to do math! [nods sagely] But I respect that, man. Props to you. Give me a fist bump.

Valdez: Due to personal circumstances, I would prefer not to.

Chisaki: Aw, c’mon! Here, give me your hand!

Valdez: T-that’s not wise, Chisaki-kun- I mean, Chisaki-san -

Chisaki leans over and punches his hand, but immediately winces and recoils.

Chisaki: [shaking out hands] Ow, shit. What do you do, work out your hand muscles? They’re like rocks!

Valdez: W-well, I - I never-

McRae: Everyone shut up. I’m thinking.

Everyone shuts up as McRae contemplates his next move. After a moment, he places down some tiles. He sits back as everyone else crowds in to admire his handiwork.

McRae: “Zygote”.

Chisaki: Oh?

McRae: 19 points.
Chisaki: OH??

McRae: Triple word score box.

Jaws drop around the room. Even Everett looks mildly impressed.

Chisaki: OHHH!!!

Everett: Wh. What??

McRae: [shrugs] Yeah.

Everett: WHAT??

Chisaki: OHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

Khalaf: [to Valdez] How many points is that?

Valdez: Um… a lot? I think 57.

Khalaf: Wow.

Chisaki: OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

Valdez: Chisaki-san, are you okay?

Chisaki: [inhales] OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHkkay I’m good now, yes, thank you. Chisaki-kun is fine, by the way. I don’t mind.
Valdez nods, pocketing that information for future reference. Khalaf looks to Chisaki intently.

Khalaf: So what do the scores look like?

Chisaki: Uh…

She pulls a paper from the desk and reads it out loud.

Chisaki: With McRae-san’s last play, we have… Khalaf-san 25, McRae-san 107, and… [wincs]

McRae: Her score won’t get lower if you don’t say it.

Chisaki: … Rett-chan 298.

McRae: [sighs] Aw.

Everett: Ha. Perish.

Khalaf: We still have twenty tiles left in the bag…

Everett: Plenty of time for you to make a surprise comeback!

Khalaf: I sincerely doubt that.

As expected, Everett proceeds to kill everyone at Scrabble. After she wins round 2 with a 200 point lead and an argument starts between Chisaki and Khalaf, I try to step in to distribute Monotokens and get roped into round 3 instead. To everyone’s dismay, including my own, I lose horribly because my words are even worse than Khalaf’s.
We continue late into the afternoon until Bates shows up with food from the kitchen. Allegedly, McRae summoned him too. Scarily enough, Bates is the only one of us who can come close to beating Everett, losing his first game by only one point. She laughs it off and absolutely demolishes him in the next round.

The room, formerly so bland and boring, now seems to sparkle with laughter and vibrancy. I sit on the side, eating my curry (which is, in fact, somewhat mediocre, but I can’t blame Atsui for burning out after cooking so much) and soaking in the atmosphere. In particular, Khalaf seems to be genuinely enjoying themselves, actually laughing at something that McRae said. As soon as they catch my eye, their smile fades to an expression of concern.

Khalaf: … What? Is something wrong?

Chiyo: Huh? No, don’t worry! You’re fine. I’m just glad to be here. Like, uh, hanging out.

Shit, I didn’t realize I was staring. I can feel my face heating up, but to my surprise, so does Khalaf’s. They don’t reply for a moment, but when they do, they’re smiling again.

Khalaf: [tugs at hat] …Me too.

A shadow descends from above. Bates crouches behind Khalaf, grinning widely.

Bates: Hey, what are we talking about?

Khalaf: [nearly punches Bates] NOTHING!

Bates laughs and flashes a victory sign before going back to getting his ass kicked by Everett. In the end, everyone comes back to getting their ass kicked by Everett.

By the end of a particularly riotous upset (Chisaki 18, McRae 123, Valdez 245, Everett 430), Khalaf finally decides that they’ve had enough of English for the day and head to bed. I linger a bit longer until everyone leaves except Chisaki and Everett, then help them put away
When the game is back in the cabinet until it is called again to this mortal realm, Chisaki flops down on the couch. Before I can tease her about how she still has energy, I realize that her expression has become stony serious.

Chisaki: Rett-chan.

Everett: Hm?

Chisaki: You don’t think that could be it, huh? SHSL Board Game Specialist or something like that.

Chiyo: … I didn’t even think about that.

Chisaki: It’d make sense, right? I mean, what kind of human person consistently scores over 300 every game of Scrabble?

Everett: I mean, competitively? I’m sure people score higher than 300 all the time.

Chisaki: But not high schoolers, right?

Everett: Hm… I guess.

She sits down next to Chisaki and pats the cushion beside her, indicating that I should take a seat too. A bemused frown tugs at her lips as she furrows her brow.

Everett: I don’t think that’s right, but I don’t know enough either way.

Chiyo: You can tell?
Everett: Mm… gut feeling. [shakes head] No, that’s not it. I don’t think my talent has anything to do with board games. I mean, it says on my report card that I like board games, and no one else has any likes or dislikes related to their talent. So I don’t think that’s it.

Chisaki: Well, like, except Claude-san. He doesn’t like classical music for some reason.

Everett: Really? Why not?

Chisaki: I dunno, I guess it’s because of his violin dubstep whatever. Not my problem.

For the past two days, until this point, Everett hasn’t seemed all that perturbed by her lack of memory. Now, though, she runs her hands through her hair, but she does seem like she’s trying to remain calm for Chisaki’s sake.

Chiyo: You really can’t remember anything…?

Everett: In a way, I guess. There’s different types of memories. There’s stuff like knowing how to ride a bike, or manners, or common sense things. For example, I know what s’mores taste like, even though I haven’t eaten one in the past two days and I could really go for one right now.

Chiyo: Oh, like implicit and explicit memories, right? I think I read about that in class once.

Everett: Right. I think. Medical stuff grosses me out, so I’ll have to take your word for it.

Chisaki: [raises hand] Okay, fair, but more important matter. What’s a s’more?

Everett: You toast marshmallows over a fire and then make a sandwich with that, graham crackers, and chocolate.

Chisaki: Hm. [nods] Points for the fire, but that sounds horribly American.

Everett: Chisaki-chan, you are missing out on so much in life.
Chisaki: Noted. Continue.

Everett: And then there’s memories about your identity. Your explicit memories…? I think? Stuff like the people you’re close to, things that happened to you.

Chisaki: So, like, the fact that I crashed a plane the first day of flight school.

Everett: Right- *Tsukino Chisaki you did fucking WHAT.*

Chisaki: I’m joking! I’m joking, Rett-chan! Please don’t kill me!

Everett: You’re spared for the time being. If we ever play Scrabble again, I will destroy you, and that’s a promise.

Chiyo: So you have implicit memories, but your explicit memories...

Everett: [closes eyes] Nothing. All I have is my name.

Chisaki: Do you know if you have family? Or anyone waiting for you?

Everett: That was the point of the spiel, Chisaki-chan. No, I don’t.

Chisaki: Shit, dude, that’s ass. If I forgot about my brother? I don’t know what I’d do.

Chiyo: Same… This must be tough on your family.

Everett: I’d argue it’s tough on all our families, considering the situation.

Chisaki: Well, yeah, but like? When you go home, and you see people who claim to be your
family, but you just don’t know for sure. What would you do about that?

Everett: …

When Chisaki brings up the scenario, Everett’s expression goes completely slack. This doesn’t escape Chisaki’s notice, and she leans over, arm outstretched.

Chisaki: Rett-chan? OH-

Chiyo: AH??

I cry out and jump to my feet, but by the time I do so, Everett shoves Chisaki off the couch. I can’t even think of a plan of defense before Everett pulls Chisaki back up, apologizing profusely.

Everett: Oh my god, I don’t know what came over me, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to-

Chisaki: It’s fine! It’s fine, Rett-chan, I think I just startled you. Please don’t feel bad! Besides.

Everett: Besides what, I just pushed you off the couch, are you okay??

Chisaki: I’m fine, but like, besides.

Chisaki: That was pretty hot.

Everett: …

Everett: You know, I’m seriously considering pushing you off this couch again.

Chisaki: [covers face with arms] Aaah!! No!! Don’t hurt me!!
Chiyo: Are both of you sure that you’re alright?

Everett: She just tapped me on the arm and I reacted like that. I really don’t know what happened there, I’m so sorry.

Chisaki: Seriously! I’m fine! But I stand by what I said.

Everett: Chisaki-chan.

Chisaki sticks her tongue out, and they’re instantly back to normal. Though they’re both playing down the event, there’s real fear in their eyes. My heartbeat is still pounding in my ears - what was that? Why did it happen?

And perhaps most importantly, who is Aster Everett?

Everett: But, um, going back to the previous thing. With the family stuff. I’d probably be able to recognize people I knew before all of this. No, I know I can.

Chisaki: Oh snap, really? Did you test that? When??

Everett: … Yes. On the first day. As soon as we had that meeting with the robot birds.

My eyes widen.

Chiyo: So you mean it’s someone in the class?

Everett: I don’t remember why I know them, I just know that I did.

Chiyo: Oh gosh.
Chisaki: Wait, what?? Who??

Everett: … You’re not going to believe me.

Chiyo: If you’re not comfortable telling us, that’s fine! Especially because this must be really sudden, and you’re tired-

Chisaki: No it’s not!! This could be vital information!!

Everett: [sighs] Well, alright then. I guess that’s a good point.

Everett: The only person from my past that I recognize is…

**She frowns.**

Everett: …Sekisada-san.

**Sekisada??**

Chisaki: Wait, WAIT?! HIM?!

Everett: [wincses] See, I knew you wouldn’t believe me.

Chisaki: He’s so mean! And snarky! And mean!! I refuse to believe you would be associated with that jerk!

Chiyo: He did seem nicer to you at the meeting…

Everett: [nods] Right. I noticed too.
Chisaki: He was WHAT?! I didn’t even think that was possible! I need to see this!

Everett: I don’t want to say anything about it, because I don’t want to, er, talk to him.

Chiyo: I don’t blame you.

Chisaki: B-but this could be the key! The key to your past!! You gotta talk to him!!

Chiyo: Chisaki-san…

Chisaki: No, listen! This is so super huge, how aren’t either of you freaking out?

Everett: I mean, I could spend all my time worrying about it. [shrugs] Or I can accept that whatever’s happened with Sekisada or myself is in the past and spend my time making new memories instead.

A genuinely warm grin splits her face.

Everett: Tonight was really good, thank you guys! But I think I’m tired. Want to head back to our rooms?

Chisaki agrees quickly, but still seems dissatisfied with Everett’s attitude about Sekisada. I think I get what Everett means, though. There’s only so much you can do now if you keep clinging to the past. And given the past two - er, the two years before HPA…? I feel like that’s a lesson I’ve had hammered home time and time again.

We part ways when Everett goes into her room. Chisaki, though she usually seems energetic, completely deflates as soon as Everett is out of sight and quickly excuses herself to her own quarters. This must be bothering her a lot more than she’s admitting.

After washing up, I head back to my room as well. I turn on my Parchment to find two new messages. As soon as I see the first one, I let out an involuntary sigh.
Greetings to everyone! As it’s been several days since our arrival and we have individually had plenty of time to gather information and theories about our situation, I felt it would be prudent to organize occasional morning meetings from here on out. Report to the kitchen at 8:00 sharp tomorrow morning. Failure to attend WILL cast you in a suspicious light. Please bring an open mind and all of your logical reasoning skills!

Ughhh. Ugh ugh ugh I really do not want to go to this. I still see the value in morning meetings, but putting Murdock in charge sounds like the beginning of yet another witch-hunt.

At least if some of the people I haven’t seen around go, then I’ll be able to know how they’re doing. And then I can watch things like how Sekisada acts around Everett, or take notes on what makes Ekyou smile, or figure out what Khalaf thinks of everyone...

I guess I have to go. Doesn’t mean I’m going to be happy about it.

I open the other message. This one is already much friendlier.

(I’m sending this message to everyone except Murdock-san)

I know no one is going to go to her meeting just because she said you should and first off I’m so sorry
But like I guess it’s a good idea to talk about stuff just so that we can regroup and etc
If it’s any consolation I’m going to make pancakes. Lmk if you have any requests on that
Thx

… At least there’ll be pancakes.

I’m about to put my Parchment away before a thought occurs to me. If Harai-san shows up tomorrow, and because they still haven’t replied to my message (nor have I nor anyone else that I know of actually seen them in the past two days), maybe it’d be good to do something for them to remind them that they’re remembered.
It takes a lot of bargaining and a promise to wake up at 5:30 that I may regret shortly, but in the end I’ve convinced Atsui to help me with my plan. I spend the rest of the night messaging as many people as I think would be willing to help me, and three additional recruits later, I’m feeling pretty confident. By the time the nighttime announcement plays, I actually feel like I’ve accomplished a lot of things today.

Here’s hoping tomorrow’s meeting can be just as productive.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found here.
Curiously, what wakes me up in the morning is not a morning announcement, but the sound of an alarm. I’d already accepted that this situation isn’t a dream, but hope swells in my chest anyway. Could it be? I’ve gone home?

And then I look at the clock, realize it’s 5:40 and that I said I would help Atsui in return for his helping me with my plan, and sigh deeply. And then I realize that I said I’d be there by 5:30 and nearly fall in my attempt to scramble out of bed.

Needless to say, my morning is not off to a great start.

Even though I get to the kitchen at 5:45, Atsui doesn’t seem in much better shape than I am, just mumbling a “yeah whatever” in response to my apology. He hands me a pancake mix recipe and starts working on his portion of the plan. By the time the first early risers begin to trickle into the kitchen, the cake I asked for has been safely tucked out of sight and the scent of fresh pancakes fills the room to mask the smell. From that point on, I’m way too busy carrying dishes back and forth to even think about anything else.

If I’m busy, though, Atsui must be stressed out of his mind. Even though he already made pancakes, he’s frying sausage and eggs while somehow simultaneously making fresh whipped
cream; yet, he seems completely in his element, even trading banter with a half-asleep Kashizaki as she hovers around him. It’s exceedingly obvious how professional his training is, and I should definitely ask him for tips one day.

While I’m trying not to pay too much attention to the people who come in and out (in case Atsui needs me for something), I do catch a glimpse of Murdock scowling towards the pat of butter on her pancakes. Oh boy.

Chiyo: Murdock-san…?

Murdock looks up in surprise, expression morphing to a tight, closed-mouth smile as she catches my eye. She nods once, then heads out the door without any further acknowledgement. Did I do something wrong?

… Considering it’s Murdock, I probably shouldn’t care, but I do. If I get the chance, I should probably go and apologize for whatever it is I did. But like, realistically, would she care?? Should I want her to care??

I’m thirty seconds into a debate with myself weighing the pros and cons of apologizing before I realize Atsui is calling for me.

Atsui: Kumoshita-san, you’ve been leaning against the counter for a while, now. If you’re tired, you can go eat. I can handle it from here.

Chiyo: Oh! No, I’m fine, I can help. Did you need something?

Atsui: Nah, just checking. I just need to put everything on plates. [stifled yawn] I don’t know how I’m going to make it through this meeting. Please restrain me from doing anything stupid.

Chiyo: Uhh… would you be mad in the moment if I do?

Atsui: Depending on whatever it is, maybe.
Chiyo: Then no promises.

Atsui: That’s fair.

**We both yawn at the same time, then Atsui picks himself back up and returns to the stove.**

Chiyo: Do you ever get tired?

Atsui: …

Atsui: Well, I mean, I’m pretty tired right now, if that’s what you’re asking??

Chiyo: What? No! I see that you’re tired! Can I do anything to help?

Atsui: No- ughhh okay fine hand me that plate over there. Thanks.

Chiyo: [gives him the plate] I mean, do you get tired of cooking? Is cooking burnout a thing?

Atsui: Not yet. I don’t want to test that. I haven’t cooked three meals a day, every day, before we got here, so that’s a challenge… but then again, there’s pretty much nothing better to do. So it’s fine. I cook a lot at home anyway.

Atsui: See, my family is, in a word, prideful. About our food. So people like showing off and seeing what other people show off. At home, I’m encouraged to cook a lot, as long as it comes out good.

Atsui: [shudders] But then family dinners are pretty much ten-course feasts, but as potlucks… It’s scary.

Chiyo: It’s really cool that you have such a dedicated family, though! They must be really supportive of you, since you got into Hope’s Peak and everything.
Atsui: Meh, debatable.

Chiyo: Debatable…?

**Though his methodical food transfer doesn’t slow, Atsui’s shoulders slump a little. He gestures in the air with his spatula, flicking egg bits across the range.**

Atsui: It’s not that cool in comparison to everyone else. My ten year old second cousin got on that cake decorating show and placed second. I think he’s still mad about it. And my dad’s sibling’s wife is like, some famous American food critic? I don’t know. She has a restaurant, too. Uh, and there’s probably some others I’m forgetting. It’s a big family.

Chiyo: No kidding. That’s incredible, though… A whole family dedicated to cooking.

Atsui: Not the whole family, ‘cause like, my cousin Hisaichi is a librarian. And there’s some other random people who don’t cook. [mutters] Dodged that bullet. [louder] But like, yeah. I see your point. Thanks.

Atsui: How about you? Don’t you have a family of like, morticians or something?

**My smile must freeze on my face, because Atsui immediately winces.**

Atsui: Sorry. Weird thing to ask while we’re making food. You okay?

Chiyo: Eheheh… yeah. Hey! Do you want me to bring that to the sink?

Atsui: Huh? Okay. Here. [hands over a set of tongs]

For likely the same reasons I’m not prying into his statement about almost not cooking, he seems willing to let my past slide. I drop the tongs in the sink, then quickly place a plate of pancakes in a newly arrived and drowsy Bates’ hands and turn him back out of the kitchen. When Atsui speaks again, the room near-empty, his tone is light and we’re back to normal.
Atsui: Going back to the topic of cooking burnout. I think it’s just a good way to keep busy.

Chiyo: Don’t you get tired of it?

Atsui: Kumoshita-san, what did YOU do the past two days?

Chiyo: I… hung out with a lot of different people, I guess?

Atsui: And have any of them shown interest in cooking or otherwise doing chores?

Chiyo: Aside from McRae-san, no.

Atsui: My point exactly. Someone’s gotta do it, so it may as well be a person that can actually cook.

Chiyo: I can make sandwiches!

Atsui: Do you seriously want to eat sandwiches for the rest of your life?

Chiyo: ...I could try?

Atsui: Luckily, you don’t have to. I gotchu, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: Mm…

Now that the rush of people seems to have slowed down, I have the time to check my phone. 7:42. Even though it’s only been two hours since I woke up, I already feel like I’ve been awake for a whole week. I’m officially reconsidering my morning person qualifications.

When I look back to Atsui, he glances away quickly. I clearly have no choice but to resort to my tried and true method of just blurting out whatever it is that I’m thinking of.
Chiyo: Do you really think we’re going to be stuck here for the rest of our lives?

**Atsui blinks.**

Atsui: Oh shit, that was like the exact same sentence structure that I said earlier. Nice.

Chiyo: What?

Atsui: Nothing. Uh, as for your question. I dunno. I mean… would it be so bad?

**Didn’t he just talk about his family at length?? How isn’t he worried about them??**

Chiyo: Aren’t you concerned? We’re in the middle of nowhere, we can’t escape, and if we want to, we have to…

I don’t finish the statement. **Atsui just nods patiently.**

Atsui: But no one has. Killed anyone, I mean.

Atsui: And then whoever set everything up seems like they care a lot about our standard of living. Between you and me, I’m not even out to my family, and whoever put us here put binders in my closet AND put the name I go by on all my stuff. [tugs at vest] Sure, I’m still getting used to it, but I’m just saying, that’s a pleasant surprise.

Chiyo: So what you’re saying is that whoever put us here might... *not* want us to actually kill each other?

Atsui: [shrugs] It’s a real possibility. After all, we have an abundant amount of food - it gets restocked every night. We have warm beds. Why would we even want to kill?

Atsui: Unless it turns out we have some freaky serial killer running around, I don’t think anyone’s
gonna kill anyone.

**Somehow, although I didn’t realize it was there, Atsui’s rambling lifts a weight off my chest. A slow smile tugs at my lips.**

**Oblivious, Atsui continues to muse to himself.**

Atsui: And like, I know we’ll be rescued eventually. Hell, I’m sure people are looking for us now. We’re Hope’s Peak students. Graduates. Whatever. The point is, we have families that are looking for us, right? Right.

Chiyo: Thanks.

Atsui: What? You’re welcome, but what’s up?

Chiyo: I think that’s the most reassuring thing anyone’s said in regards to this whole situation. And that helps a lot. To, um, hear.

**There’s so much more that I want to say - about how I get wound up easily about small things, or how it didn’t feel like anyone was processing the gravity of the situation, or that thinking about death makes me want to curl up and… well, not die, exactly, but just not deal with life for a while.**

I don’t voice any of it, and though I can’t even find the right words to express my gratitude, Atsui just flashes me a grin and a tired thumbs-up.

Atsui: No worries, dude. I got you.

Murdock: I would hope so.

**SPEAKING OF GETTING WOUND UP OVER SMALL THINGS.**
We turn around quickly to find Murdock standing in the doorway. She promptly crosses the room and drops her plate in the sink (Atsui winces at the clatter) and proceeds to sit down at the table, hands clasped.

Murdock: Don’t mind me, I’m just waiting for the meeting to start. What were you two talking about?

Atsui: Oh, it’s-

He catches a glimpse of my expression and presses his lips together.

Atsui: It’s nothing.

Murdock: Are you sure? It didn’t sound like nothing.

Atsui: I said it’s nothing.

Murdock narrows her eyes, and again I get the distinct impression of a jaguar.

Murdock: If you’re sure, Atsui.


The two remain in a silent standoff as, at what feels like a snail’s pace, the rest of the class files into the kitchen. Even Harai lingers near the back of the room. Though sixteen people have been pressed into such a small area, there’s still plenty of space.

What’s interesting, though, is the quality of conversation buzzing around. Mutters and worried conversation overpowers any kind of banter - I can’t even make out Chisaki or Bates’ usual cheerful interjections. Though judging from what state Bates was in yesterday, I can’t say I’m surprised. I catch Khalaf’s eye, and they make their way over.
Unfortunately, Murdock sees them first.

Murdock: Good morning, Khalaf.

Khalaf: … Morning. [turns to Atsui and me] Atsui-san, Kumoshita-san. Thanks for breakfast, it was really good.

Atsui: Yeah, no prob. What’s with everyone?

Khalaf: Did you not get the announcement?

Chiyo: I think I was too busy cooking to pay attention.

Khalaf: That’s fair. How long have you been awake, anyway?

Chiyo: Uh… Two hours?

Khalaf: [eyes widen] Oh gosh. And you’re still planning to do that thing for Harai-san?

Murdock: What thing for Harai-san?

Atsui: [looking at his Parchment] Nunya.

Murdock: Nunya…?

Atsui: Nunya business. [turns off Parchment] It’s some announcement from Ariel about how we’re having a meeting and everyone should be there because we made pancakes. Also, he has something important to announce there. So that sucks.

Chiyo: He used us for bribery??
Murdock: Mm. [sniffs] I think it’s very rude of him to be co-opting my meeting for whatever it is that he’s going to do.

Khalaf: I suppose.

Murdock: Anyway, Khalaf, where have you been the past couple of days?

Khalaf: Losing to your cousin at Scrabble.

At the reply, Murdock’s expression cycles through surprise, a flash of disappointment, and then something that seems like rage before settling back on her former neutrality.

Murdock: Is that so.

Atsui: Would you rather he have won, or.

Murdock: Not at all, actually.

Atsui: Then why do you have to sound so mean? Legit curious. I’m not trying to be mean back, by the way.

Murdock: [inhales deeply] I would assume the contrary.

By this point, people are starting to take notice of our conversation. The worried murmurs are swiftly traded for inquisition and other, presumably helpful, contributions.

Valdez: [placating] We can invite you next time. To Scrabble. Although, and I apologize in advance, if we invite Everett-san to play, we’ll all just lose.

Chisaki: It’s true! She kicked all of our asses collectively!
Everett: All the more reason to play. For real, I don’t mind going easy on you.

Murdock: I’m fine.

Atsui: Do you just not like board games or something?

Bates: [to Atsui] Maybe you need to make more food next time.

Atsui: Maybe I’d need to show up. Hell, we can make it a party.

Shionaga: Sounds good to me. What do you think, Sumitama-chan?

Sumitama: I-I’d love to!

Ekyou: But then we should ask Murdock-san instead, since she’s the person who we’re asking about all of this in the first place.

Murdock: I said I’M FINE.

Kashizaki: You don’t sound fine. Have you eaten today?


Kashizaki: Shut up, Sekisada-san.

Sekisada: Said the nail artist.

Kashizaki: Said the SEAT FILLER. What does that even have to do with anything?
Sekisada: I dunno, but at least I acknowledge that my talent sucks.

Kashizaki: Let me guess, is this about two days ago? In the library? Is this REALLY the best time to settle this?

Sekisada: No. I’ve been wanting to say that for a while now, actually. I just thought now would be good.

Kashizaki: … WHY??

Chisaki: Wow, looks like this situation involving that dude needs some defusing, huh, Rett-chan, haha- ACK I’M SORRY I’M SORRY!!

Bazhanov: Hm. That looks painful.

Ekyou: Chisaki-san, do you need help?

Sekisada: ...“That dude”? 

Chisaki: I DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING!! RETT-CHAN PLEASE LET GO OF MY EAR!!

Amid the commotion, Murdock looks increasingly stressed, clasping her hands above her head and leaning on the table as the situation grows increasingly out of hand. As the situation between Kashizaki and Sekisada continues to escalate, I almost miss a figure moving to Murdock’s side. He reaches out to tap her shoulder.

McRae: Ti…?

Murdock: Don’t fucking speak to me.
He reels back, looking hurt. Immediately, her formality drops, and she leans out of her seat.

Murdock: That was harsh of me. Are you alright?

McRae: I… [shoulders slump] It’s fine.

He moves away to stand by Bates’ side. Murdock almost moves after him, alarm in her eyes, before settling back down with a sigh and a frown. This is probably the most genuine expression of emotion I’ve seen from her since we woke up, and something stabs at me that I wasn’t expecting to feel towards Murdock of all people.

Pity.

My contemplation, and in fact the conversations occurring as a whole, is shattered with the sound of a phone buzzing on a sixteenfold scale. Though several people don’t move, and though I already know the alert waiting for me, I fish my Parchment out of my bag.

Ariel: Good morning! The time is 8:00 am and nighttime hours have ended. Rise and shine, and please enjoy your day!

A seventeenth voice sounds behind us - tinny, soft, and too familiar. I’m almost afraid to turn, already knowing what I’ll find.

Ariel: Or, I suppose… you already are. Kuhuhu.

Sekisada: Oh, look! It’s the bird that wants us to kill each other, but doesn’t want to say that it wants us to kill each other!

Kashizaki: Ugh, right. You again.

Chisaki: Hey, dove! You’re no good, dove! You’ll never be shit!
Ariel: Is this how you behave towards one another?

Valdez: [wincing] I hate to break it to you, but... it’s like what Sekisada-san said. You’re a robot bird that wants us to kill each other, but apologizes for it the whole while. It’s kind of off putting. Sorry.

Sumitama: I prefer it to Caliban...

McRae: Mm. Nah. Both of them suck.

Ariel: You are all just incredibly rude.

Valdez: ... [mumbles] I would still love to take you apart to see how you work.

Ariel: And CREEPY.

He ruffles his wings, clearly agitated.

Ariel: Still! I came down here for an important announcement! Doesn’t anyone want to listen to me??

Ekyou: No.

Bazhanov: [to Ariel] I accept that you’re modeled after something that I enjoy, but you are objectively garbage.

Ariel seems completely speechless with the last comment. Bazhanov pats his head gently.

Bazhanov: Your beak is the wrong shape, by the way. It shouldn’t be so pointed. You look like a woodpecker.
Bates: Wig! Snatched!

Khalaf: [pained] I am literally begging you to please never say that ever again.

Ariel: So none of you are even vaguely interested in what I have to say. All you can do is insult me.

Atsui: To be entirely fair, this is the most united this class has been all morning. So by all means, please keep being terrible.

Ariel ignores Atsui and flutters onto the table. He snaps open his wings with a loud clack noise, drawing everyone’s attention.

Ariel: ENOUGH! You WILL listen to what I have to say, or I WILL call Caliban to come down. Do I make myself clear?

Chisaki: Hell no! Fuck the establishment!

Shionaga: [places hands over Sumitama’s ears] Woah! Language!

Ariel just tilts his head.

The next moment, real razor blades snap out of his wings. Murdock scrambles back just in time to keep her glasses from being torn in two. More than a few screams and gasps rise from the room, including my own. For his part, Ariel seems dead serious, all trace of the pandering and apologizing wreck gone.

Ariel: I said.


Not a sound from the rest of the class.
Ariel nods simply and retracts the blades, though I’m still eyeing his wings carefully. So is Valdez, but he seems more impressed by the sudden transformation than anything.

Ariel: The first announcement. I have Monotokens to distribute. If you haven’t noticed yet, there is a gachapon machine at the end of the wing. You may use these Monotokens to redeem prizes there.

The compartment on his chest slides open and spills what might be even more tokens than he gave me yesterday. No one makes a move toward them, even after he closes his compartment. He then turns to look at me.

Ariel: Miss Kumoshita, you are no longer under any obligation to distribute the rest of your tokens and may keep them for yourself. Thank you for your actions.

He seems to be expecting some kind of acknowledgement. The pressure of 15 other pairs of eyes is enormous, but eventually I stammer something out that vaguely resembles an expression of gratitude. Satisfied, Ariel nods sharply, then returns to form.

Ariel: Now, onto the next order of business.

Ariel: It’s come to our attention that today marks the fourth day since you woke up here, and none of you have even bothered making so much as a plan to kill another student.

That’s… not really reassuring.

Atsui: [raises hand] Sorry to interrupt, but I think it takes people in kidnapping situations a lot more than four days to decide to murder their fellow prisoners. Even if they aren’t Hope’s Peak graduates.

Ariel: I am quite aware. Murder is quite a difficult act without proper incentive.

Sekisada: What the fuck is that supposed to mean.
Ariel: By this, I mean that I am here today to offer you such incentive. A motive, let’s say.

Harai: Excuse me?

This marks the first time they’ve spoken all morning, and some people look at them in surprise. In contrast to their behavior three days ago, they seem to take it in stride.

Harai: What could you possibly have to give that would entice us to kill someone?

Ariel: Not all of the motives have to do with a reward, per se. Some have to do with increasing existing tensions, some are outright blackmail.

Ariel: [pointedly] Some involve a decrease in the quality of life so that people would be so uncomfortable without their luxuries that they would do anything to get them back.

He glances at Atsui and me. My heart drops to my stomach. Do these robots hear everything that happens in this mansion?

Khalaf: Okay, so what are you offering?

Ariel: [shifts wings] I’m told that you are all very worried about your families and loved ones. Rest assured, they’re all very safe. In fact, we’re keeping an eye on them to ensure, among other things, that they don’t look for you.

Shionaga: [whispers] Aw, crap.

Ariel: However, I understand that some of you have extenuating family circumstances and would like to get in contact with them. And so we will permit you to do so - under some restrictions.

Ariel: Phone calls will be held in the meeting room, illuminated on your Parchment’s map. The map section of your Parchment is in the Rules tab.
Ariel: You may make a singular phone call at any time today, but you must know the number that you are calling and if you so choose to make a call, you must do it today before nighttime hours. There are obvious exceptions, of course - emergency hotlines and the like have been automatically blocked. Any attempts at calling them will be met with punishment.

McRae: Punishment?

**Ariel snaps his wing out again. The gesture he’s referring to is clear, even though the blades don’t show.**

Ariel: I’m sure you’re familiar.

McRae: [mutters] Sorry I asked.

Ariel: Furthermore, phone calls are restricted to five minutes. You will not be penalized for going over, but your connection will simply be cut off at the time. You will, however, be penalized for making reference to the killing game in any way, shape, or form. If your loved ones so happen to inquire into your whereabouts, you are to insist that you’re at a highly secretive post-graduation event and will return when you are able.

Ariel: Are there any questions?

**No reply. After a moment, a raised hand reaches above the crowd - Sekisada, looking incredibly exasperated.**

Sekisada: Okay, so, what if I don’t want to do this, because this is horribly stupid.

Bates: [whimpers] I’m a terrible actor…

Ariel: In the event that you choose not to participate, you will not face consequences. It is to our understanding that not everyone wants to or is able to participate due to fear of punishment, lack of loved ones to call, or… other reasons. [side-eyes Everett]

Everett: [straight-faced] Man. I have soooo many people to check in on. It truly is far too difficult
for me to make a decision about who I want to talk to. And I somehow remember all their phone numbers, oh boy. Whatever will I do.

Ariel: [sighs] Kuu. Thank you, Miss Everett, for your input. Are there any other questions?

Again, no reply. Clearly, I’m not the only one freaked out by Ariel’s sudden turn of face. He doesn’t seem bothered by the lack of response, however, merely nodding sharply before hopping off of the table.

Ariel: That will be all. Meeting dismissed.

And with that, he hops off the table with a flutter of wings. He doesn’t bother flying out of the kitchen, merely walking out on foot. All we can do is watch him leave until, as always, Sekisada chooses to break the silence.

Sekisada: Yeah, no, I’m not doing that.

Kashizaki: I figured.

Sekisada: Anyway, since that’s over and done with, I’m out of here.

Murdock: Excuse me.

**Her eyes flash in a dangerous glare, full attention on Sekisada.**

Murdock: Where do you think you’re going?

Sekisada: Back to bed. Obviously, we’ve learned everything we needed to come here for. I don’t need to be here.

Before Sekisada can turn to leave, Murdock slams on the table, never breaking eye contact. Sumitama visibly recoils, whimpering.
Murdock: [fuming] And who decided that? Did that stupid bird put together this whole meeting?? We haven’t even started to discuss anything.

Sekisada: Yeah, like what. “We’re in a mansion” and “we need to kill each other” and “we have weird birds”? Have we figured out anything that we haven’t learned already?

Of all people, Harai steps forward. For his part, perhaps unaware of the monumental occasion, Sekisada remains visibly unimpressed.

Harai: Yes.

Sekisada: [dubious] Oh, really? Such as?

They pause for a moment, perhaps suddenly aware of the attention they’ve drawn. With an almost imperceptible twitch, they seem to flick it off, and continue without further hesitation.

Harai: The windows are reinforced glass. Judging by the foggy but sunny weather, we’re most likely in a mountainous area.

Harai: And the nameplates on our doors were put up carelessly. I can pry mine off. Whatever was underneath was scratched out. All I can see are the letters “YU” and “V”.

Harai: In addition, there are books in the library about each of our respective fields, most of which seem to be published recently. There’s nothing on any of us or our accomplishments.

Harai: Need I say more?

Chisaki: Woah, were you investigating this whole time?

Harai: Weren’t you?
Wow. That’s… a lot of information to take in. The depth of their discoveries seems to make sense, though, if they were investigating all this time. Come to think of it, I’m not sure why else they’d have been alone for so long in the past three days. So yep! That checks out.

Sekisada: … [to Murdock] Fine. Since your lackey here knows everything, I guess, why don’t you have them talk?

Murdock else seems just as shocked as I am to hear Harai say so many words, but recovers quickly and turns to Harai with her usual pragmatic air.

Murdock: Please continue, Harai-san.

Harai: No.

The reply is swift, brutal, and just as expected. After all, who was it that invited such suspicion towards Harai in the first place? Despite this, Murdock’s eyes are wide, and she doesn’t respond.

Of course, it’s Sekisada that ends up snickering at her.

Sekisada: Get wreeecked.

Murdock: G-get out.

With nothing more than a shrug, he does. Chisaki, for one, takes that as an invitation to edge out after him before the situation gets any hairier. She’s quickly followed by Everett, then Ekyou, and so on and so forth.

As usual, most people don’t seem inclined to linger after the meeting concludes (save for the people helping with what I have planned), yet Murdock stays at the table, unmoving. Again, there’s that pity - I may not like her much, but to organize an entire meeting, have it taken over by a motive announcement, and then get shot down in front of the class… That’s got to be hard on anyone.
So I approach her hesitantly, holding out a hand.

Chiyo: Murdock-san-

Murdock: *What*

Before I can apologize, she recoils and shakes her head, as if she’s disgusted with herself. She tries again in a less hostile tone, though her voice still borders on harsh.

Murdock: I’m sorry for snapping. It’s, um. Been a trying past few days.

Her voice falters and she pauses, blinking rapidly. All things considered, maybe I should try to see things from her point of view. Obviously, Murdock is determined to keep moving forward, and she doesn’t seem to have any sort of malicious intent. She just seems more than a little oblivious to how she’s actually coming across, and I’m sure that’s something that most people struggle with at some point or another. Right?

Murdock: [wipes eyes] Is there something you needed?

Chiyo: I was wondering if you’d like to stay a moment? There’s something that I was planning since last night. We’d love to have you here, if you want!

Murdock stares. My face starts to heat up.

Chiyo: … We have cake!!

She blinks again, seeming suddenly aware of the surrounding events. Slowly, she turns to look at Valdez pulling Harai aside; at Khalaf and Kashizaki having a conversation; at Atsui, in the midst of pulling a cake from the fridge, mouthing something unintelligible in my direction but closing his mouth when he catches Murdock’s gaze. When she faces me once more, Murdock’s smile is tinged with an inexorable sadness.
Murdock: I very much appreciate the offer, but I’m afraid I would be in the way. Clearly, you’ve put a lot of thought into whatever you have planned here. I don’t want to intrude.

Chiyo: Y-you’re not intruding! I asked if you wanted to stay, I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t being sincere. And, as you’ve said, it’s been really stressful lately. You’ve been working really hard to figure out whatever’s going on with this whole situation, and…

I trail off. Murdock continues to smile at me, her expression slowly morphing to a determined shell rather than any genuine conveyance of emotion.

Once more, I get the feeling that I did something wrong.

Murdock: Thank you, Kumoshita.

She stands up, her chair scraping soundlessly against the floor.

Murdock: But I’ll be leaving now.

I think I did do something wrong.

By the time the doors close, I already feel the weight of Harai’s eyes on my back. In fact, there’s another four pairs of eyes waiting expectantly for me to do something. I quickly shove the incident with Murdock out of mind and focus on the present, on Harai steadfastly ignoring the cake and staring directly at me.

Harai: So. Why do you want me here?

Harai: And what’s with the cake?

Chiyo: It’s, uh…

Chiyo: ...an apology?
Harai looks from the cake, to me, to Atsui. Their silence is nothing less than deafening and seems to last for an eternity.

Harai: … An apology.

Atsui: Apparently we were too quick to judge you or something.

Oh my god this sounds so stupid now that we’re actually doing this and everyone is looking at me. And right after that interaction with Murdock!! Agh!!! I need to go back to bed!!!

Chiyo: I, um, hope you like it???

Atsui: [lamely] It’s strawberry shortcake.

Harai: Wow. That’s my favorite.

Atsui: For real? You’re not being sarcastic?

Harai: … Why would I lie about cake?

Atsui: Okay, good point, good point.

When Harai seems to look away, Atsui glances at me and does an obvious fistpump. Harai clasps their hands and sets them on the table, making no move toward the confection.

Harai: You… really didn’t have to. But I appreciate it.

They continue to sit, impassive. In retrospect, this was a pretty horrible idea. Inviting Harai to a party focused on them when they’ve already established that they don’t like people? What was I thinking??
The silence drags on for almost a minute, the five of us staring down Harai as they continue to sit, arms folded, until, impatiently, Kashizaki clears her throat.

Kashizaki: … So are we going to eat or what.

Khalaf: Kashizaki-san, don’t be rude.

Kashizaki: [holds up hands] I'm not trying to be rude! I was told there would be cake! I was also told that we could eat said cake! What are the rest of you even here for, if not eating cake?

Atsui: Being loving and supportive of Kumoshita-san, obviously.

Kashizaki: Implying I’m not?!

Khalaf: Did you really only come here for cake?

Kashizaki: Did the rest of you only come here for Kumoshita-san??

Khalaf: [pulls hat over eyes] Now that you mention it, cake is a very good motivator for anything.

Valdez: Yes. [pause] Well, yes to Kashizaki-san’s question, because of course I’m always happy to spend time with Kumoshita-san, and I’m also agreeing with Khalaf-san. Cake is indeed very good.

Kashizaki: You’re all a bunch of suckups.

Chiyo: I-I mean, if I were in your place, I would come for the company!

I’m choosing to take Kashizaki’s comment with a grain of salt… though, admittedly, cake is very appealing. Damn it. I thought socializing and food was the perfect combination to draw someone out of their shell.
Harai: [shrugs] You all can have the whole thing, since you care so much. I don’t eat in front of people.

Valdez: Maybe so, but didn’t you mention that that’s your favorite…?

Harai: That has nothing to do with whether or not I’ll eat it now.

Oh… that makes even more sense. I guess I have to revise my plans for talking to Harai next time. Assuming there’s a next time at this rate. Thankfully, Valdez at least seems willing to take Harai’s responses in stride, nodding thoughtfully at their response.

Valdez: Understood. But don’t you want a slice to go? Or something?

Harai: …

Harai: … Yeah. I would. Please.

Atsui: Sweet. I’ll cut the cake.

Khalaf: Are you sure? You and Kumoshita-san have been up for hours. I can do that.

Atsui: No. Never.

He hisses for good measure. Kashizaki covers a smile with her hand.

Khalaf: [sighs] Atsui-san, I mean this as kindly as possible, but I don’t mean what I said in a caring way. I mean that in a “I don’t really trust you with a knife right now” way. Give me that.

Atsui: H-hey??
To my surprise, Khalaf actually ends up prying the knife from Atsui’s hand and cutting the cake themselves. There’s a bit of argument about who got the ugly slice that fell in on itself, but Harai quickly claims it for themselves despite the rest of our protests. Maybe the fact that it was also the largest piece has something to do with that.

Soon enough, we’re reduced to idle chatter over the sweets. Harai seems to have relaxed a little, even joining in the conversation when addressed, though they still make no moves toward actively getting to know any of the rest of us. Despite all of my worrying, thankfully, the event seems to have been pulled off smoothly.

Eventually and inevitably, the six of us part ways to spend the rest of our days. All I can think about is heading back to sleep for another few hours. Waking up early usually isn’t that big of a deal, but waking up early, cooking for two hours, and then having two meetings back to back?? Scary. Anyone who can deal with such things on a similar scale has my undying respect.

Somehow, I make it back to my room. Flopping down on my bed, I close my eyes.

...

And I open them to see a clear sky on a school campus, too stately to be middle school, yet familiar enough that I know where I am - outside the administration building. Could this be…?

A hand slips into mine, and I know from how practiced the motion is that it can’t be the first time.

It’s a beautiful day-

-broken by a scream.

(???): AAAAAAAAAAAGHHHHH!!!
CHISAKI?!

I scramble out of bed and dash for the door. The phone call room is the meeting room, right?? Oh god, if she’s dead-

No. Stop thinking about that. She’s alive. She has to be.

Right?

As I stagger to the door, I almost crash into a similarly panicked-looking Shionaga and Ekyou. We don’t even acknowledge each other in our rush.

What we see is...
Ariel, looking more embarrassed than anything, white wings suddenly stained with bright color.

Everett, eyes desperate and wild, yet completely still as she stares at the robot.

And Chisaki, sobbing, clutching her left arm with her right, a stream of blood dropping to the floor from... what used to be her hand. Now, her left arm ends in a stump, garish against the white backdrop.

My heart freezes in my chest. This can’t be happening. Chisaki...

Shionaga: [hands over mouth] Oh my god.

Chisaki: I- I-

Everett: …

Instead of saying anything, Ekyou’s eyes narrow. I watch, wide-eyed, as she strides toward Ariel with all the dedication and force of a fallen angel, radiating pure contempt that seems to grow with every step.

She stops between Chisaki and Ariel, glaring at the robot.

Ekyou: Well?

Ariel: I’m sorry for my actions, but Miss Chisaki knew the risks when she made her phone call. If she had only listened-

Ekyou: You cut off a girl’s hand, and you have the nerve to say that you’re SORRY?!
For the first time since I’ve met her, Ekyou seems genuinely furious. If not for the blades still protruding from Ariel’s wing, I get the feeling that she would crush him with her bare hands.

Ekyou: I demand that you get her medical attention, you *lovely host*.

Ariel: I am under no obligation to do anything of that sort.

Ekyou: Well, guess what, I don’t care what you have to say or argue about this. This is your fault. You literally caused it to happen.

Ekyou: So, if you’re really as sorry as you keep on saying, you’d fix it.

Rather than put up a fight, Ariel simply retracts the blades in his wings. Watching him, he almost looks truly apologetic.

That is, until he gestures toward Chisaki with an outstretched wing still stained bright. She scrambles back, eyes wide with fear, and I can almost taste bile.

How did I forget that, no matter how sorry he acts, he still wants us to die?

Ariel: Right… Miss Chisaki, I’m afraid I need you to follow me.

Chisaki: Don’t…

Shionaga steps forward wordlessly, offering Chisaki his elbow. Shaken, she barely grabs onto it with her right (only) hand. Ariel hops out of the room, careful not to make any sudden movements. As he gets to the door, he turns back to us and opens his beak.

Ariel: And… again, I’m-

Ekyou: Not sorry enough to prevent this from happening, clearly. Get out.
He dips his head, merely, before leaving the room entirely. Slow, careful, Shionaga guides Chisaki out of the room, careful to avoid moving the stump that she hides behind her jacket. The sound of her quiet sobbing echoes down the corridor long after they’ve departed.

I tear my gaze away from the door and focus on the ground instead, catching sight of something fleshy and covered in blood.

... That’s not much better.

When I look back up, Ekyou is glaring at me in full force.

Ekyou: Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: Y-yes?

Ekyou: If you’re not doing anything, can you send out a mass text? Let everyone know what happened.

Chiyo: Of course.

Ekyou nods sharply, then turns away. Though she seems now more determined than angry, she’s still so much more composed than I am... It’s a stark reminder of how useless I am in this kind of situation.

Shoving down my intense desire to burst into tears on the spot, I pull out my Parchment and start composing the message as Ekyou approaches Everett. She speaks quietly to the taller girl, noticeably more gentle.

Ekyou: Everett-san. I know things are scary right now, but I need to know- what happened here?

Everett: I- I...
Ekyou: Take your time.

Everett: Right…

**She takes a deep breath, then continues, eyes forcibly distant.**

Everett: I don’t have anyone to call, obviously, but Chisaki-chan wanted me to accompany her. She said she was going to call her brother, a pilot. She didn’t say anything about what she wanted to say, just that she was going to catch up with him.

Everett: And as soon as the line came on, she screamed “hey, we’re in a killing game”...

Ekyou: Dumbass.

Everett: [half-laughs] Yeah. She sure is. And then Ariel cut off her hand. And then the rest of you got here, and...

**By this point, Everett is shaking with… rage? Sorrow? Something along those lines. She glances down at the hand on the floor, then squeezes her eyes shut tight.**

Everett: I told her! I told her not to do anything dumb, and then…

Everett: …

Everett: … [defeated] This always happens.

Chiyo: What does?

Everett: Everything. I can’t save anyone, and…
Everett: …

She opens her eyes, gaze distant once more.

Everett: … I forgot. Again.

Everett: I’m sorry. I should go help Chisaki-chan.

Ekyou: Everett-san, wait-

Everett pushes past Ekyou as if she wasn’t even there, heading quickly out of the room. Ekyou lowers her outstretched hand, looking more lost than even the girl who just left the room.

Chiyo: Ekyou-san? I finished sending the messages out.

Ekyou: [looks up quickly] Ah? Oh, thank you, Kumoshita-san. I appreciate it, and I’m sure Chisaki-san does too.

She, too, glances at Chisaki’s hand. Just the reminder of its lying there, inexpressive and bloody and limp, is enough to turn my stomach in knots. Ekyou must catch a glimpse of my expression, because she wordlessly presses her own hands on my shoulder and guides me out of the room.

When the door clicks shut behind us, Ekyou turns to me, jaw set. Her eyes are unreadable, though when she speaks again her voice has returned to its usual monotone.

Ekyou: Kumoshita-san, do you need anything else?

Chiyo: No. Nothing.

She nods, gently pressing me away from the meeting room.
Ekyou: Then you should go. Take some time for yourself.

Chiyo: Thanks.

Ekyou: For what?

Chiyo: For, um.

For handling the situation so well? For caring so much? For being so strong when the rest of us couldn’t be?

Chiyo: For that whole situation. You did more than any of the rest of us could think to do. And standing up to Ariel…

Ekyou’s expression softens, and a slight smile touches her lips. Her eyes, however, droop at the edges.

Ekyou: I’m just doing what anyone else would do.

Chiyo: Not anyone.

Ekyou: Well, then, it’s just a matter of finding the courage to.

She touches my shoulder again, soft as a breath.

Ekyou: See you around.

And with that, she turns around and heads into the atrium. I stand for a moment before deciding against following her, and instead drift to the opposite direction, pretending not to notice the bloodstains trailing across the white carpet.
Eventually, I find myself in the living room, staring out of the window as the sun sets. It’s been three days, and the weather still doesn’t seem to have cleared up enough to see the landscape at all.

Who would have put us here? Why would they want to inflict such suffering upon us, to cut off a hand with no valid explanation other than breaking an arbitrary rule? And what would be the ultimate purpose behind all of this pain…?

Evidently, I lose track of time, because I barely notice when footsteps approach. I turn to see McRae heading towards me, and my heart freezes - does he know about this morning with Murdock?

Chiyo: Oh, hi.

McRae: I got your message.

Chiyo: My message…?

McRae: About Chisaki-san.

Oh. So is that what this is about. Despite the cold open to such a serious topic, he seems disaffected by his declaration, and immediately changes the topic.

McRae: I came over to ask, do you want to check out the gachapon?

I’m not sure how to feel about the request, especially since it’s, again, such an abrupt topic change. And such a lighthearted one… he didn’t even ask if Chisaki is okay. Which, admittedly, I’m not sure of either, but at least I would know that he cares.

But of course, if I said no, it would hurt his feelings. And after messing up so badly with Murdock, I think it’d be a good idea not to dig my grave any deeper.
McRae: Really? You don’t think it’s weird or anything?

Chiyo: No…? It’s just a gachapon machine. Why would it be weird?

Though he doesn’t answer the question, his posture relaxes, and he even smiles slightly. I guess this means more to him than he’s willing to say.

McRae: Cool. Let’s go.

We head over to the Monomachine, being ever mindful of the electric barrier, and he crouches to inspect it. For all I know, considering his response to its mention a few days ago, this is the first time he’s seen it. It’s greatly unimpressive to myself at this point, however, so I stand back and watch.

The lack of conversation between us seems somewhat strange, a total contrast to the Scrabble night that we had yesterday or even to our text conversation preceding it. Which, in turn, struck me as weird - McRae really doesn’t seem like the type of person to initiate conversation out of the blue, though all things considered, he seems sociable enough. Just not particularly talkative.

But then again, I’ve made enough Internet friends to know that some people are just more comfortable expressing themselves through text. And for what it’s worth, McRae does seem happy enough to be in social settings, though in all honesty I haven’t seen many emotions from him that weren’t also some flavor of spacey.

… Speaking of spaciness, judging by his expression, he’s stopped fidgeting with the machine and has been looking at me expectantly for quite some time now.

Chiyo: Is something wrong?

McRae: You wouldn’t happen to have any tokens?

McRae raises his eyebrows.

McRae: I guess not.

Chiyo: Sorry about that.

McRae: No big deal. I know Atsui-san took the ones from this morning and stuck them in the kitchen.

Chiyo: Do you want to go back?

McRae: Nah. Next time.

He kicks the ground idly, then directs a soft kick to the Monomachine itself. Instead of bouncing off, though, his foot barely glances off of the base and ricochets directly into the wall.

McRae: [wide-eyed] Shit.

It leaves a noticeable scuff.

McRae: Uh. My bad.

Chiyo: Oh god. Do you think they’re going to do something to us…?

McRae: No idea. Let’s get out of here before we find out.
Chiyo: Agreed.

Before we can take a single step, however, a thud resonates from the direction of the fireplace. A dark shape waddles away and towards us, dusting itself off and forestalling any further action.

Caliban: Stop where you are. I see you.

McRae: [under breath] Ohhh fuuuck.

Caliban: I agree. I don’t want to deal with you, but apparently Ariel is too busy attending to other things than to deal with rulebreakers. What a pity.

McRae: Didn’t Chisaki-san break a rule?

Caliban: Well, look at that, she sure did. Congratulations to her. And so did you. So. Hm. What to do with you two…

He pauses, glowing eyes seeming to focus and refocus between the two of us.

Caliban: How attached are you to your fingers?

Chiyo: V-very.

Caliban: I’m kidding, anyway. I can barely fly as it is. I wouldn’t be able to fly and cut appendages off. Pity.

McRae: [blinks] You mean, you… don’t have razor blades in your wings?

Caliban: Unfortunately, no. We can’t all be as fancy as that prissy showoff of another mascot.
Chiyo: So does that mean we don’t get punished? For scuffing the wall?

Caliban: Who gives a damn about you, daydreamer. If I were you, I’d be more worried about arthritis hands over there.

McRae: Arthritis hands?

Caliban: That’s what you’ll have if you keep playing your video games all the time, no?

McRae: I program them more than I play them. If anything, Kumoshita-san is the one who uses her thumbs for her talent.

Chiyo: Uh, probably! Yeah!

Caliban: Hmph. Whatever. The point is, you broke a rule, and you’ll have to face punishment for it at some point in the future.

I flash back to Chisaki sobbing over her hand. Could that be McRae next? And knowing that I couldn’t do anything to stop it…

A hand taps on my shoulder. McRae looks awfully bored with the prospect of such a consequence; he pulls out his Parchment, merely and lazily.


And then he starts scrolling through the device. Doesn’t he take this seriously?? I guess I can try to hold a conversation… maybe…

Chiyo: So, um. I mean, it’s just a scuff on the wall! I don’t think it’s necessary to remove any appendages!
Caliban: Who said anything serious about a punishment of that caliber? [mutters] Now that you mention it, that could be interesting, though…

Chiyo: Eep!

McRae: [without looking up] I’d prefer the kind of stalling that doesn’t involve discussing whether I should keep my fingers.

Caliban: What?

Chiyo: [quickly] But does he have to face punishment?

Caliban: Of course, it’s in the rules. “Students are strictly forbidden from causing damage to the property” and “failure to comply with any of the aforementioned rules will result in punishment”, keh?

McRae: The first one isn’t in the rules.

Caliban blinks.

Chiyo: What? Really?

Caliban: [uncertain] Yes it is. Shouldn’t it be?

McRae: No. Check for yourself.

I pull out my Parchment and navigate to the rules section. Sure enough, there’s a distinct absence of any rules pertaining to property damage. Instead of relief, though, all I feel is an ever increasing sense of dread. Especially looking at the last rule, that rules may be amended…

Indeed, Caliban simply cocks his head.
Caliban: Hm. Well. I suppose we should add that.

**A tense moment passes. Nothing happens. McRae checks his Parchment again.**

McRae: [matter-of-fact] You did not add that.

Caliban: [musing] On second thought, it would be far more interesting for the sake of murder scenes if you’re all free to do what you like in every case.

Caliban: So it’s decided. Feel free to drop a chandelier on someone or something like that. I don’t care. I’m not paid enough for this.

McRae: We have a chandelier?

Chiyo: You get paid?

Caliban: [to McRae] Yes. [to me] No. But we are on a budget here, so unless you’re killing someone, try not to let stupid things like this happen again. I’m not the one who has to repaint this, that’s Ariel’s job, but good lord does paint get expensive. Paint can be 3000 yen a gallon, you know, and in this economy that’s simply ridiculous.

McRae: I’m mostly surprised either of you are able to paint without thumbs.

Caliban: Oh, hush and put faith in us. Unless you’d like to do it instead.

McRae: Pass.

Caliban: I thought so. Now, I’m a very busy bird and I must take my leave to get back to more important matters. For instance, “making fun of my cohost while he tries to apologize to the girl whose hand he cut off”.
I stare at him, suddenly disgusted.

Chiyo: Leave.

Caliban: Keheh.

He flutters away, dipping to the ground between swoops. McRae turns back to the Monomachine and sighs.

McRae: Well, that was ass.

Chiyo: No kidding… I’m glad you don’t have to face punishment or anything like that, though.

McRae: Mm, same.

And now we’re back to awkward silence. I feel like this is a theme in every interaction with McRae, an issue only worsened by the very noticeable mark on the wall.

Chiyo: We should probably go.

McRae: We should come back here sometime with actual tokens, though. [scuffs foot on ground] It gets pretty boring when all we have are books and Scrabble.

Chiyo: You mentioned Atsui-san keeping them in the kitchen, right?

McRae: Mhm. I wouldn’t mind coming back with you, though. Since this was kind of a dud.

Because this was kind of a dud, I’m surprised McRae even wants to hang out again. Though I’m always happy to spend time with people! Especially because I don’t really understand McRae in particular.
Chiyo: If you’re sure! Just text me, okay?

McRae: [nods] Yeah, of course. See you around.

He heads back towards the main area of the living room, where Bates is already sitting. After a moment, I head to the kitchen, waving back to Bates when I pass the two of them. McRae is already engrossed in a journal, oblivious.

I pick up dinner and end up wandering with no particular destination in mind, eventually finding myself in the atrium. When I get there, I pause for a moment in the doorway. Valdez looks up, surprised, from where he sits cross-legged, but smiles quickly and beckons me over. I take a seat next to him.

Valdez: Hi, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: Hey!

Valdez looks almost expectant, as if he were waiting all along for someone to walk through the door, yet going by the somewhat panicked look on his face, he probably wasn’t expecting me.

Chiyo: Oh, are you waiting for someone? I can leave-

Valdez: No, no! You can stay if you want.

Chiyo: Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude.

Valdez: It’s absolutely fine. Please stay.

Chiyo: Alright, then.

They flash me a grateful smile as I take a seat next to them. We don’t wait long before the
door clicks open again, causing first Valdez and then myself stand up.

With shaking, hesitant steps, Chisaki walks into the atrium. Her jacket is no longer shrugged around her shoulders but worn properly, almost as if to disguise the bandages under her left sleeve. She wobbles her way over to the two of us, smiling in the silence that stretches just a moment too long.

Chisaki: … Hey.

She flashes an exhausted smile. I smile back, some of the worry finally lifting.

Chiyo: Oh my gosh! Are you okay?!

Immediately, I reach out to steady her last few steps, but she brushes me off. Seemingly unconsciously, her right hand drifts to her left arm, but she catches herself and hides both hands (one hand) behind her back.

Chisaki: I’m… Not sure what I’m gonna do now. But I’ll live! Assuming this doesn’t get infected.

Valdez: Chisaki-kun, I’m really sorry. That must have been so sudden…

Chisaki: Oh, don’t worry about it! I don’t know what I was thinking, really! Assuming I think ever!

Valdez: Now really isn’t the time to joke about this.

Chisaki: I’ll be fine, Dez-kun! I’m like, young and resilient! And…

She nearly falls over just standing up. Valdez quickly reaches out to steady her, but she bats his hand away and plops down on the floor in the same motion. Clearly winded, she continues talking as if she’d never stopped.
Chisaki: Really tired. Like, wow.

Chiyo: You should be resting! Why aren’t you resting!

Chisaki: Pfft, I said don’t worry. I’m a rebel! A R3BEL, in fact. Anyway, it’s not like anyone stopped me from leaving the medical room.

Chiyo: Then why did you??

Valdez: I, ah. Asked her to meet us here.

Chisaki: Can confirm!

I open my mouth to say something about Valdez being more responsible, but before I do, they turn to me, looking apologetic.

Valdez: I promise that this won’t be long.

Chiyo: ... Well, if you’re sure.

I mean, I trust him not to have called her here without a good reason, but I’m still worried. Amputees don’t normally recover that quickly without proper medical attention, and considering that Chisaki wasn’t even anesthetized during the procedure is even more worrisome. Still, Valdez’s tone is gentle when he crouches down next to her.

Valdez: Chisaki-kun, as soon as we’re done here, I need you to go back to the medical room to rest, okay?

Chisaki: Boo on your being responsible! I can handle myself!

Chisaki tries to strike a pose, expression instantly contorting with pain at the gesture.
Valdez: [seriously] I mean it. Or else I’ll call Everett-san here to take you there.

Finally, visibly, she deflates. In the one gesture, all of her bravado drops, leaving just…

...A girl who lost her hand.

Chisaki: … Alright. Alright, yeah, I will.

Valdez: Good. So.

They sit back, avoiding eye contact. For a long moment, they don’t say anything.

Valdez: … This is a lot to deal with. I’m not sure what to say.

Chisaki: You said you had something to say to help? Or something like that.

Valdez: Right. Guess I’ll start there.

Slowly, they start tugging at their gloves. Unlike their every other nervous gesture, this seems practiced, and their words are hesitant yet measured when they speak again.

Valdez: I know this is hard. Admittedly, I don’t know you very well, and I can’t speak for your past experiences. This is weird to say and probably weirder to hear, but I really hope that this is the worst thing that has happened to you or will ever happen to you.

Valdez: And for what it’s worth, you’re one of the coolest people I’ve ever met. I mean, you’re a flight student AND have fantastic music taste. Not to mention that you’re very easy to talk to.

Valdez: Which is another thing I like about you. You treat pretty much everyone the same and you approach life with so much energy and enthusiasm. So I know you can get through this.
Valdez: What more can I ask for in a person? Or a friend?

Valdez: ...  

Chisaki: Oh my god, Dez-kun, I love you too, now stop drawing it out and get to the point.

Chiyo: Chisaki-san!

Valdez: [half-laughs] No, it’s fine. I’m kind of stalling, haha. This is taking longer than usual- oh! There we go.

He finally pulls his glove off with a clean swish. What’s amazing, though, is not the seemingly unnecessary elbow-long length of the glove.

No, the amazing thing is the dull gleam of metal underneath. Valdez wiggles his prosthesis’ fingers, making a creaking series of clicks with each movement. Chisaki’s eyes are as wide as saucers.

Chisaki: [hushed] Holy shit.

Chisaki: Dez-kun is a robot.

Valdez: N-no I’m not?!

Chisaki: That sounds an awful lot like something a robot would say!!

Valdez: It’s just my arms! I have prosthetic arms!

Chisaki: A ROBOT IS TAKING OVER DEZ-KUN?! MORE AT TEN.
Valdez sighs, but doesn’t look too bothered. He drums his fingers against the ground idly.

Valdez: So um, yeah. I don’t have arms past my elbows. Never did.

Valdez: Or, I mean, I guess I had them when I was a baby. But then I had an infection, so… now I don’t.

Valdez: [quietly] So I get it, Chisaki-kun. And I don’t know how you’re feeling right now, but I know you can get through this. Okay?

Valdez: And…

He pauses.

Valdez: Are you crying?

Chisaki: [scrubbing at face] NO.

Valdez: Oh. [beat] Uh, good?

Chisaki: I mean, I AM crying. I’m just! God!

Valdez: [dryly] You can be god, yeah.

Chisaki: Shut up! I’m trying to be serious here! I’m just, like.

She pauses too, still rubbing at her eyes, before speaking again, solemn once more.

Chisaki: This is a big thing to you. And you mean a lot to me, so any big thing to you is a big thing to me. So I want you to know that I really appreciate that you’re willing to share it with me over something so small.
Chiyo: ...Your entire hand got cut off??

Chisaki: I keep saying, I’m fine!


Chisaki: [bright] Anyway, it hurts to move my other arm, but pretend I’m hugging you. Like, super tight.

Valdez: I’m imagining it.

Chisaki: Good. This is the kind of thing that unites us as people. You too, Kumo-chan! Pretend I’m hugging you!

Chiyo: Okay!

Valdez shrugs off his jacket and picks up his discarded glove. He’s halfway through pulling it back on when he hesitates, biting his lip.

Valdez: By the way, this stays between us three, okay? I don’t want anyone to…

He trails off. Considering how nervous he’s been in every interaction so far and his tendency to blend in, I think I know what’s bothering him.

Chiyo: To think any less of you?


Chisaki: Don’t worry, bro. I gotchu. Cuz, y’know.
Valdez: I’m almost scared to ask.

Chisaki: Our situations kinda… go hand in hand.

Valdez: [sighs] I knew this was coming.

Chisaki: And I mean, this way we know that Ariel’s armed and dangerous!

In spite of her own awful puns, Chisaki wears the world’s biggest shit eating grin, and I can’t help but smile. Valdez, in contrast, gently places his head in his hands.

Valdez: [muffled] Kumoshita-san… you’ll have to give her a hand.

Chisaki: [cheery] I rescind everything nice I ever said about you because that was the worst pun ever.

Valdez: Implying yours aren’t bad.

Chisaki: Hey!!

Valdez: Sorry. I need to speak the truth.

Chisaki: Guh!! You traitor!!

She draws back her right hand to punch him, but nearly falls over from the motion instead. Her compromise is to apparently lie on the floor, cheek pressed against the concrete.

Chisaki: Whoops.

Valdez: Alright, time to go to bed.
Chisaki doesn't protest as Valdez picks her off the ground and guides her out of the atrium. Somewhat lamely, I follow them to the exterior of a spare room, presumably the medical room, opposite the meeting room. After a moment, Valdez steps out of the room without Chisaki. They take a deep breath before turning to me.

Valdez: Thanks, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: For what? I didn’t do anything.

Valdez: You were there to listen, and that means a lot. Besides, I trust you, I don’t mind your knowing about me.

For the first time today, he smiles without a hint of sadness, and all of the tension evaporates from his frame. He looks genuinely relieved, though something still weighs on his posture.

Valdez: Though... I don’t know about you, but I’m tired, too. I think I’m going to bed. It’s almost ten, after all.

Chiyo: Huh?? It is??

I guess my nap was longer than I thought. Come to think of it, have I seen a clock all day? Valdez clears his throat.

Valdez: So if you’ll excuse me…

Chiyo: Oh! Right! Goodnight!

Valdez: Goodnight, Kumoshita-san.

I’m not quite tired enough to head to bed myself, and instead I wander to the library to find books to leaf through. By the time the nighttime announcement goes off, I’m back in my
I’ve pulled a variety of books on each of our respective talents - up and coming names in football, journalism, violinists… True to what Harai said, I can’t find anything about any of us students between the pages, aside from a brief footnote about a popular pastry chef named Fuu Atsui. Probably one of Atsui’s relatives.

It’s pretty late when I finish leafing through a beauty magazine when I look at my Parchment. A new message? How long has that been sitting there?

[23:32] T. HARAI:
Thanks. For today.
Did you take all of those books?

Shit, they noticed??

[23:56] C. KUMOSHITA:
Yes sorry!! o_o;
Do you want them?
I can bring them to your room

I don’t really expect a reply, but get one near-instantaneously anyway.

[23:57] T. HARAI:
No, I’m done reading those.
But if you’re doing research into everyone else too, I think you should know something.
I mentioned that there’s no information on anyone in the class, right?

[23:58] C. KUMOSHITA:
Right…?
T. HARAI:

That was a bit of a lie.

“Modern Energy and Japan”. Page 122.

There’s an entire two pages on Valdez and his involvement with the Fukushima wind farms that his profile mentions.

I frown at the screen. Is Harai lying? That would be such a strange and specific thing to lie about. I jot off a quick thank-you, but get no further reply. Since I don’t have that particular book, the only way to find out is by looking into it tomorrow.

But… why Valdez? How is he special? Other than the prosthetics, but he seems really determined not to let them define him. Is there a reason why he’s the only one who seems to have any life outside of these halls?

Or maybe… is there something that he’s hiding?

Though, as long as it’s so late, it’s not like I can do anything to figure out the answers to my questions. I guess these are all for another day.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found here.
When I wake up the next morning, judging by the room being even brighter than usual, I’ve slept in. Checking my Parchment confirms this, as the morning announcement was two hours ago. Ugh… I used to be able to wake up at 6:30 for school every day. Evidently not anymore.

Incidentally, checking my Parchment also confirms that I’ve gotten more messages since last night. Neither of them are from Harai, but I wasn’t really expecting one anyway. Hoping, yes, but expecting? Not really. Yet I can’t shake a sense of disappointment, even as I open the messages from Khalaf.

[8:25] A. KHALAF:

Is everything alright? Valdez-san mentioned you went to bed late.

And how is Chisaki-san doing? I don’t think we’re close enough for me to ask her myself.

I can’t help but smile as I type out a reply. Hopefully they don’t mind that it’s so late.

[9:43] C. KUMOSHITA:

I’m fine, ty!! Hope you’re well too! ^u^ 

I talked to Chisaki-san last night, I’m pretty sure she’s okay… she needs a lot of rest though

[9:43] A. KHALAF:

Well, that’s reassuring. Glad to hear that you’re both doing alright.

Did you just wake up?
Woah, that was fast. Were they waiting for me to respond?

[9:44] C. KUMOSHITA:
Yeah shgsldjfg
I didn’t fall asleep until past midnight

[9:44] A. KHALAF:
Wow. Take care of yourself, okay?

[9:44] C. KUMOSHITA:
I will! <3
You look after yourself too!

[9:45] A. KHALAF:
Of course, I don’t want to make you worry.
That said, do you need food? I can drop something off in front of your room.

[9:45] C. KUMOSHITA:
Dw I can get food myself!!
Wait did something happen in the kitchen?? oAo

[9:45] A. KHALAF:
Not exactly.
Or, something was going to, but it didn’t.

[9:45] C. KUMOSHITA:
???

[9:46] A. KHALAF:
Didn’t you get messages from Murdock-san?

Oh, right, I had another message. What would Murdock want to talk about? I open the message, which seems to have been sent early this morning.

[7:30] T. MURDOCK:

Good morning. Given the poor outcome of yesterday’s meeting, I thought it would be prudent to hold another today.

Would anyone care to join me at 8:15? I’ll be in the kitchen.

There seems to be another message.

[8:51] T. MURDOCK:

Never mind.

Oh, no… I don’t think that went over well. I wince with pity and open Khalaf’s messages again.

[9:49] C. KUMOSHITA:

That is… kinda concerning

Did you go?

[9:49] A. KHALAF:

Yeah.

To the first statement. I didn’t wake up until 9 and missed the meeting.

Valdez-san checked on her, though. He says that she’s moping in the kitchen, but I don’t mind going to get you food.

[9:49] C. KUMOSHITA:

Ah…

I can get food myself dw!!!
I’m sure she’s done moping by now, it’s been an hour

[9:50] A. KHALAF:

Well, if you’re sure.

I feel like I should do something about this. Again, I really don’t want to condone Murdock’s behavior, because wow she’s kind of overbearing, but at the same time, she’s a person just like everyone else. Someone should go check on her. Preferably someone who’s not me, as every time I try to talk to her she ends up mad at me. But who could I…

Wait a second.

[9:52] C. KUMOSHITA:

Khalaf-san?

Could you please do something for me? •o•

[9:52] A. KHALAF:

?

[9:52] C. KUMOSHITA:

I think it’d be good for someone to check on Murdock-san between the meeting

But I’m pretty sure she hates me... o_o;

Ik you two are on okay terms though!

So would you be okay with that? All I can give you in return are Monotokens though.

[9:52] A. KHALAF:

Re: “you two are on okay terms”, that’s incredibly debatable. But I’ll try.

You don’t have to give me anything in return, though that’s kind of you. I don’t need anything from the gachapon machine.

But I have to ask, though.
Why?

[9:52] C. KUMOSHITA:

Why what?

[9:53] A. KHALAF:

I mean

Nevermind.

[9:53] C. KUMOSHITA:

No, go on

[9:53] A. KHALAF:

She hasn’t been pleasant lately, is all I mean. I just think it’s amazing that you can stand to be around her, let alone ask me to help her.

That came out wrong. I do want to help her, too.

But I don’t know how much good it’ll do.

[9:54] C. KUMOSHITA:

A little bit of good is better than none though!

Even if it doesn’t end up doing anything in the long term, at least we can say we tried!!

For once, there’s a lull in our conversation, and I take the moment to actually get out of bed. By the time I’m properly dressed for the day, there’s another message on my Parchment.

[9:57] A. KHALAF:

Fair enough.

I’ll let you know how it goes, alright?

And in the meantime, I left you a donut anyway. Ekyou-san found a box of them in the pantry.
[9:57] C. KUMOSHITA:

^o^!!

Thank you so much!!

[9:57] A. KHALAF:

Anytime. :-)

Now that that’s settled, I’m free to do whatever else my heart desires! Which right now looks to be a whole lot of nothing. If Murdock is still at the kitchen, I really don’t want to walk in on her talking to Khalaf, so it’s probably best to avoid that.

My gaze drifts to the stack of books on my bedside table, and I sigh. Better go return those in case someone needs them; though Harai said they finished reading those already, other people might have a renewed interest in investigating the mansion after Harai’s spiel yesterday.

After eating the donut (which is about as good as a storebought donut can be), I walk into the library to find Kashizaki inspecting a shelf. She doesn’t even look up at my entrance, seemingly absorbed in her studies if not for the fact that she’s yelling across the room. Because apparently Sekisada is here too, I guess, buried in a book fort almost exactly like he was a few days ago. If not for the fact that I’d seen him yesterday, I might have thought he hadn’t moved in all this time.

And as usual, even though they’re on opposite sides of the room, they’re arguing. Great.

Sekisada: Yeah, you’re just saying that because all you do is stare at your phone all day. Bet your grades were shit.

Kashizaki: Actually, I was ranked #1 at my junior high and passed several entrance exams for both public and private high schools before I got scouted by Hope’s Peak, yet I STILL found time to pursue my talent to an Ultimate level, unlike you over there who just had to sit through TV shows and smile. Morning, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: What’s going on?
Kashizaki: Dealing with the daily atrocities that make up this absolute clown.

Sekisada: Back at you. Anyway, at least I acknowledge my talent is useless. What’s your excuse?

Kashizaki: I’m actually happy with my talent. If you hate seat filling so much as you claim, why don’t you just do something else? Oh, right. Cuz you’re too “useless” or whatever.

Sekisada: Again! At least I acknowledge it!

Kashizaki: Yeah, I’ve clearly proven that I’m useful outside of Hope’s Peak, while you keep reusing your arguments. Get back to me when you can do half the things I’m capable of. [to me] What can I do for you?

Chiyo: Oh, I was just going to put these back.

**I hold up the books. Kashizaki inspects the titles, nodding.**

Kashizaki: So you’re doing research, too… That’s astute of you.

Sekisada: Nerd.

Kashizaki: Said the guy reading romance novels.

Sekisada: They’re not romance novels! They’re historical accounts!

Kashizaki: Fictionalized historical accounts… of romances. Hence, romance novels.

Sekisada: [sniffs] You don’t know what you’re talking about.
Even though they’ve been arguing nonstop since I walked in (and most likely before), neither of them seems really mad at the other. They just seem to be arguing for lack of anything better to do, though both of them do seem significantly annoyed with the other.

Still, I’d really just like to return my books.

Chiyo: So, um, does anyone actually put these away in order?

Sekisada: No. Do it yourself if you’re so goddamn smart.

Kashizaki: Sekisada-san.

Sekisada: What?

Kashizaki: That’s pretty rude.

Sekisada: Oh, like I haven’t been rude this entire time.

Kashizaki: [frowns] Look, I don’t care if you’re rude to me, but there’s no need to drag someone else into this whole mess.

Sekisada: I’ve been extremely rude to everyone, Kashizaki-shi. You’re not special. Besides, Kumoshita-shi can defend herself, you know.

Chiyo: Um??

Oh gosh why did I get dragged into this? Regardless of whether this argument is just to pass the time or a genuine quarrel, I don’t want to escalate the situation.

Kashizaki: Well?
Chiyo: Uh, I… I guess Sekisada-san’s got a point. He’s rude to everyone.

Though I’m disagreeing with her, Kashizaki just shrugs. She doesn’t seem upset, merely taking the statement in stride.

Kashizaki: Mm, fair. Still, standing here and arguing isn’t exactly how I planned to spend my morning. Want to find something else to do?

Chiyo: Actually, I was thinking about staying here.

That, she frowns at.

Kashizaki: With him? Are you out of your mind?

Chiyo: I mean, I’m actually looking for a book, but I wouldn’t mind getting to know him, too!

Kashizaki, astounded, looks from me to Sekisada and back, trying to determine if I’m lying. Honestly, I’m not sure if I am either. While of course it’s important to know about people before deciding to like them or not, Sekisada’s right - he’s been nothing but rude the entire time I’ve known him. Yet maybe he can be nice sometimes…?

Visibly weighing her options, Kashizaki sighs heavily and closes her eyes, rubbing her forehead before opening them again.

Kashizaki: You know, this is what I mean by your being too nice. That man’s just unbearable.

Sekisada: [calling over] I heard that!

Kashizaki: [over shoulder] Don’t care. [to me] You’re probably making a terrible decision.

Chiyo: Maybe so, but… I don’t want to isolate anyone on purpose. [lowers voice] That could make him a bit of an easy target.
Kashizaki: Or make him a killer.

**Seeing my expression, she rolls her eyes.**

Kashizaki: No one’s going to kill anyone, though. Besides, the moment Sekisada-san tries to start shit, I’ll get Ekyou-san to bash his head in the wall.

Chiyo: …

Kashizaki: Nonlethally.

**Her warning delivered, she shrugs and steps back from the shelf.**

Kashizaki: But, whatever, I can’t stop you from trying to interact with him, I guess. Just don’t do anything stupid, and don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Chiyo: I think I’ll be fine!

Kashizaki: Suit yourself. If you need me, I’ll be tracking down Ekyou-san. [unconvincingly] For reasons unrelated to bashing Sekisada-san’s head against a wall.

Sekisada: [calls over] I didn’t say anything the first time because I thought I misheard you, but you’re planning to WHAT?

Kashizaki: If I were you, I’d be more worried about what Ekyou-san would do.

Sekisada: Excuse me??

Kashizaki: [to me] See you around.
She looks genuinely sorry for me as she departs. But surely Sekisada can’t be that bad, right? I mean, everyone can be snappy sometimes. Maybe he just needs someone to be nice to him!

Confidently, I approach the beast, mentally repeating these ideas to myself. He doesn’t even look up from his books when I approach.

Chiyo: Hi!

Sekisada: Don’t talk to me.

Chiyo: Okay!

Actually, in retrospect, I’m not sure what I was expecting.

He goes back to his book and I take the opportunity to search for the one that Harai mentioned last night. Eventually, I find it and flip to the pertinent page. Sure enough, there’s a two-page spread on Valdez. Though it’s extremely technical and makes my head spin, the gist of it is that his own contributions - when he was in middle school, for heaven’s sake - were instrumental in upgrading a wind farm that was set to be opened a year later… I wonder how that’s going? Surely it’s open by now.

But that’s not the important part, of course. What’s important is that there’s information about one of us - not a relative, not a friend, but someone from our own class. I stare down at the pages, reading and rereading, until I hear another voice.

Sekisada: Oh. There you are.

I close the book quickly and look up as he walks, looking almost disappointed, towards me.

Chiyo: Were you looking for me?

He pauses again, somewhat lamely.

Sekisada: I thought you left.

His tone reads that he was hoping that I had left.

Chiyo: Well, uh… Surprise! I’m still here!

Sekisada: [sighs] Unfortunately. [points] What’s that all about?

Caught, I show it to him. As always, he remains deeply unimpressed. I’m beginning to think that “deeply unimpressed” is his resting state. Even after I flip to the page with Valdez’s information, he feigns a yawn.

Sekisada: Huh.

Chiyo: You don’t think that’s suspicious?

Sekisada: Of course it’s suspicious, but the hell do you want me to do about it?

He brushes his hair back with a scoff. I was just trying to be helpful…

Sekisada: So Harai-shi was either not looking hard enough, or lying. I’m leaning lying, but it doesn’t really matter. What of it?

Chiyo: They’re the one who told me about this, actually.

Sekisada: Yeah, doesn’t change the fact that they lied to the rest of us. As far as I’m concerned, that’s even more reason not to trust them or anyone in this stupid mansion.
Chiyo: I- I guess, but-

Sekisada: I mean, we haven’t even confirmed that no one’s involved in this whole situation. Why should any of us trust each other? What’s the point?

**I press my lips together as Sekisada continues to rant, now almost laughing in between mocking words.**

Sekisada: Listen, no one in this killing game is trustworthy, and I wouldn’t put stock into any of what they have to say. I bet that they just want to take advantage of you. What’s to say that they aren’t planning to kill you, too?

Chiyo: Sekisada-san, you haven’t even bothered to interact with anyone.

Sekisada: Because I can’t trust any of you, and frankly, I don’t care enough to. How about you? You’ve been interacting with literally everyone, but doesn’t that make you a target? Come on, someone could just off you and destabilize the whole group. Pretty sure one of us could value that.

**I flinch at the mention of death and he smirks. Yet, oddly, instead of panic, all I can muster is what’s possibly the most revulsion I’ve felt throughout my whole lifetime. How dare he speak to someone - anyone - like this? Deliberately preying on their fears and treating everything like it’s just a game?**

**Despite every screaming instinct to be tactful, I find myself snapping at him.**

Chiyo: Why are you so mean all the time? I’m just trying to be nice to you.

Sekisada: Yeah, like you’re trying to be nice to everyone. It doesn’t come across as “cool” or “friendly”, you know. It comes across as “two faced” and “sneaky”.

Chiyo: Maybe to you, but I’m just trying to make friends. Because, I don’t know, making friends might make people _less_ likely to kill you?
Sekisada: Oh, please. Haven’t you seen any sort of reality television? The asshole never gets eliminated first. The TV producers need them for drama. That’s how you get ratings.

Sekisada: Which furthers my point, because nice people are never there to make friends. They’re here to pretend to make friends and then backstab their alliances. So how can I trust you?

Chiyo: But this isn’t a TV show! These are real people, Sekisada-san! You can’t just be mean to people and think everything is fine!

Chiyo: Don’t you want friends?

Sekisada: ...

Sekisada: [sighs] Listen, just because you’re nice to someone doesn’t mean that they’re your friend. And sometimes people don’t deserve friends after everything they’ve done.

The fight seems to have gone out of him, but I’m still seething, still petty enough to get one more shot before common sense takes over.

“Everything they’ve done”… what has he done? What could he have done?

Something clicks, and before I can stop myself, I blurt it out-

Chiyo: … Is this about Everett-san?

He blinks, eyes widening. For the first time, he looks genuinely surprised.

Sekisada: How do you know about that.

Strangely, a note of fear has crept into his voice. Still, I push on. No going back now.
Chiyo: She says she recognizes you but doesn’t know why. You’re the only person she knows from before her memory was erased.

Eyes still wide, Sekisada takes a hesitant step back, then another. Oh, god, I shouldn’t have spilled Everett’s secret like that, but while this may not have been right, it feels necessary. Especially because Everett herself doesn’t seem inclined to confront him, and from the way he’s reacting…

Chiyo: Did you…

I falter.

Chiyo: Did you do something to her?

His expression shifts from fear to anger to, for a very brief moment, a deep and profound sadness, before finally settling on something that could be neutrality - or, perhaps, regret.

Sekisada: I have to go.

He drops his book and rounds the corner. With a jolt, I stumble forward and after him.

Chiyo: No, wait-

But by the time I get to the next aisle, he’s gone, as if he were never there. I pace fruitlessly for a few moments before kicking at the ground and leaving.

Damn it! If only I hadn’t messed that up… Sure, Sekisada was being a complete jerk, but maybe I could have handled that better. After all, who’s the one who keeps saying that people might just be lashing out and to be kind to them?

One thing’s for sure, though. He almost certainly did something, more than likely something very bad, to Everett in the past. That’s… really unsettling. What could possibly have been the magnitude of his actions? Does it have anything to do with her memory loss?
... Is it even safe for her to be around him?

I think I’m more confused now than I was before.

Lacking options, I head back to the kitchen where, to my surprise, Khalaf is seated at the table. They look up at my arrival and nod a greeting.

Khalaf: Morning.

Chiyo: Good morning!

I take a seat across from them, and they hand me a bag of chips. Nice.

Chiyo: So how did everything go? With Murdock-san.

Khalaf: Well enough, I think. I let her know that we’re all looking out for her, although I’m not sure how convinced she is.

Chiyo: Oh! That’s good!

Khalaf: She left the kitchen pretty quickly after we talked, so I’ve been sitting here until you walked in.

Chiyo: But you’re still sitting here.

Khalaf: [adjusts hat] … Maybe so.

We exchange smiles, theirs seeming significantly tired, then lapse into a comfortable silence.
(For some reason, I have the urge to lean over and embrace them.)

Khalaf: How was your morning?

Chiyo: Ugh…

Khalaf: That bad, huh?

Chiyo: Yeah.

Perhaps judging by the look on my face, Khalaf props their elbows on the table and rests their face on their hands.

Khalaf: Alright, tell me about it.

Chiyo: Everything?

Khalaf: If you want.

At first I hesitate, but I end up telling them everything about Kashizaki and Sekisada, down to the reasons why I was in the library and what I found about Valdez. But that requires backtracking to Harai messaging me last night, which requires more backtracking about Valdez and Chisaki (though I leave out the part about his prosthetics and just say something vague about Valdez reassuring Chisaki). And then I realize I didn’t actually explain the whole thing with Sekisada and Everett that well, so I tell them about that too.

So, basically, I’ve just told them about everything that I learned in the past four days regardless of how secret it’s supposed to be. Good job, me!

They’re silent throughout my spiel, nodding at appropriate times but otherwise not responding. When I’m finally done, they narrow their eyes, but still don’t say anything.
Maybe this isn’t the best idea. Sekisada’s words still echo in my head - anyone could be hiding their true nature, and the more nonthreatening I seem, the easier a target I could be seen as. Yet, somehow, being around Khalaf puts me at ease. Like, a lot more than with anyone else in the building, despite the fact that I haven’t spent nearly as much time with them as I have with other people. I wonder if they feel the same…?

...Wait, where did that come from? That’s weird. I think I need to clear my head. Or just get out of this situation. This has definitely been a stressful three minutes as they digest everything I just said, I’m sure that’s the problem. Yeah.

Eventually, the silence stretches far too long to be comfortable. Khalaf still seems to be mulling over my words when I start to fidget.

Chiyo: Um…

Khalaf: … Wow. That’s... a lot to take in at once.

Chiyo: I’m sorry!

Khalaf: Don’t be. [half-smiles] Thank you for telling me all of this, I really appreciate that you trust me enough to do so.

Chiyo: Any time! I’m really glad that you’re willing to listen. I know I can trust you, you’re just…

I struggle for words for a moment before giving up. That’s a little too much emotional intimacy for someone I just met a few days ago.

Chiyo: [lamely] You’re just cool, I think.

They avoid my gaze quickly, barely smiling.

Khalaf: Thanks. You too.
Before I can feel embarrassed, their smile slides off their face and they sigh heavily.

Khalaf: Besides, you’ve been way busier than I’ve been. [counts on fingers] All I did in the past several days is sleep a lot, talk to Murdock-san, and then lose to Everett-san at Scrabble. Meanwhile you’ve actually been making progress with investigating and talking to people. I feel kind of bad, really.

Chiyo: Oh, no, you didn’t have to do anything! Honestly, I didn’t expect most of this to happen. Especially with Everett-san and Harai-san. Please don’t feel bad!

Khalaf: Still, though. I’m a journalist. I should be looking to uncover the truth, but I’ve clearly been taking too much time to relax.

Chiyo: There’s nothing wrong with that! I know a lot of people’s lives are super busy outside of all this.

Khalaf: [shakes head] No, if there’s anything I can do to help with this, I want to be able to do so. I’ll be working to discover things too in the coming days.

Chiyo: It’s no problem! Although…

Khalaf: Although?

I hesitate.

Chiyo: If you’re investigating, would it be presumptuous of me to ask that you tell me anything that you find out, too? Since I told you all of this.

Their eyes widen, and they stare at the table. For a second, I’m worried that I’ve offended them, but it passes and they nod to themselves.

Khalaf: Yes, I don’t see why not.
Chiyo: Yeah! We can be a team!

Khalaf: A team?

Chiyo: If that’s okay with you, of course, I just thought-

Khalaf: No, that’s more than okay with me. I like spending time with you.

At the simple declaration, they pull their hat lower and turn almost entirely red; yet, despite their obvious embarrassment, a smile touches their lips. Weirdly enough, I find myself smiling too.

Chiyo: I like spending time with you too, Khalaf-san.

And for the first time since arriving here, I don’t feel stressed at all. Of course I’ve been happy here before, between spending time with Atsui and Kashizaki, listening to Valdez and Chisaki, and especially the Scrabble night, but something about this is different. I’d be completely content just sitting here like this forever.

The moment is shortly broken by the click of the kitchen door. Khalaf and I immediately settle back into our seats as Ekyou walks in, looking more than a little disoriented.

Ekyou: Am I interrupting something?

Khalaf: Why are you here?

Ekyou: Hungry. Need food. Are there still donuts?

Khalaf: Last I checked, yes.
Ekyou: Cool.

She heads into the pantry off the kitchen, and Khalaf returns to staring at their Parchment as if our whole conversation hadn’t just happened. The atmosphere is all too suddenly awkward, and I end up ripping open the bag of chips. These are just as mediocre as I remembered.

Shortly, Ekyou returns from the pantry with a cheap powdered donut, which she places on a plate. She then proceeds to the refrigerator and brings out what *better not be* a squeeze bottle of mayonnaise. Khalaf, too, looks mildly afraid. Ekyou catches our expressions as she drizzles an exorbitant amount of the condiment on the pastry.

Ekyou: What?

Chiyo: Is that mayonnaise??

Ekyou: Don’t knock it until you try it.

She takes a bite of the whole concoction. I can feel my soul dying.

Ekyou: Anyway, I’ll see you around.

Her mission accomplished, Ekyou leaves with her terrible… weird… thing that I can’t in good conscience call a meal or even a reasonable snack. Khalaf and I exchange glances and collectively decide that we’ve both had enough of hanging out in the kitchen for one day.

They head off to the library as I finish my chips, and eventually I decide to follow. Unfortunately, as Bates said a few days ago, our collective options for entertainment are extremely limited sans the Monomachine. Something about the concept of crouching in front of a gachapon machine while stuffing tokens into it seems enormously unappealing at this time, at least alone, so I guess it’s time to read more. Hooray.

As soon as I step foot in the hallway, however, I catch sight of a grey-and-red figure I hadn’t expected to see and frown. Harai is just standing in the middle of the hallway, leaning against
their door. Considering that I haven’t seen a trace of them aside from yesterday, it’s incredibly odd that they’re just standing here. They don’t seem to have noticed my arrival and continue to stand, motionless.

After a couple of seconds, it’s increasingly clear that they either don’t notice me or don’t care. Either way, it seems in bad taste to just let them stand here. I reach out somewhere between tapping their shoulder and hovering awkwardly, and just decide to greet them instead.

Chiyo: Hello?

At the noise, a jolt seems to run through them and they turn their head from side to side quickly.

Harai: Huh-?! Oh. Hi.

Chiyo: Is something wrong?

Harai: No. Nothing.

Harai: [mumbles] ...where am I.

Chiyo: Um… what do you mean by that? You’re in-

Harai: [waves hand] Yes, I know I’m in a building called Mansion Milan, and I know we’re in a killing game. Do I look like Everett-shi to you? But why am I in the hallway…

The last portion of their statement seems directed more to themselves than anything else.

Chiyo: What were you doing before you got here?

Harai: I was, er. Investigating.
Chiyo: The hallway?

Harai: Well, I was.

They press their mask closer to their face and pause for a long moment.

Harai: … But I think I fell asleep. [sighs] That would explain it.

Chiyo: You were up for a long time last night… Do you always keep such late hours?

Harai: I do what I want.

Chiyo: How many hours of sleep have you been getting since we got here?

Harai: Eight.

Chiyo: That sounds reasonable.

Harai: Oh, wait, you meant per night. I thought you meant altogether.

Chiyo: Harai-san??

Harai: I’ll be fine. It’s necessary that someone look into our situation, since no one else seems inclined to.

Chiyo: Maybe, but… you still need to take care of yourself. And you don’t need to be the only one investigating! I know Murdock-san has been trying to get information!

Harai: What she’s doing is speculation. I’m the one who’s actually investigating.
Chiyo: Well, if you need help, I’m free now. You seem pretty tired, and if I could at all make things easier for you..?

Admittedly, even though I don’t really want to investigate at this present moment, I do want to get to know Harai a little better. Yet they don’t seem all that excited at the offer, instead fiddling with the layers of their cloak. They take a long moment before responding, and I’m pretty sure they’re going to say no anyway.

Harai: … Alright.

Chiyo: Wait, really?

Harai: Yeah. You won’t have to do much. Follow me.

I don’t even have time to be surprised that they accepted the offer before they head down the hall at a brisk pace, leaving me to run and catch up. No further conversation is held between us, which is… I mean, I can’t say I didn’t expect it.

Before long, we’re standing in front of an all-too-familiar room.

Harai: This is where the phone calls were held yesterday, correct?

Chiyo: Yeah.

Harai: And where Chisaki-shi’s hand got cut off.

Chiyo: … Yeah.

They nod sharply and simply, then push the doors open. When I take my first steps into the room, I squint at how bright and pale everything seems to be. How clean it is, and how lovely that no trace of yesterday’s carnage remains.
It makes me sick.

Harai doesn’t seem bothered by this at all. Maybe it’s just because they aren’t close with Chisaki, but they genuinely don’t seem to care that she lost a hand here yesterday. Their steps are clinical and clipped, and they flit about the room quickly, taking note of everything on the Parchment in their hands.

The silence stretches out for what feels like minutes before I sneeze. Harai looks up, startled, seeming to realize suddenly that I’m still here.

Harai: Bless you.

Chiyo: Thanks. Is there anything I can do to help?

Harai: … Not that I can think of. Sorry.

Chiyo: That’s alright. What are you looking for anyway?

Harai: [shrugs] Anything that stands out. To be honest, I came in here two days ago already. Not much has changed.

Chiyo: Yeah. But now Chisaki-san had her hand cut off…

Harai: Hm.

They tilt their head, lowering their Parchment.

Harai: I’m sorry to hear. You two seem close.

Chiyo: I’ll let her know when I see her.
Harai: By the way, you didn’t end up using your phone call, did you?

**What an abrupt topic change...** Although, I guess there’s not much Harai can say about Chisaki, considering that they barely talk to anyone. As far as I know.

Chiyo: No. I wasn’t going to anyway, but after yesterday afternoon...

Harai: Hm. Fair enough.

Chiyo: Did you?

Harai: No.

Chiyo: I mean, now that I think about it, I’m not sure if anyone actually took Ariel up on that offer. Other than Chisaki-san, of course.

Harai: I saw Ekyou-shi and Shionaga-shi head in, too. I’m not sure which of them actually made their calls. There were other people before them, of course, but they were right before Chisaki-shi.

Chiyo: Ah.

**Ekyou did mention having a sister, and Shionaga’s talked about his parents. Still, it’s a little curious that Sumitama didn’t go with them.**

Harai: But you were there, weren’t you?

Chiyo: Huh?

Harai: When Chisaki-shi’s hand got cut off. Could you please tell me about it?
Chiyo: Oh, um. I actually got there right after the whole thing was over. And then Ekyou-san kind of stepped in and took charge of everything.

Harai: Ah. I see.

Chiyo: So if you want to find out what happened, you should talk to her. Oh! Or Everett-san, she was there for the whole thing! Although I’m not sure how she’s doing.

Harai: [nods] Fair enough, I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.

Apparently satisfied for the moment, they turn back to staring at the floor - the same spot covered in so much blood yesterday is now spotless today. It’s amazing and somewhat horrifying how quickly and well that was cleaned up.

Chiyo: By the way, I got a chance to look at the book you mentioned last night.

Harai: It’s suspicious, isn’t it? That Valdez-shi is the only person to have seemingly existed outside of this building.

Chiyo: Yeah. But don’t you think it’s a little weird that of everyone to have information on, it’s him?

Harai: Hm.

Chiyo: Every single one of us achieved things before arriving here, but why is it that the only person that’s given any heed is Valdez-san? Is there a reason that his accomplishments are recorded and no one else’s? I mean, after all, Bazhanov-san is something of an attention getter, and then you’re really young for a kabuki actor…

Harai continues to type on their Parchment, unresponsive. I fidget with my gloves for just a moment.

Chiyo: Not to mention that some of us have famous relatives. Shionaga-san’s parents used to be household names in volleyball, from what I’m told. But the only other person who I found any
information about is one of Atsui-san’s relatives.

Harai: In a book? May I see it later?

Chiyo: Huh? Oh, sure! I put it back in the library, though.

Harai: Alright. Just let me know the title.

Despite all of my own rambling, Harai doesn’t seem inclined to add anything. They’re halfway through double checking the games cabinet before I attempt to make conversation again.

Chiyo: So what do you think?

They pause.

Harai: What do you mean, what do I think?

Chiyo: What do you think about Valdez-san?

Harai: I, um… I guess he’s okay? Why would you want to know about what I think?

The question seems to have taken them off guard, and they fiddle with their cloak again, agitated.

Chiyo: You’re really smart, Harai-san. I think you’re one of the most perceptive people here, and if anyone could figure out why we’re all in this mansion and what the people behind it want with us, I’m sure it’d be you.

Harai: You’re sorely mistaken.
Chiyo: What do you mean by that?

Harai: “Smart” and “perceptive” are two different things, for one. Please don’t get them confused.

Chiyo: You definitely seem like both, though!

Harai: I- no. [shakes head] I just find information.

Chiyo: But- 

Harai: It’s not hard to do. I don’t mind it.

And they’re quiet again, continuing to tap away. Despite their neutral tone, I can’t shake the heavy sense of resignation rolling off of them in waves. Do they really want to be investigating? They don’t seem unhappy to be doing this, exactly, but they don’t seem happy, either. Just… determined. That isn’t a fault. Is it?

At last, they shove their Parchment into what I can only assume is a pocket in their cloak and face me again.

Harai: But if you have any input, I wouldn’t mind hearing it.

Chiyo: Oh! Alright, I’ll let you know.

Harai: [nods sharply] I’m done here. Is there anything else that you wanted to look at?

Chiyo: Not particularly.

Harai: Then we should go.
Without further hesitation, Harai strides out of the room. Once again, I’m left to run and catch up; by the time I do, we’re halfway down the hall again. They look up quickly when I fall into step.

Harai: What are you still doing here?

Chiyo: Do you not want me here?

Harai: No, I-

Abruptly, they cut off and stop in their tracks. I pause, but they’re already walking again.

Harai: It’s fine. You can stay, I was just surprised that you’d even want to.

Chiyo: Of course I want to! You’re doing important work, and I want to help.

Harai: Hm.

Harai keeps their gaze determinedly forward, but they seem significantly less guarded all the same.

Harai: Next, I wanted to look at the gachapon machine.

Chiyo: Oh, I have tokens for that! If you want to take a break.

Harai: [nods] That’s extremely helpful, actually. I overheard Kashizaki-shi talking about a recurring jagged motif on some of her trinkets, so I wanted to look into that.

Chiyo: So you want to see if you can get anything that has the motif?
Harai: Yes. Hopefully it shouldn’t be too difficult, I’m not too sure how many people have taken items from the machine.

Chiyo: Couldn’t you just ask Kashizaki-san about it? Gachapon machines never give you what you want.

Harai: Yes, but…

We turn the corner by the library, and they fall silent. I frown.

Chiyo: But…?

And then I look up and heave an enormous mental sigh.

Bates: Aha! There you are!

Bates stands in the hallway, seeming to have cornered Khalaf. The latter simply slouches, back pressed against the door to their room.

Khalaf: [mutters] Thank you Allah and everyone else.

Harai: You were looking for us?

Bates: Ah, no, sorry. I just haven’t seen either of you in the past few days! Good to know you’re still alive!

Khalaf: Bad time to joke about that.

Chiyo: I-I guess!

At least they’re not arguing like Kashizaki and Sekisada were this morning… but oh, gosh,
these two give me such a headache when they’re in the same room. To be honest, Bates gives me a headache on his own. I think it’s just him that gives me the headache, actually.

Harai is slowly edging sideways around them towards the living room, and I can’t say that I blame them. Unfortunately, Bates steps in front of them, ever present smile still plastered on his face.

Bates: So! What are you two doing?

Harai: Why do you care?

Bates: Woah! No need to get so aggressive!

Harai: I’m not trying to be.

As far as I can tell, they really aren’t, though irritation creeps into their voice. I’d better step in.

Chiyo: We’re just trying to figure things out. We already looked at the meeting room, where they had the phone calls yesterday.

Bates: You didn’t actually end up using your calls, did you?

Chiyo: Um… no.

Khalaf: Let me guess. You didn’t either.

Bates: Ahaha, no way. I’m an awful actor, remember? And I didn’t wanna take that risk. I mean, sure, I was thinking about it, but after that pilot girl lost her hand… [shudders] I figured, nah, not worth it. But I really hope she’s doing okay!

Khalaf: Yeah, I’d bet you care so much about someone whose name you can’t even remember. [to
me] So where are you off to now?

Chiyo: Uh…

Harai: Monomachine.

Khalaf: What?

Harai: We’re going to look at the Monomachine.

Bates: Aw, really? It’s kinda boring. What are you even looking for?

Harai: Anything. I won’t know until I get there.

Bates: Ahaha, I guess that’s a good point.

Khalaf: Can you stop saying useless rhetorical things for five minutes?

Bates: Can you stop acting like you have a stick up your ass for five minutes?

Khalaf: [bristles] You-

Chiyo: Khalaf-san, do you want to come with us?

The effect is immediate and almost comical. Khalaf snaps out of their rage and ponders the offer.

Khalaf: … You know what, sure. [shrugs] We’re a team, right?
Chiyo: Yeah!!

I smile, and even Harai looks somewhat awed. That went well! Good job, me!

And like the Jaws shark, Bates is grinning behind Khalaf with all his teeth.

Bates: Ooh, I want to see! Kumoshita-chan, do you still have tokens? Can I have some?

Chiyo: … Yeah!!

If Harai had a face, I’m pretty sure they would be glaring at me right now. As it stands, Khalaf looks suddenly and very immediately displeased. Bates, as always, seems oblivious to the chaos he has just wrought upon the group.

Bates: Great! So let’s go!!

He all but skips down the hallway, expecting us to follow. I’m the only one who makes a move towards him, and with a sigh, Khalaf falls into step. Harai brings up the rear, seeming utterly annoyed by their own expedition becoming hijacked.

We approach the barrier without further incident or conversation, but upon rounding the corner, Bates stops where he stands.


What scares me most is the complete and sudden lack of any kind of emotion in his voice. No cheer, no snark, nothing.

Dread settles in my stomach. I try to peek around him.

Chiyo: What is it?
Bates: It’s awful, I don’t… Ah. Don’t do that.

He steps in front of me, blocking my view. Khalaf catches up to us, frowning at the sight, and shoves Bates aside.

Khalaf: What-

They stop, too, for what feels like eternities. When they speak again, their voice is gentle, laced with sadness.

Khalaf: Kumoshita-san.

Khalaf: You don’t want to-

They pause.

Khalaf: I’m sorry.

Chiyo: Wait, I don’t get it. What’s going on? Why don’t you want me to-?!

The realization, belated as it is, hits me with the force of a truck.

Chiyo: ... 

Chiyo: … No .

Harai: Why did you all stop here?

Bates: I…
Harai brushes past the two of them, who finally part in front of them. I follow close behind, already knowing what I’ll see.

And what I see is…

… I can’t say I didn’t expect it, with how Khalaf and Bates were acting, but I still fall to my knees.

How could this have happened? How could someone with such potential and such a bright future ahead of them be lying in front of me now?

Brendan Valdez, the SHSL Mechanical Engineer, is…

Dead.
This can’t be happening.

Why him?

Why any of us?

The world tilts around me. I can barely make out the people by my side, let alone the announcement buzzing across the mansion’s speakers, but one thing cuts through my consciousness.

Khalaf: Chiyo-

I want to reach towards them, but I’m trapped where I stand, drifting in and out of focus. Valdez can’t - he can’t be dead. Wasn’t I just talking to him yesterday? The day before? Has it only been five days since I met him?

but now he’s gone and he’s never coming back and I won’t ever again speak to him or hear him joking with Chisaki or even feel his quiet presence and we’ll all die here alone forgotten and he won’t go home-

...

...

...

And then there’s nothing but black.
Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found here.
And I stand, frozen, as a jingle finishes playing.

Ariel: A body has been discovered! After a certain amount of time has passed, our first class trial will begin. Please feel free to investigate to your heart’s content!

That can’t be possible, right? Valdez isn’t actually dead. Yet the pallor in his skin, the wide-open eyes, and his wild but slack expression all say otherwise.

He really is gone.

A choking rage starts to rise in my chest, but I shove it down. I didn’t know Valdez that well, but I can’t afford to let my anger at the situation distract any of us, especially not myself.

After all, any journalist - especially the SHSL one - has to search for the truth.

「CHOOSE A PERSON: AMAL KHALAF」

And in theory, nothing should get in the way of this goal. All of us have a responsibility to the class to investigate so no one else dies today - aside from the killer, of course.
Kumoshita, though, has gone pale as a ghost, arms stiff at her sides. Suddenly she tilts forward, eyes flickering shut.

Amal: Chiyo-

And thank goodness, I catch her right before she hits the ground. Though I shake her gently, she doesn’t stir. She’s definitely out cold.


Amal: Shut up.

Bates: Niiice.

Harai: I agree. Shut up.

Bates: You’re not the boss of me.

As I bring Kumoshita to rest on one of the couches, I grit my teeth in frustration. Is this how working with Bates is gonna be? Before I can snap back, a familiar voice sounds from behind us.

Ariel: Ah, I see you’re still here.

The three of us turn to Ariel, who seems to have just arrived. It takes a fluttering step towards Valdez… or, I guess, Valdez’s body. That’s going to take some getting used to.

Ariel: Congratulations on being the first three to discover the body!

Bates: I’m pretty sure that’s not a good thing??
Ariel: I, er. Suppose not. Though it does have some benefits… For instance, those first three who discover a body are innocent of the crime.

Amal: So you’re saying that none of us killed Valdez-san.

Ariel: If phrasing it in such a way makes you feel better, yes.

Amal: … Alright. I’ll keep that in mind.

**Given my present company, that doesn’t exactly make me enthusiastic.**

Harai: Are you going to share anything useful with us?

Ariel: Goodness, of course! What kind of bird do you take me to be?

Bates: One that wants us all to die in a mistrial!

Ariel: Kuu… I assure you, that isn’t my intent. I wish to aid you as much as I can while still facilitating the operation of this killing game. Now, if you’ll give me a moment…

There’s a buzz from my pocket. I fish out my Parchment and navigate the menus to the magnifying glass menu, which was formerly locked. Apparently, it’s a section called:

Harai: “Ariel’s Files”?

Ariel: Yes. I, ah, thought to put together some information about the case before you. So they are, so to speak, my files.

Bates: Geez, how self-centered can you get?
Amal: The irony of that statement is not wasted on you, I see.

Ariel: [tilts head] Of course, the alternative is to *not* supply this information to you.

Bates: [hurriedly] Right, right.

**Now that Bates has shut up, I’m finally able to open the file and process it in peace.**

*The victim was Brendan Valdez, SHSL Mechanical Engineer. The time of death was 12:02 PM, and the body was discovered at 1:13 PM by Claudius Bates, Amal Khalaf, Tatsumaru Harai, and Chiyo Kumoshita.*

*The cause of death was electrocution. The victim has several bruises along his back and upper arms, as well as extensive electrical burns in the same areas, but no other injuries otherwise.*

*Though it’s useful, something about the wording of this file is bothering me. Harai, too, taps their Parchment screen, then looks back to Ariel.*

Harai: You said the three of us were the first to discover the body.

Ariel: So I did. What of it?

Harai: Why is Kumoshita-shi listed as having discovered the body?

Ariel: Ah?

**It seems to zone out for a moment, eyes dimming, before returning to its animated self.**

Ariel: Ah. That’s right. It seems Mx. Harai and Miss Kumoshita had discovered Mr. Valdez’s body at the same time. Unfortunately, that means one of you two may not be innocent.
Harai: [shrugs] Meh.

Amal: You aren’t worried?

Harai: People will suspect me no matter what I do. I’ll just have to defend myself.

They’re remarkably unaffected by the whole situation. Evidently finished with its announcements, Ariel turns away.

Ariel: Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to inform the rest of your peers of these developments. Odd that none of them decided to gather here.

Ariel: [mutters] Evidently, none of you seem to know how to participate in a killing game.

Bates: I mean… wouldn’t it be bad if we did?

Ariel: Perhaps it would be better for your chances at survival.

With that, it flies away.

「 EVIDENCE: Ariel’s File #1 」
「 EVIDENCE: Body Discovery Announcement 」

Ariel seems to have made a complete turnaround from its apologetic nature from the past few days, which is oddly… relieving? At least it’s not pretending to be nice anymore, but I just wish it wasn’t happening under these circumstances. Poor Valdez.

… That’s all I can really say about him, unfortunately. I didn’t know him that well, aside from that Kumoshita liked hanging out with him a lot. And he was always friendly to me. Still, to know that he’s dead, and that someone in this building killed him, is enough to throw me for a loop.
I shake my head. I don’t have time for this. I crouch down next to Valdez… or his body, I guess. Aside from the injuries that were mentioned in Ariel’s file, it seems like he’s relatively unharmed. The electricity is probably what killed him.

Which is what it says, right there, in the file. Great going, me.

Bates: Anything interesting?

Amal: Well, he’s dead.

Bates: No, shit, Sherlock. How about the flowers?

Amal: The what?

Bates: [rolls eyes] You sure I shouldn’t be investigating for you, Amal-san?

I choose to ignore that and instead look at the flowers he mentioned. They seem to be folded out of paper and tied in bunches. If I knew more about origami or flowers or what origami flowers should look like, I would probably know what they are. Alas, I don’t for either count. This had better not be important.

「 EVIDENCE: Flowers 」

Harai drops down next to me and watches in silence as I gently close Valdez’s eyes. They’re quiet for a long moment.

Harai: Their shoes.

Amal: What about them?
Harai: They’re covered with paint.

In fact, due to a spilled paint can, the entire area seems covered with paint in smudges and patterns along the floor. Though there are footprints, they all seem to have the same design as Valdez’s boots. Where there may have been footprints from another student, the paint seems hastily scrubbed out - if there was a different print there before, there isn’t one now.

Not to mention that this crime scene itself is a complete mess. There’s even a few solid dents on the barrier, presumably where Valdez was slammed against. He evidently didn’t go down without a fight. But why on earth would someone want to kill Valdez?

「 EVIDENCE: Footprints 」

「 EVIDENCE: Signs of a fight 」

Bates: So like, what should we do now?

Amal: Maybe you could actually make yourself useful.

I stand up again and look Bates in the eye. It’s extraordinarily frustrating that, for all my attempts to look intimidating, he’s almost the same height as I am. Maybe taller, if you count his hair. Fucking Bates.

Amal: Listen. You’ve been nothing but insufferable the past few days, and frankly, you’re not helpful at all. The very LEAST you could do is be respectful to Valdez-san’s memory and actually investigate so the rest of us don’t follow him.

Bates: Uh, yeah, hello, who just pointed out the whole thing with the flowers? Sure as hell wasn’t you. I assure you, I’m perfectly capable of figuring out this case myself. In fact, I know I can, but I guess I’d better step off so that some people can jerk themselves off to how smart they think they are.

Bates: I’m not stupid, Amal.

I glare at him for a moment, unsure whether to call his bluff or punch him in the face. Or
both. Both is sounding extraordinarily appealing. I never get a chance to follow through on either of these, though, as Harai sidesteps us both and then turns to face us.

Harai: Now isn’t the time for this, you two. We should ask everyone else about their involvement with the murder and collect more evidence.

Amal: … You’re right. We should do that.

I am not admitting that I was wrong in front of this absolute clown.

Amal: But someone should stay behind and make sure no one tampers with the scene. Or with Kumoshita-san. I nominate Bates-san.

Bates: Shouldn’t Amal-san be the one staying? Y’know, because you and Kumoshita-san are attached at the hip. Or Harai-san-

Harai: I second Khalaf-shi’s statement. Let’s go.

Bates: Bwuh-?!

Harai wastes no time in evacuating the scene, and I follow quickly, leaving Bates sputtering behind. At least neither of us have to deal with him for the time being. Apparently we’re sticking together for now, but given my options, I can’t complain. What I wouldn’t give for Kumoshita to be here, though.

Admittedly, it’s very strange to be spending time with Harai. It seems like they never want to interact with the rest of us, aside from what Kumoshita had planned for them yesterday. In fact, I’m not actually sure how they ended up spending time with her today?

Not like I’m jealous or anything, of course.

Harai: So. The motive.
Amal: What about it?

Harai: You didn’t use yours, did you?

Amal: And what if I did?

Harai: Nothing. You’re in the clear, anyway, so it really doesn’t matter what you did with your phone call.

Harai: [turns away] If I remember correctly, Valdez-shi didn’t use his. I doubt many people did.

Amal: So… That’s a pretty useless motive, then. Now that you mention it, I don’t see how it was meant to facilitate murder in the first place.

Harai: How so?

Amal: Why would someone be pushed to kill someone because they got to speak to their loved ones?

Murdock: There could be plenty of reasons for that.

I look up to see Murdock and McRae walking towards us, Murdock several steps ahead of her cousin. She stops in front of us, waiting for him to catch up.

Murdock: Perhaps a relative is sick and dying, so it’s urgent that a student returns home through winning this killing game. Perhaps they have outstanding debts to an unknown entity that they need to escape for. Or a student simply misses their family enough to be pressured to kill.

Murdock: For what it’s worth, I used mine.

Amal: Who’d you call?
Murdock: [promptly] No one of concern.

McRae catches up, looking more than a little shaken. He stands close to Murdock, almost hiding behind her. For her part, Murdock is acting like her usual pragmatic self, immediately going back to business.

Murdock: We got here as quickly as possible. What happened?

I fill her in quickly, trying to make it as brief but comprehensive as possible for the sake of Harai standing silent at my side. They’re clearly more than uncomfortable with the person who accused them of masterminding the whole situation and then asked them for information on the situation not three days later. Murdock doesn’t seem bothered by these circumstances, and simply nods, frowning.

Murdock: So, Valdez, huh…

McRae: What? He seemed really nice…

Murdock: Yes, he was. [adjusts glasses] I can’t believe someone would want to kill him of all people.

McRae: Agreed. I wish I had known him better, he seemed cool.

Amal: I think we all wished we knew him better.

McRae: Mm.

Amal: Though that brings up an interesting point. Did anyone really know them?

Murdock: To the best of my knowledge, no. [sighs] I had spoken to him in the first few days, but I’m not sure why he stopped talking to me.
Harai: … I wonder.

Murdock: Did you say something?

Harai: No. But with the phone calls…

McRae: What about them? [stuffs hands in pockets] I used mine, too.

Harai: Really?

McRae: Yeah, why?

Harai: Nevermind. [tugs mask] I had some questions, but they should wait for later.

Murdock: Still. It’s a shame that Valdez passed away.

Amal: Why?

* I’m wholeheartedly expecting a response along the lines of “wanting to get to know him” or something cheap and similarly Murdock-esque. Instead, her expression melts into one of sorrow, and she lowers her voice.*

Murdock: He didn’t deserve it. No one should have died today. If there’s anything I could have done to stop it…

… Well, that’s more emotional depth than I had expected from her of all people. I wish I didn’t have to say I’m surprised, but I’m definitely grateful that she doesn’t seem to be actively harmful. I pat her shoulder; she seems surprised at the gesture.

Amal: Well, that’s why we’re investigating. So we don’t die too.
Murdock: I’m afraid that no matter what we do, it might not be much good.

Amal: Anything helps. All we can do now is our best, okay?

Murdock: … [nods] Of course. Stay safe, alright?

Amal: You too.

McRae: If we find anything you didn’t mention, I’ll send a message.

Amal: Really? [recovers] Alright. Thank you, we’ll do the same.

Murdock nods sharply, and she and McRae proceed to the crime scene. I stare for a moment before following Harai further down the hall. While I still don’t agree with Murdock’s politics, I think I can start to respect her as a person. That’s what Kumoshita would want me to do, right?

… Why do I care so much about what she thinks?

Something about this case stands out, though. Not only had very few people known much about Valdez, seemingly even fewer had actually used their motives. Aside from Murdock and McRae, I’m not sure if anyone had. Maybe that’s important.

「 EVIDENCE: Motive 」

「 EVIDENCE: Relations with Valdez 」

It takes me a second to notice that Harai is several steps behind. They’ve stopped entirely and are staring at the floor. Instead of observant, however, they look dumbstruck.

Amal: Is something wrong?
Harai: … We should have gotten alibis from them.

… Ah, shit.

Amal: Do you want to go back?

Harai: No. I’m pretty sure neither of them…

Harai: …

Harai: [sighs] … This is a situation that doesn’t allow for assumptions. I’m messaging McRae-shi.

They pull out their Parchment and start typing into it, maintaining their pace. If they’re sure, I guess. They are right, though - this is a situation that can’t allow for any errors in judgement.

We pass by the first wing of rooms, then the library. At the laundry room, however, I hear voices. Arguing voices. I don’t really want to deal with whatever the hell’s going on over there, but at least there are people to question.

I push through the doors and glare at the washing machine, as well as the people around it. Atsui sits on the dryer while Kashizaki folds clothes, and Sekisada of all people standing near them.

Sekisada: ...And that’s my life story.

Atsui: Dude, you didn’t even say anything before that sentence.

Sekisada: Yeah. My life is boring.
Kashizaki: I can tell.

Near as I can tell, I’ve interrupted absolutely nothing of note. And that’s the problem.

Amal: What the hell do any of you think you’re doing?

Kashizaki: Laundry.

Amal: Laundry?? Valdez-san is dead and you choose to do LAUNDRY??

Atsui: Wait, Valdez-san is what? You’re kidding, right?

Don’t they realize that Valdez is dead?! I’m so frustrated I could scream, as it is, I’m barely able to control my voice.

Amal: Did you. Not hear the announcement go off.

Atsui: No??

He pulls out his Parchment and scrolls through it, eyes wide. Frantic, he slides off the washing machine, quickly.

Atsui: What the fuck! What am I- what are any of us still doing here?! We have to go investigate!!

Sekisada: Meh. No point.

Atsui: Yeah, no, you’re not useless enough to just sit here and do nothing! Come on, we’re going!

Atsui grabs a sputtering Sekisada by the arm and drags him out of the room. It’s good that someone here has sense, unlike…
I turn back to Kashizaki, who’s still folding clothes. For all of my clear exasperation, she seems completely unaffected.

Amal: Well?

Kashizaki: What? This shit wrinkles. Just give me a moment, I’ll catch up.

She continues to fold, unbothered. I give up. Before I can leave the room, Harai steps in and clears their throat.

Harai: I saw Atsui-shi and Sekisada-shi leave. Did you even ask for alibis at all?

Amal: Oh.

I am terrible at this investigation stuff.

Amal: My bad. [to Kashizaki] What were you doing at the time of death?

Kashizaki: Well, I have no knowledge of this case whatsoever, so I don’t know what the time of death is. But I’ve been doing laundry with Atsui-san all day. You can check the dryer if you want, I don’t care.

Amal: Right… And when did Sekisada-san get involved?

Kashizaki: About half an hour ago? He came in with his own laundry, saw us, and immediately tried to leave. We did make him stay, though. [shrugs] At the very least, Atsui-san and I can verify each other’s alibis. Sekisada-san is on his own before he got here.

「 EVIDENCE: Kashizaki’s Testimony 」
Amal: ...Alright, that makes sense. Thank you.

Kashizaki: Eh. You don’t think the trial can wait until this load is done, do you?

Amal: If I were you, I would have other priorities.

Kashizaki: Again, I’ll catch up. Don’t think I’m useless. I’m not Sekisada-san.

Harai: Harsh.

Kashizaki: But true.

With that, Harai and I leave the laundry room and head towards the atrium, only to run almost face-first into someone.

Everett: Oh! Sorry.

Amal: It’s fine. What’s going-

I stop, seeing Everett’s companion.

Chisaki, trembling slightly, doesn’t even seem to notice either Harai or myself, eyes completely glassy with either shock or tears. Or maybe both. Probably both.

I wish I knew what to do, but…

Amal: Is she alright?

Everett: [sighs] Completely devastated. I heard from Sekisada-san how you’re pushing everyone to investigate, but…
Amal: No, it’s fine. Were they close…?

Everett: I think so. I mean, I didn’t know Valdez-san myself, but Chisaki-chan was telling me about how they were spending time together yesterday.

Everett: And now he’s dead.

Amal: Ah.

Judging by what Kumoshita told me earlier today, that checks out. For Chisaki to lose both her hand and her friend in a matter of days, if not hours… that would be hard on anybody.

Everett: If either of you have any evidence, I’ll be happy to contribute during the trial. [lowers voice] But don’t you dare put any pressure on Chisaki-chan.

Amal: I wasn’t going to-

Everett: I really mean it, Khalaf-san. You don’t know how it must feel.

Of course I know how it feels.

Amal: [coldly] Perhaps I do. What about you, Everett-san? Do you remember someone you love dying?

She flinches back, and I immediately feel bad. She’s just looking out for her friend, referencing her memory is crossing a line. But, evidently, it’s a little late for that.

Amal: … I’m sorry. That was low.

Everett: ...
She looks like she’s about to snap at me or burst into tears, but deflates.

Everett: It’s alright. I get it, it’s been a long day.

Amal: Still. That was going too far on my part.

Everett: Mm. Just forget it, okay? Uh. So to speak.

Before this situation gets derailed further, Harai speaks up. To be honest, I completely forgot they were there. I’d assume that’s how they prefer things, though.

Harai: I’m sorry to interrupt, but do either of you have alibis for the time?

Everett: Chisaki-san’s been in the medical room all day. I spent most of the day with her.

Harai: Define “most”.

Everett: [dryly] Well, I woke up and ate breakfast pretty early. But I don’t think 6:30 in the morning is the time of murder, is it?

「 EVIDENCE: Everett’s Testimony 」

Okay, that’s good to know, but:

Amal: 6:30?? On purpose??

Everett: Yes? Sleeping at 10 pm and waking up at 6:30 is perfectly reasonable??

Harai: I wish that were me.
Everett: How much do you sleep?

Harai: Uh. [tugs at cloak] About two hours. Per night.

Everett: Please fix your sleep schedule.

Harai: R-right.

Harai doesn’t seem poised to argue, and merely turns aside. Surprisingly, they don’t seem too agitated by this particular conversation, at least not like they were in our last three encounters.

Harai: My condolences to Chisaki-shi, but we really ought to continue our investigations.

Everett: If there’s anything I can do, let me know, okay?

Harai: [nods] Of course.

Everett: [to Harai] And you. You’d better take care of yourself.

Harai: … I’ll try.

Amal: We’ll bring whoever did this to justice. See you at the trial?

Everett: Yeah. See you.

Gingerly, I step around Everett and Chisaki. The last I see of the two of them is Everett gently walking a well and truly crying Chisaki back to the medical room. Though I feel bad, the best I can do for now is investigate. God, I wish I was a nicer person.
In the atrium, Ekyou, Sumitama, and strangely enough Bazhanov are gathered and making quiet conversation. Or, rather, Ekyou and Sumitama are making conversation while Bazhanov watches, hands clasped, saying nothing.

Sumitama looks up when I approach with Harai, her eyes widening in surprise, but I immediately talk over her. I’m not making the same mistakes, rudeness aside.

Sumitama: Oh-

Amal: Alibis?

Ekyou: Huh?

Amal: Your, er. Alibis. Do you have any?

Bazhanov: Yes, actually. [picks at gloves]

Bazhanov: I’ve been here in the atrium all day.

He doesn’t say anything more.

Amal: … Okay, and?

Bazhanov: And what?

Amal: Did anyone see you?

Bazhanov: Hirono and Iris are here now, aren’t they?
Amal: I mean, before that. At the time of the murder. Around noon.

Bazhanov: Ah. In that case, no. But before Hirono and Iris came in, someone else did.

Amal: Like who?

Bazhanov: I didn’t care enough to look over. I didn’t think anything of it. Rest assured, if I had known this would be the outcome, I would have checked their identity. My sincerest apologies that I hadn’t.

He falls silent, and I frown. Sure, he might say he’s sincere, but... do I really trust like that? I guess I’ll have to take his word. He’s Bazhanov, anyway - who knows what he’s thinking.

「 EVIDENCE: Bazhanov’s Testimony 」

Harai: Thank you.

Bazhanov: No problem.

Harai: How about you two?

Ekyou: Huh??

Sumitama: Oh, you mean us... Well, I had been with McRae-san and Claude-san this morning.

Amal: Why?

Sumitama: Because they asked me to.

Amal: Why did you say yes??
Sumitama: Because they asked me to!! Did I say something wrong??

Amal: No, you’re fine, it’s just… [lowers hat] Ugh.

Harai: Bates-shi is insufferable.

Amal: Bates-san IS insufferable.

Sumitama: I think he’s okay, but… [bites lip] I guess I can see that. Maybe...

**I have no idea what anyone sees in him.**

Harai: What happened to Shionaga-shi?

Sumitama: Geh? I don’t know. We don’t hang out all the time, so I haven’t seen him all day. Why?

Amal: I don’t think Harai-san or I have seen him, either.

Bazhanov: Odd. Is he at the library, perhaps?

Ekyou: That makes no sense. He hates reading.

Bazhanov: Well, you know him better than I do.

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EVIDENCE: Sumitama’s Testimony
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Amal: Then what were you doing, then, Ekyou-san?
Ekyou: Didn’t you see me? I came into the kitchen to eat.

Amal: [grimaces] I think I forcefully expelled that from my memory until you mentioned it. Do you always eat like that?

Ekyou: Yeah. Why?

Amal: Huh.

Ekyou: What’s up?

Amal: Nothing.

I might have to have a conversation with Atsui in the near future to avoid this ever happening again.

Sumitama: I’m so worried… Someone actually died. Someone that we know. And then someone that we know killed them… [shivers] I hope we can actually figure out who did this.

Amal: Of course we’ll be able to.

Sumitama: I hope so. I mean, as long as people like you and Ekyou-san are here, it should be fine, right?

Ekyou: Who, me?

Sumitama: Yeah! You make me feel a lot more confident in myself! Knowing that you’re on my side helps a lot!

Ekyou barely smiles, looking at once concerned and grateful.
Ekyou: Thanks. I’m glad I can do this for you.

Harai: [calls over] By the way, what are these?

They point to the flowerbeds, and I notice something I ought to have seen long ago. Paper flowers?

Ekyou: Oh! Those are hydrangeas! Kumoshita-san, Shionaga-san, and I were folding those a few days ago. See? You can string them together to make a whole hydrangea.

Amal: … I see?

Sumitama: That’s so neat! All I have are rotten seeds.

Ekyou: Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll come up soon! Maybe they just need more sun, it’s been really foggy lately.

Bazhanov: But some of them are missing.

Sumitama: Wait, really? Did someone dig them up? Is that why they came here earlier?

Bazhanov: Not your flower seeds. The hydrangeas.

He’s right. The flowers that Harai pointed out - the hydrangeas - are the same as the ones at the crime scene. Someone must have moved them for whatever reason.

Bazhanov: Anyway, why would someone want to dig up flower seeds? I doubt people even knew they were there. I know I didn’t.

Sumitama: Still…
Amal: Better yet, why would someone want to take your flowers in a murder case?

Sumitama: Wait, someone did that?

Amal: Someone left the hydrangeas on Valdez-san’s body.

Sumitama: [frowns] Ah. Why would they do that?

Ekyou: That sounds useless.

Her hands still shake for a moment, but she clenches them into fists.

Ekyou: I think we’ve spent enough time here, Sumitama-chan. We should make sure we actually investigate Valdez-san’s body. Or, at the very least, that we pay our respects.

Sumitama: Right. See you guys soon.

Harai: Okay, bye.

Harai and I stay behind a moment, but don’t find anything else of note. Even Harai seems slightly discouraged by the lack of relevant evidence we’ve been finding. Everything feels like one wild goose chase after another, and the clock is ticking...

Leaving the atrium, I realize how long it’s taken us to get here from the crime scene. Despite the fact that we’ve been interrupted at several points, it took us at least ten minutes to walk from point A to point B. The culprit must have gotten from place to place extremely quickly if they had time to kill Valdez, get the flowers, and then walk back to the scene of the crime, all while remaining unsuspected if not unseen.
When we get to the library and I reach for the door, Harai turns to me abruptly.

Harai: I’m going to head back to the crime scene. I still don’t have an update on Murdock-shi and McRae-shi, so I’m hoping that I run into one of them on the way.

Amal: Oh, alright. See you soon?

Harai: Hopefully. You should make the most of your time. Who knows how much longer we have to investigate?

Amal: Right.

And with that, they take quick steps down the hall. I’m still not sure how to feel about them, but they don’t seem that bad. In any case, having them as an investigation partner helps a lot.

I walk into the library - while it may be a bit useless to investigate here in particular, if the atrium had clues, maybe the library does too. Except that there doesn’t seem to be any change from the last time I was in here yesterday, nor does it really seem that anyone’s here. This was probably a waste of time.

Amal: Hello?

Oh, there’s a voice and a shuffle. Shionaga pokes his head out from behind the bookshelves, holding a book himself.

Shionaga: Oh, hey, Khalaf-san.

Amal: Hi. You heard about Valdez-san?

Shionaga: Yeah. So I came here.
Amal: To…?

Shionaga: [shrugs] Research, I guess. I don’t know what I’m doing.

**Ordinarily, I’d say that something is better than nothing, but this seems especially pointless. Maybe I’m just too worked up, though.**

Amal: What exactly are you researching, then?

Shionaga: Uh… I was trying to look up electrocution and stuff. But I don’t think any of that actually helps. It’s good to know how medical things work, but most of it went over my head.

Shionaga: Oh, but I learned that the actual voltage of electricity doesn’t affect whether the person dies. So I guess the paint must have made Valdez-san extra conductive or something.

Amal: That’s, uh… good to know?

Shionaga: [sighs] Not really. I’m afraid I’m not that useful right now.

**From what I remember of our first day here, Shionaga sure likes to sit on the sidelines and not do anything. Maybe it’s a good thing that he’s actually trying to research, then.**

Amal: Then what are you reading now?

Shionaga: Oh, um.

He holds it out to me, looking sheepish. I’m having a hard time reading the decorative script on the cover.

Shionaga: This account of a serial killer… Tokyo Bloom?
Amal: Is that seriously the best thing to be looking into right now?

Shionaga: Maybe not? I don’t know, just… This killing method seemed relevant.

Amal: How so?

Shionaga: So this serial killer, Tokyo Bloom. They kill people by shoving them off tall buildings.

Amal: That has absolutely nothing to do with this situation.

Shionaga: I’m getting there. Their call sign is usually a folded origami flower. A bunch of hydrangeas.

My blood runs cold. I struggle to keep my voice level.

Amal: Okay, so what?

Shionaga: [sighs] Khalaf-san, this needs to stay between us for now, in case I’m wrong.

Amal: If you’re going to accuse someone of being Tokyo Bloom, that’s a very long shot.

Shionaga: I know. And that’s why it needs to stay between us. Okay?

Amal: … Alright. I’ll bite.

Shionaga: [closes eyes] Thank you.

Shionaga: So Tokyo Bloom is suspected to be a female student who lives in Tokyo, with a possible history of crime. This is thought to be coincidence, but they started killing on the day of the apprehension of this other serial killer, Mercury’s Halo, also known as Ekuko Uyama.
Amal: Mercury’s what?

Shionaga: Another serial killer. They killed people with dimethylmercury, this really specific poison. It’s not that important right now.

**This is a lot to take in at once. Now there’s another serial killer involved?**

Shionaga: I’ve been spending a lot of time with Ekyou-chan. She’s mentioned having an older sister who attends the University of Tokyo, which was where Uyama-shi allegedly obtained the poison.

Amal: Listen, Shionaga-san, this is starting to sound really dumb.

Shionaga: Just hear me out, okay?? I know this has nothing to do with the case, but I’m kind of freaking out, because if Ekyou-chan is a serial killer-

**He stops, but the words hang there, the accusation heavy.**

Amal: … So you think Ekyou-san is Tokyo Bloom.

**Shionaga twists the bracelet on his wrist, looking agitated. I don’t blame him.**

Shionaga: Well. In short terms, yeah.

Amal: When did you find the time to research all of this?

Shionaga: Yesterday.

Amal: And why, exactly, did you do that…?
Shionaga: Because I’m worried! Look, I don’t care if you believe me or not, but I can tell you one thing for sure. I guarantee you, I wouldn’t have cared about any of this if not for Ekyou-chan’s phone call yesterday.

Amal: She made one?

Shionaga: Yeah. To her sister. She asked to speak to a warden, and then asked questions like if her sister’s proud of her, when they’ll be able to see each other again… But it wasn’t phrased like Ekyou-chan was the one that needed to get out of her situation.

Shionaga: I think her sister might be in jail. And not for a petty crime.

Amal: I…

Shionaga: See, it’s all super suspicious. And I’m onto something here, right?

Shionaga: This isn’t just a matter of who killed Valdez-kun. This is a matter of who might kill the rest of us.

Shionaga: Please, Khalaf-san.

This all sounds so far-fetched. The hydrangeas, this report, Ekyou herself… Shionaga seems truly desperate, though. The least I can do is say I believe him. Even if I don’t actually.

Do I?

Amal: Thanks for bringing this up.

Shionaga: [perks up] So you believe me?

Amal: I’m glad that you’ve brought it to my attention, but I’m worried that this might be a distraction…
I frown, remembering the flowers.

Amal: … Actually.

Shionaga: Actually?

Amal: You might be onto something. There were origami hydrangeas at the scene of the crime, weren’t there?

Shionaga: Yeah! That’s why I brought this up in the first place!

Amal: I guess. Wouldn’t that be a little obvious? Why would a serial killer put their calling card at the scene of a crime that they’re trying to get away with?

Shionaga: I don’t know, glory or something?

Amal: But they’re trying to get away with it.

Shionaga: Still…

Shionaga fidgets with his bracelet again.

Shionaga: But you get where I’m coming from, right?

Amal: I think I do. I can bring it up at the trial, if it’ll make you feel better, but I don’t think it has anything to do with this case.

Shionaga: But not necessarily Ekyou-chan herself, right? Because I don’t want anyone to be mean to her or anything.
Amal: Of course not. Unless she does anything to cement herself as Tokyo Bloom, I won’t bring her name into this.

He visibly relaxes, seeming relieved. This must have been stressing him out a lot, especially if he had been thinking about it for the past day.

Shionaga: Thanks. I knew I could count on you.

Amal: Uh, no problem, I guess.

Amal: I mean this in the nicest way possible, though, but you didn’t happen to do any actual investigating into the case, did you?

Shionaga: … No, not really.

Amal: … Right. Okay.

So that was indeed a waste of time. I think I lost anywhere from ten to twenty minutes from this conversation alone, which is admittedly irksome considering the circumstances. Still, though, if this information can help us in any way…

Before I can do any more investigation, y’know, for the actual trial ahead of us, another announcement plays over the intercom.

Caliban: Ding dong, the investigation period is over. Would everyone be so kind as to gather at the fireplace? Within, oh, the next ten minutes or so. Don’t push it, unless you want to be like Stumpy. Thanks.

The intercom clicks off, and Shionaga and I exchange glances.

Shionaga: … I guess I should have been investigating more, huh.
Amal: It’s a little late for that.

I guess I’ll have to work with what I’ve got.

「 EVIDENCE: Tokyo Bloom 」
「 EVIDENCE: Shionaga’s Testimony 」

We leave the library and head into the hallway. Before we get far, something in the bathroom catches my eye.

Amal: You go ahead. I need to check something.

Shionaga: Huh? Okay.

With that, I quickly duck into the (thankfully deserted) boys bathroom.

I don’t know what I expected to find, but the floor is littered with wet footprints. A quick check of the trash can reveals an entire wad of paint-covered paper towels. Strange.

「 EVIDENCE: State of bathroom 」

Whatever. I don’t have time to dwell on this. I head quickly to the fireplace before I’m too late.

Even though I spent a moment investigating the bathroom, I’m still not the last one to arrive at the fireplace. As is typical of this class, no one is talking when I arrive. I stand by the side of the room, arms folded. When Harai notices my arrival, they stride over, pulling out their Parchment.

Amal: Hi?
Harai: I’m sending you a list of the evidence that we compiled, as well as some of my own insights. Hold on.

A soft ping. I take out my own Parchment to see our findings compiled into a list of bullet points. Seems that they noticed the bathroom, too... How does Harai have the speed to write everything down in such detail? I don’t even remember half of what we investigated.

Harai: Murdock-shi and McRae-shi say that they had spent the afternoon playing board games, by the way. Which is in addition to McRae-shi spending the morning with Sumitama-shi and Bates-shi.

Amal: I see.

```EVIDENCE: Murdock and McRae```

Harai: Enough of that. Did you find anything useful in the library?

I did promise to Shionaga that I would talk about Tokyo Bloom eventually... just maybe not now. Something tells me that would be more trouble than it’s worth.

Amal: Nothing of note.

Harai: Hm.

They don’t seem that mad, despite my answer, and thankfully say nothing about all the time I wasted chasing a dead end.

Though the sixteen fifteen of us are all present, neither Ariel nor Caliban has come to tell us what to do now. I end up drifting to the couches again and take a seat next to Kumoshita. Her expression is peaceful, almost as if she hadn’t passed out from shock.

I sigh. Honestly, not having Kumoshita awake with the rest of us is stressful. Even if she isn’t the best with death, just having her investigating with me would make me feel a lot more
secure. As it is, I’m sure the main reason why I’ve been so snappish in the past hour is because I’m worried about her. Not like I’m gonna say that, but.

Or maybe I’m stressed because Bates keeps giggling in my general direction.

Bates: Dude, you know you’re playing with her hair, right. Like. She’s passed out. You’ve known her for five days. That’s really fucking weird.

My face is bright fucking scarlet and I can feel it.

Amal: Die.

Bates: [shrugs] Well, I hope your investigating was worthwhile, otherwise I just might! And what a shame that’d be.

Bates: Oh, and the rest of you might die too. That sucks.

Sekisada: Bates-shi, for the love of god, shut the fuck up. What are we supposed to do now?

Almost as if in response to his question - actually, let’s face it, probably in response to his question - the fireplace suddenly goes out with a pop. What once was a roaring fire is suddenly extinguished, with nothing but a swiftly cooling metal grate where it once was.

And, in the next instant, a voice calls from behind us. If it can even be called a voice.

Caliban: Glad you asked.

First Caliban and then Ariel approach us, to absolutely nobody’s delight. Caliban turns its head from side to side, taking in the crowd of unenthused students.

Caliban: [completely sarcastic] Wow! Your first trial! How thrilling!
McRae: I can’t say the same.

Caliban: Oh, hush. You just haven’t seen how exciting a trial can be. Friendships are made and broken over these. And someone dies at the end! Isn’t that exciting!

Everett: Not… really.

Caliban: Ah, posh. Now, everyone get on the elevator and we’ll head up.

Shionaga: The what?

Caliban: The fireplace, of course! Why else would the fire so dramatically have gone out?

Harai: … If I stand on hot metal I’m pretty sure my socks will catch on fire.

Caliban: Well, that’s your fault for not having shoes, ain’t it.

Harai: You literally did not supply me with shoes to begin with.

Caliban: Keh! If you don’t hurry it up, you’ll have a lot more to worry about than ruined socks!

Some people, notably not including Harai, start to drift to the elevator. I don’t get up from the couch and just watch everyone.

Caliban: What’s the holdup, Four-Eyes?

Amal: What about Kumoshita-san?

Sekisada: What ABOUT her? Look, let’s just get this trial over with.
Amal: She’s still our classmate. Should we take her with us?

Ariel: Er, Caliban, if I may…

Caliban: Keh. Go for it.

Ariel: Under most circumstances, all students are required to participate in class trials, upon, er.

Ariel: Upon pain of death.

I tense.

Amal: You’ll have to get through me first.

Ariel: No, no! Oh my goodness, no! That’s why we put a rule in this game to avoid that!

McRae: [calls over] Rule 8, right? “Exceptions may be granted on a case-by-case basis, mostly in regards to health situations”.

Caliban: Thank you, you terrible rules stickler. I’m sure one day you’ll make some tricky faerie very happy or very annoyed.

McRae: Happy to help.

Ariel: So, no. I believe these qualify as extenuating circumstances. Nothing will happen to Miss Kumoshita while the trial is in session. If she does so happen to wake up, I’ll be sure to guide her to the trial room. Is that alright?

Amal: …
Ariel: I promise no harm will befall her.

Amal: I don’t trust that.

Ariel: Perhaps not, but if you refuse to attend the trial yourself, then I’m afraid there will be consequences.

**Consequences. Right. So I can’t afford to get caught up on hangups like this. But at the same time...**

I take off my hat and place it gently over Kumoshita’s chest. I’ll live to see her again. We all will.

Except, well. The killer.

Amal: … Alright. Let’s go.

Slowly, as if in a dream, I move to the elevator - the last person to do so. With a jolt, a railing pops up from the metal grate, confining us on the platform as it begins to ascend. No one, not even Bates, says a word, the gravity of the situation finally catching up.

The elevator rises to the center of a circular room, a little smaller than the living room and filled with what seem to be sixteen podiums. Huge windows enclose the area, finally providing a clear view of the world around us.

Mountains. Nothing but mountains and sky, not a trace of civilization to be seen in any direction around us. I have to fight off a desperate laugh.

We really are trapped here, aren’t we?

Another jolt, and the railing drops. I go over to inspect a podium - each of them seems to be made for one of us. Everett has to guide an absolutely devastated Chisaki to stand at her podium before taking a stand at her own. My heart beats faster as I walk past the one
designated for Valdez, never to be used. There’s a picture of him tacked to the stand, just to make it obvious who’s missing, but I avoid looking at it.

I get to mine and stare at my name engraved on the wood, steadfastly ignoring the empty stand beside me.

This is where justice is delivered or follied. This is where everything - or nothing - can be revealed.

This is the difference between life and death.

Caliban appears from a smaller door to the side, hopping in short bursts to a gilded perch that seems specially made for it. It watches us for a long moment, then tilts its head.

Caliban: Now.
Caliban: Let the trial begin.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found here.

A list of truth bullets can also be found here, if you'd like to try your hand at solving the case yourself. Theories are much appreciated!
1-6: As There Are Tongues, Are Hands, Are Accidents

Chapter Summary

Ready, aim, fire away.

Chapter Notes

If you’d like to have the truth bullets to follow along with for this trial, a list can be found here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

「 TRUTH BULLETS 」

- **Ariel’s File #1**: The victim was Brendan Valdez, SHSL Mechanical Engineer. The time of death was 12:02 PM, and the body was discovered at 1:13 PM by Claudius Bates, Amal Khalaf, Tatsumaru Harai, and Chiyo Kumoshita. The cause of death was electrocution. The victim has several bruises along his back and upper arms, as well as extensive electrical burns in the same areas, but no other injuries otherwise.

- **Body Discovery Announcement**: Bates, Khalaf, Harai, and Kumoshita all saw Valdez’s body. However, while the first two are innocent, the latter two saw the body at the same time.

- **Flowers**: Origami hydrangeas were left on Valdez’s body. These were taken from the atrium.

- **Paint**: Paint was spilled at the scene, which Valdez seems to have stepped in. There are other smudges in the ground, but they seem to have been distorted beyond recognition.

- **Signs of a fight**: Judging by the paint and the dented barrier, as well as Valdez’s injuries, there was a struggle before he died.

- **Motive**: Not many people took advantage of the opportunity to call home. Even fewer seemed affected enough to kill someone over it.

- **Relations with Valdez**: Aside from Kumoshita and Chisaki, almost no one knew anything about Valdez.

- **Kashizaki’s Testimony**: Atsui and Kashizaki were doing laundry an hour before the BDA went off. Sekisada came in half an hour before the BDA went off, but what he was doing before this is unknown.

- **Everett’s Testimony**: Everett and Chisaki spent all (most of the) day in the medical room.

- **Bazhanov’s Testimony**: Bazhanov spent all day in the atrium alone. He had heard someone come into the room but didn’t see who.

- **Sumitama’s Testimony**: Sumitama, McRae, and Bates spent the morning together.

- **Distance**: It takes over ten minutes to walk from the crime scene to the atrium.

- **Tokyo Bloom**: A serial killer based in Tokyo, thought to be connected to the serial killer Mercury’s Halo. Their calling card is a bouquet of origami hydrangeas.

- **Shionaga’s Testimony**: Ekyou has a sister who attends the University of Tokyo, which is
connected to Mercury’s Halo.
- **State of bathroom:** The boys bathroom has wet footprints all over the floor. There are paint covered paper towels in the trash can.
- **Murdock and McRae:** Murdock and McRae spent the afternoon playing board games.

「CLASS TRIAL: IN SESSION!」

**OBJECTIVE:** Discover the culprit behind Brendan Valdez’s murder.

Despite the announcement, no one seems inclined to make a move. Caliban looks from side to side, eyes flashing in clear annoyance. When after what feels like three minutes, no one actually says anything, it flaps its wings in frustration.

Caliban: What? What are you all waiting for? I said go! Start having a trial!

Kashizaki: [raises hand] What, exactly, are we supposed to do?

Caliban: Argue! Fight! Say something! Anything except what you’re doing now!

Bates: [raises hand] So like, if I started beating someone up right now-

Caliban: Don’t do THAT! Use your words! Use your words to beat people up!

Sekisada: Okay, I’ll bite. [to Kashizaki] You suck.

Kashizaki: Yeah, you too. I think everyone kind of thinks you suck.

Sekisada: To be fair, I kind of think everyone else sucks.

Sekisada: Except, like, Bazhanov-shi, I guess. But that’s because I don’t know enough about him to say anything either way.
Bazhanov: … Should I say thank you?

Sekisada: Yeah, go for it. I don’t care.

Bazhanov: Thanks.

Caliban: Not that kind of fighting! Do you want everyone to die?

Shionaga: Don’t YOU?

Caliban: Partially, but not without a fight! We have an audience to entertain! A whole viewership that has waited two weeks for the outcome of this trial! If you all die off the bat, what’s the point?

Sumitama: W-what is he talking about?

Murdock: Focus, everyone. We have a killer to uncover.

**Murdock seems incredibly in her element, even adjusting her glasses as she turns to look at Caliban. It seems to be freaking out, covering its face with its wings.**

Murdock: Do you happen to have any parameters for the trial?

Caliban: [peeks out] Keh?!

Murdock: As in, are there any rules that we need to abide by before we get into all of this?

Caliban: [sighs] The spiel. You want me to do the spiel.

McRae: You have a whole spiel prepared?
Caliban: It wasn’t MY idea!!

Everett: [glances at Chisaki] Maybe we shouldn’t be provoking the robot bird that, as previously stated, wants us all to die.

McRae: Oh, don’t worry. He doesn’t have blades.

Everett: Really?

McRae: Yeah. Only Ariel does.

Caliban: Hey! Don’t go spilling all my secrets!

Kashizaki: So you’re telling me, if we all rush him right now, we could beat him up with no repercussions?

McRae: [shrugs] Better not. We don’t know who’s controlling him or what will happen to us if we do destroy him.

Caliban: FINALLY, socks-and-sandals over there has something decent to say. Don’t come after me! I’m just the messenger!

McRae: Socks and sandals?

Caliban: You objected to “arthritis hands”.

McRae: You need to try harder with your insults.

Murdock: [impatient] So what’s this about a spiel?

Caliban: Ugh… I hate this thing. But since you asked so nicely…
It suddenly drops all of its grandeur and lists sideways, eyes dull as it recites.

Caliban: [monotone] Let's begin with a simple explanation of the class trial. During the class trial, you will present your arguments for who the killer is, and vote for "whodunnit".

Caliban: If you vote correctly, then only the blackened will receive punishment. But if you pick the wrong person, I'll punish everyone besides the blackened, and the blackened will be able to leave the mansion with no consequence.

As soon as it finishes the last word, it flares up again and settles back into its original posture, looking vaguely annoyed.

Caliban: What are you looking at me like that for?

That was. More than a little creepy, admittedly.

Caliban: Anyway, stop dilly dallying or I’ll ask Ariel to come up and deal with you himself.

With that, it finally seems done talking. I adjust my glasses. Time to make some actual progress.

Amal: … So. What do we know about this case?

Bates: Weren’t you the one investigating?

Amal: I’m checking to make sure if anyone else has additional information.

Kashizaki: Could someone fill me in on the investigation? [rushed] Yes, yes, I know, I was doing laundry, et cetera, I need to pay more attention, et cetera.
Harai: Did you really do no investigation?

Kashizaki: [ignores that] The point is, we’re here now. What are the cornerstones of this case?

Shionaga: Well, Valdez-san got slammed against the electric barrier. The one by the gachapon machine.

Bazhanov: Yes. Instead of the electric barrier literally anywhere else in this building.

I’m not sure what to make of that response.


Murdock: … Right.

Bazhanov: [automatic] I’m sorry.

Murdock: For what?

Bazhanov: …

So much for him talking, I guess.

It really doesn’t seem like we have any leads. Except, of course…

Amal: Just to check, everyone saw the flowers, right?

Everett: The flowers?
Amal: There were origami hydrangeas at the crime scene.

Kashizaki: That’s so dumb, who would even have the time to fold those?

Ekyou: They wouldn’t need to. Kumoshita-san, Shionaga-kun, and I were making them a few days ago in the atrium.

Bazhanov: [nods] Can confirm. Someone came in and took some of the flowers today.

Murdock: And you didn’t stop them?

Bazhanov: … I didn’t see who it was.

And there it is again. Every time Murdock talks to Bazhanov, he seems to go completely still. Maybe it’d be good to look into that later.

Murdock: [sighs] That’s all well and good, but so what? What’s so important about the flowers?

Amal: Well…

I glance at Shionaga, who flashes me a thumbs up and a nervous smile. Great support there. I steel myself and turn back to Murdock.

Amal: Have any of you heard of a serial killer called Tokyo Bloom?

Instantly, the atmosphere changes from laid back yet suspicious to one of… disbelief?

Sekisada: [covers face with hands] Oh my god are you FUCKING kidding me.

McRae: Oh, I heard about that one. That’s the one that drops origami flowers over their victims, right?
Atsui: Hey, we were looking into that a few days ago! [to everyone else] Sekisada-san’s a true crime nut.

Kashizaki: And a nerd.

McRae: [wrinkles nose] You guys hang out?

Atsui: Yeah, we were in the library the day after we woke up.

Ekyou: I remember that. Shionaga-kun, Sumitama-chan, and Kumoshita-san were all there too, right?

Murdock: Hm. Kumoshita-san gets around a lot, doesn’t she.

Everett: She’s nice to hang out with! I just wish she was here with us right now…

Kashizaki: I think it’s better that she isn’t. Knowing her, she wouldn’t want to accuse any of us. [sighs] Which I suppose is admirable, but… we wouldn’t be having this trial if not for Valdez’s murder.

Atsui: Which brings us back to the flowers… does this mean that there’s like a Tokyo Bloom fan running around or something? A copycat murder? Something like that?

Sekisada: [muffled] You absolute dunces, that’s not what Khalaf-shi is getting at.

Sekisada: They’re accusing someone in this class of being a serial killer.

Atsui: Wait, you’re serious?

Amal: … Yes. [adjusts glasses] Between the hydrangeas, and the fact that some people have been acting very suspiciously as of late…
Amal: I don’t want to outright accuse anyone, but there’s a very real possibility that someone in this room has killed before.

A blanket of uncomfortable silence settles upon the room. I glance first to Ekyou, then to Shionaga. Both of them avoid my gaze.

Could this be a legitimate lead?

BATES: YOU’RE OUT OF TUNE!

Amal: Excuse me?

Bates: Since you first brought up this crackheaded theory, I’ve been trying to come up with a better violin-related pun, but I don’t have one so we just have to use what we’ve got.

McRae: How about “that sounds strung together”? Or “don’t resort to violins” or something like that.

Bates: Actually, that second one is pretty good. Maybe not in this situation specifically, ‘cause there was like, an angle I was going for, but that’s funny.

McRae: I do my best.

Bates: But anyway! Who’s to say that Tokyo Bloom is even involved? Or any kind of serial killer, really?

Amal: W-well-

Bates: [seriously] No, really, listen to me, Amal-san. And I don’t mean brush me off like you always do.
Suddenly, it feels like there’s only two of us in the room. Has he always been capable of being so serious?

Bates: This is stupid. All you have to go off of is, what, that there’s flowers at the crime scene? That’s such a far shot.

Amal: I mean…

Bates: Don’t even say anything else. We’re sidetracked enough as it is.

Bates: And no, I’m not just saying this because we don’t like each other. I’m saying this because it’s the truth.

Bates: I know you’ve got evidence or some unsubstantiated claim or something. Maybe this something convinces you utterly that Tokyo Bloom must in fact be a major part of the case. But we need to live. Not chase after some butterfly that might not even be relevant.

The weight of his eyes is heavy.

Bates: Okay?

Amal: ...

I break his gaze and look to Harai, who gives a tiny and almost imperceptible nod. In an instant, my self-righteousness dies in my throat - I don’t want to admit I’m wrong. I never want to admit I’m wrong.

But sometimes life doesn’t give you what you want.

Amal: … Alright. I see your point.

And just like that, the tension is severed, the atmosphere lost. Was I the only one who noticed
that? That was probably even creepier than Caliban, to be honest. What the fuck.

Bates just runs a hand through his hair and laughs as if nothing had happened.

Bates: Ahaha, good. So let’s get back to business, not this serial killer nonsense, okay?

Atsui: Oh thank god. If there was actually some serial killer among us, I’d laugh. And then scream, probably.

Everett: … What?

Atsui: [flustered] Look, the point is, I’m just glad we’re not discussing it at length anymore!

Ekyou: [quietly] So am I.

A glance at Ekyou reveals that she’s gripping her podium so tightly that her knuckles seem white, even from my angle. Shoot. I should have considered how she felt. Even if she herself isn’t a serial killer, wasn’t Shionaga talking about how he thought her sister could be? Not like that’s relevant. As far as I know.

It’s like what Shionaga said, anyway. This serial killer nonsense might not have anything to do with the trial at all. All this blackened would have to be is strong in order to kill Valdez.

Wait. Aside from the Tokyo Bloom stuff, actually...

Amal: … Ekyou-san.

At the inquiry, Ekyou looks up, eyes wild.

Ekyou: W-what?
Amal: Relax. I’m sure you’re not a serial killer.

Amal: Whether you’re innocent here, on the other hand...

Ekyou: But why are you…

A heavy weight of realization settles on her slumping shoulders.

Ekyou: … You think I’m the killer.

Amal: I don’t specifically think *you* are the killer. But the evidence lines up, doesn’t it?

Kashizaki: How so.

Everything I say fills me with guilt, but this is the most concrete lead we’ve had so far. I push on anyway.

Amal: Valdez-san was slammed against the barrier hard enough to make dents. That means that the killer must have been fairly strong. You’re an… ōendan? That’s the word, right?

Ekyou: Yes, but there are other people here who are physically strong. Like. [looks around] Um, Shionaga-kun. Sorry to bring you into this.

Shionaga: Huh? It’s fine, I know you’re just making a point. But… [frowns] Khalaf-san has one too.

Ekyou: Wait?! But I just established that their point could apply to either of us!

Shionaga: Ekyou-chan…

Ekyou: W-what? Why are you looking at me like that?
He hesitates before continuing in a low tone.

Shionaga: Your sister.

**Ekyou tenses, looking too frantic not to be worried.**

Atsui: The university student?

Sumitama: Megumi, right?

Amal: Megumi…?

Sumitama: Oh, she’s Ekyou-chan’s sister. She studies butterflies at the University of Tokyo-

Ekyou: **Don’t speak of her.**

**She gulps, shaking. Again, she’s gripping the podium, blinking hard with every word.**

Ekyou: You don’t know me. You don’t know her. You don’t- you don’t know anything about either of us.

Murdock: What would your sister have to do with this situation? She’s not here with us, is she?

Everett: Did her sister do something? I’m sorry, I’m legitimately lost right now.

Amal: Well, from what I’m told-

Ekyou: [gripping head] SHUT UP! Just shut up! She’s a good person! She wouldn’t… She wouldn’t have-
Sumitama: Ekyou-chan, please calm down! No one’s accusing your sister of anything!

Sumitama: A-and… I believe you, okay? I know you didn’t do it.

Ekyou: …

Shionaga: Ekyou-chan, I’m not going to air your business. But the fact remains that you had an incredibly suspicious phone call, and more reason to kill than the rest of us. And I don’t want to say that you killed Valdez-san. But until further notice, you’re our best guess.

Ekyou: …

Amal: … So, if we could proceed to look at the evidence…

**SEKISADA: I WON’T STAND FOR THAT!**

Bates: See, like that? That’s the kind of line I want to make. There’s an implicit pun in there about standing ovations, and it makes sense, since he’s a seat filler. That’s the kind of one-liner caliber I’m going for.

McRae: Cool. Should I be taking notes?

Bates: Honestly, it might be a good idea. What if you need to make one of these fancy declarations?

McRae: [nods] You do have a point.

Sekisada: Can you two stop being complete idiots for five seconds?

Bates: I’ll do my best, ahaha.

Sekisada: Look, I don’t know what crack you’re on, but I don’t think this murder was thought out that well. Valdez-shi evidently had time to fight back, since there’s all these signs of a struggle at the scene - just look at the dents in the barrier. And the paint everywhere. I’m still not sure where that’s from.
McRae: My bad.

Sekisada: No kidding, your bad. Why did you leave paint there? For that matter, how did you even GET paint?

McRae: Oh, I didn’t. I kicked the wall yesterday on accident, and Caliban was talking about repainting it.

Caliban: Keh. That may or may not be true, but I refuse to confirm it.

McRae: Kumoshita-san was there too. She can back me up on this if she comes back.

Sekisada: Okay, good to know, whatever. The point is that I think it was a pretty sudden attack, and Valdez-shi evidently was able to fight back, but ultimately lost. So the killer can’t have been THAT strong, right? Otherwise they’d have been able to overtake Valdez-san pretty fast. He’s not exactly conflict prone.

Sekisada: So who’s well-liked enough for Valdez-shi not to be immediately suspicious of them, not particularly strong, and could play up a supposed aversion to death to remove themselves from the situation?

Oh no.

Sekisada: Kumoshita-shi, that’s who.

Sumitama: That’s not fair! She isn’t even at this trial!

Sekisada: See, that makes sense too. She could have faked her fear of death. In fact, she could have faked passing out.

Amal: I- [shakes head] She’s out cold.
Bates: Right. ‘Cause lovebird checked. I, for one, think it’s more plausible than Ekyou-san.

Harai: I doubt that Kumoshita-shi has the physical strength to do something so drastic. Ekyou-shi, on the other hand…

Bazhanov: I have no real opinion. However, I am more inclined to believe Amal’s argument, since he actually factors in evidence rather than speculation.

Atsui: Same. Not because I don’t like you, Sekisada-san, but Khalaf-san’s argument makes way more sense.

Everett: Yeah, plus “Valdez-san wouldn’t have suspected Kumoshita-san” would apply to any of us. As you’ve said, he doesn’t seem to like conflict.

Sekisada: … Point taken, I guess, but I stand by what I said. She’s too nice.

Kashizaki: [sighs] I hate to agree, but I agree.

Sekisada: THANK you.

Kashizaki: You’re still a nerd, though.

McRae: I think you’re onto something, Sekisada-san.

Murdock: As do I.

Sumitama: Geh!! I don’t want to accept that it’s Kumoshita-san! But…

Ekyou: But it might be.

Chisaki: … [mumbles] But it might not.
Ekyou: Chisaki-san?

Rather than reply or even acknowledge Ekyou, Chisaki continues to stare at the ground as if she had never spoken. Shionaga clears his throat.

Shionaga: But for what it’s worth, I still think Ekyou-chan is suspicious.

Kashizaki: Then I’m afraid we’re at an impasse.

Bates: Yeah! Your logic has a lot of holes in it!

Harai: So does yours.

Caliban: Oh? What’s this?

Bates: Wah! You’re still here?!

Caliban: Why wouldn’t I be?

McRae: He spoke earlier. No one acknowledged it.

Caliban: Except you, Four-Eyes!

McRae: You already used that nickname for Khalaf-san.

Caliban: I’m trying my best to come up with derogatory yet inoffensive nicknames, here.

McRae: Maybe you could get pun tips from Sekisada-san.
Sekisada: Don’t drag me into this.

Caliban: Never mind all that! [mutters] Note to self, work on nicknames.

Caliban: Now, it seems we’re split down the middle, hm? How will we ever resolve this?

I stumble forward as my podium detaches itself from the ground. Across the room, Chisaki barely grabs onto the railing to steady itself before our - all of our - platforms rise into the air. How-?!

Caliban: The rules of this particular debate are simple. Each of you must argue for a side, which I assume are the ones you’ve just expressed. At least, I hope they are.

Within seconds, the podiums settle into opposite lines. I stare at Sekisada and narrow my eyes.

I won’t be wrong again.

Caliban: Have fun!

「 SCRUM DEBATE 」

QUESTION: Who is the killer?

CHIYO KUMOSHITA: Claudius Bates, Tiana Murdock, Tristan McRae, Ririka Kashizaki, Iris Sumitama, Hirono Ekyou, Sentarou Sekisada

HIRONO EKYOU: Alexei Ilyich Bazhanov, Tsukino Chisaki, Aster Everett, Ryouji Atsui, Kanemori Shionaga, Tatsumaru Harai, Amal Khalaf

...
Bates: You wouldn’t need to be strong to kill Valdez-san, as long as you had the element of surprise.

Bazhanov: Even if you did take him by surprise, why would the killer be Kumoshita-san of all people?

... 

Murdock: Kumoshita was particularly close with Valdez, wasn’t she?

Chisaki: … I was close with Dez-kun, too…

... 

McRae: When I learned about the paint yesterday, Kumoshita-san was with me.

Everett: But the killer didn’t seem to notice there was paint - otherwise, why would they have knocked it over?

... 

Kashizaki: Who cares about Ekyou-san’s sister? She has nothing to do with this situation.

Atsui: I mean, if Ekyou-san and her sister were close, then she’d probably be worried. Maybe enough to kill.

... 

Sumitama: The motive barely affected any of us! Who would kill over something that small?
Shionaga: If you found out your family was in danger through the motive, that would be reason enough to kill.

...

Ekyou: It couldn’t be me! I never even spoke to Valdez-san before!

Harai: The same could be said for most of us. I never spoke to Valdez-san, either.

...

Sekisada: Kumoshita-san is too nice for her not to be hiding anything.

Amal: Kumoshita-san is nice because that’s just the kind of person she is!

...

Bazhanov, Chisaki, Everett, Atsui, Shionaga, Harai, Amal: THIS IS OUR-

- and there’s a loud whir.

Though the podiums settle back into their original positions, I barely notice. From what I can tell, everyone else is similarly enraptured by the center of the room, where the dais - the elevator - has quite suddenly descended. Which can really only mean one thing.

Kumoshita woke up.

The wait for an elevator to arrive is excruciating, especially when your life hangs in the balance. And yet, as I stand here, I’m filled with dread. Everything has been going so wrong in this trial, and I know that I can’t figure this out on my own. But how much more help could one person bring? Hopefully a lot, because they could make or break this trial.
Or perhaps not.

...

...

...

After all - as the *SHSL Cellphone Novelist* - I can’t be that important to this case, right?

「 CHOOSE A PERSON: CHIYO KUMOSHITA 」
When the elevator reaches the top room, there’s a dazzling gleam and I have to squint to see anything. Vaguely, I feel Ariel hop out of the elevator beside me and flutter some distance away. In the meantime, I offer a sheepish smile and a hand wave.

Chiyo: … Hi! I’m not dead!

I look around, taking in the scenery around me. The mountains finally visible through the windows. The empty podium next to an astounded and rather embarrassed looking Khalaf. The vacant stand opposite mine with a crossed out face that I am pretending not to see. I’m not sure what I was expecting out of all of this, really.

I walk quickly to my own podium, each step echoing in the once-again silent room. This whole time, as I’ve been settling in, not a word has been exchanged between anyone. Instead, people are giving me (and each other) anxious glances. Finally, Harai speaks, looking at a spot slightly above my head.

Harai: … Nice hat.
Chiyo: Oh! Thanks! [pushes it up] I, uh, woke up with it?

Khalaf coughs, conspicuously hatless. Without it, their hair sticks up in a cowlick. It’s kind of cute, actually.

Khalaf: Are you okay?

Chiyo: I’m fine, just a little tired. [points to head] Do you want this back? You don’t mind that I’m wearing it, right?

Khalaf: Oh, no, you can hang onto it for now. It, um. Looks good on you.

Chiyo: Oh! Thank you!

Khalaf: Don’t mention it. Like literally don’t.

They half-smile anyway, and I find myself grinning despite myself. This fades EXTREMELY QUICKLY as everyone continues to stare at either myself, Khalaf, or for some reason Ekyou with varying degrees of awkwardly knowing expressions.

Chiyo: … Why is everyone looking at me like that?

Bates: Ah, we just had a massive debate about whether you or Ekyou-san killed Valdez-san. No big deal!

Chiyo: That’s a pretty big deal??

Kashizaki: It’s sarcasm. He’s being sarcastic.

Chiyo: I know, but...
I look at Ekyou as she stares at the floor, looking very determined not to face me. Is she… crying?

Chiyo: … But it can’t be either of us?

Sekisada: Shouldn’t it be?

Chiyo: No, no, really. I checked Ariel’s file, and it said the time of death was around noon. At the time, Khalaf-san and I were in the kitchen, and then Ekyou-san came in and ate a… donut. If you can call it that.

« EVIDENCE: Kumoshita’s Testimony »

Ekyou: … That’s right. I was. That was my lunch.

She sounds almost as if she’s talking to herself.

Ekyou: I couldn’t have killed Valdez-san. I was in the kitchen. And you two saw me.

Chiyo: Yes? Why do you sound so surprised?

Ekyou: [shoulders slump] Oh my god. Kumoshita-san, thank you.

Chiyo: You’re… welcome?

How come this was called into question? Khalaf should have been able to back this up. Did something happen?

Bates: Wait, wait, then how come we didn’t hear about this earlier? Especially since dear old Amal-sama’s the one who said that Ekyou-san was suspicious.
I turn to Khalaf, who continues to look astounded and flustered. I feel like things did not go well while I was passed out.

Chiyo: Did you not tell anyone this?

Khalaf: I... kind of forgot.

Chiyo: Forgot?

Khalaf: Yes.

Khalaf: Don’t ask.

I would press the issue, but they look incredibly embarrassed as it is, so I’ll let it slide. This time. This is still incredibly concerning.

Chiyo: So, to backtrack, we haven’t looked at the facts. Did anyone investigate at all?

Khalaf: [blinks] Er. Harai-san and I searched the spaces available to us?

Harai: [hurried] I’ll send my investigations to you. One moment.

Ekyou: Wait, so does this mean I’m in the clear? For good?

Kashizaki: Don’t act so shocked. [frowns] Of course, if literally anyone else had brought this up earlier...

Chiyo: Are you people telling me that everything you’ve done so far was based on speculation??

The lack of a clear answer is enough of an answer. I gently place my hands on the podium to
Chiyo: Look, I know things are hard. I know it’s so much easier to jump to conclusions and to believe what we want to believe. It’s hard to accept that Valdez-san is…

I take in a deep, shuddering breath, and look directly at Chisaki.

Chiyo: That Valdez-san is dead.

Chiyo: But we can’t bring him back, no matter what we try. All we can do is bring the killer to justice so that we don’t die, too. And that means we have to focus, okay?

Chiyo: We can’t hide things from each other. The truth has to win out. But everyone has to cooperate, okay? No wild accusations, and no distractions.

People are glaring outright at Khalaf at this point as they seem to sink into their stand.

... Wow. What did I miss? I hope it wasn’t important.

There’s a soft ping noise from my bag, and I fish out my Parchment to find a message from Harai with all of the evidence. This is... interesting. Between the flowers and the smudged paint, it’s hard to tell how intentional this murder is - wait, we have a laundry room?? Shoot. I hope no one noticed that I didn’t know that.

Chiyo: What’s with the flowers?

Khalaf: [bright red] Ignore it.

Chiyo: Wait, but if the killer cared enough to move them from the atrium to the crime scene-

Khalaf: Just ignore it. At least for now.
Murdock: He led us on a wild goose chase about a serial killer.

Bates: Don’t worry, I talked them down before they did anything stupid!

Oh. So that’s why Khalaf seems so upset. They got told off by Bates of all people. Yikes… I hope they’re doing alright, though.

I finish looking through the evidence and nod to myself. Please, childhood spent reading kid mystery series, pull through.

Chiyo: So let's take this from the top.

Chiyo: Can someone explain what we’ve determined about this case so far?

「 NONSTOP DEBATE 」

(bold text: disagree)

Truth Bullets:

> Signs of a fight
> Motive
> Flowers

Atsui: So we all got here and we went to our podiums. Valdez-san’s one freaks me out, just saying, Valdez-san if you’re watching me as a ghost I’m sorry.

Kashizaki: Not that kind of “what we’ve determined so far”. We deduced that he died from someone smashing him into the barrier.

McRae: Huh? When did we say that? The dents could have been from another weapon, right?
Bazhanov: Regardless of the weapon, it would make sense for him to have been taken by surprise. His expression was very telling.

Kashizaki: Yeah. If anyone attacked him, regardless of how strong they were, he probably would have let them. Poor dude seemed pretty timid.

Chisaki: I know- I knew Dez-kun. He wouldn’t have let himself die.

Everett: Chisaki-chan, don’t push yourself too hard.

Chisaki: ...

Shionaga: No one’s answered the question of the flowers yet…

Khalaf: Give it up, Shionaga-san, that went nowhere. I’m sorry.

Atsui: ...Uh, I have nothing useful to add. But the podium is still creepy. I’m sticking to that.

「 USE: Signs of a fight to dispute “taken by surprise” 」

CHIYO: NO, THAT’S WRONG!

Chiyo: It’s like what Kashizaki-san said. Someone definitely slammed Valdez-san into the electric barrier, but he was aware enough to fight back.

Bates: Hey, that also points to the possibility that the murder could be an accident. I mean, if this killer were strong enough to kill Valdez-kun, why even have the struggle?

Chiyo: [nods] Right! So it wasn’t premeditated.
Knowing that no one in this mansion would really WANT to kill someone else puts me at ease, a little. I feel like learning that someone I know had or has murderous intent would take me completely off guard.

I’m also pointedly ignoring Sekisada staring at me.

McRae: Okay, but how do we know about the slamming into the electric barrier part? [shrugs] I agree with you, by the way. I’m just playing devil’s advocate.

Everett: I don’t know about you, but I didn’t see any weapons in the mansion that *could* be used to make those dents.

Ekyou: The barrier is extremely dangerous, by the way. I’m sure just touching it could cause severe damage. So the fact that it was left unsupervised… [glares]

Caliban: Stop looking at us like that. It is literally our job to kill you.

Harai: Blunt force seems to be the easiest explanation for the dents. I feel like this is the one thing we can all agree on.

McRae: Yeah, agreed. Just wanted to make sure we’re all on the same page.

Everett: So since that’s settled, where else can we go from here?

Kashizaki: If anyone even mentions the flowers I’ll eviscerate you. Nonlethally. And figuratively.

Atsui: Okay, good that it’s figurative, cuz I was gonna SAY-

Kashizaki: You’re not exempt from this.
Shionaga: Moving back on topic, what else IS there to discuss? I mean, this case has been super confusing so far...

Bazhanov: How about the paint?

McRae: Oh-

Bazhanov: [waves hand] Yes, yes, I know where it came from. But what purpose does it hold to this case?

Shionaga: Could it have made Valdez-kun more conductive to electricity or something? Like, as a murder weapon. Sort of.

Sumitama: No. The paint would have been too negligible to provide a significant change in his conductivity. [pushes glasses up] I think.

Atsui: Plus, it only seemed to be on his shoes and legs, and Ariel’s File says the burns are on his upper arms and back… [frowns] Is anyone else wondering why he doesn’t have injuries on the rest of his arms?

Sekisada: Meh. It doesn’t really matter now.

Kashizaki: You never know.

Sekisada: Yeah, like if you’re you, you’d NEVER know.

Kashizaki: Can you stop being obstinate?

Sekisada: No.

Khalaf: Now really isn’t the time, you two.
Bates: Yeah! Stop fighting! I can’t believe I’m the one saying this!

Kashizaki: We’re not fighting! I literally don’t get what his deal is or why he has to needle me all of the time!

Everett: [stern] Sekisada-san, stop heckling Kashizaki-san. If we end up dead from all of your nonsense, it’ll be your fault.


WHAT THAT-worked??

Sekisada: But we still haven’t gotten any new information. Okay, so Valdez-shi died in a fight, and there’s paint for some reason. How is that even relevant?

Ekyou: I still want to know how the flowers could be tied to the case.

Sekisada: And the rest of us want to know about your sister, so.

Everett: [warning] Sekisada-san.

Sekisada: [puts hands up] My bad.

Bazhanov: Going off of my previous point… before it was totally derailed.

Despite his passive-aggression, Bazhanov maintains his perfect posture. Actually, that just adds to the passive-aggressive effect. I don’t know what I’m talking about.

Bazhanov: Doesn’t it seem strange that the paint was in those specific parts of the crime scene?

Bazhanov: As in, Brendan’s boots, and on the floor. But the footprints on the floor seemed
Sumitama: Maybe the killer cleaned up some of the paint?

**MURDOCK: WATCH YOUR REASONING!**

Bates: Ah, that was good! Can you help me with mine?

Murdock: [pointedly] Now’s not the time.

McRae: Woah. You’re on a roll.

Murdock: Wh-

Bates: One more time!! Come on, Murdock-chan!!

Murdock: … [opens mouth, then closes it] Okay. Thanks. I guess.

Murdock: The point is, what’s so important about the paint?

Bazhanov: [mumbles] I was just getting to that.

Murdock: Yes, sorry. But who’s to say that the killer even got paint on them? And where would they have cleaned up? What would even be the point of cleaning the paint?

Atsui: That’s a lot of questions.

Murdock: And I don’t have answers.
Murdock: So, Bazhanov? What do you have to say about that?

Bazhanov: …

At the direct confrontation, he seems to have gone completely still, eye flicking from side to side. I tap my podium to draw Murdock’s attention away; she fixes her gaze on me, eyes flashing.

Chiyo: Um, I think Bazhanov-san is right…?

Murdock: Prove it.

Oh good lord this is terrifying.

「 REBUTTAL SHOWDOWN 」

*Truth Bullets:*

> State of bathroom
> Ariel’s File #1
> Paint

Murdock: There was paint at the crime scene, yes,

Murdock: But how relevant is it to the case itself?

Murdock: There’s no way that the paint could have been involved with the killer directly.

Chiyo: Of course it’s relevant! Everything is possible evidence!

Chiyo: Valdez-san stepped in the paint, just look at his boots and the footprints.
Chiyo: So it’s not a stretch to assume that the killer got paint on them as well!

Murdock: Yet there’s no trace of it outside of the crime scene. No cleaning supplies, nothing.

Murdock: I’ve spoken to Kashizaki-san and company, and they allege that they were the only ones in the laundry room.

Murdock: If the killer was involved with the paint, how else would they have removed it?

「 USE: State of bathroom to dispute “outside of the crime scene” 」

CHIYO: CUT THAT OUT!

Chiyo: Um, to preface, I didn’t actually go in the boys bathroom. Just so, er. So please no one comment on that.

Khalaf: … You literally passed out??

Chiyo: … Right, cool, I guess that clears things up. But anyway!

Chiyo: According to the evidence that Harai sent me, there were wet footprints and paper towels with paint on them in the boys bathroom.

Shionaga: I think you lost me somewhere in there.

Kashizaki: So you’re saying that the killer could have cleaned up in the boys bathroom? Which is why there’s no evidence of cleaning supplies elsewhere.

Chiyo: Yes, exactly!
Murdock: … I see.


Even though she’s backed down, I still can’t get a handle on if Murdock is mad at me or not… I guess I’ll have to look into that later. Eep.

Bates: All that pretty much means that the killer is male, right? Neat! That clears half the class! Good job team!

Everett: Not including you.

Bates: Well, I saw Valdez-san’s body! I’m home free!

Sumitama: D-don’t sound so excited. Someone died.

Shionaga: But what about the footprints at the scene? How would they have been cleaned up?

Harai: I don’t think they were cleaned up, necessarily.

Harai: They could have been smudged. Maybe with the culprit’s shoes, which they would proceed to clean anyway.

Khalaf: Oh, that would make sense. There was still a lot of paint at the crime scene, and it would take too long to walk between the bathroom and the crime scene to clean it up.

**ATSUI:** I’LL MAKE YOU EAT YOUR WORDS!

Bates: Not too shabby. A little on the long side, though.
Atsui: I’m trying, okay? I came up with that like, on the spot.

Kashizaki: Can you stop going on about puns? Why are you even making puns in this situation?

Bates: Listen, someone just died. Someone’s gotta lighten the mood and it may as well be me.

Kashizaki: No you don’t??

Atsui: Okay, I’m ignoring both of you, but there’s one thing I don’t get! Obviously the killer would want to clean up their own shoes and whatever, but why exactly would they have tampered with the paint at the crime scene?

Atsui: Or, for perspective, why would he leave Valdez’s footprints intact? Cause they did.

Ekyou: Perhaps it was out of respect to the deceased?

Atsui: Ekyou-san, I mean this in the nicest way possible, but the culprit killed an entire person. I don’t think they care too much about angering the deceased.

Kashizaki: That does bring up a good point, though. If they went through the trouble to clean up their own shoes to minimize their involvement, why would they bother with the crime scene?

Everett: Maybe they wanted to throw people off?

Bates: No, shit, that’s the point of almost everything that’s happened here so far.

Everett: Well, yes, but… maybe there’s a clue in what they erased?

Khalaf: How so?

Everett: [frowns] I can’t put my finger on it...
I think I see what Everett is getting at.

「HANGMAN’S GAMBIT」

Why would the paint have been tampered with?

...

「FOOTPRINTS」

Chiyo: I’VE GOT IT!

Chiyo: What if their footprints were distinctive?

Ekyou: Huh?

Chiyo: Valdez-san had left footprints from the paint, right? And no one had tampered with those.

Bazhanov: So you’re saying that the killer had tampered with their own footprints.

Sumitama: But not Valdez-san’s…?

Chiyo: Right. Because maybe the killer could have been discovered by their footprints.

Sekisada: Well, whoop de doo, let’s all look at everyone’s feet because THAT’S not weird at all.

Everett: I don’t think it’s that hard, actually. Most of you wear pretty similar footwear, so people with different footwear stand out.
Bates: [dramatic sigh] Such is the tragedy of male fashion.

Sekisada: Why are you always like this?

Bates: Haven’t you gotten used to it by now?

Sekisada: … [mutters] Yeah, so I guess I should have expected this.

Bates: That’s the spirit!

Murdock: [musing] So the killer didn’t plan to kill Valdez, but still managed to kill him with brute force.

Khalaf: They cleaned up the paint on their shoes in the bathroom, and smudged the footprints at the scene because their shoes have a distinctive print.

Harai: So all of that taken into account…

Chiyo: That means…

I stop, the realization hitting like a train. Across the room, Ekyou looks suddenly and very violently ill. For the first time since I’ve met her, she seems completely taken off guard.

Surely, she must have come to the same conclusion that I have.

Ekyou: W-wait. That can’t be right.

Ekyou: They… it’s…

I take a deep breath.
Chiyo: The killer must be …

「 CHOOSE A PERSON 」

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found here.
Chapter Summary

Promise that you won't forget about me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

「 CHOOSE A PERSON: KANEMORI SHIONAGA 」

Ekyou: Shionaga-kun?

Shionaga: What? Why are you all- what are you looking at me for?

Chiyo: It has to be you, right…? You’re physically strong, so you could have made those dents. You’re wearing cleats, so of course your shoes are distinctive. And then you could have cleaned up in the boys bathroom.

Atsui: Wait, seriously?

Sekisada: [eyes wide] Oh. Oh wow holy shit.

Shionaga: Well, uh, that’s… That’s fair, but there’s still a lot more that we need to figure out about the case. Like the-

Bates: Ah, just give it a rest with the flowers already! They’re not even relevant!

Murdock: We’ve proven that they’re not relevant to the possibility of a serial killer, yes, but we haven’t proven that they aren’t relevant to the case.

McRae: I guess that’s still pretty important.
Shionaga: Yeah, exactly! There’s a lot more that we could be debating right now! We need to keep looking at all the evidence!

Khalaf: … So let’s keep looking.

Shionaga’s smile becomes increasingly strained the longer that Khalaf glares at him.

Shionaga: Yes! Let’s do that!

« NONSTOP DEBATE »

Truth Bullets:

> Sumitama’s Testimony

> Tokyo Bloom

> Bazhanov’s Testimony

Murdock: There’s still nothing reasonable that the flowers could have been used for in this case. I think we need to let that lie for now.

Sumitama: Well, I’m just glad the killer - whoever they are - didn’t dig up my actual flowers!

Ekyou: Sumitama-chan, now really isn’t the best time to be happy about that.

Sumitama: I- I know, but…

Sekisada: It’s pretty obvious who the killer is at this point. Just stop denying it.

Shionaga: N-nothing’s set in stone!
Everett: Wasn’t Shionaga-san with Sumitama-san and Ekyou-san at the time of the murder, though? I thought you three were attached at the hip.

Murdock: If you ask me, it’s a little too obvious to mess up the boys bathroom and assume that the killer is male. That would rule out half the class, and the killer would know that.

Ekyou: That’s fair… Or does the killer really need to be strong? If they did a bad job of taking Valdez-san by surprise, a struggle would have ensued regardless…

「USE: Sumitama’s Testimony to dispute “with Sumitama-san and Ekyou-san”」

CHIYO: DON’T CALL THAT CORRECT!

Bates: [clicks tongue] That needs work.

McRae: I don’t know, she’s a cellphone novelist. It’s a stretch, though.

Chiyo: Have you two been doing this all trial?

Bates: Only, like, whenever someone tries to dispute something.

McRae: It’s really funny. Trust me.

I just stare at them for a moment before turning away.

Chiyo: Shionaga-san wasn’t with Sumitama-san all day, according to her own testimony. She says she spent the day with McRae-san and Claude-san, didn’t she?

Sumitama fiddles with her hair, brushes it out of her face, hesitates before giving an answer.
Sumitama: That’s… right.

Shionaga: That’s RIGHT?!

He slams on the podium suddenly, causing Sumitama to flinch back.

Sumitama: Shionaga-kun-

Shionaga: OF COURSE that isn’t right! I was with her, I swear!

Bates: No you weren’t.

Shionaga: Ghk-!

McRae: I’m backing that up. I don’t think anyone’s seen you all day.

Everett: [raises hand] I saw him at 6:30 am?

McRae: That doesn’t count.

Kashizaki: Is something wrong with your sleep schedule?

Everett: It’s perfectly reasonable! I wake up that early!

Kashizaki: Mm, yeah, sounds fake.

Atsui: I wake up at 5:30 sometimes!
Kashizaki: That sounds fake too.

Murdock: We’re all missing the point. Shionaga, what else do you have to say for yourself?

**He glares first at her, then at the rest of us, hands twitching as if he’s about to strangle someone.**

Shionaga: I- I-

Shionaga: You can’t prove anything!

Sekisada: Then what was the past hour for, dumbass?

Shionaga: Nothing! It was for nothing! You’re just making stuff up to defame me!

Atsui: Listen, I think most of us have better priorities than ruining people’s reputations right now.

Bates: Ah??

Shionaga: So yeah! You’re all idiots for believing this fucking NONSENSE!

Everett: Then give us a reason not to believe it!

Shionaga: I… I…

**He looks from side to side, desperate for an escape that isn’t there. Finally, he pounds the podium again.**

Shionaga: I just- I swear it wasn’t me!
Chisaki: Stop lying.

… Oh my god, I totally forgot about Chisaki.

Which is in itself a really weird thing to notice, but as she clasps her right arm over her left, it’s hard to even recall the animated personality she’s presented for the past several days. In fact, I think this is only the second time she’s spoken since I woke up.

Yet a deep sorrow traces her eyes as she stares at the ground, completely avoidant of Shionaga’s demanding deflections.

Chisaki: Everything brought up here agrees with your guilt. Everything you’re doing now is making you more suspicious.

Chisaki: Which really just means one thing.

Chisaki: You killed my friend.

With that, she’s silent again. And with that, Shionaga draws back, face turning red.

Shionaga: You… You…

Everett: Don’t you DARE yell at her.

Shionaga: Who said I was going to yell at HER?! I’ll do whatever it takes to clear my name!

Khalaf: Don’t you get it? There’s nothing you can do to clear your name! You don’t even have an alibi!

Shionaga: I’ve been nothing but helpful this ENTIRE time! Across this investigation, across this past week, everything! I’ve been nice! I’ve been better than who I was before! You can’t just- you can’t just come in here and tell me that I killed someone! I didn’t!
Everett: Being nice isn’t the same thing as, I don’t know, NOT KILLING PEOPLE!

Shionaga: You don’t know me! You don’t know why I would have done this or anything! I didn’t even know him! And I wouldn’t have done this! [pounds podium again]

Atsui: Dude, cut that out! You’re really not making a case for yourself here!

Shionaga: [ignores him] Ekyou-chan! You believe me, right?

Ekyou: … If you did this, and you accused me, then…

Ekyou: …

Ekyou: I thought we were friends, Shionaga-kun.

Shionaga: [shakes head] I- Of course we’re friends, that was- That was- ARGH!!

Ekyou: Friends don’t accuse each other of murder.

Shionaga: …

He sighs, raking a hand through his hair. The fight seems to have gone out of him in a rush.

Shionaga: … Listen, I’ve been cooperative this whole time. Or, I don’t know, before I got wrongfully accused of murder.

Shionaga: Aside from the evidence - which I keep telling you, can’t be right - what did I do wrong? I’ve been as helpful as I can be. I’ve been helping you investigate, for heaven’s sake.
Shionaga: I haven’t even tried to interfere with the actual investigation or this trial, right?

Chiyo: I…

I falter. We’re close to the end of the case, I can feel it. But if I can’t answer this question, then…

Something brushes my head, and I look over to see Khalaf take their hat off of it. They place it on their own head, adjust it, and nod once.

Khalaf: I’ve got this.

「 PANIC TALK ACTION 」

“When have I done anything to interfere with this investigation?”

⋯

「 TO-KYO BLO-OM 」

KHALAF: YOUR STORY ENDS HERE!

Bates: … Okay, that was pretty good.

Khalaf: [ducks away] Thanks.

Khalaf: Remember Tokyo Bloom?

Chiyo: The serial killer?
Sekisada: Oh good lord PLEASE do not start going off about that again.

Khalaf: [shakes head] I’m not going to. But… it makes sense that it was brought up at all.

Khalaf: The flowers at the crime scene are hydrangeas, the calling card of this serial killer. And at the beginning of the trial, we thought a lot of the evidence pointed to Ekyou-san.

Khalaf: But… Shionaga-san, you’re the one who brought Tokyo Bloom up to me to begin with. So you could have planted the flowers at the crime scene and waited for someone to come into the library, then talk about how you were worried about the murder being connected to a killer, when in reality you just wanted to misdirect our attention to what’s important about the case. Getting Ekyou-san involved was just the icing on the cake.

Khalaf: That’s the best way to avoid an accusation, right? To accuse someone else.

Khalaf: You’re the killer. Aren’t you?

Shionaga: …

Khalaf: …

Shionaga: … [sighs]

Shionaga: … Yeah. Yeah, you caught me. I killed Valdez-kun.

Shionaga: Ekyou-chan, I’m sorry.

Ekyou: …

Shionaga: I took advantage of you. You didn’t deserve that.

Shionaga: And Sumitama-chan…

**He doesn’t look her in the eye, but she glares directly at his hunched shoulders.**

Sumitama: Why?

Sumitama: Why- why the *fuck* would you kill someone! What would you have had to gain?!

Sumitama: I-if it weren’t for Valdez-san… would…

**With each word, she’s been slowing down, her gaze slipping until she, too, looks at the ground.**

Sumitama: …

Sumitama: … Would it have been me?

Shionaga: [stomps foot] Oh my god! NO!! I-

**He pauses, perhaps considering how his actions could be perceived, before gently lowering his foot and continuing in a softer tone.**

Shionaga: I never meant to kill Valdez-kun. Or anyone. This was entirely an accident.

Sumitama: Promise?

Shionaga: [nods] I promise.
Everett: Then why did you?

Shionaga: [glances at Chisaki] This is going to be rough to hear. And, um, I know it sounds pretty unbelievable. But I genuinely believe that if I hadn’t killed him, he would have killed me first.

Chiyo: He would never.

Shionaga: [hands up] Just hear me out, okay! Look, let me explain. I guess I should start from the beginning.

Shionaga: I know a lot of people complain about this, but there’s really not much to do in this building. Aside from the same rooms and the same people, the only thing that’s any different around here is the Monomachine.

Shionaga: So before lunch, I went to go check it out. I got tokens from the kitchen, and then I ran into Valdez-kun, which was kind of weird, because I don’t think I actually talked to him extensively before the incident. He said he was going to look at the electrical barrier to try and shut it off.

Shionaga: And we were walking over, and we were talking, and we got to the barrier. And we were still talking, except he got really quiet, and his arms started... twitching? Or something?

Shionaga: And all of a sudden, he starts trying to strangle me.

Kashizaki: That’s bullshit.

Shionaga: Why would I lie about this?! You told me to tell the truth!

Kashizaki: You have every reason to lie. You already mentioned that you don’t want your reputation to go bad, right?

Ekyou: Just let him finish.

Shionaga: Right. [nods] So of course I’m trying to figure out what’s going on, and then he’s literally trying to kill me, and I don’t- I didn’t want to kill him, but…

Shionaga: [stares at the ground] I slammed him on the barrier and he stopped moving.

Shionaga: I- I killed someone. I could have prevented this. I…

He stops talking, finally defeated. I can’t even imagine how it must feel to know that you killed someone - someone you knew, someone you could have been friends with. As much as I want to be disgusted by Shionaga and his actions, as much as I want to reason that it could have been avoided, I just… can’t. Not now. Not seeing him like this.

Does it make me a bad person if I don’t hate him?

Khalaf: … Thank you.

Shionaga: [half-laughs] Don’t thank me, I literally-

Khalaf: I know. But thank you for finally coming clean.

Khalaf: It’s hard to say the truth, especially if it isn’t a kind one. But at least the rest of us can rest easy knowing this.

Shionaga: … Thank you, Khalaf-kun. Can I call you that?

Khalaf: Go for it.

Shionaga: [exhales] Thanks, dude. For believing me. Both with Tokyo Bloom, and with- with this. Even though you probably shouldn’t have believed me before, I appreciate it.
Khalaf: … Yeah. Whatever.

Harai: Should we recap the case? I’d… admittedly, I’d like to write it down. For further analysis.

Kashizaki: That’s kind of insensitive, isn’t it?

Chiyo: No, Harai-san’s right. I think having everything laid out will help us to understand every last detail of this case.

Khalaf: Let’s get started, then.

« CLOSING ARGUMENT »

BEGIN!

Chiyo: A few days ago, we all woke up in this mansion and were told that we needed to kill each other to escape. But after several days, no one had even planned to commit a murder, which prompted Ariel to issue a motive: we were each permitted to make a five minute phone call to a person outside of the mansion. Though some people took advantage of this, many people didn’t, especially since Chisaki-san lost her hand when she was trying to call her brother. And in the end, it didn’t really affect this case at all.

Chiyo: The killer had no plans for what they wanted to do this morning, let alone whether they wanted to kill someone. As a result, they went to the gachapon machine located near an electrical barrier. Along the way, however, they met Valdez-san, who was headed in the same direction. He sought to find a way to turn off the electrical barrier.

Chiyo: Though neither of them seemed to have killing intent and were in fact talking amicably, Valdez-san suddenly lashed out and attacked the killer, but we still don’t know why. In any case, to defend themselves, the killer slammed Valdez-san against the barrier, creating several dents. The barrier could have seriously injured someone if they just touched it, so the repeated electrical exposure was ultimately what killed Valdez-san.

Khalaf: I’ll take it from here. At some point after killing Valdez-san - or even while committing the crime - the killer had realized that both Valdez-san and themselves had stepped in paint already present at the crime scene. The killer, however, had distinctive footprints that would have led to
their easy identification. As a result, they smeared their own footprints into unrecognizability while leaving Valdez-san’s intact – a key mistake, considering that leaving Valdez-san’s footprints untouched was incredibly suspicious on its own. After this was done, they went to the boys bathroom to clean their shoes, leaving painted paper towels in the trash can and wet footprints on the floor. But to the killer, this wasn’t enough to disguise their crime.

Khalaf: The killer then went to the atrium, unnoticed except by Bazhanov-san, to collect some paper flowers that they had helped make some days before. They then returned to the crime scene and placed the flowers there to make the crime seem as if it were the work of a serial killer, Tokyo Bloom. During the investigation, they would make an innocent accusation, painting one of their peers as this very serial killer and the perpetrator of the crime.

Khalaf: It was foolproof. Almost. The killer overlooked one key detail - the peer they chose to accuse had an airtight alibi for the time of murder, and the killer themselves did not. From there, it was just a matter of reexamining all of the evidence.

Khalaf: All in all, the person who killed Valdez-san…

Chiyo: … Was Kanemori Shionaga, the SHSL Football Player.

「 BREAK!! 」

Bates: … So that’s it?

Shionaga: [nods] That’s it.

Caliban: Keheh! It’s voting time already? I thought you were NEVER going to finish prattling on.

Kashizaki: Get on with it.

A soft buzz. I check my Parchment to find a popup encouraging me to vote for one of my peers. I skip over Valdez’s greyed out portrait, but hesitate over Shionaga’s.

In the end, I vote for him. What else can I do?
Ariel: Well done! You’ve unanimously identified the blackened as Kanemori Shionaga, SHSL Football Player! I’ll admit, I was nervous, kuu…

Everett: Shut up. You don’t get to have this moment.

Ariel: [nods] Of course. Take your time.

Shionaga: I’m sorry about everything. I know everyone must be disappointed in me.

Sumitama: It’s not your fault, Shionaga-kun! If Valdez-san hadn’t tried to kill you-

Chisaki: [suddenly] It wasn’t Dez-kun’s fault.

Sumitama: Oh, then I suppose you think Shionaga-kun had started it, too?

Chisaki: [shakes head] No. No, Valdez might have attacked Shionaga-san, but it wasn’t his fault. He’s got- he had…

**Chisaki grimaces, clutching her stump of a left arm. When she finally turns in my direction, her eyes are glittering with tears.**

Chisaki: God. God, I’m sorry. I swore I’d never tell anyone, but I- I know Dez-kun wouldn’t have killed anyone, and this might be the only way to even kind of disprove it.

**She takes a deep breath.**

Chisaki: He had prosthetic arms. Up to his elbows.
Chiyo: … Oh my god. That’s right.

Khalaf: So what you’re saying is-

Chisaki: Someone, like the person behind all of this, might have- someone might have controlled him, and made him lash out at Shionaga-san. I don’t want to be right. But if the other option is that Dez-kun knowingly tried to kill Shionaga-san, then I’m sorry, but I can’t accept that. I can’t.

Chisaki: So don’t slander him, don’t say that he was an attempted murderer, don’t…

Chisaki: Don’t pretend that you knew him. You all admitted it. None of you knew him. So don’t call him a monster.

Shionaga looks, wide eyed, at Chisaki. He opens his mouth, then closes it, and then simply nods.

Shionaga: I won’t. And he’s not.

Shionaga: I don’t know if we’re ever going to find out what happened with Valdez-kun, but you’re right. He’s not a monster. Alright?

Shionaga: And you should hang in there, Chisaki-chan. You’re really strong. You lost your hand, and now your friend, but I know you can get through this.

**Chisaki doesn’t reply, but Shionaga doesn’t seem surprised. With that taken care of, he turns next to Ekyou.**

Shionaga: And Ekyou-chan…

Ekyou: I forgive you, don’t worry.

Shionaga: I’m so- wait, what?

Shionaga: B-but I framed you. Of being a serial killer. And then as a murderer.

Ekyou: Yes, but…

Ekyou: You’re- you’re my friend! And friends don’t stay mad at friends, right?

Shionaga: [blinks] You also said that friends don’t frame friends for murder?

Ekyou: [crumples] Shionaga-kun, you’re about to DIE, please just give me this, okay?

That’s right. The punishment for being found guilty as the blackened is…

I’m going to lose another one of my friends, right in front of me this time. And there’s nothing I or any of us can do.

Shionaga: I…

He watches her for a moment, then opens his arms. Ekyou steps off her podium and to his and pulls him into a tight embrace. Shionaga, being Shionaga, awkwardly pats her hair. Sumitama walks over to them as well and hugs them both.

Eventually, as it always happens, Shionaga steps away.

Shionaga: Things will be okay. This won’t ever happen again.

Shionaga: That goes for everyone, alright? Don’t let this happen again. Please. For me and for Valdez-kun. Ariel mentioned that no one was planning a murder this whole time, and as far as I know, no one else has prosthetics, so…
He shrugs, smiling slowly.

Shionaga: I’m sure you’ll figure it out.

Caliban: Alright, enough of this touchy-feely stuff. Eugh. Never was a fan. Are you about done?

Shionaga: I’m good. Let’s go.

Sumitama: No, wait-

Caliban: There will be no waiting.

With the declaration, Caliban’s eyes dull.

Caliban: You’re lucky you got this long. I never had a chance to say my goodbyes.

What was that…?

In the next instant, he’s animated again, as mocking and sardonic as ever.

Caliban: Any last words?

Shionaga closes his eyes, inhales, and exhales. His hands shake at his side.

Shionaga: Nah. I’m ready. It’s been real.

Caliban: Eh, fair enough. Let’s give it all we’ve got, shall we?
A chain shoots out from a door behind Caliban and secures itself around Shionaga’s neck. He doesn’t even struggle to escape it as it drags him back to the birds, away from the podium, away from us, and away from the rest of his life.

Sumitama: NO!

Caliban: IIIIT’S PUNISHMENT TIME!

The slamming doors echo behind Shionaga, and a screen flickers to life.

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GAME OVER
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SHIONAGA HAS BEEN FOUND GUILTY

TIME FOR THE PUNISHMENT!

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The 20,000 Leagues Prize
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SHSL FOOTBALL PLAYER KANEMORI SHIONAGA’S EXECUTION: EXECUTED

...

Shionaga stands on a small boat pitching through a stormy sea. Despite the precarious weather, he’s still smiling, still optimistic despite it all. He tries to take a step forward-

But he can’t move.

He looks down in panic to find his feet encased in metal. Desperately, he starts trying to pull free, and finally crouches down to slam on the platform with his fists. His hand goes straight through, and, slowly but surely, the boat begins to sink.

What an unseaworthy vessel, to capsize at the merest pressure. But perhaps this shouldn’t come as a surprise. After all, between the strange square shape and the metal plaque stamped on the front, one thing is becoming increasingly clear.
This isn’t a boat - this is a human trophy.

The storm rages around him as he desperately tries to escape. Waves break against the camera as even it is submerged. In this weather, it’s doubtful that he’d be able to escape the podium, let alone swim to safety with no land in sight.

And he slips beneath the surface, hands still grasping at unreachable air.

... 

And I tear my gaze away, heart pounding in my ears. There’s nothing but an ominous stillness.

That’s it, right? I don’t need to know what happens next, right? The podium sinks. He’s going to drown. He’s going to die and we did nothing, nothing at all to stop it.
That’s all. Just another death that I don’t see in person.

...

There’s a buzzing noise, somewhere, and if I were on screen I imagine I would smell ozone.

These are the only hints we get before there’s a bright flash and a crack shakes the trial room.

I still can’t look. Instead I stand, gaze frozen at the ground, as the lights brighten and the trial room returns to life.

Sekisada: W… What the FUCK was THAT?!

Atsui: [wide-eyed] Oh my god. Oh my god???

Murdock: … Well.

Chisaki: …

I finally bring myself to look up to Khalaf looking back at me, their expression cloudy as the rest of the room comes back to life. Sometime in the middle of the sequence, Ariel and Caliban seem to have evacuated the room, leaving us all to ponder our next course of action.

That is, until Kashizaki stumbles off of her podium and towards the elevator.

Kashizaki: [looking ill] Let’s- let’s get out of here. Now.

There’s no argument as the rest of us shuffle off our podiums and cluster on the elevator. Sumitama pauses for a moment, staring at the screen but seeing the closed doors under it,
before Ekyou takes her hand. As soon as they step on the platform, the last to do so, the railing locks into place and we begin our descent.

The ride down is silent, all of us contemplating what we’d just seen. Or, I guess in my case, what I didn’t. In the end, it doesn’t really matter how he died. What matters is that we woke up here with 16 people, and that tomorrow we will wake up with 14. But we’ll wake up. We have to.

No one really wants to linger in the living room after we get there, and people drift off in their pairs and trios. I catch Chisaki’s shoulder before she can brush past me.

When she looks up, she doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t resist being pulled aside, either. More than anything, she just looks lost.

Chiyo: Hey.

Chisaki: … Hi.

I wish I had something encouraging to say.

Chiyo: … Um. You doing alright?

Chisaki: No. I mean, yeah. I mean- [smiles] Everything will be just fine, right?

Chiyo: No, it’s not! Two people died today!

Chisaki: ...

Chiyo: [sighs] Chisaki-chan, you can talk to me.

Chisaki stops baring her teeth. When she speaks again, her voice is so much smaller than I’ve
ever heard it.

Chisaki: Kumoshita-chan, didn’t you see how useless I was in that trial? I think the only thing I did was make concerning statements.

Chiyo: You lost your hand and your best friend back to back.

Chisaki: So? Ekyou-chan had to defend herself from being a serial killer. You passed out! And you both did so much more than I did!

Chisaki: I mean, c’mon, I’m sure that if I were in Dez-kun’s place-

Chiyo: Don’t say that.

Chisaki: -I know he would have done everything he could have to look for my killer, you know? I’m just...

The desperation in her eyes twists a knife in my chest that I didn’t realize existed. Chisaki sighs and sets back on her heels, maybe picking up on my discomfort.

Chisaki: You’re really good at this. And you found- you found him. So thank you.

Chiyo: That’s not something I should be proud of.

Especially since uncovering the killer means that he’s dead now, too.

Chiyo: Is there anything I can do to help you now?

Chisaki: The trial’s over. I don’t know what you could help me with. [shakes head] Besides, I’ll get over it. I have to.
Chiyo: No you don’t.

Chisaki: Yes, I do.

Chiyo: No, you-

I stop. Now isn’t the best time to be arguing with her about what’s clearly a deep seated issue.

Chiyo: … Fine. But I want to hang out with you tomorrow, then. If you’re okay with that?

She blinks, looking surprised, before nodding once.

Chisaki: Okay. Okay, I can do that.

Chiyo: And bring Everett-san!

Chisaki: I will. Thank you, Kumo-chan.

Chisaki: And hey! Maybe we can have a party or something?

Chiyo: Yeah, if you want.

Chisaki: Nice. [waves stump] I feel ready to handle anything, y’know?

Chiyo: You need to rest that.

Chisaki: I can handle a little pain!

Chiyo: You just used that pun!
Chatting like this seems to have put Chisaki at ease, even though it’s STILL concerning how easily she’s slipped back into our back-and-forth banter.

Chisaki: But, legit, I’m kinda tired, so...

Chiyo: See you tomorrow?

Chisaki: Yeah, of course!

She brushes past me for real this time, leaving me alone in the living room. Or, well, almost alone. Into the shifting light of the fireplace walks Harai.

Chiyo: Were you waiting for me?

Harai: Kind of.

They don’t say anything else and just scratch at their face for a moment.

Harai: …

Chiyo: …

Harai: …

Chiyo: Did you need something?

Harai: Maybe Everett-shi is right.

Chiyo: Huh?
Harai: I need to sleep.

They lift up their mask enough that they can yawn. Between the trial and the lack of sleep they claim to get, I’m surprised they’re still standing. Though, what was the point of their staying behind?

At least they’re being open.

Harai: See you tomorrow.

Chiyo: Oh! R-right, good night!

Harai just nods at me and heads down the hall. I’m left alone with nothing but the crackling fire for company. It must be late - not a single light seems to be left on aside from the fireplace. Is this what nighttime hours are like?

It’s probably best not to be out here for too long.

Somehow, I make my way back to the room. It’s not until I close the door behind me and that I let the day catch up to me. Though I want to cry, though I feel bad that I’m not, all I can do is sit on the bed as a hole seems to tear itself in my chest.

Valdez, Shionaga… I’m so sorry.

I can’t believe that I’m never going to see either of you again. I can’t believe that I couldn’t have done more to keep you with us.

Neither of them did anything wrong, I think. Regardless whose fault it ultimately was, neither of them would want the other dead… but now, of course, they’re both gone. Why would they, of all people, need to die? Why does anyone?
There has to be something, anything, that I could do to uphold their memories. Like...?

Oh. I know.

When I open my Parchment, I have texts from Khalaf. I hover over them for a moment before exiting the messenger, leaving them unopened. My emotional capacity has checked out for tonight, so this is going to have to wait. I hope that they’re doing alright.

I take a deep breath, open my messages to Valdez, and start to type.

Sure, what I do can be considered by many to just be emo poetry, and granted, it’s not my best work. Still, I end up losing track of time, and as the minutes fly by I can almost forget the reasons why I’m sending these. By the time I hit send and close Shionaga’s messages, it feels as if the hole in my chest... hasn’t quite closed, exactly. But we’re getting there.

And suddenly, of course, there’s a knock at the door.

Chiyo: Uh, come in?

The door creaks open, but no one enters. I- I don’t know if vengeful spirits are a thing, but if they are-

Yet the only ghost in my room is the white bird that hops through the door.

Ariel: Miss Kumoshita, it’s very late. I’m surprised you’re still awake.

Chiyo: Y-yes? It sure is??

Ariel: Kuhuhu...

He ducks his head under his wing in a pale imitation of laughter. I take the moment to
inconspicuously put down the lamp I had grabbed to throw at a potential specter.

Ariel: Ahem. I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here. I had a favor to ask of you.

I really don’t know if I should be accepting any more favors from him.

Ariel: You see, er…

Ariel: Caliban and I, um. Are aware of your family history and prior mortician training.

Chiyo: … Oh.

Ariel: It’s not just you, I promise! We have information on every one of the class’s histories. But, er…

Without waiting for me to properly react or process this new revelation, the panel on Ariel’s chest slides out, and he deposits on the floor…

… A pair of gloves. And a towel.

Before this, I thought Ariel was nice, or at least trying to be as kind as possible to us in a harsh situation. Before this, I was at least hoping, somehow, that he could have been forgivable.

He’s saying something, but I can’t hear over the blood rushing in my ears. It’s only when he stops, head cocked inquisitively, that I can put together words.

Chiyo: … Y… you…

Ariel: Are you alright?
Chiyo: You…

Chiyo: *Disgust* me.

Ariel: Kuu-?! I suppose that’s fair-

Chiyo: No, no, I don’t want to hear. You took these off of the deceased and you expect me to just-to just hold onto them like they’re some sort of trophy?!

Ariel: Please, no, that wasn’t my intent-

Chiyo: And- and you took off Valdez-san’s gloves?! He specifically didn’t want anyone to know about his arms, and you- and you-

**If this, of all things, is what’s finally making me cry, after Valdez and the trial and everything, I don’t want to notice it.**

Chiyo: Get out of my room.

Ariel: Miss Kumoshita.

Chiyo: Now. Please.

Ariel: Miss. Under any other circumstances I would gladly do as you ask, but I need you to hear what I have to say.

Chiyo: No. I don’t care.

Ariel: I can stay here all night.

Chiyo: …
He’s bluffing. He’s got to be. I scrub at my face and don’t reply.

Ariel: …

Ariel: I won’t get into specifics, but…

Ariel: We have to cremate the bodies. And it’s better that these are kept, so that something of the deceased remains.

He pauses for a moment, perhaps waiting for an answer, or at least an acknowledgement. I don’t plan on giving him either.

Ariel: You don’t have to keep them with you or anything. Goodness, you don’t even need to look at them if you don’t want to. I only ask that you do keep them.

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: … Why me? Why can’t you do it?

Ariel: Would you rather I keep them?

I don’t answer. I shouldn’t have said anything to begin with. Ariel must take my silence for a denial.

Ariel: I thought not. It would be even more disrespectful of me to pilfer the dead and then keep it, hm?

Ariel: As for why you in particular, Miss Kumoshita, I don’t mean to be blunt, but I feel that you could use some lessons in regards to letting go of the dead.
Chiyo: You mean my grandmother, don’t you.

Ariel: Well, perhaps. But some of my concern pertains to your reactions towards death as a whole. I mean this kindly, but with how you reacted to Messrs. Valdez and Shionaga…

Chiyo: … So you mean that I need to stop being so squeamish, huh.

Ariel: I didn’t say that. I only mean that this could be perceived as a weakness. You’re evidently a very capable young woman, and I’m sure that you could take the lead in trials from here on out.

Ariel: But in order to do so, you’ll need to overcome your aversion to death. For both yourself and everyone around you.

How dare he speak as if he knows me? Or any of us? What was the whole trial today even for, if not to prove that no one really wants to kill?

Chiyo: We’re not going to have another trial. No one’s going to die.

Ariel: You never know.

Ariel: …

I don’t say anything more. Eventually, Ariel shuffles his wings and turns to the door.

Ariel: It’s very, very late. You should sleep. I hear that Miss Murdock has another meeting planned for tomorrow.

Ariel: It would be wise to show up. After all, you never know when you’ll lose someone else.

Ariel: Goodnight, Miss Kumoshita.
The door clicks shut behind him and I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. I have… mixed feelings about this bird. Mostly bad ones. Unsettled ones. Ones that may be improved if I could yell a bunch of nasty names at him without fear of repercussions.

Still, I don’t want to forget any of what I just heard. Considering how tired I am at this point, the Parchment screen is barely visible, but I type down something anyway - mostly about Ariel and Caliban knowing our past and what Ariel said about cremation. I don’t even hesitate before sending it to Harai… wait, shit, this might not be comprehensible.

Thankfully, I don’t receive a reply maligning my grammar or content. Or, really, any reply at all. I guess that’s good. Harai must be getting sleep. For a moment, I consider sending it to Khalaf as well before remembering the messages they sent me, and at this point, I don’t think I can reply to them coherently right now.

My gaze drifts to the heaps of fabric on the floor, forlorn, forsaken. I walk over to them carefully, then shake myself. It’s not as if I have anything to be afraid of… right? Yet it’s still a long moment before I can bring myself to pick them up.

I turn over the mementos in my hands, debating, before tucking them into my bag. It seems only right to carry them with me.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, I crawl into bed and turn off the light. I fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow, one thought still lingering in my mind:

This can never happen again.

DANGANRONPA: A STORMY LAST HURRAH

CHAPTER 1: COMPLETE
The map for Zone 1 (Prologue + Chapter 1) can be found [here](#).
Chapter Summary

...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[10:36] C. KUMOSHITA:
who are you, really?:
“the first to pass on”

but also:
a face in the crowd
a messy eater
good at scrabble
incredibly talented
a problem solver
sympathetic and caring
a dear friend
(someone i wish i had known better,
before it was too late)

who are you, then?
you are loved
you are missed
you are remembered
and i hope you are at peace.

...

[11:12] C. KUMOSHITA:
this is how it ends (for you at least)
a smile, a hug, a ship sinking at sea
and a promise that it’ll never happen again.
we will pray that it won’t.
we will pray you were right.
we will laugh and cry and live for you, in your stead.

so we will be better in ways you said you’d be
and we will seek kinder, softer solutions
we will put our best into the world, and
the world will echo your name back.
[ ITEM OBTAINED || Padded Gloves]

A pair of dusty golden gloves that go up to your elbows. These would be useful regardless of whether you were working with delicate mechanics, or if you were hiding something.

[ ITEM OBTAINED || Workout Towel ]

Admittedly, this is a lot cleaner than you'd thought it was. It’s soft to the touch and very fluffy, but for all its worth you can't shake the stench of saltwater.

[ OUTFIT CHANGES ]

[ TSUKINO CHISAKI || SHSL FLIGHT STUDENT ]
“NO! You... YOU did this?! YOU’RE why she’s- she’s!-“

“Umitsu-kun, please, calm down-“

“She had her whole life ahead of her! She was- she was SIXTEEN!!”
“You had no idea what she would-“

“Did you know? Did you know that she was going to - to- god, you don’t even deserve to know what she was going to do. All the things she was going to accomplish when she got out of here. All the things she was going to do if you didn’t fucking- I can’t. I can’t do this. I hate you. I hate you I hate you I hate you.”

“She could have been the mastermind. I really thought she was.”

“I don’t care! I don’t care if she was the mastermind or what, she was my FRIEND and I- I cared about her. Okay? I just, I cared about her. A lot. And you- you killed her.”

“Umitsu-kun...“

“Don’t even speak to me.”

“...”

“... I never had a chance to say goodbye, you know.”

“... ... I know. And I’m sorry.”

“I said don’t speak to me.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“And I said okay.”
Chapter End Notes

The OOC trivia section for Chapter 1 as a whole can be found here.

The other funky fresh thing that went up today is Clear Skies mode, or the Free Time Event mode of DR:ASLH! PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE make sure you're caught up with whatever's posted of DR:ASLH canon before checking out Clear Skies!
Chapter Summary

But the morning will come.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A dream…?

No. Perhaps, a memory.

Though I hear voices, their owners don’t seem to be aware that I can hear them; or rather, they don’t seem aware that I’m present at all.

(???): Hey, did you see? [XXXXX] posted again last night. It’s not pretty.

[???): Ugh, seriously? You’d think they’d realize we can actually see what they’re saying by now. This is way more than just gossip. It’s downright disgusting. Spilling all of our personal information and our secrets to the whole world for the sake of “entertainment” or whatever...

(???): Right? [sighs] I don’t think I can go home over break. My parents would kill me if they found out how I’m presenting right now.

[???): Oh, stop being such a drama king. What are the odds that your parents follow an anonymous high schooler’s social media account? What are the odds that they care?

(???): … I mean, you’re probably right.

[???): Aren’t I always?

(???): For the sake of my personal safety, I’m not answering that.
[???: Smart move.

(???): Still, back to [XXXXX]. No matter who’s actually seeing this stuff, it’s still gross. Someone needs to do something about it.

[???: Okay, like what?

(???): …

(???): I dunno. But it’s gonna be something.

[???: Yeah, Einstein. get back to me when you have answers.

(???): Einstein didn’t have all the answers, though. He initially rejected the theory of a quantum universe-

[???: Nerd.

(???): This was on our final!

[???: And?

(???): You got 100% on the final!

[???: And??

(???): … You are making my life so difficult. I need you to know this.

[???: Hey, look at it this way. Because you missed a single question on the final, you now get to
look up Einstein facts just in case you need to make a rebuttal against me. And now you have. So life is complete.

(???): Uh… I guess that’s one way of looking at things, yeah.

[???): But you’re STILL a nerd for looking that up AFTER the exam.

(???): H-hey!!

That’s right. I recognize these two now.

Even as Kashizaki and Atsui leave the area, I doze, warm light filtering on my face. I don’t (or can’t) open my eyes to see them, anyway, and it’s not like it matters.

Eventually, there’s another set of footsteps and a tap on my shoulder. The voice that follows is warm, gentle, and laced with amusement.

I’d recognize that voice anywhere.

Khalaf: Good morning, Chiyo. What are you doing here?

Khalaf: It’s time to wake up, okay? I know you don’t want to, but please? For me?

I turn to smile at them, and-

CHAPTER 2
FAIR SERPENT BENEATH THE FOUL FLOWER
And I open my eyes, hand pressed to my shoulder where I could have sworn someone brushed their hand against mine. Did I dream at all? It’s a little odd that I haven’t been able to remember much since I woke up here, but I suppose it’s better than night terrors. In fact, I’m surprised I didn’t have any, since…

Well. All of yesterday.

I force back tears and pull the covers to my chin. If I stay in bed all day, would anyone notice? I mean, it’s not like everyone expects us to move on that quickly, of course people like Sumitama and Chisaki are probably devastated, so it’s okay that I am, too. Right?

The morning announcement goes off, and I check my Parchment, even though I already know the time. As usual, there’s no reply from Harai. There’s also obviously none from Shionaga or Valdez, but I open up each of their contacts anyway and linger for just a moment.
They can’t just be gone. I know I’m going to walk outside and I’ll find Valdez with Chisaki, or maybe Shionaga with Sumitama and Ekyou, or some combination thereof. There will be laughter, and jokes, and they will walk away friends, magically unscathed. And things will be back to normal.

… Right?

…

I whisper a silent goodbye before turning off my Parchment and putting it down.

I still haven’t replied to or even looked at Khalaf’s messages from last night, but I shove that out of my mind for now. I doubt my emotions have recovered enough to address them appropriately. What would they would message me about completely unprompted anyway? Hopefully it’s not that important.

But I think I need to get up. I don’t want to, but I should. I have to. Admittedly, I’m not sure why I have to, but I know I have this responsibility to get up already.

Also, I still need to take my pills, so that’s a huge incentive too.

So against all odds, I get out of bed and put one foot in front of the other. Eventually, somehow, I make it to the kitchen and open the door…

… and walk into possibly the most bizarre thing I’ve seen since waking up here.

Everyone else seems to be in the kitchen already, actually eating breakfast. And I mean everyone. Including Sekisada. Including Bazhanov. Including Harai, for some reason, and that is in and of itself impressive. How did everyone coordinate this so well? As far as I know, no one had called any sort of official meeting. From what I can tell, this isn’t even a meeting - it’s just everyone sitting together (or in various parts of the room) and actually spending time as a group.
On the one hand, I’m glad that this is even happening. Considering the last time we were all gathered in the kitchen just a few days ago, it’s incredible that no one seems all that uncomfortable with sharing such a space.

On the other hand, of course, this room feels far too small with only fourteen.

Atsui passes me, then does a double take and pushes me towards the table.

Chiyo: Wha-?

Atsui: Morning. Hope you slept okay. I didn’t, but too late for that. Time to eat.

He drags me past Murdock and McRae at the head of the table and Chisaki and Everett seated on the floor. Before I know it, I’m forcibly seated between Khalaf and Bates.

Atsui: Here you go. Don’t you dare move.

So this is the ulterior motive. Damage control.

Bates: Heya, Kumoshita-chan!

Chiyo: Hi?

Khalaf: [without looking up] Morning.

For some reason, neither of them seem inclined to go after the other. It’s more like they’re refusing to acknowledge each other, actually. Atsui places a bowl of rice and a glass of water in front of me, waving off my thanks before going to sit with Kashizaki, Sumitama, and Ekyou.

Bates: So how’s your morning?
Chiyo: Oh, uh, I just woke up. It’s pretty good so far, though!

Bates: Ahaha, that’s good to hear. I thought you’d be more shaken after yesterday.

I lower my chopsticks, suddenly queasy.

Chiyo: Y-yeah… I mean, I guess.

Khalaf: Hey, leave her alone.


Chiyo: No, I’m fine. Or, um. Getting there.

Bates: See? That’s good to hear!

Khalaf: That doesn’t mean you should push her. She passed out yesterday.

Bates: And then she did perfectly fine in the trial, unlike someone else I know.

Oh. Oh dear lord, it is too early in the morning for this.

Khalaf: [stiffens] Y-you said that you thought Kumoshita-san was the killer!

Bates: Uh, more accurately, I didn’t think Ekyou-san was the killer. And hey! It turned out to be neither of them, no thanks to you.

Khalaf: Okay, but you didn’t think that Shionaga-san-
I slam my hands on the table with maybe a bit too much force. Khalaf flinches back, wide-eyed, at the noise, while Bates just seems mildly surprised.

Chiyo: Can we not argue about this over breakfast?

Khalaf: I wasn’t going to-

Murdock: She has a point.

Murdock leans across the table, glaring at both Khalaf and Bates. She clicks her tongue in our general direction.

Murdock: It’s eight in the morning. Two people died yesterday. Now really isn’t the time to be discussing this. She just woke up, for heaven’s sake.

Murdock: Kumoshita, are you alright?

Chiyo: Yeah, I’m fine.

Murdock doesn’t seem to notice my surprise at her intervention, simply nodding before turning back to her conversation with McRae.

Murdock: Good. Do better.

And that seems to be the end of it. Both Bates and Khalaf stop talking and just resort to not looking at each other. Which, I mean, I guess it’s preferable, but… I’m still super curious about what happened yesterday. I know Bates told off Khalaf, but why are they even sitting together now? Now probably isn’t the best time to ask, though.

I end up surveying the rest of the room. Murdock and McRae, as previously observed, seem to be having a deep conversation. At least, on Murdock’s part. McRae seems more
preoccupied with his Parchment, though he does look up and make occasional contributions. If Murdock is bothered by his split attention, she doesn’t show it.

Meanwhile, Kashizaki, Ekyou, and Atsui seem to be preoccupied with hovering over a crying Sumitama. Ekyou herself seems to be pushing down tears as she hugs Sumitama close. I can only imagine how the two of them must feel right now.

Sekisada and Bazhanov, oddly enough, are sitting together. Sekisada keeps taking nervous glances at Bazhanov’s impassive mask while Bazhanov sits, arms folded and eyes closed. That’s... kind of an odd combination, but as long as Sekisada isn’t starting any drama, I think it should be fine.

Harai sits alone. Predictably, they aren’t eating, although there’s a neatly tied bento in front of them. Hopefully they get around to that.

On the floor, Everett and Chisaki seem to just be chilling. Or something. I’m pretty sure they’re sitting there by choice? Neither of them seem to be talking, though Chisaki is fidgeting with the bandages on her left arm. I need to talk to them both when I have a chance.

I never get this chance, however, because as soon as I finish my rice, Khalaf stands up abruptly.

Khalaf: Kumoshita-san, can I speak to you a moment? Alone. Bates, shut up.

Bates: I wasn’t gonna say anything!

Khalaf: Shut up anyway.

Chiyo: Huh? I need to put away my bowl, first-

Khalaf: Bates can get it.

Bates: No?
Khalaf: Yes. Kumoshita-san?

Chiyo: Um.

I end up following them out of the kitchen. In the living room, they stare at the fireplace for a moment before sighing sharply and turning back to me.

Khalaf: Why didn’t you reply to my messages?

Chiyo: Uh??

Khalaf: Did you even open them?

Shit!! I knew I should have read those!!

Khalaf: Forget it. It’s not that important.

Chiyo: If it’s bothering you, it’s important.

Khalaf: I kind of regret sending them, actually.

Chiyo: I can check them, just give me a moment-

Khalaf: I said forget it.

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: I’m sorry.
Khalaf: No, no, you’re fine, I’m just- fuck.

They twist hair out of their bun and refuse to meet my gaze. If I’d known that this would have bothered them so much…

Khalaf: [abruptly] I have to go.

Chiyo: What? Why??

Khalaf: I don’t want to yell at you.

Chiyo: You don’t want to what?

Khalaf: This has nothing to do with you, and I promise I’m not mad at you specifically. I think I’m just really frustrated and need to think about things by myself, okay? Just forget I dragged you into this at all.

Chiyo: Khalaf-san, you mean a lot to me, and I genuinely want to help you.

Khalaf: And you mean a lot to me, too, but I don’t want to yell at someone who passed out yesterday just because I can’t get my shit together and find a fucking culprit!

Khalaf: Shionaga-san was right under our noses the whole time! He literally convinced me that he wasn’t the killer!

Khalaf: I was so stupid...

Khalaf: And then you just came in, and then you just solved everything. And we’re all alive because of it. So thank you.

Khalaf breathes in, clenching their hands into fists.
Khalaf: But I…

Khalaf: I didn’t do enough.

Chiyo: You did plenty! You did all of the investigation-

Khalaf: But Harai-san was the one who wrote up the evidence.

Chiyo: Alright, fair enough, but you accomplished a ton in the trial before I got there, right?

Khalaf: [bitter laugh] Accomplished? Please. Your testimony destroyed the basis of every argument made before you woke up.

Chiyo: A-and? Does that not matter?

Khalaf: ...

Khalaf: I was so set on the killer being Ekyou-san. I would have gotten us all killed if it weren’t for you.

Khalaf: I’m supposed to be committed to the truth, Kumoshita-san. What kind of journalist am I?

Chiyo: You’re doing your best. It’s a stressful situation-

Khalaf: You LITERALLY PASSED OUT and you did more than I did!

Khalaf: This is LIFE AND DEATH. I can’t lose the people I care about again, not after Mom-

Khalaf: [shakes head] Whatever! I just- I used to be better! I should be better!
Khalaf: I...

Unconsciously, I take a step back. Khalaf takes one forward, then stops in their tracks, eyes wide. All of their rage freezes in an instant, then collapses.

Khalaf: I don’t want to yell at you.

Chiyo: Wait, I know you don’t-

Khalaf: Sorry.

They turn and head down the hall back to their room. All I can do is stand and watch, biting my tongue.

Every instinct is to go after them, to apologize and make things right, but their words swim through my mind. Needing to be better. Not doing enough. The truth.

...Their mom?

I should go after them- no, they said they didn’t want to yell at me, and I think they want to be alone, or- what should I do! How can I help them? I really, really need to look at those messages. They said I didn’t have to, but-

I’m already turning on my Parchment when a voice startles me.

Harai: Thanks for the messages you sent last night.

Chiyo: Huh-?! Oh! [shoves Parchment back in bag] Good morning, Harai-san.

Harai: Morning. [tilts head] Is everything alright?
Chiyo: Um. Good question?

Harai: Hm.

They don’t press the matter and only pull at their cloak for a moment before responding again.

Harai: They removed the barrier.

Chiyo: What?

Harai: Ariel made the announcement. Since we survived the first trial, they’re opening up more of the mansion. Them and Caliban.

Chiyo: Oh. That’s uh...

Harai: Morbid?

Chiyo: Pretty much, yeah.

Harai: I agree. But Ariel says that Caliban should have removed the barrier during breakfast, so we may as well go check that out.

Chiyo: Already?

Harai: Yes. If we wait too long, other people might tamper with the rooms. You’re coming, right?

I look at the hallway, Khalaf’s words still ringing. I guess it’s not like I have anything else to do.
Harai and I walk to the end of the room. I look straight ahead when we pass the Monomachine, but all evidence of yesterday’s carnage seems to have been erased. Save for the bright spot of fresh paint where McRae scuffed the wall a few days ago, no hint of Valdez’s murder is left behind.

The barrier, too, has vanished without a trace. It’s almost as if it had never existed. Harai walks past it with no hesitation, and after a moment, I follow them.

This hallway, unlike the bedroom hallways, is painted over in almost oppressive shades of dark grey and black. A collection of doors flank each side of the hall.

Chiyo: Are these more bedrooms?

My question goes unanswered as Harai peeks into a room. I peer over their shoulder. This room seems to be mostly empty, save for a nondescript cabinet and a strange stand tucked into the corner. A sheet is drawn over it, its blank surface a contrast to the oppressive darkness of the room.

Harai: I don’t think this is a bedroom.

Though I don’t move from the doorframe, Harai walks over to the stand and lifts the sheet up.

Harai: It looks like… what’s the word? For that board that artists use to paint. The standing one.

Chiyo: An easel?

Harai: Yes, that. And the cabinet…

They open the door, then close it quickly.

Harai: It’s full of oil paints.
Chiyo: Huh.

Harai: And ants. Lots of ants. [turns around] We should move on. You’re writing this down, right?

Chiyo: Oh! Um, yeah, I will!

Harai: Good.

Each successive room seems themed around one subject or another, though some seem to be entirely empty. We don’t spend too long in each room, but I don’t think Harai expects us to find absolutely everything - after all, we’re just trying to scout the area before everyone else walks in.

Yet the subjects that these rooms are centered around seem… strangely specific. Piles of astronomy books are strewn about one, while another boasts a pristine pair of figure skates wrapped in a dusty towel. One of the rooms has nothing but a single blank journal on the desk, a brittle four-leaf clover pressed between its pages.

Between the rooms, I coax Harai to at least tell me about the morning meeting. Apparently, Murdock has never called a meeting at all this morning, despite what Ariel said last night. Atsui merely sent out a message about having made breakfast, and everyone else followed. Perhaps they wanted to see how everyone else fared after the trial, or more likely, they wanted hot breakfast. Either way, Harai points out, they aren’t quite sure themselves why they went in the first place. After all, it’s not like they eat in front of people.

As they explain between room inspections, I can’t help but notice Harai’s posture, their every movement so much more articulated than it was just yesterday. Did they sleep more or something? Whatever happened, I’m glad that they’re more talkative. They certainly seem more comfortable.

At the end of the hall lies a set of double doors. As soon as we leave the last room, Harai pushes them aside and just stares. Just staring is all I can do, too, for a moment.

The double doors lead to an opulent dining room, nearly the size of the library itself. A huge
table sprawls underneath a glittering chandelier, both fixtures polished and decadent. Windows, similar to the ones in the trial room, stretch from floor to ceiling, though these are flanked by curtains. In short, this room seems simply to be the perfect display of wealth.

It takes me a moment to even process Harai’s lack of interest now that the novelty of the room has worn off on them; instead, they just… scowl? Their mask is always scowling, but they seem dissatisfied as well.

Harai: What’s the point of having a dining room so far from the kitchen?

Chiyo: Maybe whoever lived here before just wanted to show off their money?

Harai: From what I know of rich people… that sounds about right.

They merely skirt around the central table and towards another set of doors so dwarfed by the room around us that I didn’t even register its existence.

Harai: We don’t have much time to waste. Let’s keep moving.

The next hallway is considerably shorter than the one we just came from, but to my surprise, a figure is already present. They turn at our arrival, and I quickly realize that I don’t recognize this person. Why would I?

After all, I’ve never seen Bazhanov without his mask on before.
Bazhanov seems completely unbothered by the encounter, merely raising an eyebrow in mild intrigue. Woah, I can actually kind of tell what he’s feeling now. This is so weird.

Bazhanov: You seem surprised.

Chiyo: N-no! Yes? Maybe??

He actually smiles, more of a tired grin than a smirk.

Harai: You look… different.

Bazhanov: Well, yes, that tends to be what happens when you take your mask off. Which I assume is something you’d know about.

Harai: [pulls at mask] No comment.
Chiyo: You look good! Under the mask, I mean. Aside from your eye, of course.

Bazhanov: I don’t actually give a shit about how I look.

Chiyo: Um…

Bazhanov: But thank you. I appreciate it.

Harai: What made you decide to take it off?

He shrugs, conspicuously avoiding eye contact with either of us. Despite the fact that he’s comfortable enough to have taken his mask off, he doesn’t seem like he welcomes the confrontation.

Bazhanov: Reevaluating my priorities, I suppose. I assume people found it hard to get a read on what I was feeling or thinking. People were initially suspicious of me because of the mask, after all, and I had no real reason for it beyond hiding my eye. And even that could be easily accomplished with an eyepatch. Hence, the change.

Bazhanov: I know people will be suspicious of me no matter what I do, but at least this will make people slightly less worried. I think.

Bazhanov: Besides, it was itchy. Tatsumaru, aren’t you uncomfortable?

Harai: I don’t really think about it.

Bazhanov: Yeah, right. I haven’t been in a single conversation with you when you didn’t have to adjust the damn thing. Don’t lie to yourself.

Harai: I have no idea what you’re talking about.
Bazhanov: See, you're messing with your mask right now.

Harai: [drops hands] No I’m not.


Harai: I’ll keep that in mind.

Judging by their tone, they have absolutely no intent of removing their mask in public anytime soon.

Harai: Where are you going, anyway?

Bazhanov: I think there’s an open patio at the end of the hallway. I need fresh air. It’s much too cramped in this building. And you?

Chiyo: We’re still investigating, I guess.

Bazhanov: Hm. Let me know how that goes, won’t you?

With that, Bazhanov leaves abruptly, taking clipped steps down the hall. Harai and I watch him until he opens the door at the end of the corridor. That was… interesting.

Chiyo: You know, the last time I had a conversation with Bazhanov-san, he told me to stop talking to him.

Harai: And?

Chiyo: Do you think he hates us?

Harai: Who cares?
They open the first door in the hallway and walk in.

Harai: Hurry up.

Chiyo: Oh- okay, I guess.

Now that I think about it, I don’t imagine Harai cares much about what anyone, let alone Bazhanov, thinks of them. Lucky them.

The remaining rooms here seem to be styled the same as the rooms from the other hall, with each one seeming to have a particular theme, and others seeming to have nothing at all. It’s not until we get to the second-to-last one, a room with a wardrobe full of mothballs and half-rotted silk, that I finally think to comment on it.

Chiyo: Don’t you find it odd that all of this is here?

Harai: Not any more so than how odd it is to entrap our class in a mansion of all things to begin with.

Chiyo: But all of these rooms are based around such specific things! Like astronomy, and ice skating, and… whatever this room is?

Harai: Fashion. I think it’s fashion.

Chiyo: [nods] Right. So. Why do you think these rooms exist?

Harai: I don’t know.

They didn’t even hesitate before responding.
Harai: But I think you’re onto something. Why WOULD all of this be here…?

Chiyo: Maybe...

I stop for a moment as realization dawns.

Chiyo: … What if these rooms have nothing to do with us?

Harai: What?

Chiyo: I said-

Harai: I heard you the first time. Explain.

Chiyo: These look like rooms meant to cultivate a talent.

Harai: Right. Since we’re all Hope’s Peak students.

Chiyo: But these aren’t for our talents.

Harai: Yes, I’m aware of that too. Get to the point.

Chiyo: Maybe these are for a class that was here before us…?

Harai pauses in their inspection of a sewing kit, but resumes almost immediately.

Harai: I doubt it.

Chiyo: Why not?
Harai: I don’t know. It just seems stupid.

They fiddle with the latches on the kit, even pulling out a pair of tiny scissors and absently pulling them apart.

Harai: This building seems like it was hastily abandoned, considering that some of these rooms still have expensive things in them. I don’t think people would leave behind silk for no reason.

Chiyo: I mean, yeah, but I don’t know why else all of this would be here.

Harai: Rich people are just stupid.

Chiyo: And they invest in weird hobbies that they abandon at the drop of a hat?

Harai: Something like that, I guess.

Chiyo: Hm…

They leave the room quickly. As always, I follow them.

Maybe Harai is right. If the mansion was home to Hope’s Peak students and was abandoned quickly, surely we’d know about an event like that, right? It would have passed into the news, if not public consciousness itself. Hope’s Peak is pretty illustrious. But something about these rooms still bothers me…

The rest of our inspection passes without much comment. It’s only when we get to the end of the hallway that Harai finally turns to me again.

Harai: So what kinds of rooms did we find?
Chiyo: Um… [looks at Parchment] Painting room, astronomy room, volleyball room, ice skate room, clover room, fashion room, music speaker room, band instrument that plays in treble clef room, and what was that last one?

Harai: Chinese lion dancing. I think. Don’t quote me on that.

Chiyo: [nods] And then there were seven rooms that looked pretty much empty. I’ll send you my notes.

Harai: Likewise.

Chiyo: We make a good team, huh?

Harai: Mm. [shrugs] I’d say you and Khalaf-san are a bit better at the team thing.

Harai: But I appreciate the help.

They turn to the next set of doors before I can respond and enter, leaving me to follow.

The next room seems to be another sitting room upholstered, surprisingly, in shades of deep red. While the windows are huge, the charcoal greys of the rest of the room are stunningly claustrophobic. The centerpiece of this particular room is a glossy piano tucked neatly against the wall, almost unnoticeable amongst the already-dark colors.

Dang, do the people who must have been here before have weird design taste. Onii-chan could teach them a thing or two.

… I hope he’s doing alright.

Harai seems enamored with the piano, lifting the bench to reveal a collection of copy books. They flip through one and then another, then flinch when the doors creak open again. Everett peeks in, followed shortly by Chisaki.
Everett: Cool, there’s a piano?

Harai: Oh. Everett-shi.

Everett: You don’t have to be so formal, Harai-san. We’ve known each other a week, surely we’ve graduated to -san status?


Everett: Ah, no, I was kidding, you can do whatever you want. Whatever makes you comfortable, right? Did you get enough sleep last night? You seem more energetic.

Harai: Uh, define “enough”.

Everett: More than two hours.

Harai: Is five okay?

Everett: Hey, that’s pretty good! I can function on five hours of sleep!

Chisaki: You two are crazy.

Chisaki seems neither overly excited nor overly sad, merely drawing her jacket tighter around her.

Chisaki: What are you doing, anyway?

Chiyo: Exploring! What about you two?
Everett: I guess you could say the same. [shrugs] I have no idea what’s with all those rooms, though. They give me bad vibes.

Chisaki: I dunno what you’re talking about. They seem pretty cool to me. I mean, there’s an entire wood pipe in one of them.

Chiyo: That’s probably a band instrument.

Chisaki: But it might NOT be. Let me dream.

Harai: What would you even do with a wood pipe?

Chisaki: I dunno.

Harai: … No, really, is that an innuendo, or.

Chisaki: I don’t know. It sounded vaguely threatening and funny so I said it. [mumbles] Note to future self, make jokes more obvious.

Harai: You really don’t have to do that.

Chisaki: How do you feel about hand puns? [waves stump]

Harai: [to Everett] Is she always like this?

Everett: I’ve known her a week, and yeah, pretty much. Chisaki-chan, I thought you hated puns.

Chisaki: [rolls eyes] Well, yeah, but only if I’m not the one making them. I mean, Dez-kun-

She stops, what little smile she had sliding off her face. I reach out for her arm, but she sidesteps my hand.
Chisaki: [quietly] Right.

Chiyo: … I know. I can’t believe it, either.

Chisaki: I miss him.

Chiyo: I do, too.

Harai looks away. Everett places a hand on Chisaki’s shoulder, but she sighs and shrugs off the touch.

Chisaki: It just feels weird, y’know? I know I only knew him for a few days, but…

Chisaki: But they were a long few days. And he was our classmate and everything. And, I dunno, I felt like we were good friends considering the time we’d known each other. And now he’s just. Gone.

Chisaki: [half-laughes] Now that I think about it, I kinda wonder how Sumitama-chan and Ekyou-chan are doing. Having been friends with a murderer and everything.

Everett: Shionaga-san did seem sorry for what he did, though.

Chiyo: And they lost their friend, too.

Chisaki: I guess. I mean, that’s a good point. It doesn’t bring Dez-kun back or anything, but yeah. Yeah!

She flashes a victory sign and another smile, almost to accentuate her point. Everett just looks concerned.
Everett: Chisaki-chan, don’t push yourself too hard, okay?

Chiyo: If you need anything, let us know, alright?

Chisaki: I’m fine. Going to be fine, whatever. It’s not like it’s a big deal.

Everett: I’ll keep an eye on her.

Chisaki: I said I’m FINE, Rett-chan! Geez, you’re not my mom.

Everett: Nope, I’m your mom now. I’m adopting you. It’s too late, you have no say in this decision.

Chisaki: Nooo!!

Everett: As your designated mom, I say that you need to eat your vegetables.

Chisaki: [mock gasp] Oh, the horror, the horror!

Harai: … Those are good for you.

Everett: [points] You see that? That’s a responsible child.

Harai: What?

Chisaki: You can’t compare your children! That’s like, parenting rule number one!

Slowly, Chisaki seems to relax into the banter, and the tension in the room eases. Everett smiles and pats Chisaki’s head, seemingly satisfied with the shift. Even Harai seems like they’re more at ease as they play along in their serious way.
The atmosphere is immediately broken when the door creaks open again. Everett raises an arm protectively in front of Chisaki, who ducks back. Sekisada walks into the room, looking as irritable as always. He raises an eyebrow and chooses to speak directly to Everett, as if she’s the leader or something.

Sekisada: Am I interrupting anything?

Everett: Uh. No?

Chisaki: What are YOU doing here?

Sekisada: Last I checked, this is a common area, and I’m allowed to be here. [folds arms] Unless you have something to say on the matter?

Everett: I think she meant “what” are you doing here. As in, why are you here?

Sekisada: Oh. Well, same reason as the rest of you, I guess. I wanted to check out the new area.

Chiyo: Did you find anything interesting?

Sekisada: Please. Nothing about this mansion is interesting, least of all the people in it. Clearly, that includes you lot.

Why is he like this.

Sekisada: I mean, there isn’t much more to do now that these rooms are open. The fuck are we going to do about a dining room? [scoffs]

Chiyo: What about all those other rooms?

Sekisada: I don’t know how to paint. I’m not gonna start now, and definitely not with twenty-year-old paints. There’s ants in them. I didn’t even know ants eat paint.
Harai: Ants eat paint.

Sekisada: Yeah, that’s horrifying.

Everett: Well, if you need something to do, this piano looks like it’s in pretty good shape.

Sekisada: You know how to play piano?

Everett: [shrugs] You don’t?

He seems to have been left speechless at the declaration, only kicking at the ground before sighing.

Sekisada: Okay, fine, whatever. It doesn’t really matter.

Everett: Where are you going?

Sekisada: Outside. I figure no one else is there, and it’ll give me some peace and quiet.

Harai: … Sure. If you say so.

Sekisada: What are you talking about?

Harai: Nothing. Have fun with that.

Sekisada hovers for a moment, waiting for someone else to say something, before finally shrugging and opening the glass sliding doors to step out onto the balcony. Everett and Chisaki exchange loaded glances. I turn to Harai.
Chiyo: Bazhanov-san’s still out there, isn’t he?

Harai: Yes.

Chiyo: … And we’re not going to do anything about Sekisada-san going outside, too.

Harai: … Also yes.

Everett: Wow. That’s cold. What if he comes back in?

Chisaki: We should run away in case he does.

Chiyo: Huh?

Chisaki: [opens door] RUN AWAAAAAAAY.

The four of us head back through the second wing. Again, I hold my breath as we pass the place where the barrier used to be, and I think I catch Chisaki lowering her head as well. Still, we make it back to the living room without further incident.

When we get to the fireplace, Chisaki looks at Everett, hand on her hip.

Chisaki: So you’re not planning on talking to Sekisada-san.

Everett: Nope.

Chisaki: Ever?

Everett: Uh-huh.
Chisaki: Like, never ever.

Everett: I don’t want to. He’s a jerk.

Harai: What’s all this about?

Chisaki: Haven’t you ever seen how Sekisada-san acts nicer to Rett-chan than like, literally everyone else combined?

Harai: I… can’t say I have, no. I don’t talk to people if I can help it.

Chisaki: Yeah, that makes sense. Sekisada-san is an idiot.

Harai: [mutters] I meant all people.

Everett: What about Kumoshita-san?

Chiyo: Wh-wh- what do I have to do with this??

Chisaki: Ooh, that’s right! You two are hanging out right now!

Harai: She’s tolerable.

**Should I feel honored?? I guess it’s good that they have someone they feel okay about interacting with.**

Harai: But what about Sekisada-shi?

Everett: Oh, it’s whatever. You know how I don’t remember anything, right?
Harai: Right. Unless you're lying.

Everett: [rolls eyes] Yeah, right, I wouldn’t do that. I do, however, recognize one person, and that’s-

Harai: Sekisada-shi.

Everett: Exactly. I have no idea why I remember him of all people, and quite honestly I don’t know if I want to. He’s a jerk.

Harai: … Now I’m pretty sure that you’re lying. Why should I believe you?

**Everett just shrugs and smiles, completely serene.**

Everett: Same reason I believe that you aren’t the mastermind behind this whole situation.

**Harai freezes, then looks slowly at her. Even without their expression visible, they have the posture of a deer in the headlights before a semi. Yet, bit by bit, their shoulders relax into something resembling their former position.**

Harai: … Alright. I guess I can trust that.

Harai: But if you don’t mind, may I ask you a few questions?

Chisaki: Huh??

Everett: Why?

Harai: I’ve been collecting as much information as I can about the mansion and this whole situation, and you’re one of the people I’ve been meaning to talk to for a while. Between your missing memory, the fact that you seem to know Sekisada-shi, and…
They glance at Chisaki’s left arm. Chisaki tenses, drawing her jacket closer around her.

Harai: The fact that you were present during Chisaki-shi’s phone call.

Everett: … Ah.

Harai: I think it’s important that everything you know is recorded. If something happens to you, then I might never know the answers to some of the questions surrounding this mansion.

Harai: If that’s okay with you.

Chisaki: [stage whispers] Say no.

I want to tell Chisaki to step off, but… honestly, I think she might have a point. Considering that Everett doesn’t really want to think too hard about her past, and that Harai’s request would be incredibly forward even if they had been better friends with Everett, I really don’t see why she should accept the interview. But against all odds, Everett nods sharply.

Everett: Okay, sure.

Chisaki: Seriously?

Everett: Yeah. I’ll do it.

Chisaki: SERIOUSLY??

Harai: Oh? Oh. That’s. Good. Thank you.

Clearly, they didn’t expect her to say yes. Everett hums for a moment before speaking again.
Everett: But first, here’s a question for you, Harai-san.

Harai: Hm?

Everett: What if something happens to YOU? What good is all that information?

Harai: I’ve been sending a lot of it to Kumoshita-san. She can take over the investigation if she wants. I don’t care what happens beyond my death.

**Their reply is prompt, almost rehearsed. Have they been thinking about this? Should I be?**

Everett: Fair enough. Here’s another question.

Harai: You just said “a” question. Meaning one.

Everett: I lied. Second question.

Harai: Fine. Go on.

Everett: Do you know if anyone will miss you if you die?

Harai: No.

Everett: [waivers] D… doesn’t that bother you at all?

Chisaki: Yeah, don’t you have family? Siblings? Anything?

Harai: Not really. I haven’t seen my parents in the past two years.
Chiyo: Two years??

Harai: Well. Maybe five, if we really did lose three years of our lives. I don’t want them to care.

Harai: As for the people in this mansion, it doesn’t matter what they think of me. I just do what I should do to contribute. Ideally, people don’t notice me at all.

Harai: It’s not like I’m interesting.

Everett: I see.

Chiyo: That sounds really lonely.

Harai: What’s your point?

Everett: [sighs] Harai-san, I’m worried about you. [ticks off fingers] You’re saying some super concerning things, you claim you barely sleep, I’m pretty sure you don’t eat-

Harai: Oh, I eat. I just don’t eat in front of people.

Chisaki: Dang. [snaps fingers] I was thinking food just phased through your mask or something.

Everett: So I don’t want you running yourself into the ground for the sake of gathering information or whatever, okay? You need to take care of yourself.

Harai: I’m doing everything I can to help the group.

Everett: I’m not forcing you to do anything, but consider it. Taking breaks is good sometimes. Making friends is good sometimes.
Harai: Are you offering?

Everett: If you want.

Harai seems legitimately surprised, rocking back and forth where they stand for a moment before replying.

Harai: … I’ll consider it.

Everett: Eh, good enough. So you wanted to have an interview, right?

Harai: R-right. Maybe we could go to one of the spare rooms?

Chisaki: Ooh! I’ll come with!!

Harai: Sure. I guess. Kumoshita-san?

They look at me expectantly, shifting their weight. It’s pretty clear to me that they don’t really want any more people to tag along, though I think they wouldn’t necessarily mind…? They did mention that I’m tolerable to them. So it’s not that big of a deal. Right? Maybe?

All things considered, I shouldn’t get so wrapped up in my head and concerned with what other people think of me. I really need to check with other things anyway.

Chiyo: I think I’ll pass! I’m kind of hungry.

Chisaki: Oh mood.

Everett: Then go eat!!
Chisaki: No!! I’ll eat when you eat!!

Harai: This shouldn’t take long, I promise.

Everett: Alright, alright. Have fun, okay, Kumoshita-chan?

Harai: What does eating have to do with fun…?

Chisaki: If you don’t have fun eating then what’s even the point?

Harai: I eat to live.

Chisaki: Yeah, and I live to eat, what’s your angle?

The three of them head back to the new area, bickering the whole way. Or rather, Harai answers Chisaki’s questions completely seriously while Chisaki and Everett tease them for it. Though Harai speaks in clipped responses, they seem more comfortable with the two of them than they have been in all the time I’ve known them.

If I could see their face, I think they’d be smiling.

When I drop by the kitchen, Atsui is slumped over the table, eyes closed. McRae sits across from him, reading a book. He nods at me when I walk in.

McRae: Sup.

Chiyo: What happened?

McRae: He dragged me here, told me to watch the oven, and then passed out.
Chiyo: Is he okay?

McRae: Yeah. I think.

Chiyo: You think?

McRae: It’s for the best. He’s been pushing himself really hard lately. The fact that he’s getting any kind of sleep is probably good.

McRae: Besides, didn’t he say he wakes up at like 5:30? Willingly? That’s scary. Let him sleep.

I guess he’s right. It’s not like McRae seems particularly bothered by having to watch Atsui, anyway.

Chiyo: Well, thanks for holding down the fort.

McRae: It’s whatever.

I get a bag of chips and leave, kind of awkwardly. That... probably didn't leave a very good impression. Oops.

I don’t really have anywhere to go, so I end up wandering around the first wing. There’s not much here that I haven’t seen already, and in fact, even with the addition of the new wing, this building is still far too small for any meaningful kind of activity. Is that part of the killing game, too?

Eventually, I make my way to the atrium without having encountered anyone. Now that I’m here, I may as well go in.

I push open the doors to find not Sumitama and Ekyou poking around the planters, but for some reason, Murdock sitting by herself. She looks up when I enter and nods a stiff greeting.
Murdock: Kumoshita. Kind of you to join me.

Chiyo: Oh, uh…

I don’t really want to spend time with Murdock, but it seems I have no choice.

She scoots over, and I take a seat next to her.

Chiyo: What are you doing here?

Murdock: Just… thinking, I guess. [waves] It’s a beautiful day.

I hadn’t noticed it when I was in the living room, but a lot of the fog seems to have burned off today, and a lot more of the landscape is visible. At least Bazhanov has something to look at. For us, that means that light streams into the room, casting specks across the atrium. It would almost be pretty, if it were not so profoundly lonely so many miles from civilization.

Murdock doesn’t say anything else, closing her eyes. In the afternoon light, she looks almost like a model viewed in profile, sunbeams dancing along the brass of her jewelry and glasses. I’m beginning to think that maybe she fell asleep when she speaks suddenly.

Murdock: May I ask you something?

Chiyo: Um-

Murdock: Yes, I know, I just did. But something else.

She doesn’t wait for my answer before continuing, voice softer.

Murdock: Do you think I’m a bad person?
Chiyo: W-what?

Murdock: Bad. Morally black. Kicks puppies and eats kittens, so on and so forth. What do you think of me, Kumoshita?

Chiyo: Oh, I heard you. I, um. Just thought that was a really blunt question.

Murdock: Hm.

Expression completely and calculatedly blank, she still doesn’t open her eyes. For some reason, if I were to lie my way through this conversation and tell her that she’s amazing, I feel like she would just hold me at even greater distance. The best I can do is give her an honest answer, right?

Chiyo: I think… well, I don’t think you’re a bad person.

Chiyo: I think you can be harsh sometimes. And really controlling. But you’re also very capable. I feel like you’re used to being a leader, and you do a good job of it.

Chiyo: I think that you’re human, like the rest of us.

My answer doesn’t seem to satisfy Murdock; she wrinkles her brow and shakes her head at the response.

Murdock: No, no, I’m aware of all of that. What do YOU think of me?

Chiyo: What are you talking about?

Murdock: I- Here. Let me put this another way.

She opens her eyes and stares at me, deadly serious.
Murdock: Do you hate me, Kumoshita?

Chiyo: I…

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: … No, I don’t.

Murdock: [raises eyebrow] Really. I promise I won’t get mad if you tell the truth.

Chiyo: That IS the truth! I mean, I don’t really understand why you’re distant to me or why you’re so obsessed with the ethics of everything, but just because I don’t understand parts of you doesn’t mean I don’t like you!

Murdock: Ah. I see. I’m too distant and obsessive to be likable, then…

Chiyo: I never said that!!

Murdock: Kumoshita, calm down. I’m not upset in the slightest.

**Could have fooled me.**

Murdock: I’m trying to piece together what everyone thinks of me so that I can improve as a person. I’ve noticed that people don’t seem to care much for my attitude, and I’m genuinely curious as to why that is.

**Is… is she actually being serious right now, or is she joking?**

Murdock: Of course, you’re not obligated to answer, but I would heavily appreciate anything you have to say.
Chiyo: I already said what I have to say.

Murdock: If you’re sure.

Chiyo: Yes, I’m sure! Are you okay?

Murdock: What do you mean by that?

Chiyo: This just doesn’t seem like you. You’re always so put together and confident, what’s wrong?

Murdock: [snaps] Can’t I just want to improve myself and be more likable?

Chiyo: Y-you’re likable!

Murdock: Says who?

Chiyo: Says me!

Murdock: Do you really?

Chiyo: I wouldn’t say that if I didn’t mean it!

Murdock: I’m sure you say that of everyone.

Chiyo: But I mean it, Murdock-san. I admire a lot about you, and even if we don’t see eye to eye, I think you’re a good person.

For a moment, she seems to hesitate, before setting her jaw.

Chiyo: T-that’s because-!

Murdock: Because? Because, what? I’m too overbearing? Too controlling? [shakes head] I’m doing what I need to do to survive in this world. What’s wrong with that?

Chiyo: Nothing! Just-

Murdock: That it’s unpalatable and hard to deal with, I’m sure. I know I can be cold, calculating, passive-aggressive-

Chiyo: Please let me speak-

Murdock: [raises voice] No one gives a damn what I have to say about anything in this stupid class! No one even bothers trying to understand why I am the person I am today!

Murdock: I’m successful! I’m self-reliant! I’m determined, you said that, but...

Murdock: Is that not enough? What does it take in order to be appreciated - no, not even that, I just want to be liked by other people and to feel confident in that. I want to be good. I...

She falters, expression slowly falling slack.

Murdock: I think I might have- [closes eyes] No. I know I fucked up. With… With Valdez.

Murdock: I saw him yesterday, you know. After that meeting that I wanted to hold. I was so wrapped up in my own little world of self-pity, and he came to the kitchen just to check on me. And what did I do? I brushed him off. I didn’t speak to him again.
Murdock: And then not four hours later, he…

Chiyo: …

Murdock: … I wish I had known him better. I know he didn’t like me. If only I had more time-god, that’s ironic, I literally make watches. I just- ah, shit.

As soon as the words leave her mouth, Murdock starts blinking rapidly. She lets out a short harsh sigh and removes her glasses, methodically wiping at her eyes as she still speaks.

Murdock: People can leave your life so suddenly, Kumoshita. Sometimes you’re lucky enough to get a do over. And, s-sometimes…

Chiyo: [softly] Sometimes it’s not an option.

Silently, she nods, hands pressed against her face.

It’s really scary to watch someone you barely know cry, even more so when you’re pretty sure that they hate you. Murdock cries like melting ice, trying so hard to remain dignified and complete while slowly falling to pieces. I can’t do much more than pat her back, and even then she shrugs off my hand.

She laughs after a moment, derisive.

Murdock: I’m sorry. I don’t know- [voice cracks] I don’t know why I’m crying. You shouldn’t have to see me like this. I should be better than this.

Chiyo: No, you shouldn’t.

Murdock: [sharp] But it’s not fair to you-

Chiyo: You don’t have to be better than anyone, Murdock-san. You can just be.
Her shoulders slump, then tense again.

Murdock: But what if I don’t want to just be? What if I want to be better than I am now?

Chiyo: I think that depends on your definition of “better”. I don’t think you should push yourself to be likable for the sake of it. I think that you should just be the person you genuinely want to be.

Murdock: [rubbing eyes] Easy for you to say. Everyone likes you.

Chiyo: People like you too.

Murdock: Really. I doubt there’s a single person here who does.

Chiyo: What about McRae-san?

Murdock: Oh, Kumoshita.

With a final cough, Murdock places her glasses back on her face. She smiles, this time without any emotion at all.

Murdock: That’s the person who I’m sure hates me most.

I can’t reply before she stands up, all trace of her breakdown suddenly vanished. What stands before me now isn’t human, but a painted face - calm, collected, almost eerie in how put together it is. Only her puffy eyes betray her.

My heart aches with pity.

Murdock: I’ve used far too much of your time here, Kumoshita. I’m sorry for wasting your afternoon.
Chiyo: You didn’t waste anything! I’m glad you were able to talk to me!

Murdock: Were you really?

As usual, she doesn’t wait for a rebuttal and turns to leave.

Chiyo: Wait.

Against all odds, she pauses.

Murdock: Yes?

Chiyo: If you need anything at all, please let me know, okay? I’ll be happy to help you.

Murdock: Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.

And everything about her screams that she won’t.

I don’t get another chance to call to her again as she strides out of the room, head held high. All I’m left with is a gnawing sense that I should have done more.

If I’m as nice as everyone keeps insisting I am, shouldn’t I be better at actually helping people? Or, no, nice and helpful aren’t the same thing. Are they? One ties into the other, right? Nice people are usually helpful, too. But I don’t want to have to be nice. I don’t want to have to be anything. I want-

No, it doesn’t matter what I want. It’s more important that everyone else is able to get along. And if I have to be the shoulder to cry on, then it’s a necessary sacrifice, right? It’s about the good of the group. Even if I’m bad at it.
If I could want something, I’d just want to exist without the extra pressure of being what everyone else wants me to be. But couldn’t the same be said of anyone? Why is this bothering me so much? Doesn’t that make me a bad person if I don’t want to help, or if I can’t?

And, what Murdock said about not getting do overs...

My gaze lands on the planters, and the only blossoms there. A set of folded hydrangeas.

...

I need to get out of here.

I barely make it to the girl’s bathroom before throwing up in the sink. For a moment, I consider just leaving all of this mess for someone else to deal with, before shoving the thought aside and finding cleaning supplies.

What the hell is wrong with me.

After I finish cleaning up, I glare at myself in the mirror. I don’t intend to say anything, but the words leave my mouth anyway.

Chiyo: Stop overthinking.

I don’t look back when I leave.

It’s not even late, but I go back to my room anyway. Just to make absolute sure that there’s no intrusions, I shove my nightstand against the door as a barricade. I don’t even know what I’d do if I talked to someone right now. Yell? Cry? Both?

I’ve been lying on my bed for a while before I remember Khalaf’s messages. As much as I want to be concerned about putting them off for so long, the only feeling I can distinguish is disappointment. Whether it’s at myself or at them, it’s nearly enough to stop me from looking
But not quite.

「 YESTERDAY 」

[21:30] A. KHALAF:

Hey.

Thanks for taking charge in the trial. And for making sure we all didn’t die.

I need to confess, though.

I did something really stupid today. I got too carried away with a theory and didn’t even stop to consider the facts.

Any of them. I had them. I just didn’t use them.

I accused Ekyou-san of murder for no reason at all. If I had thought things through for any amount of time I would have realized that I was wrong. Even Bates could see that.

I think I’m a failure, but that’s besides the point.

Thank you for everything, and I’m sorry.

—

「 TODAY 」

[7:56] A. KHALAF:

Shouldn’t have dumped all of that on you

Ignore that please

Oh. So this is what they meant earlier today, about wanting to be better… I know that they’ve said to ignore what they sent on multiple occasions, both via text and in person. But I can’t just leave this unacknowledged, when clearly they’re hurting. So not replying just makes the situation worse. Right?
Before I can think twice, I find myself already typing a reply.

[18:22] C. KUMOSHITA:
You’re not a failure!!
You were under a lot of stress and thought you were doing the right thing
And okay maybe you were wrong, that doesn’t mean you failed or are a bad person
You’re an amazing person and I know you don’t make the same mistake twice
So please be kinder to yourself!
I’m here for you all the way!!

I take a deep breath before sending one more message. I hope all of this at least somewhat makes up for what I did and didn’t do today.

[18:41] C. KUMOSHITA:
<3

Hopefully they’re okay. Hopefully they’re being easier on themselves now than they were this morning. Hopefully they aren’t mad about me sending this so late. All I can do without their response is hope, really, but damn it, I’m going to hope so hard that they’ll feel it from down the hall. Yeah! I still feel really bad about not reading this earlier, but I can’t do anything about that now, I guess…

There’s nothing else that I really need to do at this point, so I end up scrolling through my Parchment and everything that Harai and I have written about the past week. The things Harai mentioned about the mansion - the mountains, “YU V”, and even what they said about Valdez... it all worries me. With the addition of the new rooms and their oddly specific subjects, my questions about our situation have only multiplied.

I guess I could always ask Valdez whether they know about the book-
… Ah. Right.

I keep forgetting.

Shaking my head, I refocus on the screen before me only to realize that I’ve reached the evidence list from yesterday’s trial. That’s enough reading for today.

I’m about to put my Parchment down and sleep early when it buzzes with a new message. I open it without even seeing the name, but pause as new lines scroll across my screen.

[20:01] C. BATES:

hey kumoshita

do you want to hang out tmrw?

(asking over text cuz i didnt see you all day today lol)

Uh.

Uhhh.

What?

Since when- why does Bates want to spend time with me?! I should think about this for a moment. Surely if I rush into this I’m going to say something I regret.

[20:04] C. BATES:

bitch i can see your read receipts i know youre reading this

OKAY HE CALLED ME OUT NEVERMIND TIME TO MAKE A DECISION NOW. I didn’t even know we had read receipts on these things??
If Khalaf finds out that I’m willingly spending time with Bates, they’re going to be so pissed at either him or myself, and at this point I’m not sure which would be worse. BUT SUCH IS THE PRICE OF SOCIAL PRESSURE.

[20:04] C. KUMOSHITA:
I wouldn’t mind!
What’s the occasion? OvO

I know I’m gonna regret this.

[20:05] C. BATES:
no real reason i just want to talk to you! alone.
also wtf is ovo
wait its a face ok

[20:06] C. KUMOSHITA:
Wait. Alone?

[20:06] C. BATES:
oh mcrae will be there probably
but basically alone!
dont bring amal lol

My first instinct is to rescind my acceptance. That’s really suspicious, isn’t it? To want to talk to someone alone, completely unprompted? No, Calm down. Ariel said no one had made plans to kill anyone. Surely that hasn’t changed now that...

… Well, now that Valdez and Shionaga are. Gone.

My Parchment is still buzzing.
[20:08] C. BATES:
earth to kumoshita
you still have read receipts on did you like walk away or something
hello?
hewwo, even??
is anybody thewe??
u
w
u
what the fuck am i doing with my life.
kumoshitaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaAAAAAAA
whoops i hit caps lock soz

[20:15] C. KUMOSHITA:
Still here
What time do you want to meet tomorrow?

[20:15] C. BATES:
oh uh
no time in particular ig?
right after breakfast maybe?

[20:16] C. KUMOSHITA:
Are you sure you’ll be awake? >_<;

[20:16] C. BATES:
ill probably be awake

functional is another story

[20:17] C. BATES:

idk abt you but my sleep has been S H I T

lots of nightmares

[20:17] C. KUMOSHITA:

I’m sorry to hear!!!

I’ve only had one dream I remember and it was from a nap so idk??

[20:17] C. BATES:

eh its w/e at this point ill manage

ik you can too you’re good at handling stuff

[20:17] C. KUMOSHITA:

Thanks?

[20:18] C. BATES:

yeah yw

anyway see you tomorrow or something i need to get back to this composition

music is fake and hard dont do it

[20:18] C. KUMOSHITA:

Noted shfksjflsjfl
oh that’s a keysmash ok

Bates doesn’t send any more messages, to my relief. I’m kind of tired of dealing with today as a whole. Between worrying about everyone in the mansion, and worrying about my own personality, and worrying about the possibility of murder, I don’t know how much more worrying I can handle in one day. And cheesy as it is, I really hope that everyone’s doing alright. Especially Chisaki and Everett, Sumitama and Ekyou, Bazhanov, Harai, Atsui and McRae, even Murdock- okay, everyone, actually. I’m no longer certain that we’ll all be okay, which might even scare me more than the possibility of another death.

(Or does it?)

At least I kind of know what I’ll be doing tomorrow, in what can only be described as the loosest sense of the term. I’ll just have to take it one step at a time. I’ll talk to Bates and maybe McRae and figure things out from there. Yeah!

And then to fix things with Khalaf…

… Well, I’ll sort it out later.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 2 (Chapter 2) can be found here.
I open my eyes to a blank ceiling and a morning announcement and heave a sigh.

Would anyone really care if I just... stayed in bed today? Yesterday was a mess and a half in and of itself, what with Khalaf and everything... I hope they’re doing alright. If they’re at breakfast already, I’m sure they wouldn’t want to see me. So overall it’s better to stay here! Yeah!

... Oh, geez, today’s one of those “feeling really bad for no reason” days. That’s a pretty good reason for me to go to breakfast and talk to people. And don’t I need to talk to Bates? Great. Dandy. Fantastic. I guess I shouldn’t keep him waiting.

When I drag myself to the kitchen, I sit down at the first chair I find and thunk my head down on the table. Bazhanov looks over, eyebrows raised, and scoots very slightly away. I can’t blame him.

Bazhanov: Morning.

Chiyo: Mmgh.

Bazhanov: You slept well, huh.

Chiyo: Ghh.

Bazhanov: Would you like some egg bread?
Bazhanov gives me the roll in his hands, and I very suddenly realize that I haven’t eaten since… When did I last eat? Wow. No wonder this tastes better than usual.

For his part, Bazhanov pulls another roll off of a platter and begins to disassemble it, picking at crumbs. For all his meticulous concentration, he doesn’t seem inclined towards actually eating it. It’s admittedly still super weird to actually see his face and notice things I didn’t notice before. Does he always stick his tongue out when he’s concentrating like that?

Bazhanov catches my stare after a moment and smiles slightly before returning to what seems now to be basically an egg, which he inspects for a moment and then pops into his mouth. If I were a bird, I’d be scared of him.

It seems that everyone’s mostly sticking to their same groups from yesterday: Everett and Chisaki, Murdock and McRae, Sumitama and Ekyou. This time, however, Kashizaki sits apart from Sumitama and Ekyou, eating bread with a pair of chopsticks as Atsui snores peacefully across from her.

In another twist from yesterday, Bates sits with Murdock and McRae, laughing loudly at something said while Murdock smiles, almost amused. She seems to have recovered gracefully from her breakdown yesterday, but… Is that smile forced? Am I just imagining it? I can’t even tell that she’s insecure, and McRae especially doesn’t seem to either. I’ll have to ask them both about their situation, assuming I can work up the courage to. Or the tact. Actually, maybe I won’t ask them.

Surprisingly, Harai sits with Chisaki and Everett. And even more surprisingly, they seem to be enjoying themselves, or at the very least they seem a lot more comfortable. Though they still don’t eat, they listen intently to Chisaki as she gestures her way through a story, then says something that sets the other two off in theatrics. I guess it’s only logical that an actor gets along well with people who love comedic exaggeration. Just watching the trio is enough to put a smile on my face. Chisaki’s enthusiasm is starting to feel genuine again.

The only two missing from the room are Khalaf and Sekisada. In retrospect, it makes sense that Khalaf isn’t here, but I still cast a guilty glance towards the door. If only I could do something to help them… I’ll have to check on them when I have the chance. As for
Sekisada? Though I’m never going to admit it, I’m relieved that he isn’t around at the moment. But where is he, anyway?

Almost as if summoned (and I really hope he wasn’t), Sekisada pushes through the kitchen doors and looks around. To my unending amazement, Bazhanov actually perks up when he enters and waves him over. I take that as my cue to leave, taking a new seat next to Kashizaki as she chases crumbs around her plate. She merely tilts her head in greeting.

Kashizaki: Morning. Don’t wake up Atsui-kun.

Chiyo: He’s really been running himself ragged, huh?

Kashizaki: Mhm. Some other people have volunteered to help in the kitchen, but he doesn’t trust anyone enough to actually let them cook. I think McRae-san only got to cook this morning because Atsui-kun fell asleep pretty much immediately.

Chiyo: Geez… Is he gonna be alright?

Kashizaki: [squints] I think so. He probably just needs to sleep. I don’t think he’s even been anywhere in the second area yet, since he’s been spending so much time in the kitchen. I’ll keep an eye on him, don’t worry about it. Morning, Murdock-san.

Wh- when did she get here?? Yet here she is, standing at Kashizaki’s elbow. I try to look as cool as Kashizaki does. I’m probably failing. Guh…

Murdock: Good morning, you two. [frowns] Kumoshita, I wanted to talk to you.

Chiyo: Me? About what? Yesterday, or-

Murdock: [sharply] No.

Kashizaki: Yesterday?
Murdock presses her lips together and chooses to ignore Kashizaki. Which is NOT GREAT for me, since now I have her full attention. Help.

Murdock: Kumoshita, have you seen Khalaf this morning? I assumed that everyone would be here at breakfast. And you two are close, so.

Chiyo: I-I, uh. Well. No, I haven’t, but-

Kashizaki: They had a fight yesterday.

Murdock: [raises eyebrow] A fight?

Kashizaki: Yeah, during breakfast yesterday. Before Ariel announced the new area.

Murdock: Is that so?

Chiyo: [mumbles] Something like that.

Murdock: … I see. That explains a lot.

Murdock: I suppose I’ll check on them myself, then. [sighs] I meant to hold a meeting today to check where everyone is at emotionally, but… I suppose that’s a little hard without everyone being here.

A meeting to gauge everyone’s emotional states? That would have been helpful yesterday. Isn’t Murdock supposed to be punctual? Wait, no, to be fair, she didn’t seem like she was in much of a state to conduct meetings yesterday anyway…

… I’d better stop thinking bad things about her in case she can read my mind. I wouldn’t be surprised if she can.

Murdock: I also meant to ask everyone to hold daily meetings or something of the sort. But since
Sekisada-san and Bazhanov-san threw away their Parchments, that makes announcements so much harder-

Kashizaki: Hold on, they did what?

Murdock: [sighs again] Apparently it was an impulse decision on both of their parts. I don’t know what possessed either of them to even consider it. I mean, come on. We only get one device, don’t we?

Chiyo: B-but why would they even do that? I can maybe understand that individually, but those two specifically…?

**Murdock tosses her head back and barks a single sardonic laugh.**

Murdock: Oh, haven’t you heard?

Murdock: *They’re friends now.*

The horror of that statement echoes around the three of us and off a still peacefully-snoring Atsui. I glance to my previous seat, where the two are indeed trading what sound like barbs but are met with laughter from each party involved.

Oh god.

Kashizaki: [helpfully] Yeah, we’re all gonna die.

Murdock: It… would sure seem so.

Murdock’s expression folds into one of exasperated hopelessness. Kashizaki points her chopsticks at the other girl, flicking a crumb across the table. As Kashizaki continues talking, Murdock brushes off her vest.
Kashizaki: So, what. You were going to check on Khalaf-san, right?

Murdock: Right. But I don’t want to leave Tristan alone with... [wrinkles nose] Claude. Have you seen him? He’s basically a child.

Kashizaki: Aren’t you the youngest person in our class?

Murdock: [haughtily] Age has no factor on maturity.

Chiyo: If it helps at all, Claude-san asked me to talk to him last night after breakfast! So, um, if you’re worried about McRae-

Murdock: Fine. That’s fine with me. I trust you, Kumoshita.

The way she smiles at me does not make me at all confident in this declaration. Kashizaki doesn’t seem to notice.

Kashizaki: Yeah, cool. And if you’re worried about holding a meeting or whatever, I’ll wake up Atsui-kun.

Murdock: Ah, that won’t be necessary-

Kashizaki: Nah, it’s all good. [pats his shoulder] I’m pretty sure he’s the only person in this room that everyone actually respects.

Chiyo: Counterpoint: Sekisada-san.

Kashizaki: Fair point. But Sekisada-san doesn’t respect anyone, so that’s a lost cause from the start. [turns to Murdock] Seriously, though. You can count on us, Murdock-san.

Murdock: … If you’re sure.
She doesn’t sound all that convinced, but stands up anyway and nods a brisk farewell to the two of us.


As Murdock walks away, Kashizaki returns to pushing crumbs around her plate. She glares with such an intensity that she seems determined to burn a hole through the cutlery.

Chiyo: I’m pretty sure she hates me.

Kashizaki: Oh, I feel that. Don’t you need to talk to Bates-san or something like that? You’d better do that before she gets back.

Chiyo: Ugh… Wish me luck, I guess.


When I stand up, Bates immediately grabs McRae’s arm and waves at me. He all but drags the shorter boy to the door, McRae looking mildly confused all the while. It’s clear that I’m supposed to follow them, but before I can take a single step forward, Kashizaki clears her throat again.

Kashizaki: [calls over] Hey, talk to Khalaf-san when you get the chance, okay? They’re worried about you.

Chiyo: They’re worried about me? I’m worried about them!

Kashizaki: Again, you and me both. Seriously, I don’t know why they’re talking to me about this situation, or really at all. It’s weird. Please sort this out so this stops happening.

She continues to fiddle with her chopsticks before finally setting them to rest. Despite her light words, and despite the fact that she claims not to be close to Khalaf, I get the feeling that she thinks this is important, too.
Chiyo: I’ll do my best.

Kashizaki: Good luck with Bates-san.

Chiyo: Thanks. Good luck with Atsui-san.

Kashizaki just hums in agreement, and I hurry out of the kitchen to catch up with Bates and McRae. Or apparently, just the former. As soon as I walk out of the kitchen, I’m greeted by an unusually awake Bates, who bounces back and forth on his feet.

Bates: G-O-O-D morning, Kumoshita-chan! What took you so long?

Chiyo: O-oh, I was just talking to-

Bates: Doesn’t matter! We’re behind schedule, my dude. Come on, let’s go.

Without even waiting for a response, Bates starts towards the second wing. I have to jog to catch up to him. Stupid tall people, being so inconsiderate of those of us with shorter legs…

Bates heads through the hall with little hesitation, opening one of the doors to a spare room and gesturing me in with a grand sweeping motion.

Bates: Come in, come in!

The potentiality of the situation finally catches up to me, and I do not go in. After a moment, Bates leans away, letting the door close with a click.

Bates: Is something wrong?

Chiyo: … Are you planning to kill me?
Bates: [blinks] Whatever gave you that idea?

Chiyo: Oh, uh, you’re. Unusually energetic? And you’re kind of scaring me. And you’re telling me to go into a room alone with you, and...

I don’t finish my statement. In an instant, all the bravado drops from Bates. He just puts his hands on his hips, and when he speaks again, it’s with a certain patronizing exasperation that, for just a moment, seems almost… too knowledgeable?

Bates: Okay. First off, if I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t have made it so obvious. I mean, come in, leaving? In front of everyone? And then dragging McRae along with us? Does that sound suicidal or what?

Chiyo: … Well. Uh.

Bates: Unfortunately for all of us, I can comfortably assure you that I have no plans to die anytime soon. Sorry! You’re stuck with me forever, ahaha.

Chiyo: Y-you say that like you have a choice.

Bates: Well, I have a choice as to whether or not I want to fucking kill someone, Kumoshita-chan. I have a self-preservation instinct.

Bates: [shoves hands in pockets] Honestly, though. You sure didn’t care this much when dear ol’ Amal-sama took you out of breakfast yesterday, did you.

Chiyo: That’s different.

Bates: Yeah, because then you had a fight.

Does everyone know about that already???
Bates: [twirls earbuds] Did you piss them off or something? Or, let me guess. Lover’s spat?

Alright, I’m pretty sure the principle of not replying to bullies applies here.

Bates: Ahaha, there’s no need to answer that. And I mean that nicely! I’m sure you two would be adorable together. Maybe in another life, mm?

Chiyo: Get to the point.

Bates: What point? You’re the one who has the problem.

I adjust my bag and glare up at Bates, about to give him a piece of my mind. I’m the one who has a problem? He’s the person who dragged me out here and still won’t explain what the hell is going on! If anything, he’s the one who needs to stop being so infuriating! I-

Bates: Although, if you really want to know what I think of Amal?

Chiyo: I didn’t ask.

Bates: Just hear me out. It’s not like I’m asking you to agree with me or anything.

Chiyo: … Fine.

Bates: That’s better than “shut the fuck up, Claude”, so I’ll take it. Ahaha.

I can’t even retaliate before, with little more than half-closing his eyes, Bates’s expression changes to one of complete seriousness.

Bates: If they haven’t told you already? Amal nearly got us all killed in the trial.
Chiyo: And they shouldn’t blame themselves!

Bates: Did they pay you to say that or something? Just hear me out, Kumoshita-chan.

Bates: Amal’s the one who accused Ekyou-chan of being the killer, y’know. Even though they saw her in the kitchen, like you said. They were ready to make us all vote wrong before you showed up just because they forgot something happened. They blame themselves? Good! They fucked up! They could stand to fuck up a little more often!

Bates: Ugh, see, the thing with Amal is that they act like they’re so high and mighty and they know everything, but really? They’re just prideful. They jump to conclusions too quickly and they don’t like to admit they’re wrong. If they have a goal? They’ll drive everyone to death in order to fulfill their sad little dreams.

Bates: [tugs on earbuds] The way I see it, or the way I’ve seen them? I don’t think they care who gets hurt as long as long as they’re right. I don’t think they even care if they get hurt themselves.

Bates: I mean, come on. Nothing they do is because it’s logical, it’s because they’re right. Not because they are factually correct, but because they’re so naively self-righteous that they can’t stand to think that they aren’t. Hell, I’m pretty sure they only think I’m dumb because I disagree with them. And I mean, I poke fun at them a lot because they’ve got a stick up their ass and LORD knows they need to get it out, but two days ago? Two days ago they’ve established themselves as pretty actively dangerous.

Bates: So that’s my take.

Chiyo: … So what do you want me to do with this information. Do you think I should stop being their friend, or.

Bates: Again. [shrugs] I told you, you don’t need to agree with me, and honestly I don’t really care what you do as long as you’re aware.

Bates: You’re pretty cool, Kumoshita-chan. I haven’t talked to you much, but I like you a great deal more than I like Amal, and you seem reasonable enough. I trust your judgement. Doesn’t mean I’ll act on it, but I think you can make decisions for yourself.
Chiyo: …

Chiyo: … Thanks. I'll keep it in mind.

Bates: Like hell you will. I know you’re thinking something like “they’re my friend and I trust them and wow, Claude is full of shit”. … Okay, you look really offended at the suggestion, so maybe not that last part. You’re just that kind of person, right, Kumoshita-chan? Nothing wrong with that, but y’know. Never should trust anyone in this mansion. Not even me.

Bates: After all.

Bates: You never know who might want to kill you, huh?

I don’t know what to say in response through the dread coiling in my throat. For his part, Bates doesn’t seem to expect any sort of coherent answer, and doesn’t even pretend to wait before opening the door again.

Bates: Good talk.

He strides into the room, not even bothering to see if I’ll follow. I hover in the doorway for a moment, weighing my options, before following.

This room - the speaker one, apparently - seems to be already occupied; McRae sits on the ground, fiddling with some dial or other. He’s got his headphones over his ears, which is a little surprising considering that I haven’t seen any music players or anything of the sort since we’ve arrived and I definitely hope he hasn’t just plugged his headset into the speakers. As far as I can tell, though, he doesn’t seem to have heard a single word of my conversation with Bates. Thank god.

McRae takes his headset off when I follow Bates into the room, though. Bates himself looks mildly surprised that I chose to stick around, but shrugs it off anyway and proceeds to help McRae set up… whatever it is that they’re setting up. I don’t know what’s going on here, so I end up hovering to the side before Bates finally stands up and nods to himself.
Bates: Okay, cool.

McRae: What’s all this for, again?

Bates: I found something pretty important. Like, really really important.

McRae: … As in, these speakers, or?

Bates: Well, I mean, yeah, these speakers are pretty cool. But… [kicks at stereo] Is this working?

McRae: Yeah. I think. I haven’t tested them, but-

Bates: [appears not to have heard] Okay, good. Stand back. [offhand] Ah, and maybe cover your ears, Kumoshita-chan.

Chiyo: Why would I-

I never finish my sentence.

Something - is that music?! - starts blasting over the speakers. Even though I slam my hands against my ears, the screeching throbs through my head and everything around us. I can barely register McRae calmly setting his headset into place (how I wish that were me) and Bates grinning at us with the single biggest, shit-eating, most distinctly Bates grin, seemingly unfazed by the wall of noise assailing us.

Bates: [yelling] PRETTY AWESOME, RIGHT?

Chiyo: [yelling] WHAT?

Bates: [yelling] I WOULD HAVE PLAYED MY OWN COMPOSITIONS, BUT I DON’T
Chiyo: [yelling] WHAT??

Bates just laughs and faces me. The easy smirk slides off his face, and he speaks again at a normal volume, which I am barely - just barely - able to make out over the din.

Bates: There’s a camera in the back corner of the room. Behind me.

Chiyo: Wh-

Bates: Shh, don’t talk too much. And stop craning your neck like that, my God, how obvious can you get that we’re having a secret conversation. They’re in every room except the personal ones. Don’t comment out loud on them, okay?

Chiyo: GOT- [lower] I got it.

I- I mean, I know I can’t trust anything in this mansion, but... I didn’t realize the extent of that. Although... should I be surprised? I don’t think I’m surprised, exactly, but I’m a little impressed that of all people to notice these things, it was Bates and not Harai or something. And I’m a little impressed I’ve managed to put together so many thoughts in a row, oh my gosh, how does anyone function with this much noise??

Almost as if he’s sensing my judgement, Bates just winks at me. Behind him, McRae simply tilts his head at Bates and my conversation. He says something, but hell if I know what it was.

Bates: [yelling] HUH?

McRae: I said - [indistinct]

Bates: [yelling] WHAT?
McRae: Nevermind.

Bates heads over to McRae and just about screams in his face. McRae is completely unbothered, though he leans back a little. I head over in that direction to stay... a part of things. Or to ask McRae for his headset. I feel like I could use it before my eardrums explode.

Bates: [yelling] WHAT DID YOU SAY??

McRae: Oh, I heard you that time. [points to headset] These make it hard to hear. What?

Bates: HAHA- [normal volume] You’re probably gonna need to take those off.

McRae sighs and does so, wincing at the sudden burst of noise. Bates is halfway through filling him in when the door slams open with a bang completely indiscernible above the noise.

Sekisada: [yelling] FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, CAN SOMEONE PLEASE TURN OFF THAT MUSIC??

Bates: [yelling] CAN’T HEAR YOU! I KINDA LIKE IT BETTER THAT WAY!

Sekisada: [yelling] I SWEAR UPON THE LIVES OF EVERYONE YOU HOLD DEAR, CLAUDIUS FUCKING BATES, IF YOU DON’T TURN THAT OFF I’M GOING TO STRANGLE YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS.

Bates: [yelling] UGH! FINE!

Bates stomps over to the speaker and yanks out a tangle of cords. With a last pathetic ear-shattering shriek of audio feedback, the room falls completely silent. My ears are ringing so much that I can’t even hear the exchange going on between Sekisada and Bates, which mostly (fortunately?) seems to consist of Sekisada chewing Bates out for blasting rave music at 9 in the morning. For once, I’m disinclined to smooth things over.

McRae pulls off his headset and looks around, looking at best mildly amused by the whole
situation. He says something, but I don’t initially catch it.

Chiyo: Sorry??

McRae: Oh, I said wow, those speakers have really good bass quality. I could actually hear them through these, so that’s pretty impressive. [pats headset]

Chiyo: Yeah… [sighs and shakes head] I wish I had a soundproof headset. I can’t actually hear what I’m saying right now.

McRae: They definitely help a lot. I get overwhelmed sometimes.

Chiyo: From Claude-san?

McRae: No, I mean in general. Not just from loud noises. Sometimes it’s soft ones, but there’s too many of them. Sometimes it’s just the world as a whole that’s overwhelming. So these help to block it out.

Chiyo: Oh! That’s good to know, and I’m glad you have that to help you!

McRae: Thanks. [fidgets with headset wire] And I can play music through these, most of the time. I mean. When I’m at home. Yeah.

Chiyo: I’d assume not rave music, though.

McRae: Definitely not, no.

I think my hearing’s starting to come back. Sekisada is indeed yelling at Bates for blasting rave music at 9 am. Clearly, I didn’t miss much. McRae absently follows my gaze to their conversation, but doesn’t seem like he’s going to speak again. He seems to be more relaxed than usual now that he’s away from Murdock. I don’t really want to comment on that, and I doubt Bates brought us here to bond anyway, but I’m glad that I’m able to spend more time with him.
By the time Sekisada has been shooed away, I can actually hear things. Bates returns his attention to us and smiles wide, far too triumphant considering that I ended up almost deaf.

Bates: So what’d you think? That’s cutting edge music for you!

McRae: Eh. It’s not really my thing.

Bates: Ahahaha… yeah. To each their own. I guess.

He kicks the ground, apparently struggling not to look hurt. His specialty is basically violin dubstep, right…? No wonder he seems out of sorts with McRae’s lukewarm reception.

Bates: Anyway, I lied. It’s not actually cutting-edge, more like… “twenty years ago” edge? Something like that.

Chiyo: Twenty years ago?

Bates: I mean, as far as I can tell. [shrugs] Music trends come and go, but that composition is characteristic of the skycore movement that was popular at the time. With that relaxed bass line combined with the brighter melodies and the metal influence-

McRae: Claude, I think you’re cool, and I mean this in the nicest way possible, but you lost me at music.

Bates: [pouts] Boo. This stuff is part of our culture, people. You can learn a lot about people’s attitudes from what music they listen to!

McRae: Okay, such as?

Bates: You don’t like this kind of EDM, therefore you are inferior.
McRae just rolls his eyes.

Bates: I’m joking, dude. You’re like, the only person here I can tolerate. [hurriedly] Ah, and Kumoshita-chan is okay too, I guess.

Chiyo: Uh… thanks.

I’m… flattered. Am I?

Chiyo: Oh, Claude-san! You should totally talk to Chisaki-chan about music! She’s super into this one band…

Bates: Ugh, please. That girl can’t classify music for shit. I don’t think she knows what half the words she uses even mean. Besides, R3BELS fans are the types of fans that think they’re better than everyone else just because their official YouTube channel has less than 500k subs.

McRae: What, now that you have 5 million subscribers, everything else is unimpressive to you.

Bates: Exactly! Just because I’m mainstream doesn’t mean I’m not good, y’know. [folds arms] In fact, I’m the best of our age for a reason! Not to brag, ahaha.

Chiyo: I… see?

Everything between these two seems loaded with inside jokes and playful teasing. As an outsider, I don’t really get it. But as long as they’re both happy, I guess.

McRae: By the way, is there anything else you needed us here for?

Bates: Hm… Nope! You’re both free to go, if you want. I’m gonna try and adjust the volume settings on these so hopefully I don’t kill anyone with the volume next time, ahaha. Thanks for coming.
Bates: Especially you, Kumoshita-chan! We should totally hang out more often, y’know?

Chiyo: Uh, yeah. I guess... I’ll be on my way, then?

McRae: I’ll stick around.

Bates: Huh? Really? Nice. [to me] Then see you, Kumoshita-chan~!

Without so much as a glance upward, he flicks a hand in my direction. Thankfully, it seems that I’m finally free to leave. When I let the door close behind me, I hear a burst of laughter, as if McRae just told the funniest joke in the world. Those two are... odd. Or maybe that’s just a Bates thing. It’s probably just a Bates thing.

I stand outside the room for a moment, collecting my thoughts. Those cameras... why would someone want to watch us go about our everyday lives? Or, perhaps more accurately given the situation... What kind of messed up person would want to watch a group of high school students slaughter each other? To- to- I can’t even finish the thought.

(It’s probably the same kind of person that wants us to kill each other in the first place.)

(But why, why, why...?)

I’m so deep in thought that upon my first steps into the living room, I trip over someone on the floor.

Chiyo: Ah-!

And for a moment, I’m standing by the Monomachine two days ago, Harai to my side and Bates and Khalaf hanging back and Valdez slumped before the four of us-

And the moment passes, and the only person in front of me is a mildly frightened and almost guilty looking Kashizaki. Neither of us say a word to each other, though Kashizaki’s terrified expression is only accentuated by her wide yellow eyes.
Kashizaki: … Uh.

Chiyo: … Hi?

Kashizaki’s eyes flick from side to side quickly. Failing other options, she opts to change the topic. Smart move.

Kashizaki: Did you meet with Bates-san and McRae-san yet? How’d that go?

Chiyo: Uh… I’d say about as well as it could go.

Kashizaki: Which is to say…

Chiyo: Confusingly.

Kashizaki: Yeah, that sounds about right.

She does not move to stand up or otherwise explain what she’s doing here.

Chiyo: So, uh… what are you doing?

Kashizaki: Gambling away my pain.

She stands up, revealing a whole nest of opened gachapon capsules by her feet. There’s got to be at least 20.

Kashizaki: Behold. [coughs] I, um, may or may not have taken half of the tokens from the kitchen.

Chiyo: Where did all the prizes go??
Kashizaki proceeds to open the pouches on her waist. A slew of trinkets pour out, some bouncing and even breaking as they hit the ground. She spreads her arms out, expressionless.

Kashizaki: Behold more.

Chiyo: [picks up a prize] Is this a rock?

Kashizaki: It's a nice one.

Kashizaki: [kicks at a tube of lip balm] I know there’s so many other things I could be doing with my life other than stuffing tokens in a gachapon machine, but sometimes you just need to take your mind off things. You know?

I pick up the lip balm and hand it to her. She takes it, turning it over in her hands, lips pressed together.

Kashizaki: It’s been a really stressful few days. I can’t say I was close to either Valdez-san or Shionaga-san, but, I mean. Two people died.

Kashizaki: Two people we knew. And one of them killed the other. And then he got- what was it, drowned and electrocuted?

Kashizaki: It’s stupid. That shouldn’t have happened.

Chiyo: … Right.

I didn’t even know that Shionaga’s execution ended like… that. I was kind of hoping I didn’t have to know. Ever.

My stomach flips knots and soon enough I find myself staring at the floor. When I look back up to Kashizaki, she seems to look right through me.
Kashizaki: … Kumoshita-san.

Kashizaki: Are you sure you’re doing alright?

Chiyo: I- I mean…

She hesitates for a moment before placing a hand on my shoulder. I never noticed it before, but she doesn’t seem to have nail polish on her fingers. This strikes me as just odd enough to fixate on rather than face her serious expression, though her voice is somewhere between concern and curiosity.

Kashizaki: Aside from the passing out thing two days ago, and aside from your argument with Khalaf yesterday - which I’m sure is stressing you out too - you seem… a little less grounded than the rest of us in regards to this situation. That being, this killing game as a whole.

Kashizaki: I know you’re not comfortable talking about your past, but your family runs a mortuary, and, I don’t know. It just seems odd that you reacted the way that you did to Valdez-san’s passing.

Chiyo: …

Kashizaki: [softens] If it’s not something you can talk about, I understand. But I don’t want you to get hurt if it can be avoided, okay?

Chiyo: … No. I can talk about it, it’s just…

I take a seat on the floor amid all of the gachapon prizes. Kashizaki mirrors the action.

Chiyo: [sighs] It’s not that big of a deal. It’s really something I should be over at this point-

Kashizaki: Clearly you aren’t. [hastily] Not to say that it’s bad that you aren’t over it or anything like that. Some people need more time to process things than other people.
Chiyo: R-right.

**My gaze remains anywhere but on Kashizaki herself. To her credit, she hesitates a moment before asking another question.**

Kashizaki: Is your family part of it, or…?

Chiyo: What? No! Of course not! I love my parents, and I love my siblings. They’re not- they didn’t do anything bad, I promise.

Chiyo: It’s just, are you sure you want to hear me complain? It’s pretty dumb.

Kashizaki: Listen, if it’s actually super dumb I’ll be sure to let you know. You’re very clearly distressed by this situation, so…

Chiyo: R-right.

**I sigh and smooth my skirt out. I guess I’ve done all the deflection I can, but… Ugh. This is still so stupid to say out loud.**

Chiyo: [mumbles] … I don’t get mortality.

Kashizaki: I mean, I kind of doubt people do until they’re faced with it, so I can’t fault you there-

Chiyo: No, no, I mean. [nervous laugh] I’m scared, Kashizaki-san.

Kashizaki: We’re all scared.

Chiyo: I don’t mean like- can you let me explain? Please?
Looking troubled, Kashizaki just nods once and falls silent as I struggle to put things into words.

Chiyo: I just don’t want to think about it. Like, what comes after people die? Is there an afterlife? What if it’s just… nothing? I don’t want to just exist, out there, for the rest of eternity. Or to be nothing, like I never existed in the first place.

Chiyo: And then when people die, they leave behind family, friends, or in the worst cases, nothing at all. I don’t want that to be me. I don’t want that to be anyone - it’s not fair, that one day you just cease to exist and there’s a you-shaped void where you used to be.

Chiyo: It’s like, when you’re alive, you’re supposed to have a story, right? You’re the hero of your own story. But what does it mean if you just… stop existing, for no reason, just because someone decided you have to?

Kashizaki: You’re referring to...

She doesn’t finish the thought. She doesn’t have to.

We are right in front of where the barrier used to be, after all.

I wipe my eyes and keep going.

Chiyo: S-so. I just don’t like thinking about it. Any of it. I said that I love my parents, but I hate that their profession involves dealing with that every day. I don’t know how they do it, how they can deal with so much grief and so many reminders that one day, they’ll be the corpses coming in to be processed. I’m lucky that I have two older brothers who are more interested in carrying on the family business than I am, since I’ll never need to be in such close contact with it.

Chiyo: [falters] And...

Kashizaki: Alright, come here.

Without waiting for an answer, Kashizaki pulls me into a tight embrace. The knot in my
chest slowly starts to unravel as my vision starts to blur.

Chiyo: I-

Kashizaki: Kumoshita-chan, kindly shut the fuck up and cry it out.

Kashizaki: I’m here.

For a long minute, all I can do is sob into Kashizaki’s shoulder. She runs her hands through my hair, muttering condolences, and it takes what’s in my opinion far too long for me to stop crying already. No one else ever thinks about this! No one else worries about these things! I’m 18, for heaven’s sake! I should be over this!

I don’t register for a long time that Kashizaki is actually saying things.

Kashizaki: No wonder you were so stressed out, if you were dealing with all of this… This whole situation is really the worst way for your fears to be realized, huh? All of this death happening right in front of us, at the hands of people we know.

Chiyo: Y-yeah. Could you please stop talking about it? I know- I know it’s something I need to work on. That I need to work through. Just… not right now.

Kashizaki: [immediately] Of course. Sorry about that.

Kashizaki: Thank you for telling me all of this. I know it must have been hard, but I’m really glad that you did. Tell me this, I mean.

Kashizaki: And, for what it’s worth…

Kashizaki: I think all we can do - all anyone can do - is to make the most of what time we have. Just live life to the fullest, because tomorrow isn’t a guarantee. Be the kind of person that you’re proud to be. I think you’re doing a good job of that.
Kashizaki: [softly] And I think they’re in a better place. Valdez-san and Shionaga-san, I mean. I don’t know if there is an afterlife, or if there’s anything on the other side, but it must be better than…

This. This living hell where we’re being watched by cameras and people yet unknown on the other side. Where we’re invited to tear each other to pieces for reasons none of us can discern.

Kashizaki: … Y’know, I get what you mean. With being scared of what comes after.

Kashizaki: See, my dad died when I was young.

Kashizaki: Hey, no, I see that look on your face, don’t you dare try to comfort me about it. It was a sickness thing, he wasn’t in pain when he passed, I’ve been over it since I was eight. Promise. But when I WAS eight, I couldn’t relax for ages. I kept thinking he’d come back or that I’d lose all sense of myself without him. Or maybe that he was suffering, wherever he was after. But when you think about it, at least the people who die in pain aren’t in pain any longer, right? Like, my dad had been dealing with this for years. It wasn’t something sudden or unexpected, and I like to think he’s at peace now.

Kashizaki: He was always super proud of me no matter what I did. I think, even though I look and am a lot different from the person I was when I was little, he’d be proud of me. Just because they’re gone from this world doesn’t mean that they’re gone from your life, though, okay?

Kashizaki: Wow. I’m rambling. None of this had anything to do with what I said about being scared.

Chiyo: I- [swallows] I had someone like that, too. My grandmother.

Kashizaki: [eyes widen] Aaand you said you didn’t want me to keep talking about this and I kept going. Sorry about that. Kumoshita-chan, don’t push yourself, okay?

Chiyo: No, it’s fine. I want to talk about it. It was hard on me when she died. I mean, it’s still hard now, but in different ways.

Chiyo: It’s not like she was in pain, or suffering, or anything like that! And she lived a really good
life, it’s just that…

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: [half laughs] I guess, in a way, she’s sort of why I have my talent. I just- I know it’s stupid, but after she passed away, I couldn’t stop texting her phone. I didn’t want to let her go. I still don’t.

Chiyo: And eventually, after her phone plan ended and her number got transferred to another person, that other person asked me if I’d ever considered publishing what I wrote. Funny how that works out, huh.

Chiyo: That wasn’t the best thing she ever did for me. I don’t want that to be the best thing she ever did for me. But since the public figured out who I am, I think that’s all my parents think I got from the whole situation. Like that’s all she meant to me. Which isn’t true.

Kashizaki: [quieter] Were you close?

Chiyo: ... When I realized I was a girl, she was the first person that I told.

I hear a quiet sigh, and I don’t know if it came from myself or from Kashizaki.

Kashizaki: She was supportive, right? I’m glad she was there for you. You’re really lucky.

Chiyo: Thank you.

Kashizaki: And I know you’ve said it was a while ago, and I’m sure you’re tired of hearing this, but I’m sorry for your loss.

Chiyo: And I’m sorry for yours.

We both manage smiles. Though I’m still wiping my eyes, I think I’m getting closer to okay.
Kashizaki: We’ll be okay, alright? We can get through this. There are people who love and care about you, Kumoshita-chan.

And with that, Kashizaki’s gaze flits downward. She casts a hand around the ground, drawing her gachapon prizes closer to her. Perhaps catching my gaze, she mumbles apologetically.

Kashizaki: I know we’re busy having a deep conversation, but, uh. I kind of want to keep these.

Chiyo: I’ll help you pick them up.

We end up collecting all of the prizes, even the more useless ones - the rock, a pack of knockoff trading cards, some kind of book about tree meditation…? Weird. Unlike Bates, Kashizaki actually seems like she wants to keep the things she got. I can respect that.

Gosh, I haven’t thought about Baa in ages, and just the conversation is enough to bring back the tears. I didn’t think this would set me off so badly, and it’s a little embarrassing to see how little progress I’ve made in the past two years. Er, past five years…? Still, I’m really glad that Kashizaki was here to help. Even though she seems like she might have some things to work through herself.

Between the two of us, we’re able to clean up the mess pretty quickly and only give up at the jar of glitter that shattered when it hit the ground. Ariel can deal with that one, I guess. Hopefully he won’t be mad.

Chiyo: Thank you for being here.

Kashizaki: Hey, it’s seriously no problem. I’m glad that you were able to talk about all of this. I mean, I’m not sure if talking about it really helped, but in any case, at least the rest of us can help you with this, right?

Chiyo: Honestly, I think it helped a lot just to get it all out there. I really appreciate your being here, Kashizaki-chan.
Kashizaki’s shoulders relax. I didn’t even realize they were tensed. Her lips tug in a gentle smile, and she opens her mouth again before another voice sounds behind her.

Ekyou: Oh. There you are.

Ekyou walks out of the area behind us, Sumitama in tow. For their parts, Sumitama doesn’t look like she’s slept a wink, but manages a smile. Ekyou, as always, looks more than a little angry, but… Wait! Ekyou and Sumitama?? Are they okay??

Sumitama: H-hi.

Ekyou: Haven’t seen you around much, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: How have you been?

I immediately wince at the question, and so does Kashizaki. That was! Not great! Ekyou seems about to respond before Sumitama cuts in.

Sumitama: How have I been? How have I been?? Do you even need to ask?? I-

Her smile splinters, shatters, breaks into sobs. Ekyou’s eyes go wide and she grabs Sumitama’s hand, squeezing tightly.

Ekyou: Shh, shh, I’m here.

Chiyo: I- I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking-

Kashizaki: Don’t apologize. It was a harmless question.

Ekyou: [frowns] It’s been a hard time for all of us, I think.
Sumitama: [sniffles] I’m- I’m sorry.

Ekyou: For what? Sumitama-chan, it’s going to be alright. I promise. Okay?

Sumitama: I don’t believe that.

Ekyou: ...

Sumitama: … But I can try.

Ekyou: [nods] Good.

She turns back to Kashizaki and me, still holding Sumitama’s hand. Despite her hopeful conviction, tiredness outlines her frame, and she looks about ready to drop- not dead. Do NOT think of that.

Chiyo: Ekyou-san, are you doing alright?


Ekyou: [looks at Sumitama] …

Ekyou: … I’m doing my best, I guess.

Chiyo: If you say so.

Ekyou: Yes. I do.

Okay, maybe she is mad. She’s probably right to be mad. That question was a more than a little bit of a bad call on my part, considering how close both of them were to Shionaga.
Didn’t I just have a breakdown about regretting the things our classmates will never be able to do?? Stupid!!!

Ekyou swings her arm back and forth a moment before speaking again, not looking at either of us.

Ekyou: We were on our way back to the laundry room. I think the washing machine should be done by now, Kashizaki-chan.

Kashizaki: Oh, neat. I’ll go with you. Kumoshita-chan, do you want me to get your laundry?

Chiyo: Huh?

I... realize, somewhat embarrassingly, that I haven’t actually washed my clothes in the week we’ve been here. In my defense, I didn’t actually realize we HAD a laundry room, but that’s no excuse for making other people deal with it.

To my abject horror, Ekyou nods again.

Ekyou: We can get it from her room on the way.

Kashizaki: Perfect. Thanks, Ekyou-chan.

Chiyo: W-wait, I don’t want to make you guys do work on my behalf!

Kashizaki: [pats my arm] Kumoshita-chan, it’ll be fine. It’s just another load of laundry. It’s really no inconvenience.

Ekyou: Mhm. I do laundry at home all the time. It’s rough during holidays, though. [sighs] All seven siblings at home at once…

Chiyo: Woah! You have seven siblings?

Kashizaki: That’s impressive. How did your parents raise all of you?

Ekyou: I ask myself that question every day.

A faint smile touches her expression at what must be the memory of her family. I don’t know how I manage with two older adult brothers sometimes - how does Ekyou handle seven??

Kashizaki speaks up, snapping Ekyou out of her reverie. In an instant, her expression reverts to her usual stoic one.

Kashizaki: We’d better get going, though. Before everything wrinkles.

Sumitama: R-right…

Chiyo: Sumitama-san.

Sumitama: Yes?

She doesn’t meet my gaze.

… I wish I knew what to say.

Chiyo: I hope you feel better soon, okay?

Sumitama: …
Sumitama: [tiny nod] I’ll try.

The three turn to leave, though Kashizaki lingers for just a second longer.

Kashizaki: Hey, by the way.

Kashizaki: Consider what I said this morning. About patching things up with Khalaf-kun.

Kashizaki: I think they miss you.

And she leaves for real. I stare after them for a moment before getting to my feet.

I… I guess she’s right. As much as I don’t want to overcrowd Khalaf, or make them uncomfortable, I don’t want to let this stagnate. They’re definitely important to me, and I don’t want to lose their friendship over such a small thing. And they didn’t come to breakfast! That’s concerning!

Besides, everyone keeps commenting on the fact that we had a fight, and it’s getting kind of annoying. I scrub my face one last time and take a deep breath before turning on my Parchment.

[12:36] C. KUMOSHITA:

Hey!!

I know things have been super weird lately but I was wondering if you wanted to sort them out?

You don’t have to respond to this btw!!

I’ll be in the library after 1, probably, just come in if you want

And if not that’s okay too!!

But even after I get lunch and head to the library, there’s no response from Khalaf. I can’t say I’m surprised, but… Aaugh. It’s well past one when I give up and just start reading The Tempest again.
Once upon a time, there was a ship caught in a storm. The storm was caused by Prospero, a duke turned magician who lived with his daughter in exile, because on that ship were the King of Naples and Antonio, Prospero’s wicked brother who had banished him to seize his title. Under Prospero’s command were Ariel, a spirit previously enslaved by a witch who had lived on the island, and Caliban, the witch’s son.

As is typical of Shakespeare’s plays, four or five plots unfold at once, but the most prominent involves Prospero’s attempts to extract an acknowledgement and an apology from the king and usurper. Once these are obtained and his title restored, with the added appeasement of his daughter’s betrothal to the king’s son, Prospero willingly sacrifices his powers and leaves the island with the rest of the cast.

So all things considered, it stands to reason that if there’s an Ariel and a Caliban, there should be a Prospero, right? Perhaps even someone among us…? But just the thought of it - that someone I know and might very well be close to could be the one forcing us all to kill each other - makes my blood run cold.

Yet if an acknowledgement and an apology are all that this Prospero wants, perhaps there’s a way to end this killing game peacefully. I think I like that ending better.

My train of thought is interrupted by a creaking open and close of the library doors. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but I close my book and look up as, lo and behold, Khalaf takes a seat across from me, clutching a stack of papers to their chest.

Chiyo: Hi.

Khalaf: … Hey.

Chiyo: Do you need help?

Khalaf: I’m fine.

They don’t meet my gaze as they set the stack of papers between us, almost like a shield. Each page seems to be inscribed with lines of English, the handwriting at times looping and loose,
at others harsh and near-linear. Between the handwriting and the language, I’m sure that I can’t read it, but something about the way each letter is formed (maybe the way that the ends curl together and the little dash over the lowercase i’s) makes me certain that the same person wrote every page.

Chiyo: Did you-

Amal: [terse] Write all of this? Yes. Fifty-three pages. Front and back. From the past two days.

Chiyo: Wow.

Khalaf: I write a lot. Sorry.

Chiyo: No, it’s fine. There’s nothing to-

Khalaf: To apologize for. Yeah. I know.

They take a deep breath, hands shaking, then reach for the stack of paper.

Chiyo: Again, do you-


I nod and do my best to give them space. Soon, they pull out a single sheet and begin to read in the halting speech of an inexperienced translator.

Khalaf: “Before we speak at length, I wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday.”

Chiyo: You really don’t have to.
Khalaf: [lowers paper] Just hear me out, please?

Chiyo: … [nods]

Khalaf: [raises paper again] “I was being, for lack of a better word, stupid. Hot-blooded, angry, self-righteous. So yes, stupid. And I’d like to apologize for that, first and foremost.”

Chiyo: Forgiven.

Khalaf: You’re kidding me, right?

Chiyo: Of course not! I wouldn’t joke about this! Why are you surprised?

Khalaf: I don’t know, I just?? Wrote all of this?? In case you were mad??

Khalaf waves a hand across the desk and at the pile of papers, which looks suddenly pathetic.

Chiyo: Khalaf-san, I’m not mad at all. I promise.

Khalaf: Maybe you should be! I yelled at you! I didn’t want to yell at you! I still don’t! I-

They pause, close their eyes, take a deep breath, pull off their glasses, and begin to clean them before continuing, their voice conversational, even matter-of-fact, but clearly restrained.

Khalaf: I’m really frustrated.

Chiyo: Okay, we can start there. What are you frustrated about?

Khalaf: [half-smiles] You sound like a therapist.
Chiyo: If I’m ever in doubt about what I’ll do in the future, I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.

Khalaf: Pfft. [rolls eyes] It’s no reason you haven’t heard already, anyway. I didn’t do enough in the trial, we all almost died, I feel like people hate me-

Chiyo: Woah woah woah, why would people hate you?

Khalaf: Ugh. I don’t know. I think Bates-yogisha does.

Chiyo: What’d he do to deserve that honorific?

Khalaf: Listen. He insists on referring to me as “Amal-sama” every time we’re in the same room. It’s equivalent exchange.

Chiyo: … Claude-san does get insufferable.

Khalaf: Definitely. [rolls eyes] I’m more than willing to talk about that, but I’ll spare you the horror.

**They take another deep breath, their frantic energy all but drained away.**

Khalaf: Should I keep reading?

Chiyo: If it’s easier for you! Is there anything in particular that you wanted to talk about?

Khalaf: I should be asking you that. You’re the one who wanted to talk.

Chiyo: Ah. Right…
I press my lips together, and once again, I’m reminded of my conversation with Bates this morning. Of course I don’t believe anything Bates says, but… I feel like I really need to hear both sides of the conversation. Both with what Bates said about Khalaf being self-righteous, which I can’t really see, but…

Chiyo: … Could you please tell me about the trial?

Khalaf stops and once again I’m faced with some pretty immediate regrets. If I were them, I’d immediately refuse, or be mad, or something. Instead, they sigh and start sifting through their papers.

Khalaf: Just a moment. I know I have it in here somewhere.

Chiyo: You wrote that down, too?

Khalaf: It’s easier for me to get my thoughts on paper first. That way, I stick to actual reasoning instead of going off on… whatever that was a few days ago. [waves hand] Just give me a minute. Why do you want to know, anyway?

Chiyo: I was, um. Talking to Claude-san earlier today.

Khalaf: Oh.

Chiyo: About the trial.

Khalaf: I see.

Chiyo: A-and, um. He mentioned, about you, and Ekyou-san-

They drop their papers on the table with a resounding thud. Some of them drift across the ground, but Khalaf makes no move to collect them and glares at the table.
Khalaf: I thought she was a serial killer.

Khalaf: Okay? I thought she was this stupid, one-off serial killer that Shionaga-san tried to convince me about and APPARENTLY it worked, because look at me, I became so completely and utterly convinced that Ekyou-san of all people had not only killed someone, but had killed multiple times before. And she had an alibi for the murder! That I could have confirmed! Yet for some FUCKING reason, I thought just because a serial killer could have been involved, whoop-de-doo, they could have been the killer as well!

Khalaf: It was stupid. And dumb. And never could have been a possibility. And it was a red herring, anyway.

Khalaf: Bates knew that.

Khalaf: I sure didn’t.

This is… a lot more than I had expected during the trial. I mean, I knew that Khalaf really pushed for convicting Ekyou, but this is on an entirely different level.

Chiyo: … But you realized by the end of it, right? That she wasn’t…

Khalaf: Yeah. Bates loves reminding me that I was wrong. And I get it, I get that I need to stop being so prideful or whatever. But he’s…

Khalaf: [shakes head] I don’t want to say that he’s dumb. He’s not dumb. He just might be smarter than all of us, and that horrifies me because I don’t want it to be true. But he’s just so… facetious! Arrogant! Stupid, but not in the intelligence way! He’s the single most shallow and self-absorbed person I’ve EVER met, and believe me, I’ve met an extraordinary amount of those.

Khalaf: … And he was right. About Ekyou-san. She wasn’t a serial killer. She wasn’t even the person who killed Valdez-san. She was just doing her best. I don’t even know why I believed that she could have- she wouldn’t have- [sighs]

Khalaf: We could have died. I know I’ve been hooked on that, but I can’t- I just can’t let the people I care about- the people I love, I guess, I don’t know- you? I can’t let you die if I could have done something.
Khalaf: Not again.

Chiyo: Again?

They draw in a shuddering breath, eyes closed.

Khalaf: My parents. They were- they were really committed to, to doing good. To making a difference in the world. Like you. They grew up in Afghanistan, in a war, and then they just. Went back to it all the time. To help people. Mom was a nurse. Dad was a photographer.

Khalaf: I went with them once. Wasn’t supposed to- It wasn’t supposed to be a work trip. We were visiting family, but the house down the street got shelled out. Everyone inside survived, but they were badly injured, so we had to- we stayed. To help.

Khalaf: We meant to stay for two weeks. We stayed for two months.

Khalaf: A-and by the end of it, that house was a hospital. Some of my mom’s friends were there, and more people from the neighborhood, who were- who were targeted.

Khalaf: I was starting to get sick from all of the. All of that. You know? So my dad told me to go outside. Get some fresh air. And- and…

Khalaf: Someone- some of the militants heard that the house was being used for medical care. And that meant- that meant a lot of people. And medics. And in a war, you kill the medics first, right?

Khalaf: …

Khalaf: So- so that was the last time I saw my parents.

… Oh.
Oh, Khalaf…

Khalaf: I- I could have done more. I could have run back inside or looked for survivors. Or something. Anything. I know I could have died- I probably would have died. If I stayed.

Khalaf: [looks down] But I ran away. I couldn’t go back. I didn’t want- I didn’t want to remember them like that.

Khalaf: And I think, I don’t know, somehow I made it back to my relatives. And I ended up going home. Back to the US. I didn’t know what to do, but I had my dad’s camera. My uncle got it from the house and gave it to me- for the longest time I couldn’t look at it. But I knew I had to.

Khalaf: I’m not great at a lot of academic things. Math is harder for me than it should be. But I can write, so I wrote.

Khalaf: And that’s- that’s why I’m a journalist. Or why I want to be one. I couldn’t save them, so I just write about how it shouldn’t ever happen again, and maybe if enough people read it then they’ll listen.

Khalaf: Of course it’s stupid to think a 13 year old kid could have saved anyone from- from the world, but I feel like I could have. And I should have. And besides, now, I’m- 18, right? I’m 18. And so are the rest of you. And two people died two days ago. And… I don’t know. This is horrifying.

Khalaf: How could I have accused someone of being a serial killer? Of killing people for fun? And- and I know that if we died in the trial, it would have been my fault. Because I didn’t think things through.

Khalaf: I just don’t know what to do, Chiyo.

I’m already on my feet, hesitantly crossing to their side of the table. I take a seat across from them.

Chiyo: Amal?
Khalaf: Yeah?

Chiyo: I’m sorry about your parents.

They look like they’re about to protest - to claim that the the tragedy was long ago, to minimize the effect that it had on them - but instead, their posture sags, all resolve gone.

Khalaf: … Yeah. I am too. I just…

I pull them into a hug and bury my face in their chest. They stiffen with surprise, but slowly, bit by bit, sink into the embrace. For a long moment, neither of us move or say a word.

Eventually, I pull back and look at them directly, although they avoid my gaze.

Chiyo: … Hey. I need you to know something.
Khalaf: Go on.

Chiyo: I can’t even begin to imagine what you went through before, or what you’re going through now. You’ve- you’ve seen a lot of tragedy, more than anyone should ever experience, and you’re so strong, okay?

Khalaf: No, I’m not. I could have-

Chiyo: Amal, if you had gone back, you could have died.

Khalaf: [mumbles] Maybe I should have.

Chiyo: \textit{No}.

\textbf{I draw in a shuddering breath of my own. It’s all I can do not to clench my hands into fists, and instead, I focus on the texture of their sweater under my fingers.}

Chiyo: Don’t say that. Don’t you \textit{dare} say that.

Chiyo: You shouldn’t have, okay? You’re here now, and that matters. You matter. Please don’t beat yourself up about what happened in the past, because that’s the past. You can’t change it no matter how much you want to, okay? All you can do is…

Khalaf: … Keep moving.

Chiyo: Right. [nods] That doesn’t mean losing track of what brought you here, or trying to forget everything that happened, or anything like that. You just have to accept that it happened and let yourself feel everything that you have to feel, and then you have to move on.

Chiyo: [hurriedly] I mean, the moving on part is at your own pace. I have problems with that too. And I totally, totally get not wanting to let go of the people you love after they pass away, and if you ever want to talk about it, I’m here for you, and… and.
Chiyo: Besides, if you had…

Chiyo: [squeezes eyes shut] If you had died then. I wouldn’t have gotten to meet you. Everyone here wouldn’t have met you. [shakes head] I think you’re alive today because we were meant to be here, you know? Er, not here specifically. At least I hope not.

Chiyo: But I’m really, really glad that I met you, Amal.

Khalaf: …

Chiyo: U-um. Are you okay? Do you need anything? I-

Khalaf: No. No, it’s fine. I think- I think you might be right. But- before I get any further, you’re not mad at me or anything, right?

Chiyo: What? No, of course I’m not mad at you! You haven’t done anything to make me upset, I promise. I’m just worried about you.

Khalaf: Don’t be, I’m-

Chiyo: I don’t think you’re doing as fine as you want me to think.

Khalaf opens their mouth, closes it, and shrugs.

Khalaf: … Okay. Fair enough.

Khalaf: I think you might be right, though. No- I know you’re right. With the past being in the past and that I have to focus on the present. And having to let go. I know you’re right, but I don’t know if I can believe that, yet.

Chiyo: And you don’t have to. Yet, anyway. Take it at your own pace.
Chiyo: Besides, I’ll be here to support you no matter what. I promise.

Khalaf: Pinky swear. [quickly] I know it’s childish, but my mom used to make me do those every time I said I would do something, and-

Chiyo: You don’t have to justify anything. Here, give me your hand.

They hold up a hand and we link pinkies. When Khalaf pulls away, they’re actually smiling ear to ear. And… oddly enough, I never want them to stop smiling ever again.

Khalaf: Thank you. For everything. I think I needed all of that.

Chiyo: It’s no problem! You’re my friend, and I care about you, okay? So you need to take care of yourself, too!

Khalaf: Mm. I can try.

It’s terrifying that they have to live with that burden of so much guilt every day of their life. If there’s anything at all I can do to help them, I want to do everything I can. About their past, about their feelings, anything. Still, they seem a lot less worried now that everything’s out in the open. I feel a lot better now that all of this has been resolved, too.

Though, something’s still bothering me…

Chiyo: Um, by the way.

Khalaf: Yeah?

Chiyo: Do you mind if I keep calling you by your first name?

Khalaf: [immediately] Yes.
O-oh. Okay. Before I can apologize, Khalaf pulls their hat down, their cheeks a very striking shade of pink.

Khalaf: I mean, yes, as in, please do. I don’t mind that at all. Would you?

Chiyo: Would I what?

Khalaf: Mind. If, uh. If I did the same. For you.

Chiyo: Yeah! Yeah, of course! I’m fine with that!

Khalaf: Thanks. You have- you have a pretty name.

Chiyo: Oh. Oh! Well then! Um, thank you. I, uh, chose it myself.

Khalaf: [smiles] It suits you.

I think I will just die on the spot now. That is! Really sweet of them to say! And- augh, Amal’s just really sweet in general??

… It’s a little weird how right it feels to think of them by their first name. Not like with Bates, where I have to actively remind myself that he prefers to be referred to in person by his first name. This just feels… different? Somehow? Good different. Not bad different. But still.

I watch them shuffle their papers, eyes slightly narrowed in concentration.

Amal: So that was kind of a bust.

Chiyo: Huh? The papers? I mean, if they helped you at all, that’s good, right?
Amal: Sure. I guess you could say that.

They pick up the first page off the stack and tear it in two. I wince a bit at the noise.

Amal: [deadpan] You could also say it’s a pile of hot steaming garbage. Who let me write this stuff.

Chiyo: Oh, don’t say that, I’m sure it’s as amazing as everything else you write!

Amal: Are you being serious right now?

Chiyo: Y-yes! Of course! If I can find any of your work translated, I’m sure I’d love it! I mean, I don’t read international news very much, and I’m not a nonfiction person, but I trust your judgement and your skill as a writer! Oh, or I could be more serious about studying English! It’d be worth it, just to read what you write…

I trail off, cheeks heating up, as I catch them staring at me, with… a frown?

Amal: Subhanallah, you’re adorable.

Chiyo: G-guh?? Is something wrong with that??


Chiyo: Huh?

Amal: It’s something silly and stupid. Forget I said anything.

That is… mysteriously cagey, even for Amal.
Chiyo: I want to hear what you have to say.

Amal: Ugh. It’s not worth it. It’s kind of weird.

Chiyo: I’m sure it’s not! But if you really don’t want to ask, then-

Amal: No, no, it’s not that big of a deal. It’s just…

Amal: …

Amal: Do you remember a time when we were anything else?

Amal: I’ve been having these weird dreams lately, and…

Amal: [looks away] I don’t know. I don’t know if they’re from Hope’s Peak or before or what, but I feel like we used to be…

Amal: …

Amal: … Well, close.

…?

Chiyo: I…

And the lights turn out, leaving us both in pitch black.

Chiyo: AAH??
I nearly fall out of my chair, but Amal shushes me quickly and grabs my arm. There’s the loud sound of a phone buzz. I manage to fish my Parchment out of my bag and turn it on.

Ariel: Attention please! It is now 10:00 pm and nighttime hours have begun. Please exercise caution in these hours, and rest well!

Amal: Yeah, they turn off the lights at night. They aren’t kidding about the whole nighttime hours thing.

Chiyo: I- I guess, yeah.

My heartbeat’s still pounding in my ears! Great! It would be nice to have a heads-up next time, you dumb robot bird!!

Chiyo: But, um… In regards to what you said.

Amal: Huh? Uh, forget it. Like I said, it’s stupid.

Chiyo: No, I think you’re right.

Amal: You “think”?

Chiyo: I’ve been having weird dreams too, but I don’t remember them after I wake up. But sometimes I look at y- I mean, I look at people, and I feel like I know them better than I do. You know?

Amal: Yeah. Yeah, something like that.

Amal turns on their own Parchment, illuminating their contemplative expression. They hold it up as a flashlight and sweep its light across the library.

Amal: Come on. I’ll walk you back to your room.
Chiyo: Oh! Okay! If you’re sure, of course.

I catch a glimpse of a smile as they slip their hand into mine. Oh my god, I am going to die.

Amal: Yes, I’m sure. Let’s go.

We head back to my room in near-complete darkness, a pair of ghosts against the dark halls. When we finally get to my room and I turn on the light, framing Amal against the void, I can’t tell if I’m just tired or what, but it doesn’t seem like they’d be safe just wandering around at night, so-

Chiyo: Can you stay over tonight?

Amal: W-what?

THAT CAME OUT WRONG.

Chiyo: I mean! Oh my god. You can stay in my room, if you want, except you’ll have to sleep on the floor- I just, it’s late, and it’s dark, and I don’t want you to like, walk into something you aren’t expecting? By yourself?

Amal: Uh.

Chiyo: Okay, you probably don’t want to, since your room is like a hundred feet away, and I think I’m probably blowing things out of proportion ANYWAY, so it’s really no big deal. Please ignore the fact that I’m a mess right now, I promise I just need more sleep-

Amal: S. Sss.

Oh my god they’re going to tell me to shut up. Holy shit, I overestimated how familiar I’m allowed to be with them. I’m going to die and lose their friendship and I can never ever show my face in public ever again.
Amal: … S. Sure.

Chiyo: Wh-whuh??

Amal: I’d, um. Love to stay over.

Chiyo: I! Okay! Thanks!

Amal: I- I mean, if you don’t actually want me there, I’m okay going back to my room-

Chiyo: No, no, it’s fine! I-

The quick click of footsteps approach, and we both freeze mid-conversation. Who is that?? Who wears dress shoes?? Sekisada?? BATES???

Before I can decide whether I’d like to die by cyanide or hanging, there’s a flash of light around the corner that illuminates a very concerned looking Atsui. I nearly melt on the spot with relief.

Atsui: Uh. What the hell are you two doing. Are you like, legitimately arguing about whether Khalaf-san should sleep in Kumoshita-san’s room, or.

Amal: No.

Chiyo: Yes- MAYBE.

Atsui: … Is this the heterosexual experience?

Amal: I’m nonbinary. Anything that involves me is by default not straight.
Chiyo: I don’t even know what specific genders I like! I think it’s just everything!

Atsui: Can’t relate. To, like, any of that. Y’know what, whatever. [shakes head] Just… Just go to bed. Please. I can hear you from my room, which means other people can hear you, cuz my room is all the way at the end of the hall.

Atsui: Oh, actually, wait, while you’re here. Did you finish your argument or whatever?

Chiyo: Things are better now, yes!

Amal: Something like that.

Atsui: Cool. [stifles yawn] Uh, do you guys want to hang out tomorrow? I feel like- I feel like I need to take a break from cooking. And I like spending time with you two. And Kikun will be there.

Amal: Kikun?


Chiyo: Yeah, of course! What do you have in mind?

Atsui: … More cooking.

Amal: Didn’t you just say you’re tired of cooking?

Atsui: I mean, yeah, but like.

He brushes the hair out of his face, looking quite suddenly equal amounts of annoyed, tired, and terrified.
Atsui: It’s about Ekyou-san.

Chiyo: What did she do?

Atsui: I woke up from a nap and I found her making “NyQuil chicken”.

Amal: NyQuil WHAT.

Atsui: Do NOT ask me what that is because I don’t know either and I don’t want to know. I heard you both saw her putting mayonnaise on a donut, you know what she’s capable of. This ends now.

Atsui: Listen, it’s much easier for me to teach someone to cook instead of having to actually cook. And the universe is at stake here, so I’m literally begging you two. We need to stage an intervention.

Chiyo: Of course we’ll be there!

Atsui: Oh, thank god.

**Atsui shuffles his feet, seeming about to fall over. I’m about to ask if HE wants to stay the night before he pulls himself together and shakes it off, giving only a tired glare in both of our general directions.**

Atsui: I’m going to bed. Don’t expect me awake before 10 am tomorrow. I’ve had it up to here with myself like, not sleeping. I need to sleep. What the hell.

Amal: Noted. Don’t push yourself.

**With a nod and a thumbs-up, Atsui heads back down the hall, stumbling only once. Amal and I just look at each other for a moment before I stand aside to let them into my room. Neither of us say a word as we prepare for bed, though I do put away the neatly folded stack of clothes on my bed. Thanks, Kashizaki.**
As I lie awake and stare at the ceiling, I listen as Amal’s breathing goes from shallow to deep and heavy. Even when I’m totally sure that they’re asleep, I don’t dare turn over to look at them. It’s comforting to know that they’re here, but… Ugh.

I think that, at this point, it’s more than obvious that I don’t, like. Actually know how to feel about Amal. I care about them, yeah, but sometimes I feel like I’m saying all the wrong things. Why would they want to spend time with someone like me, anyway? We’re very different people, to put things lightly.

For starters, they’re reserved, and sometimes formal, and self-righteous, but I love that about them - how passionate they get about the things they love, how deeply they care for people. I love the way that they pull their hat down when they’re nervous, like they’re trying to disguise the way that they blush so easily - almost as easily as I do. And their smile. I wax poetic about smiles a lot, I know, but, god. Amal’s smile makes me feel like I have to work hard to earn it. They’re like if the sun were a person. They’re...

...Wait, am I falling for them?

Ugh, no no no. Stop that. This isn’t some cheesy amateur graphic novel, where the guy and the girl (loosely speaking) are in a life-threatening situation and they profess their love for each other. I mean, yeah, obviously we’re in the life-threatening situation, but this just isn’t the time! There’s no guarantee either of us will walk away from this situation alive, and we both have bigger things to worry about than if I have a crush or not.

But what if we weren’t here? What if we were in school, spending time getting to know each other, making friends with the people around us? What if we had time to watch the other sleep in common areas and hold hands on the grounds…?

Stop. Stop. I can’t let this go any further than it has already, not without their knowing, and definitely not without knowing what the future holds. But if I can just hope...

I need to sleep.
The map for Zone 2 (Chapter 2) can be found [here](#).
2-3: Fair Serpent Beneath The Foul Flower

Chapter Summary

A synchronization fallen out of time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Morning dawns slowly, lazily, almost languidly. It takes me a moment to realize that the morning announcement probably hasn’t even gone off yet.

It takes me longer than a moment to realize there’s someone standing at the end of my bed—HOLY SHIT THERE’S SOMEONE STANDING AT THE END OF MY BED??

Chiyo: AAAUGH??

Amal: Uh. [blinks] Good morning?

Chiyo: You scared me!

Amal: My bad. Are you okay?

Chiyo: Um! Yeah! I think!

Wow! That was, as a whole, extremely embarrassing! What the hell!

Amal: If it, uh. Helps at all. I was waiting for you to wake up-

Chiyo: Waiting for WHAT?
Amal stammers something indiscernible, slowly turning red. They’re not wearing their hat, though their hair is extremely messy from sleeping with it up. I sort of want to offer to do it for them, but honestly? I think I’m having enough trouble just processing their being here this morning.

Why did I ask them to sleep in my room? Why did I do that?

Chiyo: Uh, anyway, don’t you usually sleep in later than I do?

Amal: W-well, yeah. This woke me up. [holds up Parchment]

Chiyo: Did something happen…?

Amal: Nothing bad. [sits down] Ariel just sent an announcement. Apparently they want everyone to be at breakfast this morning.

Chiyo: Ugh. [rubs eyes] And what time is it?

Amal: Almost eight. We’d better get going.

Chiyo: Mm. Give me a second.

Amal waits outside while I get cleaned up. When I go to meet them, they wordlessly place their hat in my hands before pulling their hair into its usual bun. I stick the hat on my head before they can ask for it back, and a smile blooms across their face as they lift it off.

Amal: You ready to go?

Chiyo: Yep!!

The two of us take our time heading to the kitchen and walk in to the smell of a very American breakfast. Murdock nods at our arrival, then does a double take. She, very
graciously, chooses not to comment.

The groups seem to be mostly the same as yesterday, though Murdock seems to be cooking breakfast today. Despite his threat to sleep in until 10, Atsui sits next to Kashizaki, arms folded and looking very disgruntled.

Amal and I claim a spot away from everyone else. As I take my seat, I catch Bates’s eye from across the room. He simply winks at the two of us before turning back to his conversation with McRae. If Amal noticed, they don’t comment on it.

The conversation seems much more muted than usual, which makes sense, I guess. After all, if Ariel wanted us here, he probably has an announcement to make. Whatever that announcement is, I’m sure it’s not good.

At eight precisely, all of our Parchments buzz with the prerecorded message, and the doors open once more. Sure enough, Ariel flits in and sets himself on the table.

Murdock: You’re actually on time for once.

Ariel: Kuu, I’m glad you noticed. I’ve been working on that. [preens] I am a robot, after all. I have no excuse not to be punctual.

McRae: What about our first day here?

Ariel: … Like I said. It’s a work in progress.

Ariel: Aside from that, it seems you all are getting along well, hm? That’s wonderful.

Amal: Are you being sarcastic?

Ariel: No, not at all! It’s very nice to see that you’re becoming close. After all, it’s very hard to live together for any period of time without having some friends, kuhuhu.
Sekisada: Wow. Just at me next time.

Sumitama: “At”...?

Sekisada: Uh, you know, the symbol? @?

Sumitama: Why would you want someone to at you?

Sekisada: It’s like, Internet slang- [sighs] Nevermind. You evidently don’t know enough that it’d matter, anyway.

Sumitama: H-hey! Just because I stay inside all the time doesn’t mean that I don’t know anything about the outside world!

Sekisada: Yeah, right. [to Bazhanov] She doesn’t know what @’ing someone is.

Bazhanov: What is that.

Sekisada: You know what? Forget it.

Ariel: Besides! The more friends you have, the less you’re inclined to kill each other, correct?

Amal: Do you think this is a joke?

Ariel: Of course not! The very last thing I want is for all of you to die. Or, rather, any of you. It simply isn’t up to me whether or not to continue this killing game.

McRae: Then whose decision is it?
Ariel: I-!

He pauses, teetering back and forth on the table, before regaining his balance and pulling himself together.

Ariel: Er, none of your business.

Chiyo: Is it Prospero…?

Murdock: Prospero?

Sekisada: Holy shit, do any of you read? At all? Oh, right, Shionaga-

**Ekyou’s expression locks down.**

Ekyou: *Don’t even go there.*

Sumitama: S-stop being mean!

Sekisada: [shrugs] I’m just being honest. Sumitama-shi even pointed out that this whole killing game seems based on The Tempest. I’m amazed none of you read it.

Atsui: Hey, I did. [to Murdock] If it helps, Prospero in The Tempest was the boss of Ariel and Caliban. The characters, not the birds.

Everett: So, basically, there must be someone behind all of this. Potentially someone among us.

Atsui: I mean, it would sure seem so.

Murdock: That’s what I’ve been saying from day one.
She shoots a glance at Harai, who seems poised to ignore her. In their situation, I’m sure I would, too.

Murdock: But I don’t want to name any names. After all, that hasn’t gotten us very far in the past. If we do have a Prospero among us, now isn’t the time to seek them out.

Bates: Uh, no offense, but you haven’t actually had the best track record of, y’know. Enforcing that. LOL.

Kashizaki: Did you seriously just say “LOL” out loud?


Kashizaki: That’s different. She’s enjoyable to be around.

Chisaki: [cheerful] Also, if you ever use -chan for me ever again I’ll rip you limb from limb!

Bates: You and what army? … Get it? Army? Because, y’know, your hand-

Chisaki: [cheerier] Die!

McRae: Too soon, Claude.

Bates: Back to my point. Murdock-chan, you loooove your scapegoats, so like. You’re the last person who should be talking about being tolerant and accepting of others. Just saying. [at Kashizaki] EL-OH-EL.

Kashizaki chooses, perhaps wisely, not to respond. Murdock, in contrast, tilts her head.

Murdock: Perhaps so. But I like to think that people can improve on their past behavior. Wouldn’t you say, Bazhanov-san?
Bazhanov: If you say so.

At the statement, his expression becomes pointedly blank, his voice measuredly even. This... definitely is not the first time this has happened when Murdock addressed him.

Luckily, before he has to say anything else, McRae speaks up.

McRae: Hey, I have an idea.

Murdock: What’s wrong?

McRae: How about we all play a game of “let’s listen to the robot bird who told us to come here for an announcement”.

Oh. Right. Judging by the various nervous glances going about the room, I’m not the only one who totally forgot Ariel was even sitting there.

Ariel: Thank you. I was sitting there for so long, I was afraid I would rust over.

Harai: So what do you want?

Ariel: Put simply, I came to announce another incentive for you all to participate in this killing game.

Everett: Didn’t you just go off about how you didn’t want any of us to die?

Ariel: Didn’t I also, er, “go off”, about how I don’t have a choice in the matter?

Bates: Wig, sis. [nods sagely]
Amal: Why are you doing this to me personally?

Ariel: I don’t want to be presenting you with this, either. But you’ll just have to bear with me. Please. Rest assured, this one doesn’t involve any sort of personal injury.


Ariel: I simply offer you an addition to your reward if you are to get away with your crime.

Sekisada: Implying that’s much better.

Atsui: Oh, agreed. I’d rather stay here. Even if I have to put up with Sekisada-san.

Sekisada: Ouch.

Ariel: [continues] If the blackened successfully leaves the mansion, we will erase their memory of everything that has happened in this building.

Murdock: … What?

Ariel: As in, you will no longer remember anything that has happened here. Of course, you will have your memories of everything before you arrived here, so your situation will not be analogous to Miss Everett’s.

Everett: Thanks.

Ariel: But everything else - the killing game, your fellow classmates - will be null and void.

Atsui: Well, that’s a dumb motive. Why would I want to forget any of what’s happened here?

Sumitama: …
Ekyou: …

Chisaki: … [holds up stump and points to it]

Atsui: Oh. Okay, fair point.

Ariel: Well, you have plenty of time to consider your options.

Bates: “Murder” and “not murder”, huh? That’s a tough one.

I swear to god he winks at me. All I can do is remember our conversation from yesterday. I know Bates said that he doesn’t plan on killing anyone, but he still scares the shit out of me for reasons I can’t really articulate.

Harai: Is there anything else you needed to tell us?

Ariel: No. That will be all.

Ariel wastes no time in leaving the room with a flutter. People seem to settle down after his leaving, though Chisaki frowns at her plate for a moment.

Chisaki: … I mean, theoretically.

Everett: Don’t kill people, Chisaki-chan.

Chisaki: THEORETICALLY. If I woke up with no hand and no memory of how I lost it, I would pretty much lose my shit.

Everett: … [gently places head in hands]
Chisaki: I’m not wrong!

Kashizaki: You’re not right, either. I don’t want anyone to kill for something this shallow.

Atsui: Ideally, no one would kill at all.

Kashizaki: Yes, which is actually viable now that we lost the person with prosthetic arms.

Chisaki’s smile falls quite suddenly flat.

Kashizaki: [shrugs] Had to be said.

Ekyou: How about we just stop talking about any of that and discuss the matters at hand?

Sekisada: If you ask me, the biggest mistake we could make is trusting that… chunk of metal. Who’s to say that their motives are even real?

Chiyo: How would you fake a phone call?

Everett: In any case, Ariel wasn’t lying about the… punishment. [glances at Chisaki] So I think it’s safe to assume that he isn’t lying about this motive, either.

McRae: Plus, our memories have been tampered with before. It’s a safe bet that they can do that again.

Murdock: Right. Clearly, the issue is not whether they can execute the motive, but rather, are any of us willing to kill for it.

Bates: I dunno. You gotta figure, these people are getting desperate, huh?

Sekisada: Uh, yeah, I guess.

She fixes a glare on each of us in turn, giving up after Harai’s mask only stares back, impassive. Harai themselves stands up, holding a plate of food.

Murdock: Leaving so soon?


Chisaki: Wait, Harai-san! Wait for me!

The rest of the group disperses quickly. Across the room, Murdock seems to finish up her cooking venture. Weirdly enough, Atsui hasn’t complained about her presence at all and only shoots her a look once as he leaves the room with Kashizaki. I’m still in the middle of eating when Amal taps my hand.

Amal: I’m headed to the laundry room, do you want me to wait for you?

Chiyo: Oh! No, I’m good, I’ll finish here soon. I’ll probably help Murdock-san clean up, too…

Amal scrunches their face up, trying to determine how serious I’m being, before nodding, reluctant.

Amal: If you need me to bail you out, just text me.

They follow Atsui and Kashizaki out of the room, leaving me with Murdock, McRae, and- oh, Bates left too. Upon seeing me still in the room after breakfast, Murdock raises an eyebrow.

Murdock: What are both of you still doing here?
McRae: [shrugs] Dunno. It just seemed like it’s been a while since we talked.

Chiyo: I wanted to help clean up! Y’know, cuz it’s very generous of you to be cooking and all… Oh, but if you would rather I leave, I’m more than okay with that too!

Murdock: No, no. I don’t mind your staying. And I do appreciate the help. Though, Tristan, I’m not sure if that’s what you’re here for.

McRae: I’m down for whatever.

Murdock lets out a slow, measured breath. She must have been holding that in.

Murdock: Thank you. Then…

The three of us survey the sink. I guess I’d never realized how much of a mess the class can make. Fork plus cup plus plate times fourteen, in addition to the cooking equipment that Murdock was using, is a lot more dishes than I had expected.

Murdock: Here. I’ll wash dishes, Tristan can dry them, and Kumoshita can put them away.

McRae: I’m cool with that.

Chiyo: Oh! I’ll, uh, do my best.

Murdock: Right. So.

She removes her bracelets and sets them aside in a neat stack, then immediately gets to work. Murdock and McRae work quickly, each finishing their task like cogs in a well-oiled machine, which I imagine would be great in any other circumstance. Unfortunately, as I am a dumbass who does not spend time in this kitchen, I have absolutely no freaking clue where anything in here actually goes.
It doesn’t take long for Murdock to notice that I haven’t even put away the first stack of plates.

Murdock: Erm, Kumoshita. Do you need help?

Chiyo: I’m fine! I don’t really know where any of this is supposed to go, but I know I’ll find it eventually...

I can hear her quick sigh of disappointment.

Murdock: Could you please-

McRae: [mumbles] You don’t have to ask, you know.

He drops the rag he was holding and takes the stack of plates out of my hands with a little too much force.

McRae: Here, I’ll take these. You know where the cups go, right?

Chiyo: Yeah, I do! I can get those!

McRae: [nods] Cool. Thanks.

Murdock: Yes, thank you both.

I try not to let anything else become an incident while the three of us clean the kitchen. Murdock gets awfully picky about the whole process, insisting that we check the fridge for old food. I understand that she probably wants to be hygienic, but I draw the line at mopping the floor. Like, sweeping? Fine. Sweeping makes sense. But mopping?? We’re all wearing shoes in this mansion! There’s literally no reason to do this!

That all said, I can’t complain that much. At least Murdock is actually helping us with the
chores instead of standing back and observing. And, anyway, she’s a really competent leader - though she doesn’t really get what skills McRae and I have, like her failure to recognize that McRae spends much more time in the kitchen than I do, she’s really quick to delegate tasks that we can get done fast.

And, weirdly enough, Murdock seems much more animated around McRae than at any other time I’ve ever seen her. I try not to say much while we work, but she keeps up a steady stream of idle chatter, which he seems to be tuning out. If this bothers him much, he doesn’t show it save for a twitch of his hand toward his headset.

… Actually, considering what he’s mentioned about being overwhelmed by noise and the world as a whole, he’s probably bothered. I catch Murdock in the midst of a spiel about middle school with a question.

Chiyo: Murdock-san, have you always been this good at leadership stuff?

Murdock: Excuse me?

Chiyo: I-I mean! I’m not trying to doubt you or anything, but you’re really good at this whole, um. Getting people in order and delegating work thing.

Murdock: Ah. Well, that’s flattering to hear. Thank you.

I extend the hand of awkwardly stammered out compliments and she does this to me. There just is no winning here, is there.

Murdock: As for how I got here, hm. I guess I’ve had to grow up a lot in the past few years. Leadership does require maturity, after all.

McRae: Sure. Maturity. That’s one way of putting it.

This has to be the first time he’s spoken in ten minutes. Murdock’s confidence wavers for a second.
Murdock: Y-yes, of course. I mean, after… er, all of that, I changed as a person, you know?

McRae: I’d say you were already changing before we’d hit that point, but sure. Whatever makes you happy, Ti.

**Does McRae seem… resentful?**

McRae: [friendlier] But that was a long time ago, and I know you’re doing better now. So it’s all good.

Murdock: Right. It’s all good.

**She stops wiping the counter for a moment.**

Murdock: How’s Aunt Shantel doing? I’m surprised she let you pursue video games, in all honesty. [raises eyebrow] Unless she doesn’t know?

McRae: Huh? Oh, Mom’s fine. She knows what I’m doing, anyway. Maybe not the Hope’s Peak part, but she knows I make games. She’s the one who signed me up for code classes in the first place.

Murdock: That’s surprising.

McRae: Why?

Murdock: I don’t know, she’s the one who kept pushing the antiques thing on us when we were little. I’m just surprised she let you do anything else. [shrugs] Your mom is cool. I kind of wish she was my mom.

McRae: Ti, you don’t know what it’s like. You don’t even have a mom. Trust me, it may be better that way. Anyway, to be fair, she tried getting me into the curation thing. It didn’t really work. I’ve never been as into the family business as you have.
Murdock: Why did she let you sign up for coding, then?

McRae: I guess she figured that since I didn’t shut up about whatever platformer of the month I was doing, I may as well put that enthusiasm to use.

McRae: I’m here now, though. So I guess that’s cool.


McRae simply hums an acknowledgement and keeps wiping the counter. They’re talking so easily that I don’t think they even realize I’m still here. In fact, I think this is the most words I have ever heard McRae say at once.

McRae: How are your dads doing, anyway?

Murdock’s freezes, eyes immediately hard.

Murdock: Don’t even talk to me about that.

McRae: Eh. Fair enough. Kumoshita-san’s still here, after all.

Murdock: Excuse me?

She looks up quickly, fixing an almost accusatory glare on me. It is all I can do to hold up a loaf of bread in front of my chest, as if it’ll protect me. God, I wish it would. McRae betrayed me.

Chiyo: Oh, um. Hi! [holds up bread] I’m putting this away!

Murdock: Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you.
Murdock: [pinches bridge of nose] So you heard all of that exchange. I’m embarrassed.

Chiyo: No, don’t be! It sounds like it’s been a while since the two of you could catch up.

McRae: Yeah. At least three years. Since, y’know, we don’t remember three years or anything like that.

Murdock: Do you think you’re being funny?

McRae: Heh.

Chiyo: So, um… what’s all this about a family business, anyway?

McRae: Oh, it’s my mom’s stuff. My mom’s side of the family, which is to say, the side Ti and I are related on, aka her dad’s side… er.

Murdock: [promptly] I have two fathers. I hope that won’t be a problem.


Chiyo: Oh, so that’s why you’re a watchmaker, Murdock-san?

Murdock: Yes. [adjusts glasses] I’ve only gotten serious about it in the past few years, though.

McRae: Really? I thought that Uncle Will was really open to helping you with old stuff. Didn’t he help you?

Murdock: Ah… no. [wincs] I haven’t, er. Seen him in quite some time.
McRae: Wait, really? What happened?

Chiyo: He’s not-?!

Murdock: No, he isn’t dead. He’s just, ah. Taken leave of Papa for some time. Probably forever.

McRae: … Oh wow. No way. They couldn’t have-

Murdock: They divorced, yes. On unpleasant terms.


**McRae seems genuinely surprised, raking a hand through his hair. None of us are actually doing any work at this point.**

McRae: I can’t believe it, they were so close. So you just live with Uncle Quince? You haven’t seen your dad for a while?

Murdock: [terse] Yes, though it’s a work in progress. You hadn’t heard about this?

McRae: I mean, who would I have heard about it from?

Murdock: Dad. I assumed he was spending more time with your side of the family, since he had separated from Papa and myself.

Murdock: [mutters] After all, I was under the impression that you were avoiding me specifically.

**McRae’s so carefully casual expression suddenly becomes a mask.**

McRae: Right. You’d be correct.
Uh. Uh shit I don’t think I was supposed to hear that. I don’t really think I want to hear any more of this, actually, if this is veering as far into family drama as I think it is. But because I can’t help myself, an inquiry escapes my mouth anyway.

Chiyo: You were avoiding her?

Both McRae and Murdock flinch, as if neither realized I was still standing here, still pathetically clutching my loaf of bread. Murdock stares a hole through a point above my head, while McRae seems adamant in his attempts to not look at me.

Murdock: Well, it’s a long story.

McRae: Yeah. We just haven’t seen each other in a while.

Chiyo: And, um, that’s fine. I’m good with that. You two sound like you have, uh. A lot of stuff to work out?

Murdock: You could say that, yes.

Chiyo: So I don’t mind, like, leaving. Because this sounds a lot like a conversation I shouldn’t be hearing? I-if that makes sense! But if there’s anything that you guys want me to know, or if I can help at all-

Murdock: No, it’s fine. I’ve kept you here too long, anyway. You’re free to go, if you want. That includes you, Tristan. I can take it from here.

McRae: [sighs] Ti, I think we really need to talk. About a lot of stuff.

Murdock: I don’t know if that’s wise, exactly-

Chiyo: I can leave! Just tell me where you want me to put this?
Apparently out of options, Murdock’s gaze flicks from left to right before she sighs herself, relenting.

Murdock: Just leave it on the table. I can take care of it. Thank you for your help, Kumoshita.

Chiyo: Anytime! I’ll see you two around?

McRae: Yeah, see you.

I leave the kitchen and the two of them to sort things out and pause for a second in the living room, back pressed to the kitchen doors. At first, I was totally convinced that Murdock and McRae had some sort of inherent advantage in knowing each other beforehand and being relatives and all, but now? Whatever’s been going on between them for what sounds like several years, I hope it gets resolved. At least they get this chance, before whatever might happen to us happens.

The living room is all but deserted and I take full advantage of the opportunity to collect my thoughts. The one thing about this mansion that’s always struck me as odd is how quiet it all is. In most places, there’s always an undercurrent of background noise, a hum of traffic or an air conditioner. Here, though, all I can just barely make out is the crackle of the fireplace, and… is that music?

Yes, if I strain, I can catch faint strains of a melody - a haunting, gliding set of flourishes echoing from what sounds like the second area. There’s something about the tune that seems almost nostalgic, and I find myself following the music until I reach the sitting room.

Somehow, I’m not surprised to see Everett at the piano, eyes halfway closed as she frowns at the piece before her, slowly approaching the end of her performance.

Before I can say a word, she takes a breath, turns the page, and launches into a second piece. This one is far more fast paced than the first, but still carries that haunting tone - something about her playing seems majestic, triumphant, and weighted with loneliness. It’s outright impressive to watch.
All I can do is stand and watch her hands fly across the keys, catching themselves when she stumbles near the end but playing on all the same. As the final chord rings throughout the room, neither of us speak for a long moment.

Chiyo: …That was… I don’t know how to describe that. That was powerful.

Everett: [lowers hands] Thanks. I, uh, kind of didn’t realize I could do that. Feels good, though.

Chiyo: You looked like you were having fun!

Everett: Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is. Piano’s pretty cool. [stretches hands] And before you ask, no, I’m pretty sure that’s not my talent either.

Chiyo: What? Are you serious? With those skills, I know you could be an Ultimate-level pianist!

Everett: Yeah, but like… [waves hand] I just…

She sighs quickly and sharply.

Everett: Kumoshita-chan, can I be honest with you for a moment?

Chiyo: Yeah, of course! Is something wrong?

Everett: Oh, no, nothing you’ve done or anything. I was just thinking.

Everett: Does it seriously matter that much whether I have an Ultimate talent or not? People are people. No offense or anything like that, but just because you guys are the best of our age or whatever doesn’t mean anything to society.

Chiyo: Isn’t it supposed to, though? So that people who see us know that people like us are going to make the future a better place.
Everett: Honestly? I don’t think it’s important. I think the system’s arbitrary and stupid. Do you really believe all that bullshit about being humanity’s future?

Chiyo: …

Everett: [hastily] Oh, uh, you can answer that if you want. I’m not Murdock-san. I won’t kill you if you disagree.

Chiyo: Oh thank god, I’m still not the only one terrified of her.

Everett: Mhm. She can be pretty intense. But what do you think?

Chiyo: I think…

I think that’s a good question, actually. It’s important to know that us youth are the future, so if you ask me, the Ultimate program and Hope’s Peak are more of a way to showcase that ideal as opposed to singling us out specifically as THE people who will shape the future. But it makes sense that people would assume the latter, right? So I can see how that would be off-putting.

And then that would lead to people being resentful about not getting into Hope’s Peak, too. There’s only so many openings, and even though the non-Ultimate class of HPA is a thing, they’re still treated as far inferior to the main course students. I don’t know why, they’re just as important and have loads of potential themselves! No wonder some of them resort to learning talents as desperately as they can in the hopes that somehow, somehow, they’ll be considered good enough to get into the main course-

… Wait. What if that’s it?

What if Everett doesn’t remember her talent because she doesn’t have one? She’s good at board games, she’s good at piano… What if she’s a reserve course student who was trying to get into the main class? But then how would her memory loss factor into this…?
Everett: Uh, Kumoshita-chan? You look… kind of angry. Are you okay?


Everett: Oh, okay. If you say so! I didn’t think you’d think about it so much, haha.

Chiyo: I mean, I see where you’re coming from, with the whole Ultimates thing not really mattering and all that. It’s like, if the youth as a whole are supposed to be the future, then it doesn’t make sense to single people out for something as random as a talent, right?

Everett: [blinks] Oh, wow, I hadn’t even considered that. I was just thinking about how this class seems to be international students, and how Hope’s Peak can’t possibly recognize people overseas. What with the language barrier and everything, right? It’s kinda unfair. Especially for people living in impoverished countries that won’t ever get to be recognized for the things they can do.

Everett: [taps chin] Although I read there’s some academies overseas that recognize Ultimates. There’s the Elysian Institute in America, for example. It doesn’t really help my second point, but it’s something.

Everett: So for that reason, I’m kind of surprised I’m even in Japan. I pretty obviously don’t belong here?? I don’t know why I’d even attend Hope’s Peak. I don’t know why I can even speak Japanese. I must have done something crazy important to be here, right?

Everett: Too bad I can’t fuckin’ remember, I guess.

**She lets her hands fall from the keys and closes the piano with a sharp thud.**

Everett: You’re right, though. I think a lot of people are extraordinary, and we don’t need titles to recognize that. So I feel like that applies here, too. I don’t need a talent to be here, and I don’t really care if I do or if I don’t. I just want to live my life and do things I love.

Chiyo: That’s really admirable.

Everett: No, it isn’t. I just want to live, what’s so revolutionary about that?
Her words linger in the air for a moment. She lets out another short huff of a sigh before turning to face me entirely.

Everett: Sorry for snapping. I’m in a weird mindset right now. How have you been lately, anyway? I feel like we never get a chance to talk.

Chiyo: You and me both. It feels like we’re always with other people, right?

Everett: Honestly. You and Khalaf-san in particular are always attached at the hip.

I manage not to blush.

Chiyo: I could say the same about you and Chisaki-chan.

Everett: [smiles] Game point. What can I say? She’s really uplifting to be around. I’m glad we woke up around the same time and started hanging out. I don’t know where I’d be without her.

Everett: … Between you and me, though, I’ve been kinda concerned about her since Valdez-san died. She took it really, really hard - I’d say harder than you, even. [shakes head] Though I think she’s been doing better since she and Harai-san started hanging out.

Chiyo: That’s great! I was really worried about Harai-san, too, actually.

Everett: Yeah, same. They don’t seem like they take great care of themselves. I’m very happy that they’re sleeping more, and they’re eating properly, so I’m not worried about that-

Chiyo: Wait, have you actually seen them eat?

Everett: [tilts head] Uh, once. They swear they do at other times, though. Why?
Everett can make Sekisada nice AND force Harai to take care of themselves?? Forget the reserve course theory, are we sure she isn’t a super-level mediator of some sort?? She probably wouldn’t appreciate the speculation, so I should probably quit it. But still!! What??

Chiyo: No reason. I’m glad to hear, though!

Everett: Oookay. I’m glad you’re glad?

Chiyo: Where are they, anyway? Harai-san and Chisaki-san, I mean.

Everett: Oh, um, looking at the other rooms…? I’m surprised they’re not back yet-

With that, the door slams open.

Chisaki: WE’RE BACK~!

Everett: Yep, there we go.

Harai follows Chisaki as she strides into the room with exaggerated steps. Everett stands up to acknowledge them, but frowns when she notices the large package that Harai’s holding.

Everett: What’s that?

Harai: We found a-

Chisaki: No, shshsh!! We gotta hype it up!! Hi, Kumo-chan.

Chiyo: Hi?

Chisaki: We have to be suspicious about it!!
Harai: I really don’t see the point.

Chisaki: Please!!

Harai: No. [to Everett] We found this in one of the empty rooms.

Chiyo: Huh? How did we miss that?

Harai: It was tucked behind the door. Almost like whoever put it there didn’t want us to see it.

Everett: Okay, but what IS it?

Chisaki: What is it?

Chisaki’s eyes gleam like a cat’s.


Harai: [bluntly] It’s a bow.

Chisaki: Oh, god dammit, Harai-san, you ruined it!

Harai: You’re welcome.

Chiyo: A bow, like, as in a musical instrument? Claude-san would probably be happy to hear that, if you can find the rest of the instrument…

Harai: No, a bow as in archery.
They set the bundle on a coffee table and fold back the fabric. Lying underneath is a black bow, so polished that it almost gleams. Though everything in the mansion seems like it’s been here for years, this bow looks like it survived the test of time fairly well.

Chiyo: Woah.

Harai: It looks like a kyūdō bow.

Chisaki: It looks freaking awesome is what it is! And there’s a bowstring! If we want to try it out. There aren’t any arrows, though, but it might be better that way? I mean, c’mon, that would be dangerous.

Chiyo: Wouldn’t the string snap? Since it’s been here for what seems like a really long time.

Harai: We can find out.

It takes a little struggling, considering none of us know anything about archery and that Chisaki doesn’t have a left hand, but we manage to string the bow. Harai holds it up, more observant than triumphant.

Harai: Chisaki-san is right. This is dangerous to have lying around.

Chisaki: I mean, it can’t be that bad on its own, right? Since it’s just the bow.

Harai: Someone could still create some makeshift arrows and shoot someone else. All the bow does is provide force.

Chiyo: Oh, that’s true. What should we do with it, then?

Harai: I would suggest putting it back in the room where we found it, but someone else could find it.
Chiyo: If none of us saw it to begin with, though, maybe other people won’t notice...?

Harai: [shakes head] There’s still too much of a risk. We’d need to get rid of it, but I’m not sure how we could do that in a way that would completely destroy it.

As if she had been waiting her whole life for this moment, Chisaki raises her hand.

Chisaki: We have a fireplace and everything.

Chisaki: We could burn it.

Harai: [nods thoughtfully] We could burn it.

They make a move toward the bow, about to carry it off, before Everett speaks.

Everett: Wait.

She’s been… oddly silent before this.

Everett: Can I... Can I see that?

Chisaki: Heck yeah!

Harai: I’m still going to burn it when you’re done.

Everett: That’s fine, but I just want to see... something.

Chiyo: W-wait...
No one hears me, or rather, no one does anything about it. I can’t shake a feeling of dread, which only gets worse as Harai places the bow in Everett’s hands. Everett’s expression is nothing short of stormy as she turns it over in her hands.

Chiyo: Wait, don’t…

Everett takes a deep breath and draws the bowstring back in perfect posture. She holds the position, for one, two, three seconds…

…

And releases - not only the string, but a scream.

Everett: A-aa- AAAAAGH!!

Chisaki: SHIT!

Everett hurls the bow to the floor, shoulders shaking, eyes wide, gasping for breath. I rush over to help her, to do something, anything, but I don’t even know where to start as she folds in on herself, eyes clouding over. Please don’t be hurt, just please, please don’t be hurt-

Distantly, I hear a door slam, hear shouting - who is that? That doesn’t sound like Harai or Chisaki; I know they’re both close by, Chisaki hugging Everett close while Harai stands a ways back.

Yet, another presence makes itself known, nudging me aside none too gently.

Bazhanov: Move.

And it’s all I can do to obey, as Bazhanov kneels down next to Everett. My vision finally clears enough to register Sekisada standing by the balcony door, eyes wide. They must have
come in when they heard Everett scream.

Bazhanov takes a single look at Chisaki and seems to decide that he won’t get anywhere trying to pry her off, but draws in close to Everett nonetheless, speaking in soft, soothing words that I can just barely make out.

Bazhanov: You’re going to be alright. Everything’s going to be alright, but you need to calm down. Breathe with me, okay? In. Out. There you go.

Everett draws in ragged, frantic breaths, eyes still distant. Now, Bazhanov gently pushes Chisaki’s hands off Everett. She lets go, but watches him warily. Everett seems to freeze without the continued contact, but Bazhanov keeps talking with a slow, gentle tone.

Bazhanov: Do you know where you are? You’re here in the piano room. With me. And Tsukino, Chiyo, Tatsumaru, and Sen. Whatever you’re thinking about right now, it’s passed. You’re safe here. [beat] Well, relatively speaking, of course.

Everett: …

Chisaki: … [looks to Bazhanov]

Bazhanov: [sighs] Aster, can you hear me? Tsukino wants to hug you. Is that okay?

After a long moment, Everett just barely nods. Chisaki immediately wraps her arms around Everett’s shoulders as Everett buries her face in her hands.

Chisaki: R-rett-chan, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry-

Harai: [crouches down] I don’t- I’m sorry, too, Chisaki-san, this wasn’t your fault-

Chisaki: Sh- shut up. I didn’t-
Bazhanov: Don’t stress her out more, you two. What were you doing, anyway?

Harai: We found this bow.

Chisaki: W-which we’re totally going to throw into the fireplace the first chance we get, because I don’t- I don’t want this ever happening again-

Bazhanov: As in… an archery bow? [shakes head] Specifics aren’t important. So it set her off?

Harai: She- she asked to see it, yes.

Bazhanov: … I see.

Bazhanov: Well, it doesn’t matter now. The point is, it happened. Don’t let it happen again. But if it does, for whatever reason, and you don’t know why… Don’t blame yourself. Just help, damn it.

Bazhanov: [brow furrowed] My apologies. That was rude.

Chisaki: T. Thanks.

_Bazh has Everett close, and doesn’t say another word for what feels far too long._

Chisaki: Thank you. For handling that so well. And I’m sorry-

Bazhanov: No, stop that. Don’t apologize. Any of you. I’m happy to help, I promise. I deal with this all the time, anyway. I know what to do.

Harai: Do you know someone who experiences the same things?

Bazhanov: [confident] Yes, I-
He stops.

Bazhanov: …

Harai: … What?

Bazhanov: [almost to himself] I- I could have sworn… No. I know there’s someone, I just don’t…

Harai: You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.

Bazhanov: …

**Bazhanov sighs and clasps his hands, his cape rippling with the sudden motion.**

Bazhanov: I think I know someone that I’ve helped like this before, but I don’t know who. I must have met them sometime in the past three years.

Bazhanov: The missing years, I mean.

**His proclamation is met with a heavy silence punctuated only by Everett’s slowing breath. The missing years. That’s right… How could we have forgotten about those so quickly? Three years is a long time, after all.**

I’m about to say something in response when there’s a blur of motion I barely catch, and I turn quickly to see Sekisada slip out of the room. I’m on my feet before I can register the action.

Bazhanov: What-

Chiyo: I have to go. U-uh, do you need me to stay for anything?
Bazhanov: I don’t think so, but-

Chiyo: Okay, um. Take care. Sorry.

By the time Chisaki says something in reply, I’m already out of the door and down the hall.

Sekisada almost makes it to the dining room when I grab his shoulder and turn him around. I’m about to interrogate him on the spot before I reconsider and shove him into one of the side rooms, letting the door slam behind me. Instead of the usual lethargy that clings to his expression, fear grips his eyes as he scrambles back.

Chiyo: What- what the fuck did you DO to her??

Sekisada: I- I-

Chiyo: Answer me.

Sekisada: I didn’t do anything, I swear to god-

Chiyo: Then what the fuck was all of that? That- that breaking down? With the bow??

Sekisada: I don’t-

Chiyo: What do you mean, you don’t? I know you used to know her, I know you did something awful to her-

Sekisada: I didn’t- I never said that-

Chiyo: Then- then what-
Sekisada: SHUT UP.

He clamps a hand to his elbow, eyes wide. I’m about to yell back before I realize that he’s shaking, too.

Sekisada: Just shut up and listen to me. I promise that whatever the hell that was back there, with the archery thing, that wasn’t me. I had nothing to do with that.

Chiyo: Why should I believe you.

Sekisada: Because- because- it just wasn’t, alright? I didn’t- I- [sighs] Listen.

Chiyo: I’m trying, but you’re not making it easy.

Sekisada: Neither are you. I need a minute after you gave me a fucking heart attack.

Chiyo: Well- well you’re the one who- with Everett-san-

Sekisada: Oh, give it a rest with Everett-san already! We just- we just-

Sekisada: We used to be friends, okay? When we were kids.

My voice comes out lower than it has in years.

Chiyo: You’re lying.

Sekisada: Why the fuck would I lie about this?? Listen, do you like, want specifics, or what? Are you just antagonizing me?

Sekisada: Kumoshita-san- I mean, -shi- whatever. You asked. I am trying to answer your question. I am telling you what happened with Everett-san and me. I literally do not know what I could say to
make you believe me more, because the impression I’m getting is that you’re dead set against believing me for whatever reason. And I get it, I’m a jerk, but I’m a sincere jerk, so the least you can do is believe what I tell you.

Sekisada: Or, uh, don’t, and just tell me you do. I really don’t care either way.

I pause, somewhere between spitting more vitriol and issuing an apology. In the end, it’s all I can do to choke down a protest and nod at him to go on. At the gesture, Sekisada visibly relaxes, though the nervous energy doesn’t totally leave his frame.

Sekisada: So, uh. My parents are… [winces] Difficult. I’ve got an older brother, like, 8 years older? Or something. I can never remember. The point is, he got like super spoiled from living such a highbrow movie star life or whatever-

Chiyo: A what?

Sekisada: My parents have television clout, I got my talent from that, don’t worry about it. They’re assholes.

Chiyo: [mutters] Pot calling the kettle black, much?

Sekisada: They’re the kind of assholes who think that they’re amazing and perfect despite the fact that they do absolutely nothing but sit pretty, and if you’ve met me, you will know that I am the exact opposite. I sit pretty and know that I’m doing absolutely nothing. Christ, Kumoshita-san, do you have to needle me over everything I say? Would you rather I say nothing at all? Stop interrupting.

Sekisada: So my grandparents stepped in and said I should spend my formative life with them in Hokkaido, and my parents protested, but I went anyway because my grandparents were dead-set on me not growing up to be a brat. And YES, I am well aware that they didn’t do a great job of that, I said stop interrupting.

Sekisada: I lived in Yuni until I was 8 or 9. At the time, three year old me did not know how boring a super small town by the forest could be, but oh boy it sure was. I mean, it was all I knew, because I was three.
Chiyo: Okay, but what does any of this have to do with Everett-san?

Sekisada: We were childhood best friends, dumbass. I literally said that earlier.

Chiyo: Then why did you say all the rest of that?

Sekisada: I don’t know, you thought I was lying? So I decided to elaborate? I don’t know what else I can do to make you trust me.

Why is dealing with Sekisada always such a headache?? Of course I’m not going to trust him, just- god.

Chiyo: Alright. How about this. What was this clearly foreign girl doing in a [air quotes] “super small town by the forest” in Hokkaido?

Sekisada: Her parents taught English. What else would she be doing there?

Chiyo: That’s… anticlimactic.

Sekisada scowls at me.

Sekisada: No, wait, it was actually her running away to Japan as a fucking 8 year old child while her parents enacted a global manhunt. Seriously, what did you think this was going to be, a television show? It’s not that deep. It’s just life.

Chiyo: [sighs] Fine. Whatever. Be difficult. So how did you get back to seat filling, then?

Sekisada: [throws up hands] Oh my god, this isn’t even “what happened with Everett-san” anymore. This is just “interrogate poor old Sentarou about everything under the fucking sun” time. Shit, Kumoshita-san, why does it matter?

I just glare at him, considering what to say. The longer I stare, the more I waver.
Okay, he’s right. Why does it matter? Do I seriously want to learn more about Sekisada of all people? Every time I see him, I’m mad at him - and probably for good reason, considering all the things I’m still pretty sure that he’s hiding. I can’t say I entirely trust his word with Everett, but I guess he’s got a point in that I wouldn’t believe him no matter what he said. As much as I hate to admit it.

Sekisada: Look, if it means that much to you, I’ll just tell you. I moved back to Tokyo, my parents and brother decided to drape me in the trappings of fabricated luxury, whatever whatever, the only thing I can do with my life or anything is stupid seat filling because of nepotism. And that’s life. Can I go now?

Chiyo: [steps aside] … Fine. Go.

I am just. So sick of this conversation already. Whatever adrenaline prompted me to pull Sekisada aside is already ebbing. After the initial confrontation, though, even Sekisada seems more tired than angry.

Sekisada: Huh. Shit. I didn’t actually expect that to work.

Chiyo: Thank you. For telling me all of that.

Sekisada: It’s whatever. I guess if I die, someone needs to know what my deal is, huh?

Chiyo: If you think so, sure.

Sekisada: [raises eyebrows] What, not even a flinch? Weird. I thought you were sensitive about death or something like that.

Normally, yeah, but.

Chiyo: Sekisada-san, I really don’t like you. As a person. Or anything.
Sekisada: I kind of figured.

Chiyo: I’m sincerely trying to figure out a way to at least tolerate you, but you’re making it extremely difficult.

Sekisada: You and me both. I don’t get why you’re always mad at me.

Chiyo: Maybe because-

I don’t think saying “because you’re an insufferable hate-spewing asshole who thinks putting himself down excuses his behavior in putting down everyone else around him” would endear him much to me. He doesn’t seem to care about my lack of response, merely grabbing the door handle.

Sekisada: Anyway, if that’s all, I’ll see you around. [mock salutes] Try not to die.

Chiyo: I’ll do my best.

But he’s already gone, a pair of dress shoes scuffing their way down the hall. I look after him for a moment before following him out of the room.

Man, Sekisada pisses me off.

The rest of the morning is uneventful until I finally get hungry and head to the kitchen. No one seems to be around; I end up making a sandwich and eating alone. Where is everyone, anyway? Does anyone have anything resembling a proper eating schedule in this building? Somehow, I doubt it.

Though there isn’t anything else to do here, I linger in the room anyway. I feel like I’m forgetting something - wait, didn’t Atsui want to meet up to teach Ekyou how to cook? I might as well wait around for that, right?

This would be easier if I wasn’t already exhausted by all of the interactions I’ve had this
morning. But I know I can wait for that, maybe…

…

Someone taps my shoulder. I’d recognize that voice anywhere.

Amal: Hey, Chiyo, are you awake?

Chiyo: Huh?

I lift my head and blink bleary eyes to find afternoon light pouring into the kitchen. Amal steps back when they see me awake and offer a half-smile.

The moment is wholly ruined by Atsui clapping his hands together. He and Kashizaki inspect some pots while Ekyou hovers by the door, looking more than uncertain.

Atsui: Cool! We can start doing stuff now!

Ekyou: Good morning, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: Oh! Uh, hi?

Amal: How long have you been there, anyway?

Chiyo: Since… I want to say noon…? What time is it?


Geez. No wonder my neck hurts. I rub at it while Atsui finishes his inspection and turns back to the rest of us.
Atsui: Hello, friends and enemies, and welcome to another episode of “Five Dumbasses Try To Make Dinner”. I’m your host, Ryouji Atsui, and damn is that weird to say out loud. Whatever.


Atsui: Shush. Before we do literally anything, I need to ask. You guys DO know how to cook, right.

Ekyou: [raises hand] I know how to make food.

Atsui: You don’t count.

Ekyou takes the comment in stride, only shrugging it off.

Atsui: What about the rest of you?

Chiyo: I can make eggs!

Amal: To be entirely honest, I don’t cook much. I just showed up for moral support.

Kashizaki: Yeah, what he said.

Wow. We’re probably not going to be helpful today.

Atsui: [breathes heavily] Alright. Neat. This is fine. Everything’s fine.

With a shaking hand, Atsui picks up the heavily bookmarked cookbook on the table. His expression is one of sheer desperation.
Atsui: Let’s make, uh. [points] Does yakisoba sound good to everyone?

Ekyou: What’s going to be in it?

Atsui: [squints at cookbook] Chicken. Cabbage. Whatever other vegetables we have, I guess. This cookbook isn’t very specific.

Ekyou: [shrugs] Alright.

Atsui: Alright?

Ekyou: Yeah.

Atsui: No “can we substitute energy drinks for the sauce” or anything like that?

Ekyou: I trust your judgement.

Atsui: Really. Really?

Ekyou: Mhm. I think your choices sound good. I know what food should taste like, Atsui-san.

**Atsui pauses in his perusal of the book in his hands to stare at Ekyou, open-mouthed.**

Atsui: Th- then?? Nyquil chicken???

Ekyou: Well, I also have a lot of free time at home. Maybe too much. I get bored. Sometimes weird food combinations stick.

Ekyou: But like I said, I know how to cook.
Atsui’s eyes flick from side to side, as his mouth opens and closes wordlessly. In one last burst of energy, he gestures wildly at the kitchen as a whole before resting his head in his hands with a thud.

Atsui: What’s even the point of all of this, then??

Chiyo: Maybe the rest of us can learn how to cook?

Amal: Yeah. I’d like to not eat fast food for the rest of my life.

Kashizaki: You do what?

Amal: I’m left alone a lot, okay? I’m managing.

Atsui: [lifts head] Are you serious? You have no experience at all?

Amal: I mean, I burned myself once while wearing oven mitts. So, no. I don’t cook much.

Chiyo: Oh, I feel that. I didn’t know you can’t put water in a microwave until I was 12.

Amal: You can’t put water in a microwave?

The blood drains from Atsui’s face as he slowly sinks his head back into his arms.


Kashizaki: You have no idea what you’re doing, do you.

Atsui: I CAN DEAL.
His ever-increasing volume indicates otherwise. With a sigh, Kashizaki tugs the cookbook out of Atsui’s hands and stares at it for a minute before nodding.

Kashizaki: Alright. It says we’re going to need to chop some ingredients, so. Should we get on that?

She doesn’t even wait for a reply before heading to the pantry, leaving Atsui sputtering behind her. Ekyou mutters something about getting knives, leaving Amal and me to find the non-pantry ingredients. Which is, in fact, everything, because as it turns out most vegetables belong in the refrigerator, so what is Kashizaki doing, anyway?

By some modern miracle, the four of us (sans Atsui, who seems to be actively struggling not to step in and do everything himself) manage to get the ingredients cut into bite-size pieces. The next time he speaks, Atsui’s heating up a pan and mumbling under his breath.

Atsui: Okay, so you need to pan fry the chicken first, and then- God I really have no fucking clue what I’m doing.

Kashizaki: Well, that’s not reassuring.

Atsui: [sighs] Yeah, not really. [to the rest of us] I am, uh. Really sorry about all of this. I haven’t actually taught people how to do anything before. Ever.

Chiyo: I think you’re doing a really good job so far!

Kashizaki: Considering you’ve spent the past hour bouncing between panicking and complete incoherency, anyway.

Atsui: Implying there’s a difference.

Kashizaki: Mhm. You’re kind of leaning towards the second one right now. C’mon, scoot over. I can do that.
Atsui: Nope, I’ve got it. [dumps chicken in pan] So, uh. I realize this is very awkward just standing here, so! Does anyone have conversation topics?

Amal: Um, why you started cooking?

Atsui: Literally anything but that?

I take a seat at the table, since Atsui is busy being crowded by the rest of the group. He doesn’t seem to notice or mind us either way.

Chiyo: Didn’t you mention your family being food industry professionals?

Atsui: Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I am.

Kashizaki: You’re literally an Ultimate?

Atsui: Well, I didn’t exactly come out of the womb holding a frying pan or anything like that, despite what my parents expected.

Amal: Hold on. “Expected”?

Atsui: Yeah. [rolls eyes] When I got into cooking, I was really bad at it.

Ekyou: Define “bad”.

Atsui: Okay, you know my cool eyebrow scar?

Chiyo: You have a what?

Atsui: [mutters] Yeah, it’s not actually that cool. [normal volume] Anyway, I was cutting something and reached up to wipe my face and whoops! Suddenly there’s blood all over the fish,
which was really expensive and hard to get. Wild, right?

Ekyou: That… doesn’t sound bad. That just sounds clumsy.

Atsui: Same difference. The point is, I didn’t really improve for a long time. I think my parents got kinda sick of it and started being passive aggressive? All “Ryouji, I think you need to take a break from this” and “Ryouji, you’re good at math, maybe you should go into finances”. Except less politely.

Kashizaki: Kill them.

Atsui: What, nah, they’re not as bad as you think. [waves hand] I’m just being dramatic for the sake of storytelling.

Amal: So did you keep cooking to spite them?

Atsui: Nope. I just like cooking, so I kept doing it until I got better. Evidently, it worked. Who wants to put the noodles in?

**Kashizaki wordlessly takes the pan from him and drops in the noodles. Atsui takes a step back and fidgets with his vest, evidently still nervous.**

Atsui: I, uh. [inhales] Did NOT mean to dump all of that. Sorry about that. I don’t know why I’m still talking.

Amal: Hey, I asked about it. It’s all good.

**It… does not seem all good, actually. Coming from another person with a family legacy to uphold, I can’t imagine what kind of person would hear their child express an active interest in the field and proceed to take every step possible to reject it.**

Chiyo: Your family sounds really rough, Atsui-san.
Atsui: Oh, not really. They’re nice people, they just have super high expectations.

Ekyou: I can relate to that. [nods] Most of my siblings are successful adults, so a lot of my parents’ friends like forcing expectations on me, too.

Kashizaki: Such as?

Ekyou: Oh, the usual. [mimicking] “You want to be a fashion designer? You’re just like Syvel!” “Have you talked to Rousei at all about entomology? I’m sure it runs in the family!” … Admittedly, that last one is usually directed to my sister Megumi. Even òendan was one of my brother’s things. I don’t remember which one.

Atsui: Megumi studies butterflies, right?

Ekyou: Right! [enthusiastic grin] She’s super smart, and she’s super nice, and I love her a lot, and…

She trails off, her smile flickering for a moment. Atsui nods thoughtfully to himself and takes a seat at the table.

Atsui: Tell me about her.

Ekyou: I’d rather not.

I’m about to ask why when I notice Amal avoiding Ekyou’s gaze. Atsui, too, seems suddenly aware of his misstep and mutters something resembling an apology. The trial is apparently still fresh for all of us.

As much as I want to defuse the situation, I… don’t actually think that might be possible. At least, not right now. Ugh. I definitely don’t want this lingering tension to continue, but considering the whole serial killer thing, Amal and Ekyou probably won’t reconcile for a while. If not ever.
But any attention I may have had for this conversation is quickly dispelled by a quiet “shit”, leading Atsui to bolt out of his seat. Kashizaki stands by the stove, frozen, with a mess of chopped vegetables at her feet. She simply stares at it, nearly dropping the pan too.

Kashizaki doesn’t speak for a long minute.

Kashizaki: [stepping back] Damn it.

Atsui: Eh, it’s nothing I haven’t done before. What’s wrong?

Kashizaki remains motionless, eyes brighter than usual.

Atsui: Aw, c’mon, it’s not that bad. Seriously.

Kashizaki: I-

She stops again, then sighs, moving out of the way to start cleaning. Ekyou and I get up, too.

Kashizaki: [voice cracks] This is dumb. I shouldn’t be doing this.

Atsui: Kikun.

Kashizaki: I can’t cook, I can’t do anything, I can’t-

Atsui: Aw, no, Kikun, sit the hell down. Ekyou-san, watch the stove.

Ekyou: Got it.

Kashizaki: Wait-
Amal: Chiyo and I can clean up.

I’ve already gotten paper towels to pick up the mess. Awkward, hesitant, Kashizaki still stands in the middle, still as a statue.

Kashizaki: No, I did this, I need to deal with it.

Atsui: No, you don’t. Here. Sit down.

Atsui grabs Kashizaki’s hand and all but yanks her down to a seat, talking to her in a low, steady voice. Though I don’t mean to eavesdrop, I catch most of their conversation.

Atsui: It’s completely okay, alright? I mean it. We all mess up sometimes.

Kashizaki: We spent so long cutting those, and now we have to throw them all away-

Atsui: Listen to me.

Kashizaki: I AM listening, you don’t get it. Everyone else probably thinks I’m such a klutz. Fuck, I shouldn’t even have shown up.

Atsui: [sighs] Okay, look.

Kashizaki: YOU look.

Atsui: No, I’m serious. As long as you don’t start a fire, I promise no one is judging you for anything that you do in here. You’re literally speaking to two people who have either blown up microwaves or heavily considered it, a person who lives off of nothing but fast food, and a person who actively cooks rice in Gatorade to give it flavor.

Kashizaki: ...
Atsui: ... I mean, if you do start a fire, that’s pretty bad, I don’t know where the fire extinguisher is and I’m pretty sure that goes against fire safety codes. I’m also pretty sure that the fact that we don’t have a fire extinguisher is supposed to encourage us to burn down the kitchen, actually. So if you DID start a fire we’d all be fucked.

Atsui: Actually, y’know what, ignore what I just said and focus on not starting fires. Okay?

Unmoved and eyes drooping, Kashizaki doesn’t respond as Amal and I pass the conversation to throw away the vegetables, but on our way back I can barely make out her response.

Kashizaki: Fine. I’ll try to take your word for it.

Atsui: And that’s a start. I promise I’m not judging you for any of this. I did stuff like that all the time when I was 12.

Kashizaki: Yeah, but you were 12. I’m an adult. I should be better than this.

Atsui: You’re never too old to be a beginner at something. It’ll get better with time. [calls over] Ekyou-san, how’s everything going?

Ekyou: Pretty good. I think this is just going to be chicken yakisoba, though. And, by the way, since you two are talking about it. I’ve been cooking on and off since I was 14.

Atsui: [to Kashizaki] Yeah, see, and just because she’s experienced doesn’t mean she has any kind of sensibility with food.

Ekyou: [joking] Hey.

Atsui: The point is, nobody’s perfect. I’m not, she’s not, Khalaf-san and Kumoshita-san aren’t, and neither are you. No one expects you to be super good at everything, because if you were you’d probably be a robot, and we have enough problems with those birds as it is. So it’s fine, Kikun, okay? You’re all good.
Kashizaki: …

Atsui: … By the way, I’m sorry for joking around so much. I didn’t realize how light that sounded for this situation.

Kashizaki: No, that’s just who you are. And I appreciate it. I’ll… try to keep it in mind, anyway.

Atsui: Hell yeah. Just let me know if you need anything, okay? Food-related or otherwise.

Ekyou: Here’s a food-related thing. I think this is done.

Atsui gets up to help Ekyou separate the meal into portions. As they work, building up to a steady rhythm in a matter of seconds, Ekyou seems different - not energized like she is around Sumitama, nor tentatively neutral like our every conversation, but actually relaxed. If I had to guess, I’d say this is the first time she’s seemed genuinely happy. Atsui, too, seems a lot less stressed now than he’s been for the past few days. I guess he’s right in saying that helping people to cook takes less emotional strain on him than actually cooking does, even though he claims to have no idea what he’s doing. It’s a nice change!!

Behind the two, Kashizaki watches his movements, resting her head on her arms. She looks more vulnerable now than I’ve ever seen her before, not even yesterday. Amal takes a seat next to her and starts talking at her - not about comfort, but… gossip? I catch my name in there a few times, but they stop talking as soon as I draw near, though Kashizaki starts giggling. Suspicious.

After what feels like half an hour but can’t be more than ten minutes, Ekyou and Atsui turn to the rest of us with over a dozen containers of fried noodles. At this point, all I can think about is how hungry I am. Ekyou gestures to the stack with honest-to-god jazz hands.

Ekyou: Tada!!

Atsui: Behold! The fruits of our labors!

Kashizaki: More like the vegetables.
Ekyou: Or a lack thereof.

Kashizaki: Ah, hush.

In spite of the jab, Kashizaki seems a lot less bothered than she was earlier. She looks just as proud of the meal as Ekyou and Atsui themselves.

Kashizaki: So what do we do now?

Atsui: Text everyone to tell them that dinner’s ready. And it’s like [checks Parchment] 6 pm already, so that’s pretty good timing.

Chiyo: Woah, it took that long? I swear we got here earlier.

Amal: It was a good use of an afternoon. Thanks, Atsui-san.

Atsui: [blushing] Yeah, whatever. Thanks for showing up. I appreciate the help.

Ekyou: Mhm. I’m glad to be here.

The kitchen doors open and close. Atsui looks up, brandishing a container like a weapon.

Atsui: BEHOLD!

Sumitama: Oh. Hi.

Sumitama seems to draw into herself at the sight of the crowd, gaze flicking over the five of us. She stops, however, when she sees Ekyou and narrows her eyes.
Sumitama: … You.

At the declaration, Ekyou visibly deflates.

Ekyou: Oh.

Sumitama: So this is what you were doing this afternoon? Without me?

Ekyou: I couldn’t find you, so I thought you wanted to be left alone.

Sumitama: You could have told me where you were, Ekyou-chan, I- I realized you weren’t there, and I thought- I thought maybe something had happened to you-

Ekyou: Sumitama-chan, no, that’s not it at all, I just...

Ekyou looks at the four of us, then back to Sumitama. Atsui presses his lips together.

Atsui: Sumitama-san, if I may add? Ekyou-san was helping the rest of us cook dinner.

Sumitama: Don’t you usually do that by yourself?

Atsui: [blinks] Uh, I mean, yeah, but-

Sumitama: Then she doesn’t have to be here, right? Ekyou-chan, I thought you cared about me!

Kashizaki: Sumitama-san, you’re crossing a line. Ekyou-chan can spend time with whoever she wants. I understand that Shionaga-san’s death-

Sumitama: [clamps hands over ears] Shut up! Shut up, shut up! I don’t want to hear about that!
Ekyou: Sumitama-chan…

She takes a few steps towards the smaller girl, then quicker ones as Sumitama starts to cry. Ekyou wraps Sumitama in an embrace, patting her hair down.

Ekyou: Just let me know what I can do to help you, okay? I’ll do anything to make it up to you, I promise.

Sumitama: … [sniffling]

Throwing a quick glance at us again, and without so much as a goodbye, Ekyou shepherds Sumitama out of the kitchen. More than anything, Ekyou looks… exhausted. Though she smiles at Sumitama, it’s more worried than reassuring. Frankly? It’s heartbreaking. I can’t believe so much happened to Sumitama in the past few days, and I don’t even want to know how she must be feeling right now.

Atsui and Kashizaki, though, simply look at each other seriously. Kashizaki, oddly enough, looks more angry than concerned.

Kashizaki: That’s fucked up.

Atsui: Immensely.

Chiyo: What? Isn’t it good that Ekyou-san wants to help Sumitama-san?

Kashizaki: There’s something called boundaries. I’m pretty sure Sumitama-san crossed like five. [blows out a breath] But obviously Ekyou-chan doesn’t want to stand up for herself, so it looks like the rest of us will have to. I’m going to give Sumitama-san a piece of my mind.

Atsui: Wait, maybe not now. Whether or not she’s being kind of unhealthy towards Ekyou-san, she’s still crying, and it’s a dick move to yell at someone who’s crying.

Chiyo: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.
Amal: I think Sumitama-san can be given the benefit of the doubt, too. Like you said, Shionaga-san did die a few days ago. And Ekyou-san…

**Amal sighs.**

Amal: I can’t say I know her as well as the rest of you do, but if she says she’s fine, it must be fine. Right?

Kashizaki: Sometimes people say that they’re fine with something just because they don’t know how to say they aren’t.

Kashizaki: [leans against table] But whatever. I won’t yell at Sumitama-san *now*, but I’ll be keeping tabs on those two. The rest of you ought to do the same. If something happens to Ekyou-chan because of this…

Kashizaki: I don’t think I could forgive myself.

Atsui: Me neither. But we’ll keep an eye out. Or, I will, anyway. Dunno about the rest of you.

Though Kashizaki still seems quietly furious, Atsui lets the yakisoba containers fall onto the table with a thud.

Atsui: Anyway, this isn’t going to eat itself.

Amal: I don’t think we can eat fourteen entire containers of yakisoba.

Atsui: We can try.

Atsui, Kashizaki, Amal, and I spend the next hour eating and making idle chatter. Kashizaki still seems more than a little irked over the situation with Ekyou, and, admittedly, I’m worried too. I know my first instinct is to make people happy, so I totally get where Ekyou is coming from, but… Is there a point at which you shouldn’t help someone? The idea of
actively ignoring someone who needs help is absolutely unthinkable to me. So does that mean helping Ekyou or Sumitama? Both?

People do poke into the kitchen from time to time, but for the most part they take their containers and leave. I guess it’s a busy day for everyone. Despite her mood, even Kashizaki cracks a smile when Atsui jokingly pointed to Amal and ended up hurling his chopsticks across the table. But after an hour passes and the only two portions left are going cold, Amal stands up.

Amal: I don’t think Ekyou-san and Sumitama-san are coming back. Should I put these in the fridge?

Atsui: Yeah. They’ll find it.

Amal: Cool. I’m gonna head out.

Kashizaki: Let me know if they’re still out there?

Amal: Yeah, will do. Chiyo?

Chiyo: I’ll stay for a bit!

Amal: Alright. I’ll see you around.

Amal places the containers in the fridge and leaves without further comment. As soon as they do, Kashizaki leans in, all anger forgotten.

Kashizaki: So.

Kashizaki: First names, huh.

Atsui: See, I told you last night. I ran into them, arguing, about whether Khalaf-san should spend
the night with Kumoshita-san. Absolutely ridiculous.

Kashizaki: Oh, so that’s why you showed up to breakfast together?

Chiyo: Guh.

**Does news travel that fast?? Am I never going to be safe to just hang out with Amal ever again??**

Chiyo: W-what about you two, huh??

Kashizaki: Just friends.

Atsui: I’m completely and utterly uninterested in dating anyone. Never presume I care about romance ever again.

Kashizaki: Mhm. Now we can just tease you about Khalaf-kun with no fear of retribution.

**Bullies.**

Kashizaki: I mean, as far as romantic options go, Khalaf-kun isn’t bad by any stretch. He’s kinda cute. Not my type, but cute.

Chiyo: Then what IS your type??

Kashizaki: Why would I tell you that?

Atsui: [coughs] Ekyou-san.

**Without blinking, Kashizaki whacks the back of Atsui’s head.**
Atsui: I’m RIGHT, though- STOP HITTING ME.

Kashizaki: I mean, yeah, she is cute, but judging from what we’ve seen today, I’m not sure if she’s ready for a relationship. Not sure if I am either. But she’s cute.

Atsui: Oooh, someone’s got a cruuuush- I SAID PLEASE STOP HITTING ME.

Kashizaki: No. So, Kumoshita-chan, what are you going to do about it?

Chiyo: About your crush on Ekyou-san?

**I give Atsui the high five he’s been waiting for. Kashizaki rolls her eyes.**

Kashizaki: No, about your crush on Khalaf-kun.

**Atsui redirects his high five to Kashizaki. She does not take it.**

Chiyo: Uh, nothing, I guess.

Kashizaki: Seriously? I think he might be into you too, y’know.

Chiyo: R-really?

Kashizaki: Do you have eyes? He’s not exactly subtle.

Chiyo: Stop teasing me.

Kashizaki: I’m serious.
Chiyo: I mean?? I guess?? Maybe??

Kashizaki: You sound less than thrilled.

Chiyo: Uh, well.

Chiyo: [sighs] I just don’t think this is the place or the time for a relationship. We’ve seen that people can die, and, I don’t know, it doesn’t seem appropriate.

Chiyo: Maybe in another time…?

And once again, I’m reminded of all those dreams I’ve… probably been having, but can’t really remember. And apparently, the ones that Amal has been having, too.

Atsui: That’s pretty sensible, actually. Good for you.

Kashizaki: Yeah, fair enough. But once we get out of here, you two had better make something happen.

Chiyo: Eheh…

Atsui and Kashizaki seem satisfied with the answer, and don’t press further. Thank goodness.

Kashizaki: [stands up] Okay, we should start cleaning up. Kumoshita-san, you can go if you want.

Chiyo: What? No! I want to help out!

Kashizaki: No, I have to clean anyway. It’s fine. You helped earlier with the mess I made.
Atsui: Don’t beat yourself up, Kikun.

Kashizaki: I’m not “beating myself up”. I’m repaying the favor.

Atsui: Okay, whatever. Kumoshita-san, it’s getting kinda late. Kikun and I can finish up.

Kashizaki: No, I’ll-

Atsui places a hand on her arm. They stare at each other for a long moment before Atsui blinks and shakes his head.

Atsui: Geez. Do you blink, ever?

Kashizaki: It’s the contact lenses.

Chiyo: Those are lenses??

Kashizaki: Did you think my eyes were just naturally bright yellow and huge?

Atsui: Well, I mean, no, but I didn’t think Bates-san’s eyes were naturally beady and snake-like either, and he got mad when I asked him, so I didn’t want to say anything!

Kashizaki: It’s a look. But fine, you can help. Even though you lost that staring contest.

Atsui: Yeah, thank you.

Chiyo: I can help too!

Kashizaki: Kumoshita-chan, leave. Atsui-kun’s already pushing it.
Atsui: We can handle it.

Chiyo: … If you’re sure, then. I’ll see you around?

Kashizaki: Yep.

With all of that settled, I finally leave the kitchen. It’s really dark out - how long have I spent in the kitchen, anyway? They say time flies when you’re having fun, and I’m really glad to have spent this afternoon with everyone. Though I’m still worried about Ekyou, and… oh, I almost forgot about Kashizaki’s outburst, too. Yeah, that’s concerning. Is anyone okay? At all? Ever? Considering our situation, probably not.

Although… all things considered, I’m really tired. It’s only early evening, despite everything that I’ve done today, but I should probably go to bed.

Sure enough, almost immediately after I lie down, I can already feel myself falling asleep.

…

I’m sitting in front of a television screen, flinching as I skip through the channels. News. Death. Reality TV. Death. Repeat. When did it get to the point where I can’t avoid any of this tragedy? When did the world become so… awful?

News. RTV. Cooking show? Animal show. More RTV. It’s the same as always-

- and I catch a glimpse of a face I’ve seen before

- and I’m trying to scroll back, to linger on them, to place where I’ve seen them

- and I don’t see them, but a thud catches my attention, and a sickening crunch
- and blood pools under the chair in which I sit, a body shoved under the seat

- and I’m reaching out to help, to comfort, to do anything

- and

I shoot up in bed in a cold sweat.

That- that dream, that wasn’t- was it a memory? There’s no way that was a memory. I’d- I’d remember that happening. Someone dying. Someone on a screen, on live television, dying for - for what? Entertainment? How could someone be so twisted to enjoy that?

I press a shaking hand to my chest and focus on my racing heartbeat. Slowly, I start to breathe again. It’s just a dream. It can’t hurt me. I’m still here.

Oh, god, I wish Amal were here. The idea of going to their room and asking to stay with them would seem almost appealing if it were not also supremely embarrassing. I mean, I doubt they’d judge, and I can only imagine what their nightmares look like, but…

...

There’s another shuffle of feet and voices yelling.

I’m sure I’m still dreaming again up until, too, there’s frantic pounding on my door.

???: OPEN UP! EVERYONE! WAKE THE FUCK UP!

Wait, that can’t be-?!

I open the door and shine my Parchment down the hall to see Sekisada - Sekisada, of all people - slamming on each bedroom door in turn.
Sekisada: Oh my god, how deeply do you guys SLEEP?? WAKE UP!!

Across the hall, another door opens. Kashizaki peeks out, bleary-eyed.

Kashizaki: Do you KNOW how late it is?

Sekisada: I- I don’t care! Please, oh my god, I don’t- I can’t-

Something on Sekisada’s face is reflecting Kashizaki’s room light. It takes me too long to realize that those are tears.

And at this hour…

Kashizaki seems to have come to the same conclusion.

Kashizaki: Who’s dead.

Sekisada: [scrubs face] Just- just go to the dining room. I can’t- I don’t- god, that’s fucked up. What the HELL.

Sure enough, Kashizaki’s Parchment suddenly buzzes. She holds it up as a message plays over the intercom, and we all wince as the lights blaze on.

Ariel: A body has been discovered! After a certain amount of time has passed, the class trial will begin. Please feel free to investigate to your heart’s content!

No. No, this can’t be happening. Not again.

All I can do is stand as motion erupts around me, as more people wake up and doors slam across the hall. I know there’s voices - people talking to me, people talking to each other,
people rushing to the dining room, the library, anywhere, anything, what does it matter, someone else is dead-

One face cuts through it all as they make their way over to me. Amal pushes through the rabble and, when they get to me, just looks me in the eye for a long moment. They hold out a hand; I take it.

It’s not until we pass the library that I realize that their hands are shaking, too.

Before we get to the dining room, with what feels like half the world already packed into the space, Amal lets go for just a moment. They examine me again.

Amal: Are you ready? Do you need a moment first?

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.

They nod and take my hand again as we walk into the room.

When I step into the dining room, I notice three things.

First: A set of ice skates has been set above the door, such that Amal has to duck under them to even enter.

Second: Two additional objects hang from the chandelier, the first being one of the speakers from the room meant for them.

Third: The second object is a body.
To be specific, that of Claudius Bates, the SHSL Violinist.

And my world continues to fracture.
Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 2 (Chapter 2) can be found here.
Throughout the history of humanity, one question bubbles up again and again as people are faced with reminders of their mortality. Of course, the only people who know the answers are those who are no longer able to tell us, which is perhaps the part of the allure - we’re driven by the all-too-human need to find answers to questions all-too-difficult to answer.

“What lies on the other side of life?”

In terms of classical interpretations, Greek mythology depicts the Underworld and a system of judgement for those who live heroic, despicable, or otherwise ordinary lives. The philosopher Dante proposed an entire series of hells, each suited to one of the Biblical sins - but I’ve always despised that interpretation, the idea that after a short mortal life comes an eternal condemnation to further torment.

Of course, most religions have some sort of doctrine pertaining to the question. Christianity, for one, enforces an idea of heaven and hell, with the criteria for entering these afterlives varying from sect to sect. Followers of Hinduism and Buddhism, in contrast, believe in reincarnation, with the end goal either being a good enough person to reach a higher caste or nirvana through shedding all earthly attachments. Then Shinto religion doesn’t dictate an afterlife, period, and the deceased’s spirit simply becomes part of their family’s guardian. If you ask me, all of these have their pros and cons, but even I’m not sure what I’d like to believe in.

Or, perhaps, after death comes nothing at all. Yet is an eternity of unknowing void much better than torture? Or, worse yet, simply ceasing to exist as if you and your consciousness had never been?

All of these thoughts (and so many more, about pain and grief and the terror of knowing that you’re about to die) race through my head, sending dark spots across my vision, all but
threatening to scrub out the sight in front of me.

Whatever comes after death, Bates must know now.

It’s up to the rest of us to avoid having to find out.

So I have to help.

I breathe deep again and again as slowly, finally, the dark spots retreat. It’s another few moments until I realize that I’ve been squeezing Amal’s hand so tightly that my knuckles have gone white. I’m about to apologize for nearly crushing their hand before they speak.

Amal: Hey. Are you still with me?

Chiyo: I’m… I think I’m fine.

They seem surprised to hear me speak, and honestly, I am too. Especially since my voice didn’t break, though I sound a lot more nervous than I’d like to sound. I try to break my grip, but they lock their fingers around mine before I can let go entirely.

Amal: Oh. Sorry.

Chiyo: No, it’s fine, I’m just worried that I’ll break your hand!

Amal: Don’t be. I think… I think I might need this. Right now. If that’s okay.

I… hadn’t even thought they’d need the comfort, considering how put together they always seem to be. Though, really, I’m glad to have them, too.

Amal turns back to the scene, looking back up at Bates - his corpse, rather, I realize with a pang - and adjusting their hat.
Amal: So… where to begin.

Chiyo: I can’t believe, of all people to die, it’d be… him.

Amal: Bates was pretty animated. I’m surprised, too.

They continue to look up, their expression a conflicting swirl of emotions.

Amal: Honestly, I’m mostly disgusted that someone died at all. Especially so soon after the motive was announced. But Bates...

Amal: … I don’t know. I don’t think I hated him, but I don’t think I hate anyone in this mansion. He was insufferable, yeah. But he was…

Amal: …

Amal: … …

Amal: … … … He was McRae-san’s friend, right?

Chiyo: They were close.

Amal: Well, he may have been insufferable, but he sure was McRae-san’s friend. And that’s got to count for something.

… They’re doing a terrible job of pretending they’re upset. I get the feeling that they’re doing this mostly for my benefit, though, so I don’t question it. Instead, they sweep their gaze across the otherwise empty room and the odd assortment of objects strewn about.

Amal: Alright. Are you okay with walking around?
Chiyo: I’m…

I think about the entire idea of walking under a dead body as it’s strung up on display, almost like a statue that may as well be ignored. My stomach lurches.

Chiyo: [quietly] I don’t think so.

Amal: That’s alright, there’s still plenty to talk about. For starters, Ariel’s file. May I…?

Chiyo: Oh, I can check it myself.

With my free hand, I pull out my Parchment and open the file.

The victim was Claudius Bates, SHSL Violinist. The time of death was 12:00 AM, and the body was first discovered at 1:45 AM by Sentarou Sekisada, Ryouji Atsui, and Tatsumaru Harai. The cause of death was strangulation via rope. The victim has no other injuries.

Strangulation. Strangulation, not his spine breaking. Strangulation isn’t choking, but specifically blood failing to reach one’s brain through the jugular artery. And if it takes up to seven minutes for a person to die of oxygen deprivation, then that means- that means Bates must have suffered a lot, in his last moments- possibly from a killer that wasn’t even THERE, by the looks of things.

Amal: Chiyo. CHIYO.

Amal: Are you okay?

Chiyo: I’m okay. I will be okay. I promise, I will be-
Amal: No, no, don’t push yourself. You don’t have to pretend be okay if you’re not actually. I’m here. I’ll always be here for you.

I focus on their words. Gradually, the world stops spinning. Just a little. But it’s better than nothing, and much better than my state a few seconds ago.

Chiyo: Thank you. For being here.

Amal: Of course. Is there anything I can do to help you…?

Chiyo: I don’t- I don’t want to look up. Tell me about the scene. Except for- except for him.

Amal squeezes my hand again and starts talking.

Amal: There’s those ice skates, first of all. It’s a little scary that they’re right over the door because of how sharp they are, but I don’t know what the point of them is if Bates was strung up on the chandelier. And obviously he wouldn’t be stupid enough to walk into the skates and die that way.

Chiyo: R-right. Okay.

Amal: And there’s broken pieces of wood all over the room, too. There’s two of them jammed into the wall, and they both look like they have a hook in the top. I don’t know what that looks like or where they could have come from.

Amal: Oh, and, uh. There’s a speaker hanging from the chandelier. A big one. It looks like it’s almost touching the table. I don’t know where it came from, but I haven’t spent much time in this part of the building, so…

They trail off. Geez… this case is already looking like it’ll be difficult. What does all of this miscellaneous stuff have to do with anything? This is hopeless. We’re all going to die-

No, don’t think like that! I said I’d help! I need to focus!
Chiyo: Okay. Alright. What else can I do?

Amal: Do you see anything else interesting? [hurriedly] That’s not up, of course.

Chiyo: I, uh…

I cast my gaze around the room, and then to the floor. There’s what seems to be a piece of paper on the ground? Judging by how trampled it is, no one else seems to have paid it any mind. I pick it up easily and look it over. Two lines in, my blood runs cold.

Amal: What’s that?

Chiyo: Amal, you didn’t happen to write anything yesterday, did you…?

Amal: Wait. What are you- no, of course I didn’t, why do you ask?

Chiyo: This is in your handwriting.

Amal’s eyes widen and they snatch the note from me. They skim it before their expression settles.

Amal: Oh. Oh, no, this is cut and pasted together. I must have left my papers in the library from a few nights ago. I didn’t write this.

Indeed, the words seem hastily put together, with the discrepancies between different parts of Amal’s handwriting - all the loops and jagged lines - becoming glaringly obvious with each reread. Right. It wasn’t them. Of course this wasn’t made by them.
Chiyo: What does it say? I think it’s in English, and I know I can probably read it, it’s just…

Amal: It’s just what?

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: … You have really pretty handwriting. It’s very nice to look at, y’know? My English sucks, but I love how much personality your writing has! It’s very nice.

Amal: But it’s illegible?

Chiyo: Eheheh. Um.

Amal: [sighs] Right. Honestly, I don’t know if I can read some of this myself without the words in context. I’ll try.

Amal: … “Meet at the dining room at midnight tonight. It’s about the cameras.”

Amal: The cameras?

Chiyo: … Oh. Oh my god.

Amal: [narrows eyes] Is there something you’re not telling me?

Chiyo: No! I mean, yes, but.

Though I can feel them glaring at me, my gaze flickers to the walls. Tucked in a corner, so dark as to be almost invisible against the walls, is yet another one of those security cameras.
Chiyo: Not now.

Amal: What do you mean, not now? This is important to the case, and evidently it’s important in general-

Chiyo: Amal, I wouldn’t hide things from you if I didn’t have a reason, okay? I’ll tell you later. I promise.

They hesitate, but finally relent when I wrap my pinky finger around theirs.

Amal: Okay. Alright. I’ll take your word for it.

Amal: But I’m taking this note with me.

Harai: What note?

The two of us turn around as Harai approaches us, their Parchment in hand as always. They simply nod a greeting, then seem to glance down at the note in Amal’s hand.

Harai: Oh. That. I couldn’t read it, so I left it alone. What does it say?

Amal fills them in, even about the fact that the note is pieced together in their own handwriting. Harai doesn’t seem to react to the news, but their head turns the tiniest amount to the same camera that I noticed earlier. Something tells me that they had noticed the cameras before even Bates and simply failed to mention them to anyone.

Harai: Good to know.

Amal: Does everyone know about this camera thing except me? What’s with that??

Harai: Well, I have a mask obscuring most of my field of vision, so I don’t know. Maybe if you had eyes, you would have figured it out by now.
Amal: I have eyes!

Harai: Use them.

With Amal sputtering something about needing glasses or being blind, Harai tilts their head upward. They seem more contemplative than anything.

Harai: It’s too bad we can’t reach his body.

Amal: How did it get up there to begin with?

I can already feel myself tuning out for the sake of my own mental state. Nevertheless, I hear every word of the conversation.

Harai: If I had to guess… I think this was meant to be a weighted snare.

Amal: So the speaker is the weight?

Harai: And these wooden sticks could be the trigger.

Amal: The what?

Harai: Here. Give me that paper. And that pencil. The one behind your ear.

They do so, and Harai spends a moment sketching a very quick diagram on the back of the paper. The static clears from my eyes long enough to take it in as Harai taps the note.
Harai: See, it’s a hanging snare. Except the trigger is in the wall instead of on the ground, but it’s the same idea. The way that it works is that a victim gets caught on the noose here. While they struggle, they hit this trigger in the wall, which was holding the weight in place. As the weight falls, the victim is pulled up. If it doesn’t break the victim’s neck, it’ll usually strangle them.

That’s… sick. That’s completely twisted. The fact that they wanted to kill someone - set an entire trap to kill someone - the fact that someone actively plotted to make their victim suffer in death… That’s absolutely disgusting.

Amal braces my shoulder against theirs and I sag against them. Faintly, I can feel them drape an arm around my shoulder. If Harai is surprised, they don’t show it; they just hand the note back to Amal.

Amal: Why do you know so much about snares?

Harai: I was reading about hunting earlier today.

Amal: … That’s incredibly suspicious.
Harai: Not to kill anyone. I was just thinking about… stuff. After something that happened today.

**What happened earlier today…? That’s right. Everett’s incident with that bow. So what made Harai decide to look into hunting?**

I feel like they’re several steps ahead of the rest of us.

Harai: Besides, I’m innocent according to Ariel’s file.

Amal: Right. Okay.

Harai: Have you investigated the second wing yet?

Amal: I haven’t really investigated it at all.

**Harai heads across the room, then turns back to Amal and myself somewhat belatedly.**

Harai: You can come if you want.

Amal: Thanks. I think?

As Harai leaves, I finally push off against Amal’s shoulder. They startle at the sudden movement but grab my hand again, posture drooping.

Amal: Do you want to follow them?

I nod wordlessly and they pull me along, careful to stand between me and the center of the room all the while. It’s not until we’re in the second hallway that I can finally breathe again.
Amal waits for me as I recover, though they cast glances at the nearest side room. When I can think again, I catch the strains of conversation that they must have been hearing. They make a move towards the door but hesitate at the last moment before I step forward.

In the end, I’m the one who ends up opening the door to the room - one of the empty ones, from the looks of it, all too dark at this hour despite the blazing lights. Kashizaki and Atsui seem engrossed in conversation, while Murdock stands defensively by McRae, who looks more lost than anything.

… I would be, too, if I lost my best friend.

McRae: Stop looking at me like that. I’m not the dead one.

Amal: How are you doing?

McRae: Fine. I guess. It hasn’t hit yet.

Chiyo: I’m so sorry for your loss. I know that doesn’t even begin to cover it, but...

McRae: Whatever.

Murdock: Are you sure you should be investigating?

McRae: I want to make sure we don’t die, Ti.

Maybe it’s because of the early hour, or the fact that Bates is dead, but there’s an edge in his voice that I haven’t heard before.

McRae: And before you say anything, don’t tell me that I would be better off on the sidelines, and don’t fucking tell me that it’s about time I got my act together, and don’t you dare tell me that it’s good that he died because he was holding me back or whatever. I don’t want to hear it.
Murdock: [recoils] Why would I say any of that? That’s- I don’t think any of that about you. You’re your own person. I trust that you know what you’re doing.

McRae: Do you really?

Murdock: Yes, really! Where is any of this coming from? I know Bates died, but-

McRae: I said I don’t want to hear it right now.

Amal: … Are you sure you’re up to investigate?


Murdock: I-

McRae: [turns to me] Kumoshita-san, Ti and I were in this second wing all day this afternoon. After that conversation we had in the kitchen.

Murdock: Don’t just tell Khalaf about that-

McRae: I’m not talking to you, Ti. [to me] Okay? I sure as hell didn’t murder my best friend.

「 EVIDENCE: McRae’s Testimony 」

… Wow! Wow okay there’s a lot going on here! This seems more related to the argument McRae and Murdock had this morning instead of the case itself, though I’m sure that can’t be helpful. So I really don’t even know how I’d begin to defuse this situation!

It doesn’t seem like I’ll get a chance to step in, anyway, as Murdock just visibly gives up with her cousin’s rebuttal.
Murdock: … Fine. I see how it is. I’m just trying to help.

McRae: Then stop. You’re the one who followed me in here, anyway.

Murdock: Well, I was actually trying to investigate, instead of just being bad-tempered. If you don’t want to be around me, then leave.

McRae: [mimicking] Well, I’m actually in significant emotional turmoil, because my friend just died. So.

Murdock: …

McRae: [sighs] Listen, we can sort this out later, but can you please just… stop being so overbearing? For like five minutes? I need to find out who killed Claude.

Murdock: I’m not trying to be overbearing.

McRae: Then maybe you need to check yourself or something. I don’t know. I don’t know anything.

McRae: I’m leaving.

And he does so, slamming the door behind him. Murdock just gestures wordlessly for more than a few seconds before following him, her steps brisk and clipped.

Only when Murdock leaves the room do I realize that Kashizaki and Atsui have long since stopped their conversation. They seem just as perplexed and concerned as I feel.

Atsui: Hi, so like, what the fuck was that, actually?

Amal: I don’t. I don’t actually know.
Kashizaki: McRae-san got here first, then Murdock-san came in. Then you two. I think that might have been what set them off.

Atsui: Yeah, that’s… I don’t know what’s going on with those two either. Haven’t spoken to them much, but Murdock-san seems convinced that I’m evil or something like that. Does she, like, refer to you guys by last names only, too?

Amal: Definitely. [sighs] Though I don’t remember her being nearly this bad.

Atsui: I think she’s trying to comfort him. Key word being trying. Not succeeding. Anyway, what can we do for you two?

Chiyo: Did you find anything interesting?

Kashizaki: [shakes head] Not much. There’s a speaker. There’s ice skates. There’s wood bits. Bates-san is dead. It’s unfortunate, but I sort of saw it coming.

Kashizaki: [lowers voice] Though, I don’t want to bring this up to McRae-san or anything, but… I think he’s the only one who really cares that Bates-san died.

Chiyo: I care.

Kashizaki: Kumoshita-chan, you would care no matter who died. Can you honestly say that you’re torn up about Bates-san in particular?

Chiyo: …

Kashizaki is right. I’d be upset no matter what. I don’t want to put a quantifier on how much I appreciate my classmates, anyway. That’s heartless.

But am I upset for Bates…?
Amal: By the way, and I’m sorry to cut into this so abruptly, but I wanted to confirm alibis. I know we all had that cooking thing in the afternoon, right?

Kashizaki: Mhm. You’d better remember that this time, Khalaf-kun.

Amal: R-right. [adjusts hat] That’s fair.

Kashizaki: And to be clear, that would be the four of us and Ekyou-chan, along with Sumitama-san. Got it?

Chiyo: Got it!

EVIDENCE: Kitchen Events

Amal: Is there anything else of note to see here, or…?

Kashizaki: I think that’s about it. This room doesn’t have anything interesting in it.

Amal: … Should it?

Atsui: Some of them do. You’ll see. I bet Harai-san has it all written down.

Chiyo: Yeah! I can send you the notes, Amal.

Amal: Thanks. Maybe not now, like you’ve said. But I appreciate it.

At the exchange, Kashizaki’s gaze flicks down to where my hand is still intertwined with Amal’s. If she has anything to say, she doesn’t say it.
Kashizaki: By the way, and this is going to sound awful, but I kind of wish Sekisada-san had waited for tomorrow instead waking us all up. [yawns] I don’t know how we’re going to run a trial at this hour. I’m exhausted.

Atsui: I don’t know what you’re talking about. Don’t you feel so awake after Sekisada-san screamed in your faces?

Kashizaki: [shoves Atsui halfheartedly] Hey, shut up, someone’s dead.

Atsui: You started it with the poorly timed jokes. [to Amal and me] I think Kikun and I should go check out the dining room again. I feel like we missed something obvious. Something right beneath our feet. Y’know?

Amal discreetly crams the note into their back pocket.

Chiyo: Have you seen Harai-san come this way? We were supposed to be following them, I think.

Kashizaki: [shrugs] They didn’t come in here. Maybe they’re further down the hall?

Amal: Alright. Thanks.

Amal and I bid Kashizaki and Atsui farewell as we each leave the room and head our separate ways. Atsui and Kashizaki leave for the dining room again, while the two of us turn in the opposite direction.

None of the other rooms in this particular hallway seem disturbed, so we head straight through the sitting room towards the balcony. Neither of us speak, which is something of a welcome reprieve from whatever just happened in the other room, what with Murdock and McRae and everything. I think I could do without conversation for a bit.

…Not that I don’t like hearing what Amal has to say, though.

As Amal opens the door to the balcony, I realize with a start that this is the first time that I’ve
actually been out here. What’s so cool about it that Sekisada and Bazhanov insist on spending so much time out here?

Apparently, not much. It’s a pretty simple patio, with what seems to be white concrete under an ordinary white railing. Though the view is expansive and the night clear, it is unfortunately still WAY too dark to actually see anything of note. I guess I’ll have to brave the balcony’s constant occupants sometime during the day if I want a better view of our surroundings.

Yet someone already seems to be outside - Harai glances over at the both of us as we walk out, a gentle breeze rustling their cloak. I take what must be my first breath of fresh air in about a week as they nod an acknowledgement, still typing away at their Parchment.

Harai: There you are. Where were you earlier?

Chiyo: We were talking to some other people!

Harai: Did you at least collect alibis while you were at it?

Amal: Yeah. Atsui-san, Kashizaki-san, Ekyou-san, Chiyo, and myself were in the kitchen all afternoon. McRae-san and Murdock-san just say they were together, whatever that means.

Harai: Hm.

They turn back to their Parchment and type in the relevant information. Amal shifts uncomfortably, kicking at the ground.

Amal: So did you find anything interesting?

Harai: Not really. [still typing] The speaker in the dining room is from the room with the speakers, obviously. And the ice skates are from the ice skating room. Though really, all of that is a given. Whoever set up this trap had a lot of time to collect things from this area.
Amal: But that doesn’t explain the wood pieces, does it?

Harai: Surprisingly, it does.

Chiyo: Wait, really?

Harai: [nods] The paintbrushes from that first room we looked into are missing. I would assume those were broken down into the wood pieces.

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UPDATED: Paintbrushes
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Huh… I mean, it does make sense and all, but it’s becoming increasingly clear that whoever prepared this snare... really prepared for it. Like, a lot. If only someone had caught onto the killer earlier…

Amal: Have you seen anything else of note? Out here, or anything?

Harai: Not much. But you can sort of see Bazhanov-shi and Sekisada-shi’s Parchments. [points] It’s very dark, though.

Amal: … Their what?

Chiyo: Oh, uh… they apparently threw their Parchments off the balcony a couple of days ago.

Amal: Wait, but.

They blink, evidently distressed at the lack of logical sense the action makes.

Amal: But, but… Why would you??

Chiyo: [winces] Uh, I don’t know either! I don’t know if anyone does, actually.
Harai: I sure don’t. [surveys the ground] It doesn’t matter right now, anyway. Though, if you do see Sekisada-shi, would you mind asking him how exactly he saw Bates-shi’s body if he didn’t have a light?

Chiyo: Oh. [blinks] That’s a good one.

Harai: Mhm.

They seem pretty content in not saying anything further, still typing away on their device. After an awkward few seconds, they seem to realize that Amal and I are still here.

Harai: Go do something else. I’m just writing everything down.

Harai: Oh, but if you find any new information, could one of you send it to me? I want to keep an evidence list.

Amal: Of course. We’ll keep you posted.

Chiyo: Your evidence is really well put-together, Harai-san. You’re really good at this!

Harai: … Stop. You speak too highly of me. I’m just doing what I can to help.

Harai: I’m going back inside.

Without a further word, they stride back into the sitting room, letting the screen door slam shut behind them. As abrupt as their exit was, I’m… not actually sure how they felt about that comment? Maybe they’re just really, really bad at accepting compliments.

Amal and I don’t spend much time outside, only glancing over the railing to see the sad remains of two indeed-smashed Parchments. I don’t know what I was expecting.
When we go back inside, Harai is perched on the piano bench, completely and utterly ignoring the two of us. Since we’ve seen everything on this end of the mansion, Amal and I head back through the hall. I don’t realize until we’re at the door again that we’re back at the dining room - and with that, back at Bates’s body - but I don’t even have time to think about it before Amal pushes the doors open and heads in, seemingly forgetting the fact. I do my best not to look up.

Unfortunately, it’s a little hard to do that with someone already standing at the other door and gawking at the chandelier. Sekisada flinches back at the sight of Amal and me, wrenching his eyes away from Bates’s body.

Sekisada: What.

Chiyo: What are you doing here?

Sekisada: I’m investigating so we don’t get ourselves killed, dumbass. Aren’t you two always complaining about me never doing anything?

Amal: You’re right. So I’m surprised you’re here.

Sekisada: Well, sue me for being freaked out! I was just trying to get to the stupid balcony, I didn’t expect to find a dead body!

Amal: Why were you going to the balcony?

Sekisada: Why should I tell you that?? You’re just going to accuse me of killing Bates-shi!

Chiyo: No…? You’re listed as one of the people who- who found the body. You’re innocent, Sekisada-san, but we need to know what you were doing out so late anyway.

Sekisada recoils as if he’s been slapped. I know he’s a jerk and awful to be around, but… I’m trying to be nice. He’s still human, after all. And like he said, he was the first person to discover Bates, so…
Sekisada: I couldn’t sleep, so I went to take a walk. I thought going outside would help.

Amal: People do that?

Sekisada: Well, I mean, all the lights are turned off at night, so what the hell was I gonna do? Read? I have insomnia, asshole. YOU try being tired all the time with nothing to do.

That explains a lot about his temperament, actually.

Sekisada: So I was walking through the dining room, almost ran into those stupid skates over the door - still have NO clue what those are for - and I thought “hey, that’s not right”, and I looked up and there’s an entire fucking dead body. And then I went to wake everyone else up.

As much as I hate to admit it, that seems plausible enough. I’m about to tell him so when I remember the favor Harai asked. I guess I’d better get that out of the way.

Chiyo: How did you see him if you didn’t have a light source?

In a rare moment of cooperation, Sekisada digs a keychain flashlight out of his vest pocket and holds it up. I catch a glimpse of a red jagged motif on its monochrome surface. Somehow, it seems familiar…? I can’t place it, but it makes me uneasy.

Sekisada: I got it from the gachapon thing. [clicks it on and off] There, are you happy now? I thought you said I’m innocent.

Amal: We still need to learn everything about the case so we can figure out who isn’t innocent.

Sekisada: Fine. Whatever.

「 EVIDENCE: Sekisada’s Testimony 」

He folds his arms, still glancing back up at Bates. There’s a definite panic in his expression,
but as soon as I see it, he starts talking again.

Sekisada: I just keep thinking. If I had gotten here an hour earlier…

Sekisada: [shakes head] That could have been me. The only reason I’m alive is because I got here too late.

Chiyo: Well…

Sekisada: Don’t say that you’re glad it’s not me. I know what you’re thinking.

Chiyo: That’s not what I was going to say!

Sekisada: Sure. Keep lying to yourself.

Sekisada: I’m just… I’m gonna go. I don’t even know. Whatever. Have fun investigating.

Amal: Didn’t you just say you were investigating, too?


He leaves the room quickly, refusing to look either of us in the eye as he brushes by us in the direction we just came from. That’s… well. At least he’s shaping up, I guess.

As Amal mutters something about more investigation and heads in the other direction, ducking under the skates, I still don’t look up while I relay the information from Sekisada to Harai. After I hit send and shove my Parchment back into my bag, I take a last glance at Bates’ body, limp and lifeless. And as faint as I feel just looking at it, I, too, make it out of the room. I take a deep breath before I look up again. It looks like I might be shaping up, too.

Is that really a good thing?
I think I must have lingered in the dining room for too long, though, because when I leave I catch a glimpse of Amal all the way in the living room. And the auditory not-so-equivalent of a glimpse made of shouting. Shouting from someone I didn’t expect to hear it from.

Caliban: For the last time, NO, you are not permitted to burn that!

Chisaki: And for the last time, “you just can’t” isn’t really a good reason for telling me no!

I step into the living room to find the darker bird perched on a couch, looking surprisingly furious considering his normal lack of expression. Across from him, Chisaki drags a bundle on the ground, which I immediately recognize as the bow from this morning. Amal stands apart from all this, expression somewhere between awed and bewildered as the other two argue back and forth.

Chiyo: What are you two doing?

Chisaki: Oh, good, you’re here! I’m trying to burn this, but this stupid bird won’t let me for some reason it’s not telling me!

Caliban: I don’t need a reason! I run this killing game! I am the law!

Chisaki: Fuck the law! This caused emotional damage to Rett-chan, the bow goes. Anyway, it’s not like anyone could kill someone with it now that the bowstring’s gone-

Amal: The bowstring’s gone? … Wait, what was that last bit about Everett-san?

Chisaki: Not important right now, dude! But yeah, the bowstring is gone. I don’t know, maybe it’s in that whole mess of stuff in the dining room? Whatever.

Caliban: Missing bowstring or no missing bowstring, you are NOT going to burn that! I won’t permit it!
Chiyo: Um, Caliban, didn’t you say that you were okay with property damage? Like Chisaki said, there’s… a lot going on in the dining room.

Caliban: Stay out of it, Daydreamer. [eyes flash] This has nothing to do with property damage.

Chisaki: I have no clue what you’re talking about so your argument is doing absolutely nothing to convince me otherwise!

Caliban: Don’t you have a murder investigation to attend to?

Chisaki: Uh, yeah, but when else am I going to be able to chuck this thing into an open fire before someone finds it again?

Caliban: Never. Should I make it a rule? Is that what it’ll take to get you to stop asking??

A loud ping interrupts the conversation. I open my Parchment to find a new rule:

RULE #14: Do NOT destroy the black kyūdō bow.

Wow. He was actually serious.

Chisaki: Well, what are you gonna do if I break it? You already cut off my hand!

Caliban: Cut off your other hand, obviously??

Chisaki: What if I set off a trap like the one in the dining room, huh? Who would you punish then?

Caliban: You.

Chisaki: Okay, what if I got Harai-san to do it?
Caliban: Then they’d be punished. And also you.

Chisaki: Seriously? You’d even punish accomplices?

Caliban: [sarcastic] No, Stumpy, you’re special. Mostly because you WON’T SHUT UP ABOUT THIS. Just leave it alone! It’s not hard!

The way Caliban argues is, strangely, almost frantic. Though he doesn’t seem distressed, exactly, he seems poised to just fly over and seize the bow from Chisaki already. I guess this bow must be really important to someone behind the scenes. Or maybe to Caliban himself?

… No, that would be strange. What use would a robot bird have for a kyūdō bow?

Across the room, Amal jerks a “come on” motion with their head and starts towards the bedroom hallway. Since I know I’m not going to get a word in edgewise, I dash to follow them. The last I hear of the argument is something about tossing Caliban himself into the fire.

As we walk, I mull over everything we’ve learned so far. Nothing aside from the obvious crime scene evidence seems extraordinarily relevant to the case, which is more than a little worrying. Surely there has to be some missing alibi, some possible motive…?

Oh! That’s right! The motive! If someone killed someone else, they would lose all memory of what happened here, right?

「 EVIDENCE: Motive 」

At the meeting this morning (was it really only this morning?), everyone was talking about how it didn’t seem like that big of a deal and how no one would kill for it. I don’t think anyone would be selfish enough to do that, right?

… But someone who created such an impersonal mechanism to murder someone, I feel, must
be extremely selfish if they didn’t even care who died because of it.

Amal’s stride falters as we reach the library. I glance over as they stare at the door, then finally let out a sigh that shakes their entire frame. They mumble something about “might as well” and push the doors open, leaving me to follow.

Two people, oddly enough, are already in the room. Both Everett and Bazhanov stare at what’s probably Everett’s Parchment, considering he tossed his off the entire balcony. While Bazhanov’s expression remains as decidedly neutral as always, Everett frowns slightly, redirecting her gaze to Amal and me as we walk in. She jabs a finger at the device, the gesture almost accusatory if she did not look so confused.

Everett: This is the single most arbitrary and stupid rule change in the history of literally ever.

Behind her, Bazhanov stifles a laugh. Despite herself, Everett’s lip curls upward.

Everett: No, I’m serious, why would you interrupt an investigation to say this? That’s like? I thought something important was going on.

Amal: Caliban just put the rule in so that Chisaki-san wouldn’t burn it. What’s that all about, anyway?

I open my mouth to say something like, “let’s maybe not talk about that” or “I’ll tell you later”, but Everett just waves it off, completely unbothered.

Everett: Nothing. Nothing important, anyway. What are you guys doing in the library?

Amal: I could be asking you the same question. Do you have alibis?

Everett: Hm. [taps chin] Would this be for the morning, or for the afternoon?

Amal: How about both?
Everett: Sure. [points to me] Kumoshita-san and I were in the sitting room hanging out. Harai-san and Chisaki-chan came by after a bit, then Sekisada-san and Bazhanov-san.

Amal: Huh. Did you have fun?

Bazhanov: Only after Sen and Chiyo left, unfortunately. [to me] After Aster recovered, she, Tatsumaru, Tsukino, and I went to the room with all of the board games. We played Monopoly.

Chiyo: No Scrabble?

Bazhanov: Aster would have killed us if we did that.

Everett: [sighs] It’s my burden as a human being.

Amal: Wait, so what happened to Sekisada-san? Did he just leave?

Bazhanov: No, Sen came back at around 2 in the afternoon. As it turns out, he’s the best of all of us at Monopoly.

Everett: But that’s not saying much! You landed on Boardwalk and you just didn’t buy it!


Amal: Back to alibis. Did anyone leave the room at all during all of that?

Everett: Not that I’m aware of…

Bazhanov: Oh, yes, actually.
Everett: Shoot. Really?

Bazhanov: You were too busy counting your properties and struggling with understanding how mortgages work.

Amal: Let me guess. You don’t know who left the room.

Bazhanov: I wrote it down in anticipation of this exact scenario, actually.

Amal: Really?

Bazhanov: Mhm.

Despite Bazhanov’s confidence, he makes no move whatsoever towards answering Amal’s implicit question of who left the room when.

Amal: So…

Bazhanov: It’s on a paper in my room. I’ll bring it for the trial, if it helps at all. Though it probably won’t. None of the absences were longer than about half an hour each, though, and they always came back. [tilts head] All of them were presumably for the kitchen, which I’m sure you remember, since you were there. I’m sure you can verify who did and didn’t show up.

Amal frowns at the passive aggression but, perhaps wisely, chooses not to comment. If I remember correctly, the only people who didn’t actually pick up food were Ekyou and Sumitama. Even Harai dropped by, though I doubt they ate in front of anyone. So… I guess the people that left weren’t lying about where they went??

Everett: Well, I went to the kitchen. Besides, half an hour isn’t really long enough to set up that kind of… whatever it is in the dining room.

Amal: Unless people were working together…?
Everett: I really don’t know why they would be. I sure wasn’t doing anything to help all of that.

Bazhanov: And neither was I. But those are our testimonies.

Everett: If you need any further proof, I’m pretty sure Tsukino yelled something about tears of rage staining the carpet after Sekisada-san bankrupted her, so you could check for those.

At least we have some alibis! Even though these are nothing I didn’t know already. Unless Sumitama or Ekyou have particularly revolutionary testimony, I don’t think this case will be as simple to see through as the last one.

… I hope that this doesn’t set a precedent for future cases. Or that there’s future cases at all.

Amal: Well, thanks anyway, I guess.

Bazhanov: Anytime. And any other time you’d like to play games with us…

Amal: As long as Everett-san is there? Hard pass.

Everett: Good. Less competition.

Chiyo: Especially for Monopoly.

Everett: That’s the point.

Bazhanov mumbles something about needing to double check the crime scene again, and
Everett follows him out of the room. With that conversation concluded, Amal drifts to the tables. It’s pretty obvious what they’re looking at, considering that their stack of papers from a few days ago has been flipped through and apparently thrown to the floor, each page scattered across the table and floor. As they stand over the mess, hands balled into fists, they’re almost shaking.

My heart sinks as I pick up the first page. Random letters and words have been clipped from the text, and it doesn’t even look like most of them were used - for every letter from the note in Amal’s pocket, at least three or four others lie on the ground. The artistry inherent in their handwriting, all destroyed without a second thought.

Amal: This is…

Chiyo: This is so unfair to you.

Amal: What?

Chiyo: You spent so long writing all of that. It’s yours. It should be yours. It’s not just the fact that you wrote it, but the fact that it was all of YOUR frustrations and worries, the fact that someone went through it without asking you, and took it apart, again without asking you, for the purpose of killing someone…

Amal: Chiyo.

Chiyo: They didn’t even have to do that! There are magazines in this library, they could have used the letters from those or even just standard Japanese. I’ve seen Sekisada-san read magazines here and I know for a fact that he never puts anything away, they could definitely have found the words in some of the books-

Amal: Chiyo, it’s really not that big of a deal to me.

Chiyo: But aren’t you embarrassed that they read through it all??

Amal: Well, I mean, yeah, who wouldn’t be? But apparently they weren’t reading too closely if they just cut out all the letters. I’m pretty sure I mentioned cameras or just the word “me” in there
at some point in all of that. Like you said, the handwriting looks really strange next to each other. That would have been easily fixed if the person who made the note just used the word in the note.

Amal: I don’t think they cared what I had to say, and I’m fine with that.

Chiyo: Yeah, but…

That’s exactly what’s frustrating me! Amal poured so much time and emotion into their writing, and the killer just- didn’t care?! They didn’t care about the fact that they were using something so personal to another person in order to kill a third party?? How is Amal not upset about this?

Before I can struggle to further put together what I’ve actually already said, Amal’s expression softens. They take my hand again, the gesture much more confident than it was when we walked through the halls after the body announcement. Was that really just an hour ago? It already feels like days.

Amal: But clearly it’s bothering you. And we can talk about it later if it’s still a problem, okay?

Chiyo: Okay. [closes eyes and breathes in] Okay. Yes. We still need to investigate, right?

Amal: Unfortunately.

Chiyo: And unless Ekyou-san and Sumitama-san have really interesting testimony…

Amal: [frowns] Yes, I’ve been thinking about that, too. Everyone has an alibi with another person being present at the same time. It doesn’t seem like anyone would have the time to set up such an elaborate trap.

Chiyo: Yeah, unless…

Amal: Unless?
Chiyo: [quietly] Unless someone’s lying.

Amal doesn’t have an answer for that. I don’t think I would in their place, either.

In the lull, the intercom crackles to life. I look up as an announcement plays, and- oh great Caliban sounds more pissed than usual.

Caliban: Investigation’s over, please heed the new rule, get to the fireplace in the next 10 minutes or suffer the unnamed consequences. And try not to pass out. Not naming names, but you know who you are.

Caliban: AND FOR THE LAST TIME, STUMPY, PUT THAT DOWN.

Caliban: Thank you.

The intercom dies like it started, with that same crackle of feedback. The announcement seems to shake Amal out of their stupor and sets their determined expression in place.

Amal: Next time we investigate -

Chiyo: Don’t say next time. We don’t want a next time.

Amal: [nods] Right. If we investigate again, we absolutely cannot end at the library. I did that last time and I’m already sensing a pattern.

Chiyo: You don’t have to come here at all if you don’t want to!

Amal: Yeah, but there’s always someone in here. [sighs] There really isn’t much to do in this building, is there.

We leave the library, only to hear footsteps from the other hall.
Sumitama: Wait! Wait for me!

Sumitama runs up to the two of us, glasses off-kilter. She pushes them up as, at a slower pace, Ekyou walks behind her, looking more exhausted than she should be for waking up in the middle of the night.

Sumitama: Oh, good, you’re here! Did you find anything to discuss? For the trial?

Chiyo: Um... yeah! I think. Did you?

Sumitama: Nothing that other people didn’t find, geheh. [hangs head] Sorry…

Amal: Well, it’s a little late for that. What were you two even doing on this side of the building? Isn’t all the evidence in the second wing?

Sumitama: Huh?

Ekyou: [completely emotionless] We weren’t doing much. Did you need to ask us anything?

Amal: Uh…

Something tells me that Sumitama isn’t being entirely truthful about investigation. And by that, I mean I don’t think she did any at all. A few hours ago, I would have blamed it on the fact that Shionaga had died a few days ago, but from Ekyou’s expression…

If I had to guess, Sumitama probably asked Ekyou for emotional support and neither of them got much investigation done at all. And I feel like if I asked Ekyou if she was happy with that, she would probably say yes, but at this point I don’t think I would believe her.

As much as I want to help, we still need to get back to the fireplace. Whatever I want to ask these two about, it’ll have to wait.
Assuming we don’t die before then.

I take Amal’s hand and pull them towards the living room. Sumitama gets the hint and follows, while Ekyou trails behind us. I try to keep my tone as light as possible.

Chiyo: What were you doing all afternoon, Sumitama-san?

Sumitama: Oh! Um, I was in the atrium. Working on the flowers again. [brighter] Did you know? Apparently, those seeds were fresh! They germinated yesterday!

Chiyo: That’s great!

I hope I don’t sound as fake as I think I do, and even Amal furrows their brow at the amount of energy I’m trying to muster. They say nothing as Sumitama babbles on.

Sumitama: Yeah! I checked the package, and they said they grow well in full sun, so if the weather clears up, they should grow quickly! It might be a few weeks before they have flowers, but they’re coming along well!

Amal: Were you alone?

Sumitama: Oh, um. Bates-san actually came in when I was gardening, and he talked at me for a while, but… I kind of ignored him. I probably should have talked to him more, but…

Amal: I honestly can’t blame you. [sighs] I’m upset that he died, but I’d be upset if anyone died. Bates-san, though…

Sumitama: Mm, yeah. He just… wasn’t pleasant to be around. [huffs] He was so fake, you know? Asking all these questions about my flowers, but I could tell he just wanted to talk about his violin stuff. Even though we hadn’t talked before.

Even Amal looks appalled by Sumitama’s sudden brutal honesty. I’d be lying if I said I
Chiyo: Hey, uh, please don’t speak ill of the dead.

Amal: Right. Sorry.

Sumitama: Do you believe in ghosts, Kumoshita-san?

I grit my teeth to ignore the nausea this conversation is starting to give me.

Chiyo: I believe in something. Whatever it is, I don’t think you should make it mad.

Ekyou: Of course not. We’ll stop talking about it.

Ekyou’s tone closes further discussion. Sumitama mumbles something about not really meaning what she said before, too, going quiet. I’m still quietly fuming - regardless of the person someone was before they died, their passing isn’t an excuse to suddenly air all your grievances.

As we approach the fireplace, Amal turns back to Sumitama.

Amal: So when did you leave the atrium?

Sumitama: Huh? Oh, after Bates-san left… around 6?

Amal: And was there a reason you left, or...

Sumitama: I had just realized Ekyou-chan wasn’t around, and I went to go look for her! I mean, if you couldn’t find Kumoshita-san, you would be worried, too, right?
Amal: I mean, I guess.

Sumitama: And I’m glad she’s okay! Right, Ekyou-chan?

Ekyou: … Yeah.

Ekyou: You could say that.

Sumitama: Is something wrong?

Ekyou: [shakes head] No, nothing. It’s just late is all.

Sumitama: Right…

I'm starting to understand Kashizaki worrying about Ekyou. But, again, it’ll have to wait. I just hope we can all remain friends after this is resolved.

The four of us approach the fireplace. Though the people already there do talk in bits and pieces about the case and the day’s events, it’s all I can do to focus on the ground beneath me and try to control my breathing as I type evidence out to Harai. One person just died. Before the morning breaks, at least one more person will be dead.

I can’t believe I’m hoping that a person dies - what would my parents say if they saw me? What would my brothers think if they heard me say that? I’m trying to justify it by saying one death is better than twelve, but even that seems hollow. Shouldn’t the goal be for no one to die at all? Shouldn’t the goal have been for no one to have died to begin with?

Distantly, I hear Caliban’s grating screeches and Ariel’s softer coos. Distantly, I hear a snap as the fireplace goes off, and distantly, I can feel myself moving toward the elevator, the cooling grate warm through my shoes as I put my Parchment away.
And all along, I focus on Amal’s hand in mine and the breath in my chest. If these are the last moments before I die, I’m glad to spend them with the person in this building that I love most.

They tap their pinky on my own before their hand slips from mine. I blink, and suddenly I’m standing at my podium before an audience of my peers. There’s another pair of crossed-out portraits replacing living bodies, but they only add to the urgency of the situation. I take a last deep breath before placing my hands on the stand, hoping that no one can see me shaking.

For the sake of avenging Bates; for the memories of Shionaga and Valdez; for the rest of us, so that we may not die tonight...

Let’s do this.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 2 (Chapter 2) can be found here.

Chapter 2 truth bullets... Who do you think done it? Hit me with theories, or hit me with this poll if you're too shy. OR, secret third option, just yell at me in the comments! I will eat it.
Chapter Summary

Here we are again.

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday to Aster Everett! (9/26) I've decided that if ASLH character birthdays land on a Thursday, we get updates on those days now. I think the next one is actually Chiyo's (12/12), so look out for that!

Also I realize this kills the trial mood but I made an extremely dumb vine redraw yesterday please look at it.

A list of truth bullets can be found here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

- **TRUTH BULLETS** -

  - **Ariel’s File #2**: The victim was Claudius Bates, SHSL Violinist. The time of death was 12:00 AM, and the body was first discovered at 1:45 AM by Sentarou Sekisada, Ryouji Atsui, and Tatsumaru Harai. The cause of death was strangulation via rope. The victim has no other injuries.
  - **Ice Skates**: The ice skates from an abandoned room have been tied together by the laces and hung from above the door. Opening the door pushes the skates with enough force to seriously injure someone who walked in.
  - **Speaker**: The largest speaker from an abandoned room is suspended from the other side of the chandelier, away from Bates.
  - **Note**: A note in Khalaf’s handwriting. It states in English: “Meet at the dining room at midnight tonight. It’s about the cameras.”
  - **McRae’s Testimony**: McRae and Murdock spent all day together in the second wing, investigating the abandoned rooms.
  - **Kitchen Events**: Atsui, Kashizaki, Khalaf, and Kumoshita were teaching Ekyou how to cook during the afternoon. Sumitama came in at around 6 pm and took Ekyou with her when she left.
  - **Paintbrushes**: Some wooden sticks - most likely the paintbrushes from a spare room - have been procured. These are strewn about the crime scene, with two in particular being jammed deeply into the wall. Harai believes that these were used as triggers for a snare.
  - **Sekisada’s Testimony**: Sekisada has insomnia. He was headed to the balcony to relax and found Bates’s body, then went back to the personal rooms to wake up whoever he could find.
  - **Motive**: If a murder was successful, the killer would lose all memory of the killing game before being set free.
  - **Everett’s Testimony**: In the morning, Everett had a breakdown in the sitting room after
being presented with a bow, at which Chisaki, Kumoshita, Harai, Bazhanov, and Sekisada were present. During the afternoon, she, Harai, and Chisaki were in the meeting room playing board games to destress, and were later joined by Bazhanov and Sekisada again.

- **Bazhanov’s Testimony**: Bazhanov and Sekisada spent time in the meeting room playing board games with Everett’s group, though Sekisada didn't show up until about 2.
- **Absences**: According to Bazhanov, when people weren’t currently playing, they would leave the room for various reasons, mostly pertaining to food.
- **Sumitama’s Testimony**: Sumitama spent all day in the atrium looking after her flowers, which have actually sprouted. She was bothered for some time by Bates and tried to put up with him before he left around 6, at which point she left for the kitchen.

「CLASS TRIAL: IN SESSION!」

**OBJECTIVE**: Discover the culprit behind Claudius Bates’s murder.

Caliban: Let's begin with a simple explanation of the class trial. During the class trial, you will present your arguments for who the killer is, and vote for "whodunnit".

Caliban: If you vote correctly, then only the blackened will receive punishment. But if you pick the wrong person, I'll punish everyone besides the blackened, and the blackened will be able to leave the mansion with no consequence.

**His eyes glow sharply with the recitation before returning to normal. Creepy.**

Caliban: Well, what are you waiting for? Start fighting already!

McRae: I have something to say first.

Caliban: What? The beta cuck has something to say?

McRae: [annoyed] Will you cut that out? That’s not even clever.

I think the sheer dissonance of seeing McRae genuinely upset is what ultimately convinces Caliban to back off. McRae sighs, shifting his weight.

McRae: Look. Before we start any of this.
McRae: I know a lot of you might not have liked or even talked to Claude. And I realize not a lot of you might even like or talk to me.

McRae: But I don’t want to hear anything that slanders him, okay? Just because he died does not give you a free pass to be shitty about him.

Bazhanov: Tristan, if I may, I do agree. I just also sincerely doubt that anyone would take this opportunity to slander Claudius like that.

McRae: You’d be surprised.

His accusing glare lands first on Murdock, then on Amal. McRae lets the silence ring out for a moment before stepping back, eyes still cold.

McRae: But thanks, Bazhanov-san, I appreciate it.

McRae: We can start now.

Murdock: I don’t even know where to begin. This case has been confusing, to say the least.

Harai: I have an evidence list. I’ll send it to everyone.

Atsui: Oh thank god. You’re the MVP, Harai-san.

Harai: … Mm.

They seem uncomfortable being directly complimented, but pings quickly travel across the room as they send the messages out. I look at my own list and flick through the evidence. Okay. It’s something to work with. I think.
Sekisada: Wowww, lucky you guys. You actually get evidence lists.

Ariel: [cooly] Perhaps you should have thought of that before you pitched your tablets over the balcony.

Bazhanov: It was still worth it.

Amal: How are you two going to vote without your Parchments…?

Caliban: Paper and pencil, obviously.

Bazhanov: Really?

Caliban: NO!! [flaps wings] You threw away valuable equipment!! You suffer the consequences!! No voting for you!!

Kashizaki: [eyeing Parchment] So what would happen if we all destroyed our tablets?

Caliban: I- [sputters] Bad things! Very bad things! Don’t test that!

Ariel: In short, the disadvantages from not having a Parchment outweigh any possible advantages from having one. You wouldn’t have trial evidence, you can’t vote, nor can you receive announcements or send messages… It’s simply far better not to.

Chisaki: Can’t stop me!

Caliban: I’ll put in a new rule tomorrow.

Chisaki: I’ll do it before you can.

McRae: Can we PLEASE get back on topic.
Ekyou: Sure. Something I didn’t pick up on- er. [glances at Sumitama] My bad. I was wondering how the crime scene was even set up…?

Sekisada: Didn’t you see it? It was a little hard to miss.

Sumitama: Uh…

Sekisada: Okay, cool. So not one, but two people did absolutely nothing this go around. Fantastic. What the hell were you two doing if not investigating?

Sumitama: Super important stuff! Ekyou-chan was helping me!

Ekyou: Yeah. Something like that.

Even Sekisada seems a little put off by the dissonance between Ekyou and Sumitama’s replies, but he shakes it off quickly and folds his arms.

Sekisada: Alright. Admittedly, I’m curious about how that whole setup worked, too.

Amal: Why don’t we take a look at it, then?

「 NONSTOP DEBATE 」

(bold text: disagree)

(italicized text: agree)

Truth Bullets:

> Ice Skates

> Speaker

> Note
Everett: So the murder was *deliberate*. I think we can all agree on that, for starters.

Sekisada: Um, duh. It’s a little hard to *ACCIDENTALLY* set up a murder scene of that scale.

Atsu: What was that whole thing about, anyway? I don’t really get it.

Harai: It’s a *snare*.

Atsu: Like, the drum?

Chisaki: No, they mean like a trap used to catch Bates and hang him! Like one of those old timey things that hang people by the ankles.

McRae: Can we maybe not joke about this?

Chisaki: My bad. Sorry dude.

Kashizaki: I don’t think the murder was from a snare at all. I think it’s misdirection. There’s *no way that a body could be hung* from a chandelier without someone being present.

Murdock: Are you sure? If a cord were under enough tension, I’m sure the ice skates could be used to *fray the cord* and cause it to snap.

Amal: But that would require a killer *to be present* to cut the rope.

Murdock: Unless it were yet *another mechanism*. Some sort of Rube Goldberg machine…

「 USE: Speaker to dispute “no way that a body could be hung” 」
CHIYO: NO, YOU’RE WRONG!

Chiyo: … Er. That wasn’t very punny. Sorry.

McRae: I’m not in the mood. But thank you for thinking of that.

Chisaki: Thank you for NOT trying! I’m the only one allowed to make really stupid puns!

Sumitama: What about last trial…?

Chisaki: Last trial I was an emotional wreck! This time, I’ve got my head in the game! Or rather…

Everett: Oh, no, don’t you dare.

Chisaki: I’ve got a hand in solving this case.

Everett sighs.

Chisaki: Hopefully, I mean.

Chiyo: Um, okay, back to what I was going to say! Harai-san actually made a diagram of how they think the snare works.

Ariel: [suddenly] Did they? May I see it?

Amal: [unnerved] Uh, I have it in my pocket, but-

The bird hops off his perch and flutters over to rest on Amal’s stand. They fuss for a while before pulling the flattened note out of their pocket and turning it over to the diagram side, as Ariel simply examines the note. Within seconds, our Parchments collectively light up with a
Atsui: [muttering] Oh, so you get to send mass messages whenever you want, but when I want to remind people to fuckin’ EAT I have to go through each individual name and message them. I see how it is.

Murdock: Imagine how I feel with my meetings.

Atsui: Hm. No thank you.

Ekyou: But how does it work?

Chiyo: Harai-san can probably explain it better than I can…

Harai: [automatic] I am not particularly good at anything- [looks around; sighs] Okay.

Harai: See where it’s marked “trigger”? The idea behind this is that when a victim gets their head caught on this noose stretched between the doorway, they’ll hit the trigger and activate the trap.

Sekisada: Okay, great, but the trap is…

Harai: I’m getting to that. The trigger is what’s holding a weight above the ground, so when the trigger is hit, the weight falls to the ground and the victim ends up being hanged.

Chiyo: So in this case, the weight is the large speaker! It hit the ground when Bates-san activated the snare.

Bazhanov: Hm. [picks at gloves] That explains the thud in the middle of the night.
Chiyo: Wait, you heard that too? I thought that was just part of this weird nightmare I was having!

Bazhanov: It woke me up. I sleep fairly lightly.

Amal: You had a nightmare? Why didn’t you ask me for help?

Chiyo: … Did you WANT me to??

Amal: … I mean, yeah, if you were in distress???

Murdock: Focus, you two. So we’ve established that this is, indeed, some kind of snare?

Kashizaki: It seems like the most obvious option. [frowns] Maybe too obvious.

Atsui: Hey, just roll with it. Sometimes the easiest solution is the best one. What’s that called? Occult sword or something like that.

Sekisada: It’s called Occam’s razor, you uncultured swine.

Kashizaki: Nerd.

Sekisada: Oh, shut up.

Everett: But how would the killer have gotten the speaker up to the chandelier? If it’s heavy enough to lift Bates, it must have been hard to lift. Not to mention the height of the chandelier.

McRae: [arms folded] I’ve seen the speakers before. The cord from the speaker is really long, so the killer could have thrown the cord over the chandelier and pulled the speaker up, maybe using chairs and other furniture as additional weights to hold it in place.

Harai: [nods] And if the triggers were jammed deeply enough into the wall - which they did seem
to be - then the speaker could have been suspended long enough for the trap to be activated. It might not have held for much longer if Bates-shi hadn’t walked in, but what matters is that it did before he had.

Ignoring all this, Murdock simply rests her elbows on her stand, leaning forward with a slight frown. Weirdly, she seems to be studying…

Murdock: Harai? If I may ask, why are you so knowledgeable about snares?

Harai: I wanted to look into archery. The most comprehensive book relating to archery in the library was one about hunting. It also had information about snares. Ergo.

Murdock: … But then why-

Chisaki: [groans] Oh my god, Murdock-san, do you have to question EVERYTHING?? Just take it at face value! Stop being so suspicious!

Chisaki: Listen, I can vouch that Rai-san didn’t mean anything by looking into hunting stuff. They were trying to help a friend, okay? Besides, they helped to set off the body discovery announcement! They’re not involved in any of this!

Harai seems more than a little surprised at Chisaki’s passionate defense, but stands a little straighter despite their diminutive frame. For her part, Murdock’s expression has once again become a mask of politeness. She simply nods at Harai - whether it’s in approval or not, I can’t tell.

Murdock: Go on, then. What else did you find when you were [air quotes] “helping a friend”.

Harai simply stares at her for a moment. I catch a faint hiss of an exhale from behind their mask as they continue, their words significantly more clipped.

Harai: Right.
Harai: This kind of snare is intended to either break a victim’s neck or asphyxiate them, and is mostly used to trap small game. It’s not ideal for larger victims, since a larger victim would require a larger weight. It’s surprising that the killer chose it, and even more so that it worked. In most cases, it would be set to catch rabbits or foxes-

SUMITAMA: THAT DOESN’T ADD UP!

Sumitama: … Oh. McRae-san, I’m really sorry. About the puns-

McRae: Honestly I wouldn’t have had a problem if you didn’t point it out.


Sumitama: But! But! How would anyone - not just Bates-san have gotten caught on the trap if it’s designed for four-legged animals?

Amal: … What does that have to do with literally anything?

Sumitama: It’s like… it’s like! [stamps foot] I don’t know if I can explain this!!

Amal: You’d better figure out how before we all die.

Chiyo: Amal.

Sumitama: Oh. [wilts] That’s… a lot of pressure.

Amal frowns and glances to me in what I can only assume is a subconscious gesture. I may not like Sumitama much at this moment, what with her increasingly insensitive comments, but I have to work with her. That doesn’t stop me from sighing inwardly before I speak up.

Chiyo: Why don’t you just try?
Truth Bullets:

> Sekisada’s Testimony
> Snare Trap
> Ice Skates

Sumitama: S-so, um, looking at the snare, it looks like…

Sumitama: Foxes and rabbits - they walk on all fours with their heads tilted forward, right?

Sumitama: So it makes sense that they would get caught on a snare set up with a noose stretched across, say, a door.

Chiyo: Of course, but I don’t see what you’re saying- oh!

Chiyo: But humans walk upright, is what you mean?

Chiyo: If Bates-san got caught on this snare, the noose would have to go over his head, or in other words, from above him.

Sumitama: R-right! But there’s no evidence of the noose being above his head…

Sumitama: So I think it’s possible that he was killed and his body was strung up later?

Sumitama: I just don’t see how he could be caught on a trap he would need to, um. Lean into.

USE: Ice Skates to dispute “lean into”
Chiyo: **YOUR LOGIC NEEDS WORK!**

Sumitama: [wilts] Oh. I’m sorry.

Chiyo: But it’s a good point! Bates-san would indeed need to move forward with his head down to get caught on the noose. Which leads me to my next point...

Chiyo: Did you notice the ice skates by the door of the dining room?

Sumitama: The what?

Amal: [nods] Oh, that’s right. I had to duck under the ice skates in order to enter the room. I know Bates-san was a little shorter than I am, but only a little - if he went into the room, he would have to duck under them, too. So he could get caught on the noose that way.

Sumitama: Huh. I didn’t notice... any of that.

Sekisada: Sumitama-shi, you’re probably too short to notice. [mutters] Not to mention you didn’t even investigate, from the looks of it.

Sumitama: D-did too! I told Kumoshita-chan and Khalaf-san my alibi!

Atsui: Uh, no offense, but your alibi is really sketchy, so that barely helps us at all. Besides, alibis take like five seconds to explain. Were you really not investigating?

Sumitama: What matters is that we’re in the trial now!

Kashizaki: Implying that some of these other alibis aren’t sketchy? [taps screen] Some of these aren’t very specific.

Atsui: I dunno. I think “Kitchen Events” sums up what went down pretty well. They sure were events in the kitchen.
Bazhanov: But what about these other alibis? Tiana and Tristan simply being in the second wing, for example.

Ekyou: How about this. Let’s take a look at all of the alibis to see which ones can’t be taken at face value.

Murdock: Fair enough, but how would we know which alibis fall into that category? More specifically, is there a specific timeframe we should be looking at?

Chiyo: Actually!

「USE: Everett’s Testimony」

Chiyo: Murdock-san, after I was talking with you and McRae-san, I went to the second wing to spend time with Everett-san, Chisaki-san, Harai-san, and Bazhanov-san.

Sekisada: What am I, chopped liver?

Chiyo: … I guess you were there too.

Everett: Yeah. And then everyone except Kumoshita-chan went to the meeting room in the first wing to hang out.

Murdock: So the takeaway from this is that… we’re looking at afternoon alibis?

Harai: [flicking through Parchment] It seems so. If the killer had set up the trap in the morning, then one of us would have seen them or walked into the trap, so the killer must have set it up in the afternoon.

Everett: So let’s take a look at those.
Truth Bullets:

> Kitchen Events
> Absences
> Sumitama’s Testimony

Harai: After our group left, I don’t think anyone else went back to the second wing except for Murdock-shi and McRae-shi.

Bazhanov: I’d assume neither of you went into the dining room, if you’re so confident in declaring that you were in the second wing.

McRae: Basically, yeah.

Everett: Except you’d have to be in the second wing to set up the trap at all.

McRae: … Also, basically, yeah.

Chisaki: I think we can pretty safely rule out a few people regardless of alibis, though! The file says that Atsui-san, Rai-san, and Sekisada-san were the first three to discover the body.

Ekyou: If we can confirm their alibis, then maybe the people with them will be cleared of suspicion, too. There were alibis with multiple people involved, right?

Murdock: Well, if we’re looking at body discoveries, did anyone ever establish why Sekisada-san was walking around at that hour?

Sekisada: It’s the insomnia, darling. And I’m innocent anyway, so it’s not like it matters.
「USE: Kitchen Events to agree with “multiple people involved”」

CHIYO: I AGREE WITH THAT!

Chiyo: I can confirm that Atsui-san, Kashizaki-san, Ekyou-san, Amal, and myself were in the kitchen from around 2 in the afternoon until late evening! Sumitama-san came in at some point and left with Ekyou-san, and I think they spent the rest of the day together?

Ekyou: Yeah. Until the nighttime announcement. [yawns] …

Chisaki: Oh, is something wrong?

Ekyou: Just tired. Don’t worry about it.

She rubs her eyes and continues talking.

Ekyou: So, Everett-san, what about your group?

Everett: I can confirm the alibi written in the evidence. Both the morning one and the afternoon one listed under Bazhanov-san’s testimony.

Bazhanov: Mhm. Although it should be noted that there were occasional absences from the board games that we were playing…

Atsui: Eh, don’t worry about it. I remember seeing each of you come in for dinner. I’m pretty sure you’re in the clear, unless you were collaborating.

Atsui: In fact, the only person without an alibi that can be verified is…

Slowly, Atsui looks to Sumitama. She shrinks under the sudden attention.
Sumitama: M-me…?

Atsui: Uh, yeah. [points to Parchment] It says you spent the afternoon in the atrium with Bates-san, but it’s not exactly like he can verify this. Not to mention that you aren’t exactly safe through the body discovery announcement, either.

Sumitama: Y… You really think...

Atsui: Not like I’m actively trying to blame you or whatever, but you’re really, really suspicious. So uh. You have anything to say for yourself?

**Sumitama shrinks further into herself, eyes wide.**

Sumitama: O-of course I didn’t kill Bates-san! I’d never, ever want to kill anyone!

Sumitama: Y-you’re just mad because- because you wanted to hurt Ekyou-chan, and I didn’t let you-

Atsui: Woah woah woah! Since when have any of us wanted to do that??

Kashizaki: I’m pretty sure “spending time with people other than you” doesn’t count as hurting her.

**Sumitama doesn’t reply to that, only drawing in a sniff as her eyes start to water.**

Sumitama: Ever since Shionaga-san died, all of you have just been…

Chisaki: Have just been *what*, Sumitama-san.

Ekyou: Sumitama-chan, maybe now isn’t a good time to talk about this-
Sumitama: You’ve just been so… so mean!!

Sumitama: No one can even talk about him without making it about the fact that he died, or that he killed someone! Even if he killed Valdez-san, he’s still a person, right?

**While I do agree with Sumitama, is… is now really the best time to debate this? In front of Chisaki, and while we’re trying to find yet another killer?**

Chisaki: …

Chisaki: I mean. I guess.

Chisaki: But it’s a little hard to talk about people who are dead without mentioning the fact that they’re also, y’know, dead. Not to mention that also, like, Dez-kun was my friend. Maybe Shionaga-san killed him on accident, but he still killed someone, so. Excuse me for not seeing past that.

Chisaki: Anyway, this murder looks like it wasn’t an accident, so I can say this with absolute confidence.

Chisaki: Whoever killed Bates-san?

Chisaki: *Deserves to rot in hell.*

Chisaki: And if that’s you, Sumitama-san, it still applies.

Chisaki flips her hair back, fingers grazing her stump of a left arm as she lowers it. Her flat glare is the most emotionless I’ve seen her since…

… *Well, since Valdez died.*

Harai: If it helps, I don’t think it’s Sumitama-shi at all.
Sumitama: S-see!! It wasn’t me!!

Kashizaki: Seriously? Isn’t it obvious that she did it?

Sumitama: You’re just saying that because you hate me!!

Sekisada: God, can you just shut up and let Harai-shi speak?

Kashizaki: Sekisada-san, don’t be rude.

Sumitama: [sniffles] …

Harai: … Ignoring all of that. Sumitama-shi is still an unlikely suspect.

Harai: If she went to the second wing, wouldn’t Murdock-shi and McRae-shi see her?

Actually, that’s… a good point. Even if Murdock and McRae weren’t involved in the murder at all, they would hear someone going to the dining room if they were anywhere between the dining room and the living room, and if they weren’t, they would run into the killer or the trap when they went through the dining room again. Right? Right. Yeah.

Next to me, Amal stiffens. They must have come to the same conclusion.

Amal: So that means…

Harai: I think it’s a safe assumption to make that either or both of you are involved in this case.

Harai flicks their fingers under their mask and looks from McRae, still seething, to his cousin across the room. Murdock folds her hands, looking completely and totally unperturbed.
Murdock: Well, maybe so. But there’s something else that I think we’ve forgotten to examine.

Murdock: What’s all this about a note? In Khalaf’s handwriting, no less?

Sekisada: Sorry, a what?

Sumitama: O-oh, that’d make sense. You didn’t get along well with Bates-san, did you?

Amal: I didn’t write that.

Sumitama: Then who did? And how? Huh?

Amal: Sumitama-san, will you let me finish?

With a sigh, Amal runs their hand through their hair and tucks it under their hat again. They fidget with the pencil behind their ear for just a moment before speaking.

Amal: I wrote a lot a few days ago, and I left it all in the library.

Ekyou: A lot about what?

Amal: None of your business.

I pretend I don’t see the slow blush spreading across their cheeks.

Amal: The point is, someone cut out bits and pieces of what I had written and assembled it into a note. See?

They flip the paper in their hands to the side with the note and hold it up. Under the
fluorescent light, it’s clear to anyone that the note was cut and pasted together.

Amal: I don’t know why the killer - or whoever made this note - chose to make it out of my writing, but… I’m not exactly flattered, to say the least. There were plenty of magazines and books in the library that they could have used.

Sekisada: I wouldn’t appreciate that. Some people actually *read* things, Khalaf-shi.

Atsui: No one cares, dude.

Everett: What if it was to frame you? Khalaf-kun, I mean.

Amal: [pushes up glasses] That’s what I think was supposed to happen. Except that was a pretty sloppy move, considering that I can identify right off the bat that I didn’t write this. Chiyo can vouch for this, too.

Chisaki: [whispers] So are none of us even going to acknowledge that Kumo-chan and Khalaf-kun have been using first names for each other this whole time, or.

Atsui: [whispers] We’re not sure if it’s going to go anywhere.

Chisaki: [whispers] I’ll bet Monotokens they get together.

Atsui: [whispers] … Actually, y’know, as soon as we get out of this trial, I’ll take you up on that.

Kashizaki: Can you two actually focus??

Atsui: You’re right. We should be talking about how long it takes instead of whether or not it happens.

I can FEEL my FACE on FIRE and Chisaki is just nodding sagely at the observation. Oh my GOD.
Chiyo: I agree with Kashizaki-chan! We need to get back on topic!

Kashizaki: All the note stuff aside, Khalaf-kun already has an alibi. He was with the kitchen group all afternoon, remember?

Amal: Plus, why would I make a note in my own handwriting? That’s a little too obvious, isn’t it?

McRae: It could be a reverse psychology thing. It’s so obvious that it’s not obvious.

Chiyo: Maybe, except…

「USE: Note」

Sekisada: … You’re just presenting the note again?


Chiyo: I’m referring to the content of the note specifically.

Chiyo: “Meet at the dining room at midnight tonight. It’s about the cameras.”

Amal: Which I keep asking about. The what, now?

Harai: There are cameras in the mansion. It’s not that difficult.

Ariel: Ahem!

Atsui: Did you just clear your throat?
Ariel: Yes, and what of it.

Atsui: You’re a robot bird.

Ariel: … Again! What of it.

Caliban: His point is that you weren’t supposed to say that out loud.

Harai: … Well, what was I supposed to do. Sign language?

Chisaki: Ouch. Discrimination, much?

McRae: You didn’t say anywhere that Harai-san couldn’t say that. You can’t punish them for it.

Caliban: You forget that I can change the rules at any time-

McRae: We’re in the middle of a trial. Can we just not?

Caliban: …

He tilts his head for a moment before sighing, eyes clicking shut. They can DO that??

Caliban: I’m told it’s fine and to just let it go.

Sekisada: Thanks. We have enough distractions in this trial as is.

Bazhanov: Speaking of which. Wasn’t Chiyo just speaking?
… I totally forgot I was still supposed to be talking. I blink hard as I try to remember what I was going to say.

Chiyo: Basically, there are cameras all over the mansion. Bates-san told McRae-san and me about them a few days ago.

Amal: Wait, you didn’t tell me about that. [beat] You were hanging out with Bates-san? Why?

Kashizaki: To be entirely fair, I think that was in the middle of your fight with Kumoshita-chan.


Sekisada: [sarcastic] How about you, Harai-shi? When did you talk to Bates-shi about this?

Harai: Never. I actively avoided him. [adjusts mask] I figured it out by myself because I have eyes.

Amal: This is a personal attack.

Harai: I assume other people were able to catch onto the cameras as well, although it’s odd that the killer chose to refer to them specifically in their note to Bates-shi.

Across the room, I catch a glint off Murdock’s glasses as she leans forward, lips pressed together. Weirdly enough, she seems to be glaring directly across from her.

Murdock: Well, I don’t mean to assume anything, but…

Murdock: Wouldn’t all of this point to Tristan?

McRae blinks.

McRae: What? No. What the fuck?
McRae: Have you been here literally… literally at all? For the past two hours or so? Claude was my best friend, Ti, I- Actually what the fuck? How can you assume I’d kill him?

Murdock: [holds up hands] I’m not saying that you actually did it, I’m just saying that the evidence is stacking up against you.

Murdock: [ticks fingers] Kumoshita said that Bates told both you and her about the cameras, so you would be able to threaten him with a note about it. And, unfortunately, Kumoshita has an alibi for the afternoon.

McRae: Uh, your alibi hinges on mine? We have the same alibi??

Murdock: … So it seems.

Atsui: [looking between them] Wait, why is that a surprise?

Murdock: [firmly] It’s not a surprise. We were together the whole time, obviously. Ignore what I said.

McRae: Mhm. All afternoon.

Atsui continues to look between the two, concern written extremely obviously across his face. As the seconds stretch on, a pit of dread settles in my stomach.

Are…

Are they lying?

No. They can’t be.
... Can they be?

Sekisada: Yeah, bullshit. One of you did it.

Murdock: …

McRae: ...

Oh. There we go, I guess.

McRae: … How dare you?

McRae: I’m- am I mad about that? [shakes head] I don’t know. But- what the fuck? I realize that’s just been my reaction for most of this case, but I’d like to point out AGAIN, Claude was as close as I ever got to a best friend- why the hell would I want to kill anyone? Especially him?

Murdock: I agree. One thing we can conclude about this case is that, judging by the note, the killer targeted Bates in particular. I wouldn’t kill Tristan’s friend.

Sekisada is already shaking his head slowly, rubbing at the bridge of his nose as a half-laugh almost tears itself out of his throat.

Sekisada: Okay, yeah, no, you’re… really not fooling anyone.

Sekisada: You two are the only ones who were anywhere near the second wing, and McRae-shi just straight up pointed out the inconsistencies between Murdock-shi’s accusation and their shared alibi. One of you is lying. Maybe both of you.

Sekisada: Until you can get your prisoner’s dilemma shit together, I think you two are our likeliest suspects.

McRae: But… [blinks] It just wasn’t.
This is going nowhere. I just need to figure out a way for this case to make sense regardless of whether they’re lying or not. Though that sounds… extraordinarily difficult. But I’ll have to think of something. Right?

Okay. Let’s backtrack a little. What sparked this whole vein of discussion? The note? Let’s start there.

« LOGIC DIVE »

…

The trap was set:

[ For Bates / For anyone ]

…

Who made the note?

[ The trap setter / Someone else ]

…

The note was created:

[ Before the trap was set up / When the trap was set up / After the trap was set up ]

CHIYO: I’VE GOT IT!

Murdock: You’ve got… what, exactly?

Chiyo: Uh… Murdock-san, you’re not going to like this.

Murdock: … Ah.
Chiyo: What if…

Chiyo: What if the person who set the trap and the person who made the note are different people?

Murdock: …

Murdock: So what do you mean by that.

As much as I want to force the words out, I can’t seem to get them out of my mouth. This is such an ugly, ugly accusation to make. I can’t imagine what McRae must be feeling now, and I know that what I have to say will only make it worse.

But… the rest of us have to live.

Chiyo: What if the person who made the trap wasn’t intending to catch Bates-san in particular? They just wanted to kill the next person who walked into the room. But the person who made the note saw an opportunity to get rid of Bates-san, and they took it.

Chiyo: I’m saying that I think one of you set up the trap, and the other created the note. To be specific, I think McRae-san made the note because of the reference to the cameras, unless he told you about it.

McRae: [softly] I didn’t.

Chiyo: Y. Yeah.

I adjust my bag and take a deep breath. I don’t look at McRae again.

Chiyo: So I think McRae-san created the note after Murdock-san set up the trap.

If I look at McRae, all I’ll be met with is betrayal. If I look at Murdock, all I’ll be met with is restrained fury. So I look straight ahead instead, at Sekisada nodding slowly, eyes slowly
Sekisada: Okay. So let’s say you’re right.

Sekisada: Let’s say two different people made the trap and the note. It doesn’t really matter who they are, but for the sake of relevancy let’s say those people are Murdock-shi and McRae-shi.

Sekisada: So here’s the question.

Sekisada: Who counts as the killer?

Ekyou: Easy. The person who killed him.

Harai: But is that the person who set the trap itself, or the person who lured the victim to be killed…?

Sumitama: S-so… If there was no note involved, then the killer would be the person who set the trap…?

Kashizaki: Right. Which means that the person who set the trap would still be the killer regardless of whether there was a note involved, because in the end, the note is more of an indirect cause of death as opposed to the actual cause. Right?

Atsui: I dunno, I think an argument could be made either way. I think I agree with you, though, Kikun.

Oh, god, I didn’t even think about that. What side do I pick? Everything about this case just fills me with equal parts guilt and dread, especially in regards to McRae. I thought we were friends - I thought he and Bates were friends, really. And I don’t think that McRae would have done this. But with no other options…

I need to focus on something else. That “something else” turns out to be Amal, chin in hand and deep in thought.
Amal: Is it possible that they collaborated to confuse the system on purpose? To force a mistrial.

Amal: If none of us can decide on a definite answer of which person is the blackened, then wouldn’t that result in one of them getting away? Or would this just be a case with two blackeneds?

That… admittedly sounds a lot like something McRae would do, but I definitely don’t want to bring it up. Yet for all of his penchant for bending rules but never breaking them, playing with people’s lives to test his theories seems like going too far.

Ekyou: But one of them would die while the other lives.

Amal: Yes, and?

Ekyou: What would- what would even be the point of that? [shakes head] Considering the motive.

Sumitama: The motive?

Ekyou’s frown - or is it a scowl? - only deepens with Sumitama’s query. She taps her Parchment for emphasis, looking at the rest of the room.

Ekyou: “If a murder was successful, the killer would lose all memory of the killing game before being set free.” Why would Murdock-san and McRae-san want to confuse the system if only one of them got to benefit?

Bazhanov: So what you’re saying is that confusing the system as a motive doesn’t make sense.

Ekyou: [nods] I’m fairly certain. Besides, Ariel and Caliban could clear it up, since they’re here with us.

Ariel: [ruffles wings] While we do have our own specifications on what technically qualifies a person as the blackened…
Caliban: It’s a lot more fun watching you duke it out, keheh. Let’s have some democracy for a change!

Caliban: Whoever you decide is the blackened - the person who made the note or the person who set the trap - we’ll set as the blackened or this case as well.

Caliban: [eyes gleam] But, if one of you are hypothetically the blackened, remember: there’s no way both you cousins are making it out of here.

McRae: ...

Kashizaki: Yeah, the person who set the trap is the killer. No doubt about it.

Atsui: Mm, agreed.

Sekisada: I… honestly think the person who made the note would be the blackened.

Bazhanov: The person who set the trap aimed to kill anyone. The person who made the note aimed to kill Claude specifically, and he is now dead. Therefore, the person who made the note is the blackened.

Harai: The blackened is the one that directly killed the victim, and the snare was what killed Bates-shi, not the note.

Chisaki: Uh, hell no! By that logic, the person who made the note is the blackened because they sent Bates-san to his death!

Everett: Yeah, I feel the same. The note maker had a more direct role in getting Bates-san in particular killed.

Ekyou: I’m still confused, but I definitely agree that the person who set the trap had a more direct role in the killing.
Sumitama: Uh… Um… I don’t want to disagree with you, Ekyou-chan, but I do.

Murdock: As do I.

Sekisada: Are you even allowed a say in this?

Murdock: If no objections to the contrary are being made, then...

Amal: I think the person who set the trap was the killer. What about you, Chiyo?

Chiyo: I, uh…

No matter what I say, I know people will be mad at me. What have I done…?

Chiyo: I think… the person who set the trap is the killer.

Caliban cackles, a dry and emotionless thing that sends shivers down my spine.

Caliban: Well, well, well. Looks like we’re split down the middle, eh? Just as planned.

Kashizaki: Hold on. McRae-san didn’t form an opinion.

Caliban: He doesn’t need to, silly! That’s how we get even numbers for MY scrum debates. None of that “three people versus eight” nonsense where people have to argue two or three times. Here in Mansion Milan, if you snooze, you lose!

McRae: …

McRae: … No, you’re wrong.
He says it so quietly, at first I think I must have imagined it. But when I look at him - finally look at him - his green eyes flash with something sharp, something wounded, and something… dangerous. Something that I’ve seen in Murdock’s eyes before, but never his, multiplied tenfold.

McRae: You don’t get to say what I can and cannot do. You don’t get to decide any of that. I choose my own terms for how I die, and this isn’t it. I’m not the blackened, and I didn’t write that stupid note. I can’t prove the second one to you, and I know I won’t be able to - but I don’t need it.

With each word, barely restrained fury seeps into his voice until I’m amazed it’s still level. How did we ever pass him off as emotionless?

McRae: You don’t need me to pick a side because I’m ending this trial right now. Because I know who the killer is.

McRae: I thought you were just investigating on your own, because you told me that you were going to go ahead. I thought you ditched me! I thought you just straight up abandoned me because you thought I was useless, per usual. And I can’t- no, I can believe you were lying. To me. And everyone else in this room.

McRae: What I can’t believe? Is that I had believed you. I can’t believe I was so naive to take that at face value.

McRae: But I know better now. And maybe it’s too little too late, since we could have died because I kept my mouth shut. But no more. No more of this.

How did we ever pass him off as incompetent?

McRae: You told me to stand watch for you.

McRae: You told me to stand aside while you planned to kill someone.

McRae: You KILLED someone - my best friend in this building - and you had the nerve to drag
ME into covering it up.

The whole room holds its breath as McRae glares directly across from him. Slowly, venomous, he spits each word.

McRae: I know who the killer is, and *I'm ashamed to be related to her.*

McRae: Isn’t that right?

「 CHOOSE A PERSON 」

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 2 (Chapter 2) can be found [here](https://example.com).
All eyes are on Murdock, waiting for - what? A furious breakdown? A denial? Even a twitch of her expression? My heart races in my ears as the silence stretches longer and longer, Murdock’s even gaze matching McRae’s furious one. I’m not sure if I just noticed this now, but...

They really do have the same green eyes.

Finally, Murdock sighs, breaking the silence. She lifts her glasses off her face, careful to navigate the chain around her hair, and begins to clean them.

Murdock: What do you want from me?

McRae: … What?

Murdock: Do you want me to be angry, to be cold, to be the villain you can all hate? Do you want an explanation? Or do you want a confession and nothing more?

McRae: [quietly] Stop.
Murdock: What do you want me to be? What can I do now that won’t make you all hate me more than you already do?

McRae: Stop, I didn’t think- I didn’t think you actually-

Murdock: Oh, stop being such a child, Tristan. I’m making it as obvious as I possibly can, aren’t I?

**He takes a step back, eyes brighter, for once unclouded.**

Murdock: Do you really need me to explain it to you? Kumoshita has the details all laid out and pretty for the rest of you to see.

Murdock: We both know that I’m the only one who could have set up the scene. You said it yourself, didn’t you? You thought I was simply abandoning you to investigate. Clearly, I wasn’t. I’m surprised that you hadn’t called me out on that earlier, in all honesty.

Murdock: I had read about snares in the same book on hunting that Harai-san mentioned. I took materials from all over the second wing to construct the snare. I used the speaker as a weight, ice skates to manipulate the victim’s movement, and paintbrushes to construct the trap, as well as a bowstring I found. Though, in retrospect, it might have been easier to construct a trap that would kill someone with an arrow.

McRae: S-stop, Ti, I said *stop*-

Murdock: [louder] The ice skates were placed so that the victim would have to duck into the room - duck into the noose - and dislodge a trigger while they panicked. As for the speaker itself, it was just a matter of using enough weights to hold it in the air while I set up the rest of the trap. I believe someone mentioned chairs, for instance.

McRae: [hands twitching] Shut up shut up shut up-

Murdock: I wasn’t quite targeting anyone in particular, but in all honesty, Bates was on the higher end of people I wouldn’t mind gone. Am I upset about his death? Not really.
Murdock: So yes. You’re right, Tristan. I killed Bates.

McRae: …

**Hands trembling, he grabs his headset and slips it over his ears. I can’t move, can’t speak, can’t even breathe as McRae’s eyes slide shut and he folds in on himself, shoulders starting to shake with what might not be rage or betrayal but something more primal, something closer to…**

*… Grief.*

**Murdock finishes cleaning her glasses and places them back on her face with the same calmness that’s settled over her since the accusation.**

Murdock: So, yes. Are there any questions?

Sekisada: Okay, not a question, but first of all fuck you.

Murdock: I suppose that’s fair.

Sekisada: You- you just, you killed your cousin’s best friend and you don’t even feel bad about it??

Murdock: Why do you care so much? You act like you hate everyone.

Sekisada: I have some fucking sympathy, you goddamn monster! What the hell! If you don’t feel bad about it, you don’t need to SAY IT in front of him!

Murdock: Isn’t it better to have everything out in the open? After all, this is probably the last time we’re going to see each other. So to speak.

Atsui: So, woah woah backtrack, basically you’re only sorry because you got caught.
Murdock: Sure. That’s one way of putting it.

Atsui: Well, alright. This is so weird to say but for once I agree with Sekisada-san.

Kashizaki: Do you seriously not realize someone is dead because of you?

Murdock: Of course I realize that. But it’s not like I killed him directly, and it’s not like I was targeting him directly.

Kashizaki: Yes you were. There was that whole deal with the note, wasn’t there?

Amal: The note that you made out of MY handwriting, by the way. And tried to frame me with.

Bazhanov: To be entirely fair, we all agreed that the note was too suspicious to be made by you.

Amal: Am I still supposed to ignore that she went through MY writing just to kill someone?

Bazhanov: Point taken.

Wait. Wait, no, that’s not right, we decided that the person who made the note wasn’t the same person as the person who set the trap.

Kashizaki: Yeah, clearly you were targeting Bates to die.

Everett: Unless the note was meant for someone else…

Kashizaki: No. The killer explicitly mentioned the cameras. Who else in this room had met with other people about those?
Sekisada: No one would admit to that right now.

**She didn’t even mention the note in her confession. Murdock didn’t make it. I have to say something.**

Harai: If you didn’t make the note, then who did you collaborate with?

Murdock: [tilts head] I have no idea what you’re talking about.

**I have to speak-**

McRae: One question.

**His simple statement brings conversation to a standstill as he drags himself to his feet, pulling the headset off of his ears.**

McRae: Why.

Murdock: What do you mean, “why”.

McRae: Why would you- why would you even kill someone. Why the *fuck* would you want to kill anyone?

McRae: [waves hand] Don’t- you can’t even say you didn’t want to. You can’t set up an entire death trap and say that you didn’t mean it. You said you didn’t even regret it. You said you were only upset about getting caught.

Murdock: …

McRae: Are you just shallow enough to want to escape? Are you jealous of someone or something? Did you just want to see if you could?
Murdock: [softly] You know me better than that.

McRae: No, I don’t! I don’t even know you anymore, Ti!

McRae: It’s been five whole years since we last spoke to each other, not even to mention however many years we might be missing! I don’t even know you well enough to know what you wanted to get out of this!

McRae: I just don’t understand. I don’t understand you. And don’t you dare say-

Murdock: Well, that’s the problem.

McRae: [points] See! See, that’s what you always say! It’s never something to reassure me or anything like that, you’re always the one to say that I’m the one with a problem! Have you maybe considered in the past five years - hell, the past eighteen years - that YOU’RE the one with a problem? That you’re the one to be too critical?

Murdock: Tristan-

McRae: I told you to shut up! I wish you hadn’t done this at all! I wish I didn’t have to live with the fact that you, my cousin, who I trusted, killed my friend on purpose! I wish I didn’t have to live knowing-

Murdock: Tristan, LISTEN TO ME-

McRae: I wish I didn’t have to live knowing that you could have killed ANY OF US and you wouldn’t even be SORRY.

The accusation hangs in the air. McRae stands now, rage outlining his frame as he catches his breath; Murdock, directly across from him, simply stands, hands folded and as eerily still as she’s ever been.
Murdock: … Well.

Murdock: I suppose you know me better than I thought you did.

Murdock: And maybe you know now why I killed Bates.

McRae: …

McRae: … I hate that I do.

Murdock smiles tightly at McRae’s sudden collapse before addressing the room.

Murdock: So how about this. I can spell it out for the rest of you. I’ll even give you a chance to say it out loud.

I don’t want this. I don’t want this, but…

I said I’d help, didn’t I?

And sometimes, if you don’t say anything important, then no one does.

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PANIC TALK ACTION
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“Why did I kill someone, then?”

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WANTED THE MO-TIVE
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CHIYO: YOU’RE FINISHED!
Chiyo: It was… It was because of the motive for this case, isn’t it?

Chiyo: “If a murder was successful, the killer would lose all memory of the killing game before being set free.”

Chiyo: You- you wanted to kill someone, because…

Chiyo: Because you wanted to forget us. All of us. And everything that’s happened. You wouldn’t know you had killed Bates - you wouldn’t have known you had killed anyone.

Chiyo: … Right?

Murdock: Right. [smiles] You’re very smart, Kumoshita.

McRae: [whispers] … And you wanted to forget me, too.

Murdock’s expression only softens a little, and she still doesn’t look directly at him. Instead, she focuses first on Amal, then on me.

Murdock: How about you go over the case again? Just to make things clear.

Amal: I don’t-

Murdock: Or to buy time for me to live, if that’s what you’d prefer. After all, you’ve found the killer, haven’t you?

Amal: Wouldn’t solidifying the case lead to a vote?

Murdock: Maybe so. But I’m sure there are plenty of people who would be happier with me gone, anyway.
Amal: …

Murdock: Please. For me.

Murdock: Although I’m sure I don’t deserve it, do I.

Chiyo: … I can try.

Murdock: Thank you.

「CLOSING ARGUMENT」

BEGIN!

Chiyo: S-so… I don’t even know what I can say that Murdock-san hasn’t already said.

Chiyo: After the motive was announced - essentially a “get out of jail free” card, with all memory of our time here erased - the killer decided that they wanted to kill to obtain the motive. Their modus operandi was a hanging snare in the dining room designed to snap the neck of or otherwise asphyxiate the victim, but this required two things: a way to make the victim duck into a noose, and a weight to pull the victim up.

Chiyo: The first requirement was easy enough to pull off. Using ice skates that they found in one of the spare rooms, the killer was able to manipulate the movement of anyone who entered the room. Unless the victim was exceptionally short, they would have to duck into the room and get caught on the noose, which they may have ignored in favor of the skates.

Chiyo: The second part was also relatively simple to achieve. The killer used a large speaker from another spare room as a weight, using furniture in the dining room itself as counterweights while they were setting up the snare and paintbrushes from yet another spare room as the triggers for the snare. Once the triggers were activated, the speaker would fall to the ground and carry the victim upward, where they would then die.

Chiyo: This trap would have been hard to set up if the killer were interrupted, so they got someone
close to them - their cousin - to stand watch under the guise of investigation. Their accomplice took this at face value, because the killer abandoning them in favor of activities that held their attention was par for the course as far as the accomplice was concerned. And as far as I know.

Chiyo: As for the victim themselves, I’m not sure if the killer was actually involved in this, but… At some point, someone had constructed a note from Amal’s writing in the library telling the victim to come to the dining room at midnight to discuss the cameras located throughout the mansion. Whether this was made by the killer or someone else, I don’t know.

Chiyo: But that doesn’t matter now. What matters is that Claude Bates is dead. And he’s dead at the hands of you, the killer…”

Chiyo: … Tiana Murdock, the SHSL Watchmaker.

「 BREAK!! 」

I know, logically, that I should be mad at her for killing someone so casually, for throwing their life away with her own with no regret. For ending someone’s story before they even got a chance to begin it.

Yet Murdock simply nods at the conclusion, expression almost infuriatingly serene, and I know I can’t be truly mad at someone who, despite her affectations, has such an air of… resignation. Even though she’s been smiling and calm since her accusation, there’s a lingering air of distance about her, as if she were holding herself far apart from the rest of us.

Murdock: That’s about right. Down to the note.

Murdock: As I’m sure absolutely no one had bothered to think it through, I had no involvement with that part. Like I said, I didn’t target Bates specifically. Besides, Tristan sure as hell didn’t tell me about the cameras, let alone that Bates had mentioned it to him.

Atsui: Unless McRae-san wrote the note-

McRae: Fuck off and die.

Kashizaki: Alright. So if you didn’t write the note - which, by the way, I still don’t believe you on-

Murdock: I don’t care if you do or not. I’m still going to die.

Kashizaki: Okay, cool. If you didn’t write the note, who did?

Chiyo: … I have a theory.

Kashizaki: Fire away.

Chiyo: So, um. Judging by Ariel and Caliban’s reactions…

Caliban: Oh shit we’re still here.

Chiyo: I don’t think anyone was supposed to know about the cameras. Or, at least, it’s an open secret - people were allowed to take note of them, and technically we could talk about them? But it was just one of those things where it would be a really, really bad idea to.

Harai: Right. Because I saw them, too, but I didn’t say anything about them or get punished. Other people probably took note of them. Khalaf-shi excepted.

Amal: Hey.

Everett: But what you’re saying, then…

Chiyo: Sumitama-san.
Sumitama: What?

Chiyo: Ariel and Caliban’s namesakes.

Sumitama: Are from The Tempest, right?

Chiyo: Right, and in The Tempest, they’re servants to a man named Prospero.

Sumitama: Oh. [frowns] Oh, I think I know what you’re getting at...

Bazhanov: So you think someone is behind this entire killing game?

Ekyou: Bazhanov-san, you were accused of masterminding this situation on the day we woke up.

Bazhanov: … Ah. Yes. That’s right.

Harai: So you’re saying that this all but confirms that there IS a mastermind behind all of this...

Murdock: And your theory is that Bates was led into the trap with the meddling of this Prospero because he knew too much.

Chiyo: If you didn’t write the note, and no one else knew about Bates-san telling us about the cameras, then… it does seem like the most likely theory.

Amal: That makes sense. This “Prospero” could have seen you having that conversation through the cameras anyway, right?

Chiyo: Right. So it’s most likely that they’re the one that wanted Bates-san dead.

Murdock: … I see.
She frowns, seeming worried for once in the trial. Before anyone can say anything else, Caliban ruffles his wings, drawing attention back to him.

Caliban: Since we’ve been verbally summoned, do you want to vote now, or.

Murdock: You may as well.

As with Shionaga’s trial, a buzz circles around the room as we are each instructed to input our votes.

Outside, I watch as the sun starts to rise, painting the sky in shades of pink and blue. Murdock’s expression as we each put in our votes is just as clear, a sky after a thunderstorm, and I think I even catch her smiling again as I finally tap her picture.

「 CLASS TRIAL: ADJOURNED 」

Caliban: And… ding ding ding! You got it! The blackened of this trial is none other than Tiana Murdock, the SHSL Watchmaker! She set the trap, she did the deed!

Caliban: … Although if you actually had run your scrum debate and decided that the person who wrote the note were the blackened, I would have let you run with that. If you ask me, an argument for either party being the blackened can be made.

Everett: We just decided Prospero wrote the note. Would that still apply?

Ariel: We can neither confirm nor deny that theory.

Chisaki: And, anyway, technically speaking, Khalaf-kun wrote the note. Prospero just put it together!

Amal: Don’t remind me.
Caliban: Ugh, how dull. All this speculation about this and that note, this and that trap - can’t you people just take things as they are? She confessed! I told you that you got the killer! Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, y’hear?

Caliban: Now, if you’re about done, we do have a killer to execute-

McRae: Stop right there.

Caliban: I don’t have to listen to you.

McRae: Just. Let me talk.

McRae: You want drama? I’ll give you drama.

He stares, again, at the figure in front of him. Whatever’s happening now is between Murdock and McRae, and any intervention on our part feels like it might very well be fatal. Even Ariel and Caliban seem completely silenced by the amount of emotion pouring off the two of them.

Murdock: What do you want? I told you everything you need to know. I’m ready to die.

McRae: So we’re not even going to address that you wanted me to die, too.

His voice rises with every word.

McRae: We’re not going to talk about how you didn’t care who died, that you didn’t care that you even killed anyone. I don’t even think you realize that what you did was wrong, and that scares me.

McRae: What the hell happened in the past five, eight years? What made you the person you are today, to be the person that would kill someone without a second thought?
Murdock: You really don’t know me as well as I thought, do you.

Murdock: Because you misunderstand. I fully realize that my actions were wrong. I won’t defend or condone them, but I did what I felt I had to do.

McRae: What the fuck are you talking about.

Murdock: …

She sighs. She sighs, and for the first time, she looks well and truly lost.

Murdock: Everyone in this room hates me, Tristan.

McRae: Well, yeah, because you fucking killed Claude.

Murdock: Before that. Can any of you honestly say that you liked spending time with me? That you thought I was tolerable?

She pauses, perhaps for someone to deny her claim or to insist that they love her nonetheless. Though she gets no response, all she does is square her shoulders.

Murdock: My point exactly. I doubt anyone here will miss me when I’m gone, and so I have no regrets about what I’ve done. I think I’m just glad someone else whom nobody likes went with me.

McRae: You don’t know what you’re talking about.

Murdock: [ignores him] So you want to know why I wanted to kill someone, then? Because I wanted out. I want to be respected. I want to be- I want to be liked, is that so much to ask for?

McRae: … I like you.
Murdock: Can you really say that? After everything? [shakes head] You’re just saying that because you don’t know any better. You really do need better friends.

McRae: Yeah, and I would have one if, again, you didn’t kill him.

Murdock: … Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe you can make friends with some actually respectable people.

McRae: Who are you to judge who I’m friends with? Who are your friends?

Murdock: *That’s what I’m getting at.*

Murdock: I. Have. No. Friends. None of you care about me. I don’t really care about any of you. At best, we have mutual understandings to talk politely. But I don’t have friends here.

McRae: You have me! You have family, that’s got to count for something!

Murdock: Not in this case. Do you seriously think I was happy hanging around you and that idiot for the past week? I had to watch. Everyone. Go around and make friends and be buddy-buddy.

Murdock: I had none of that.

McRae: You weren’t trying.

Murdock: Yes I was!

McRae: Were you? Were you really? “Trying” doesn’t mean telling people to do what you want them to and expecting nothing more than what they do.

Murdock flinches back but McRae keeps talking, hands still at his side.
McRae: “Trying” doesn’t mean dismissing people whenever they want to do something other than what you want to do.

Murdock: But that’s what you always want to do, what with your games-

McRae: My “games” also got me an Ultimate title. I guess it also got me stuck here with you, though, so that’s unfortunate.

Murdock: … See, so that’s what I don’t understand.

McRae: What?

Murdock: How people can just… Like you. The way you are. Because you’re you.

Murdock: They tell me to be myself, they tell me that like-minded people exist, but they’re always wrong. Every time I try to find out more about other people, it turns out they never liked me to begin with.

McRae: Because, again, you don’t even try to understand other people! You just get wrapped up in your own head and never listen to people!

Murdock: Do you? Do you try? All this time, I thought you hated me because you never had interest in what I had to say.

McRae: Are you even hearing yourself? You have no interest in what I have to say, either!

Murdock: [raises voice] So I don’t get it! I just don’t get it!

Murdock: Why is it that YOU get to have friends? Why do YOU, who’s childish and spacey-

McRae: I am not childish! I was never “childish” or immature for my age! You’re the one who cut things off as soon as you thought you were too grown up for me!
Murdock: Because I was! I didn’t have time to- to-

McRae: To be a child? You were literally ten! You were a ten-year-old child who decided that another ten-year-old was too stupid for you to hang around!

McRae: It took me all these years to accept that I wasn’t at fault for that, for wanting to enjoy things that I like, and you decided that you still aren’t okay with that! If you don’t have friends, if you sincerely feel like no one loves or even likes you, maybe there’s a reason for that!

Murdock: [cold] Okay. Fine. I’m an awful person. I can live with that.

McRae: I didn’t say that.

Murdock: So can you blame me, then? For doing all of this? For killing your best friend? Say that I was jealous, that I was vindictive, it doesn’t matter. But you can’t say I didn’t have reasons.

Murdock: But it doesn’t matter. None of it does. You can die hating me for all I care. I deserve it.

McRae takes a long moment to answer.

McRae: Ti, listen. I don’t hate you.

McRae: You’re family. I know I should hate you, I should be screaming at you to die like Claude did, and sometimes family does things that you should hate them for, but I can’t.

McRae: [quieter] I never hated you, Ti. I just wanted you to see me be happy and not want to take that away from me. I wanted things to go back to when we were kids, but that’s what I get from being stuck in the past, huh?

McRae: But can I blame you? Yes, actually. Because obviously- OBVIOUSLY you don’t feel the same about me. Obviously you were happy to let ME die if you got a get out of jail free card and got to absolve yourself of all of this. Because that’s how it always is for you. As long as you walk
away unharmed, you don’t care. I’ve known you for too long to think otherwise.

McRae: I can pretend, sure. I’m good at pretending. But only to a point, and not about this.

McRae: But I don’t hate you.

Murdock: …

McRae: …

When she was talking to me the other day, about these insecurities… Could I have helped her? Could I have talked her out of doing what she’s done? If I had known, I would have done more…

But I didn’t. And we’re here now.

… Did I cause this?

Murdock: … Well, you should.

Murdock: After all, it’s like you’ve said. We can’t go back to the past. We can only move forward to the future.

Murdock: Because in the end, I still killed Bates. And he was your friend, wasn’t he?

McRae: Yes, but you were my friend too.

Murdock: I already said-

McRae: [shaking head] When we were kids. Don’t you remember that? All the times when we were stuck together because we were the only kids our age. All of the backyard adventures, all of
the stories we made up for the stuff our families would bring in… Do you even remember that?

Murdock: ...

McRae: So I’m sorry. I’m sorry for saying all of this, in front of everyone, but you’re going to die and I can’t just let you die thinking that no one loves you. I know you said all that stuff, about how your dads divorced, and how Uncle Will doesn’t spend time with you anymore, but …

McRae: People still love you. People have always loved you, Ti.

Murdock: ...

Murdock: I don’t believe you.

McRae: [sighs] I’d say you don’t have to, but it’s a little late for that one.

Murdock: And I stand by what I said. This seemed like the best option. No, it was the best option. Either I can get out of here and start a new life, or I die trying. It’s not like anyone will miss me.

McRae: I-

Murdock: I’m not trying to guilt trip you. You don’t have to say that you’ll miss me or anything like that, and I don’t expect you to, I just…

She shifts her gaze to the birds behind McRae. I realize what she’s going to say a second before she does.

Murdock: I’m done now.

Chiyo: Wait-
Ariel: Are you sure? Are all of your loose ends tied?

Murdock: I think so.

Chiyo: Wait, Murdock-san.

Murdock: Huh?

Chiyo: I’m sorry, for not doing more. To help you.

Murdock: Oh, don’t be. It’s all in the past now, anyway.

Murdock: You just need to do better in the future, okay?

Before McRae - or really any of us - can protest, she simply nods once towards Ariel. Again, just like with Shionaga, the chain shoots out from the door behind the birds and wraps around her neck. Again, just like Shionaga, she lets herself go.

In that long moment as Murdock passes him to her doom, McRae’s expression flashes between guilt, pity, sorrow, anger-

And, almost of its own volition, his hand snaps out and catches her leg.

Ariel: What are you-

The pull of fate is too much to overcome.

GAME OVER

MURDOCK HAS BEEN FOUND GUILTY

TIME FOR THE PUNISHMENT!

Instead, the lights flicker on, illuminating the chains hanging from the ceiling and outlining the catwalk beneath her in gold. A gaping abyss sprawls beneath the catwalk, but it’s no real danger considering the guardrails lining the walkway. There’s a hanging platform next to the catwalk with a hand crank installed upon it, yet there’s no need for her to use it. Why would she? After all, another light has flickered on, a bright white glow at the end of the room.

Is that all? She can just leave?

How… simple.

Murdock holds her head high and takes a step forward.

Tick.

The noise echoes, rattling the chains hanging from the ceiling. Surprised, Murdock looks upward to the source - and oh, if only escaping were so simple.

A dizzying spiral of chains and gears drape around the high walls of the room, all eventually leading back to the round mechanism in the very center of the ceiling, barely visible from this distance; what is visible, however, is the enormous digital timer. Apparently, she has but two minutes until its purpose is revealed.

And though it’s hard to make out, there’s a glimmer of green hovering at the ceiling, entangled in chains, motionless.
Her cousin.

_Tock_.

Murdock looks from the mechanism to the platform beside the very catwalk upon which she stands, then sets her jaw. Before she can take another step forward, towards the light, towards freedom, she stops.

_Tick_.

And she steps onto the platform and grasps the crank. It turns with almost no resistance, slowly but surely lifting her platform higher in the room.

_Tock_.

As Murdock’s platform ascends, so McRae descends. He doesn’t seem to react at first, but finally looks up when the two are almost level.
His eyes are unreadable. Murdock doesn’t return his gaze and continues to turn the crank.

Tick .

Murdock nearly touches the ceiling now.

Tock .

And McRae, the ground.

Tick .

At last, Murdock’s platform hovers next to the ceiling, right next to the mechanism. With every passing second, the room has started to shake. As the timer counts its way down to the one second mark McRae stares back up at her, wide-eyed, barely able to make out her face. In fact, maybe she can’t see his. Yet one feature remains clearly visible:
She’s smiling.

_Tock_.

And a flash of light consumes the mechanism, consumes the room, consumes Murdock herself, rending every last chain to dust. McRae barely catches himself on the catwalk as debris rains down around him.

Finally, after seconds that feel like a lifetime, he stands on shaking legs and looks around. Most of the debris really ended up in the abyss below, taking parts of the guardrails with it. Most of the catwalk, too, is peppered with holes and little bits of brass dust.

But the exit is still clear.

He walks towards it, still wobbling, first quickly and then slowing down as he reaches the end of the hall. He takes a last glance upward to a machine that’s no longer there and a girl that no longer lives.

And he’s the one to escape.

...

...

...

And the door opens, admitting him back into the trial room, eyes haunted. He simply stares at the floor for what can’t be longer than a minute as dawn finally kisses the sky around us.
McRae: I couldn’t save her.

All any of us can do is watch as he finally, finally starts to cry, collapsing inward on himself as first Chisaki, then Everett, then the whole class gathers around him. Though Amal reaches out for his shoulder, McRae turns quickly and sharply, hands going to his headset.

McRae: Don’t- please don’t touch me.

Amal: I’m sorry.

McRae doesn’t respond, only putting his headset on again and closing his eyes.

I think, looking at him, that his grief is not just for the loss of a family member. Rather, it’s the kind of grief for a possibility that once was, a lost opportunity, for knowing that you could have changed things but not knowing how even if the opportunity were provided to you once more. I think it’s the kind of pain that even Shionaga must have felt, once he realized what he had done, and perhaps the kind that Murdock, too, felt, once she knew that she had gone too far to return. I wish I knew what to say to help him, but as he swats away caring
hand after consolation, I don’t know if anything I provide would help at all.

Soon enough, when his breathing levels out a bit, he tries talking. Each sentence is punctuated with a gasp for air but he forces the words out anyway, stumbling as they are.

McRae: I’m sorry, I- I couldn’t save her, I could have tried, I should have tried, I got that far, but… I didn’t. I just. I didn’t. I’m sorry.

Kashizaki: McRae-san, no one blames you. That execution was really brutal. I’m amazed you’re still standing.

McRae: I- I don’t know, I guess - I don’t think. Not really.

Bazhanov: The whole thing with the timer, and the bomb…

Harai: How do you think it fit in the building…?

Atsui: How do you think they got such a big body of water for Shionaga-san?

Sumitama: D-don’t-

Everett: Hush. This isn’t about any of that. McRae-san, are you okay?

Instead of reacting with horror, however, he looks between Everett and the rest with wide eyes. He pulls his headset away from his head, looking almost as if he’d like to throw it on the ground.

McRae: What are- what are any of you talking about?

Everett: The execution. Don’t you remember?
McRae: I don’t- I don’t, what?

He’s stopped crying, his voice still unsteady, yet this time, determined.

McRae: Explain it to me. Explain what you saw on that screen.

Sekisada: Didn’t you-

McRae: No. No, I don’t think so. Tell me what you saw.

Everett: [uneasy] There was a hallway. And a platform.

Kashizaki: And Murdock-san had to raise herself to a bomb in order to help you escape, and-

McRae is already shaking his head, eyes even wider.

McRae: No. No, that’s not possible.

Kashizaki: What do you mean none of it is possible? We saw it in front of us-

McRae: I’m saying it’s not possible because none of that happened.

He glances behind him, as if to make sure that Ariel and Caliban really are gone, then fiddles with his headset again, winding the wire between his fingers and back again before letting it lie dormant in his hands. When he speaks at last, his voice is dull and totally devoid of emotion.

McRae: I grabbed her ankle. We both got taken to this room.

McRae: The collar just- it strapped her into a chair. And she died of-
Everett: You don’t have to say it if you don’t want to.

McRae: No- no, it’s important. I have to say it. I just- I wish I did more, but as soon as I saw her, I just stopped. There wasn’t even anything that would keep me from getting to her.

Atsui: But how did she die?

McRae: Lethal injection.

Sekisada: What? How?

McRae: I don’t- I don’t know why. Or how. Or anything. [half-laugh] As far as, um. Cost effective executions go? I don’t think that one is a good option. To be done automatedly.

McRae: [trailing off] But there was nothing I did to stop it. I could have…

**Hesitantly, Everett places a hand on McRae’s shoulder. When she’s met with no objections, she sighs and points him to the elevator.**

Everett: I think it’s time we all went to bed. It’s been a long night.

Sumitama: It’s almost morning.

Chisaki: If that stupid bird makes a morning announcement in three hours I’ll punch him personally. Okay?

Ekyou: Don’t do that.

Amal: I agree. Don’t do that.
Chisaki: Hey, I’m expressing a sentiment and making it clear. I’m showing my *support*. [pouts]  

Everett: [to McRae] Does that sound alright with you?  

McRae: I don’t know. I need some time to think.  

Everett: And we can do that out of the trial room. Is that okay?  

**McRae nods immediately, shoving his headset back on as his eyes gloss over again. Somehow, slowly, the class makes it over to the elevator and we begin our own descent to the living room.**  

**Although there’s more space with one less people than we started with, we still crowd to the center of the shaft, not one person complaining from the tangled mess. With Amal’s hand in mine, I feel like I can breathe again, but I still have to wonder.**  

**Despite all my resolve to help, two people still died today for, essentially, no good reason. If I had known that I could have done something to stop it, I know I would have. I know I would have tried harder, or talked Murdock off the edge.**  

**Would it have helped? If she didn’t even listen to McRae, when she was about to die, would I have been able to do anything?**  

**Could I have done more?**  

**Murdock, Bates… I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t prevent your deaths. And I promise that I won’t ever let this happen again, if I have any say in the matter.**  

I promise that I’ll do better.
The map for Zone 2 (Chapter 2) can be found [here](#).

Thank you SO SO much to Robin for helping me with the execution CG AND for the absolutely amazing wonderful post-trial CG!! I'm actively losing it!! If you aren't reading *Ultimate Danganronpa: Supernova at Sea*, who even ARE you?

Also, check out the super cool logo my friend Rilie made! It's on the first chapter of ASLH. It's SO GOOD and I LOVE IT. Their original story *RATS: 252 Chances at Redemption* slaps hard as hell too, so if you have time [slides it to you] stan Nichole
2-X: I WAS EMPTY THEN, AND I'M EMPTY NOW.

Chapter Summary

...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[5:45] C. KUMOSHITA:
the world fades to black
as you realize this,
too brilliantly.
you shone
in all aspects of the word,
a star.
forevermore chasing
what’s just out of reach,
you sought for
more than you should know.
yet you found
...some kind of companionship?
and is happiness
what you were looking for?
did you find
all that you asked?
knowledge
is
important.
your life remains
(reverse the line order. see what changes.)

...

[6:28] C. KUMOSHITA:
don’t you know? they say
that somewhere there is a woman
that the woman has snakes in her hair
that the woman has a perfect garden
that the garden is not for plants,
that the garden is full of statues

and don’t you know? all of those statues
are the people who wanted to help her
are the people who wanted to hurt her
are the people who wanted to know her
and she treats them the same, every one.

yet if you look at the myth you’d know:
the woman was not always cruel.
her eyes were once filled with kindness.
that flowers did not always hide snakes;
that fair was not always foul.

the world was not always unkind
but now that it is -
what is there to be done?
what can i

[6:56] C. KUMOSHITA:

This wasn’t supposed to be about me. I’m sorry

Murdock-san

Tiana?

I know you can’t reply, but...

I don’t think I ever really understood you

And I know you didn’t really try, but maybe I didn’t try enough either

So I wanted to say I’m sorry

I’m sorry for not doing more to help you

I don’t even know if you wanted to be helped

But it’s too late for any of that now.

I’ll try to make a better future, okay?

You said it like you wanted us all to move on as fast as you did, but I really mean it.

I don’t want anyone else to die. I don’t think anyone else does, either.

And I don’t know how to end this killing game, but I’ll try to think of something.

I promise.

Rest well.
[ ITEM OBTAINED || Earbuds ]
These are remarkably high caliber and provide a bass boosted kick to your listening experience. Or, they would, if you had any sort of music player. Or if you wanted to use these at all.

[ ITEM OBTAINED || Antique Jewelry ]
Though broken in several places and missing the pendants, these bracelets are high quality and look fairly expensive.

[ OUTFIT CHANGES ]

[ ALEXEI ILYICH BAZHANOVA || SHSL BIRDWATCHER ]
“Hey. Aspen-san.”

“Call me Erika. What’s wrong?”

“...Nothing. I think I’m just. Really tired.”

“Umitsu-kun, you’re here in my room at 3 in the morning, of course you’re tired. Here. Sit down. What’s really wrong?”

“Nothing, I told you already.”

“And I told you, it’s 3 am. What made you come to me, anyway?”

“Your room light is the only one that’s on. And I didn’t want to stare at the fireplace.”

“And you were wandering at night because…”

“...”

“... You don’t have to tell me, dear. You can just stay here, if you want.”

“No, I’m thinking. About how to say it. I came to bother you, anyway.”
“Okay. Take your time. I’ll be here.”

“... I had a bad dream.”

“Well, that’s to be expected. We just finished a trial, after all-“

“Not about them. About... About. The other two. You know.”

“... Ah. I see.”

“You know, when Kang-san gave her explanation of what happened, all I heard was static, but in
the dream I saw it all happen. The paperweight, the blood everywhere...”

“...”

“And you know, I ended up locking my talent room. You know how they gave us all rooms
according to our talents?”

“Yes. Mine has speakers and audio recording equipment.”

“See, mine has a bow and arrows. And I had fun with it the first few days, until Kusada-chan died,
and now all I can think about is how if someone got their hands on my equipment then someone
will get hurt. I don’t think I could ever forgive myself if that happened.”

“You’re awfully philosophical for a fifteen year old.”

“You’re awfully noncommittal for a - hey, how old are you, again?”

“Nineteen.”
“I changed my mind. You’re awfully old for an old person.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“... None of this is fair to you, you know.”

“Huh?”

“You’re just... You’re just fifteen. You shouldn’t have to be part of, well, any of this. Fifteen is very young, Umitsu-kun.”

“Nineteen isn’t THAT much older. It’s not like you’re, I dunno, twenty.”

“Kuhu... I suppose not. But still. It’s okay not to be holding up well, given the circumstances.”

“Do you think so? I don’t think so. I don’t think fifteen is THAT young. I think I need to get stronger and deal with it myself.”

“And you’re going to accomplish this in a killing game... how, exactly?”

“Well, by... not killing anyone! And trying really hard not to die myself!”

“... You’re so young.”

“Don’t say that like an insult!”

“I’m not trying to, I’m just...”
“Where I grew up, there were a lot of problems with high schoolers like yourself being in much more dangerous situations than they should be. Situations a lot like this one, but without the rules and such to keep everyone from dying at once. Some days I would go to school thinking that I wouldn’t come back home…”

“… Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago, it’s just… Ah. This is a bit sappy of me, and I apologize for telling you this when we barely know each other and it’s so late.”

“No, it’s three in the morning. Of course it’s sappy. Don’t apologize.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. I just… You reminded me so much of what my friends used to say. And it’s heartbreaking that it happens at all. None of us should have to say these things to one another.”

“I guess, but like, we’re here now. So I think we need to just… I don’t know, do better than we think we can do?”

“Something like that. Do you plan to stay the night?”

“… It’s very dark outside, Aspen-san.”

“I told you to call me Erika. And you can take the floor, if you’d like.”

“Aw yes. Thank you, Erika.”

“It’s no problem.”

“And, hey, if you want, you can call me Isaku! Or… The Literary Bandit, Umitsu-sama!! Keheh.”
“Ah, you’re adorable, kuhuhu. If I had a little brother, I’d want him to be just like you.”

“Oh, wait, no, you don’t want that, trust me. Also honestly don’t call me Umitsu-sama. That’s horribly embarrassing.”

“Mhm. Duly noted. But Isaku, if you ever have trouble sleeping again, you’re welcome to come to me, okay? I’ll be happy to have you here.”

“Thanks, Erika.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

…

…

…

“I should never have agreed to this.”

It’s too late now.

“No, it’s not. I can still stop this. I still have time.”

How would you do that?

“I don’t know.”

Yes, you do.
“But I don’t want to.”

Well, you don’t have to.

“But if I don’t, then...”

The decision is yours alone to make.

“Then I’ll do what I can.”

Chapter End Notes

The OOC trivia section for Chapter 2 as a whole can be found here.
3-1: What I'd Do Not To Worry Like You

Chapter Summary

Get up, get up, pressure, pressure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And here we are again in darkness.

Yet this time, squares of light illuminate the dark around me, words wrapping around my head as pings and messages come and go. Is this what it's like to dream in text?

I… wasn’t expecting something so visual.

[CARDIOID]:
Ok so is everyone here
This is 14 people right

[TIDE]:
who even ARE you.

[SOLAR]:
good question! i don’t know either! :DDD

[TIDE]:
i’m leaving before this even starts.

[CARDIOID]:
We are the HXXXXXXXX International Academy class of 20XX congratulations everyone we are
graduating now

[MABEL]:
OH FINALLY

[ANGEL]:
wait are you sure this should be 14 people? if you mean the whole class we’re missing a person :o

[KILLER]:
ill check!!!

[ZERO]:
No don’t do that. They are not invited on purpose

[PEARL]:
What?

[ZERO]:
In fact this is what we are here to talk about
We gather here today to discuss the matter of XXXXX being a little bitch

[TIDE]:
omg

[CARDIOID]:
Ouch
Harsh

[ZERO]:
YOURE THE ONE WHO SAID TO INTRODUCE IT LIKE THAT

[MELODY]:

i mean

hes not wrong.

[REGENT]:

He really isn’t. XXXXX is abhorrent.

[ROSE]:

Abborrent is a lot of scrabble points.

*abhorrent

[PEARL]:

Catch me up on the matter please

What did XXXXX do?

[CARDIOID]:

Doxx the hell out of us mostly

[ANGEL]:

doxx…?

Chiyo: That’s when someone posts your personal information online. Your name, your address...

I didn’t realize I’d said it out loud, but as soon as the words leave my mouth, they, too, are enclosed in a friendly little speech bubble. From “Atlas”, apparently… Cute.

[ROSE]:

Wait, XXXXX did all of that) ro is?

*?

*to

*us

[REGENT]:
You don’t have to correct your typos, you know.
After all, we’re aware of your situation.

[MELODY]:
have you tried speech to text b4?

[ROSE]:
No
I’m basically a cyborn please be nice to me :^(
*cyborg

[STARDUST]:
They’ve been doing it the past 3 months, yes. In the form of stories about their classmates.
Some of it is gossip, some of it is… less so.

[CARDIOID]:
Basically y’know how XXXXX keeps posting shit abt us
They keep referring to me as a guy which like yeah sure I prefer but I told you guys EXPLICITLY
not to do that in a place my parents might see, ie a website
And wtf does this bitch do???
So like if Mom sees it I am Not going home this break and you can’t make me go

[KILLER]:
???? ok that?? yikes.  
im really sorry, dude.

[CARDIOID]:
Tip I am so fucking mad

[MELODY]:
you can stay with me if you need to idt mom will mind

[ATLAS]:
^^!! My parents understand!!

[ZERO]:
And that isn’t the worst of it. We’ve all done some embarrassing things in the past few months since school started

XXXXX keeps posting them for shits and giggles

[KILLER]:
bitch.

[CARDIOID]:
Yeah pretty much

[SOLAR]:
ok ok ok so like
we know this is happening now
it sucks
what are we doing about it.
[ZERO]:
That’s what this group chat is for. We’re working on some kind of revenge.

[ANGEL]:
isn’t that going a little far? 3:

[MABEL]:
uhh have to agree with [ANGEL] there
this seems……………
………………

[SOLAR]:
well like
if we don’t fight then they’ll keep doing it.
we gotta fight dude
we gotta SHOW our TEETH
ANARCHY REIGNS SUPREME

[ROSE]:
We are so going to get suspended.

[SOLAR]:
NOT WITH THAT ATTITUDE

[MABEL]:
………………
…

[STARDUST]:
You okay there, buddy?

[MABEL]:
…………

[PEARL]:
Is your keyboard stuck?
How long are you going to type dots?

[MABEL]:
im thinking about what to say

[ZERO]:
You don’t need to type all those dots for that

[REGENT]:
You can’t honestly say that you aren’t infuriated by this?
Your career is on the line, too.

[MABEL]:
yea ok you right but
idk this seems excessive?
i dont think its that bad idk

[MELODY]:
yeah bc u never think

[CARDIOID]:
OUCH HARSH
[ANGEL]:
don’t be mean!! >:/

[MABEL]:

ik we gotta do something but
this just aint it chief

[ZERO]:
Okay so what do you propose

[MABEL]:

… idk
talk to them?

[MELODY]:

+ this will help…. how?

[REGENT]:
Personally, I feel that jumping to action would be hasty. We could potentially talk to the administration about XXXXX’s actions?

[KILLER]:
i dont know either.
i think we have to do something, though.

[SOLAR]:
like MURDER
[ANGEL]:
no!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

[TARO]:
Just opened my phone. 100+ new messages. Please explain.

[PEARL]:
Hello we’re plotting how we’re going to kill XXXXX

[ANGEL]:
NO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

[TARO]:
Cool. I’m in.

[CARDIOID]:
WOW THAT WORKED??

[TARO]:
XXXXX sensationalized my past for views, so like.
Yes that worked.

[KILLER]:
wtf is their dealll
ok let me guess they totally did mine too

[REGENT]:
Same here.
[MELODY]:

ok wow thats

kinda ridiculous really.

shit.

[ATLAS]:

I didn’t realize how extensive it was…

[STARDUST]:

I’ve been keeping tabs. DM me if you want to know what’s been said.

I’m going to punt XXXXX into the sun.

[TIDE]:

you and what army

you have twig arms

[STARDUST]:

[IMG-7069]

[PEARL]:

This is an Uno reverse card…?

[SOLAR]:

FORGET THAT THE FILE NAME HAS 69 IN IT

[CARDIOID]:

NICE

[MELODY]:
nice

[ROSE]:
Nice

[TIDE]:
i will literally kill all of you.

[ZERO]:
Calm down bitch
Also nice

[TARO]:
My data plan is being wasted on this.
Just so you know.

[ATLAS]:
So back on topic…
What should we do?

[ZERO]:
I’ll figure something out
Anyway, we’ve got a few months to think of some kind of revenge

[ANGEL]:
still don’t think this is a good idea…

[ZERO]:
Well look at it this way
Snitches get stitches.

[KILLER]:
is that a threat???

[ZERO]:
Only if you want it to be
Listen, we just need to do something, okay? And it’ll be okay with everyone else before we actually do it

[KILLER]:
....
i guess.

[STARDUST]:
What do the rest of you think?

Has it ever been a decision? XXXXX has been… well, not ruining our lives, but they’ve been irresponsible, reckless, insensitive… There’s got to be a way to fix this.

Right?

Chiyo: I’m in.

The messages around my head swirl faster and faster, dragging me along to the edge of darkness, to the light beyond, and for just a moment all I can recall is the light at the end of Murdock’s execution before I stumble forward. And...
I feel the alarm before I hear it, an irritating buzz against the wood of the nightstand. It’s all I can do to slap my stupid Parchment off the table and leave Ariel to make his stupid morning announcement muffled against the stupid bright carpet.

I don’t, however, get the luxury of ignoring the second half of the announcement.

Ariel: And if it’s not too much trouble, please come to the kitchen within the next half an hour! I have an announcement to make. Thank you!

All I can do is glare at the tablet until the screen turns off automatically, then sit up in bed with a sigh and draw my knees to my chest.
How long has it been? How long has it been since we were able to laugh together as a class, somewhere far away from this building and all its fabricated misery? It occurs to me that I haven’t seen a calendar since I got here. Not like it would matter, since apparently I’m missing the past three years of my life, anyway.

… I wonder how my family is doing.

If they’re still mad at me about my published work, or if they’ve come to terms with my mindset in a way I will never empathize with. I wonder if they even realize that I’m missing - but of course they know I’m missing, right? Shouldn’t they be looking?

According to Ariel - at least, according to Ariel on the day that Chisaki lost her hand - no one is looking for us. But I don’t want to believe it, no matter what common sense says. There’s got to be someone looking for us. They’ll find us. They’ll rescue us. We’ll get out of here.

Right?

Maybe it’s no wonder that Murdock felt so isolated and so alone. If her parents divorced and she hadn’t spoken to McRae in years, only to find him again and believe that he hated her, maybe it’s feasible that she felt like she had to do the things she did.

… Really? Am I really trying to justify murder right now?

There’s a knock on my door and I don’t even have a chance to hide my face or pretend I’m still asleep before someone peeks in.

Amal: Chiyo?

Chiyo: Myeeegh.

Amal: … I thought you were a morning person.
Chiyo: I thought you weren’t one. This is like the second time in two days you’ve woken up before me.

Amal: I didn’t sleep. I’m surprised you were able to, after…

Chiyo: Yeah. I know. After the trial.

I let my gaze drop to the corner of the room, to the tangle of earbuds and jewelry that Ariel left outside my door after the trial. I think I’m going to have to move all of this stuff out of my bag and into my bedside drawer, whenever I have the time. Something about rummaging through my bag for my Parchment and pulling out Bates’s earbuds instead seems enormously unappealing.

Amal follows my line of vision but doesn’t say anything about it, only twirling their hat in their hands.

Amal: Well, I might be stealing your morning person powers, too. But you didn’t hear that from me.

Chiyo: Mm. I guess.

They still stand at the door, shuffling their feet for a moment. I kind of feel like I owe them an explanation as for why I’m still sitting in bed doing absolutely nothing, honestly, but I don’t think I can work up the energy.

Amal: You look tired.

Chiyo: Maybe the three hours of sleep had something to do with it.

And maybe the two ghosts in my room have something to do with it, too.

Amal: [snorts] I’d bet. But we need to go to the kitchen, so…
Chiyo: Do I have to?

They sigh, cross the room, and to my abject delight/horror, run a hand through my hair (!!!!!!) and comb it out. With careful, quiet diligence, they work out the largest tangles, even the one under my neck I’d been kind of forcefully ignoring because of just how uncooperative it was getting.

All I can do is sit and die a thousand quiet deaths until they pause and speak again.

Amal: You’re the only one who hasn’t come to the kitchen yet. Kashizaki-chan told me to come and get you.

Amal: So get up already.

Amal pats my head, stands up, and heads back to the door, ignoring my whining and my plight of Not Wanting To Face People and Also No Longer Having My Hair Played With. It is a sad time to be Chiyo Kumoshita at this moment.

Amal: Don’t look at me like that. We can do something together after the meeting, okay?

... Well, I guess if Kashizaki said I should get out of bed, I should get out of bed, huh.

Amal: I’ll wait for you outside.

I somehow manage to get myself together in three minutes. Maybe part of it is that I want to hang out with Amal more, maybe part of it is that I feel guilty for being the last one to leave my room, and maybe part of it is just a need to get out of my room before I suffocate... Actually, let’s be realistic here. I just want to hang out with Amal. Though that second-to-last reason is a particularly big one, too. If I don’t find a better place for those mementos soon, I think I’ll just have to sleep somewhere else to avoid all the ghosts.

Still, as I stumble out of my room and loop my arm around Amal’s without hesitation, all I
have to say for myself is that I’m doing a very bad job of not falling for them. They don’t even seem surprised at the contact anymore. And the worst part is that I don’t think I mind.

What is the world coming to, that two teenagers can just… *exist* for a while, and be dumb and maybe in love, despite the killing game surging around them? Maybe the world isn’t so cruel after all.

All too soon, we arrive at the kitchen. I take a moment to collect myself before following Amal in.

I barely get a chance to glance at the assembled class - and McRae in the corner, expression dark - before that usual automated voice starts up again.

Ariel: Ah, good. You’re all here, then.

Sekisada: Fuck you.

Ariel: [tsks] Now, that’s not at all polite. You are aware that I am your host, correct?

Sekisada: I don’t have to listen to you.

Ariel: Of course you do. Now that we may finally proceed with announcements…

Everett: Where’s the other bird?

Ariel: … Haven’t you noticed by now?

Everett: Noticed what?

Ariel: We cover different duties. I’m in charge of motives and rewards, while Caliban is in charge of punishments, rule changes, and trials.
Chisaki: Yeah, actually, question about that.

Ariel: … [sighs] He is *theoretically* in charge of punishment, but I am the one with the means of punishment available to me. So… I suppose he’s just in charge of rule changes and trials. [mutters] Slacker.

Atsui: I mean, I dunno. It doesn’t seem like you do much all day either. Motives and rewards cover just, what, one meeting every two days or so? I’m pretty sure you could be doing all of this by yourself.

**Abruptly, Ariel turns away from Atsui, beak in the air.**

Ariel: Anyway! Anyway.

Atsui: Oh my god he doesn’t have an answer.

Ariel: ANYWAY, ahem. Since none of you seem to appreciate my presence, I’ll make this quick.

Sumitama: You said that last time!

Ariel: And the more you talk the longer the conversation gets!

Kashizaki: What the hell is all of this about, anyway?

Harai: If the last time they were here after a trial, they came to announce a new area opening, it stands to reason that they’re here to announce another area.

Ariel: I do *not* appreciate my authority being undermined.

Harai: It saves time.
Ariel: Hmph. Well, as Mx. Harai so poignantly put it, a new area has been opened.

Atsui: Where?

Harai: The only place that would make sense is the wooden barrier by the Monomachine. The one on the floor.

Ariel: [sarcastic] Yes, or why don’t you wander around the building and find it yourself. Heavens, Harai, do you just want to finish my announcement for me?

Harai: Sure. [to the rest of the class] Since the barrier is on the floor, it probably covers stairs leading to a bottom level. This theory is further reinforced by the presence of a balcony, since we’re clearly on a higher story of a building. Unless we’re actually going upstairs to investigate the trial room, which seems exceedingly likely, we get to go downstairs now. Any questions?

Sekisada: How do you know so much and why don’t you ever say any of this?

Harai: I have eyes and so do the rest of you.

Bazhanov: I beg to differ.

Harai: Oh. Right. I’m sorry.

Chisaki: Steal one.

Bazhanov: [brightly] Okay!

Everett: Tsukino, no, don’t encourage him- oh my god.

Sekisada: As long as they aren’t mine, I’m fine with it. Take, like, Khalaf-shi’s eyes.
Amal: Hey??

Chiyo: [pats their arm] To be fair, you do have very pretty eyes.

And I have some pretty immediate regrets about SAYING THAT in front of everyone else as first Amal’s face (and likely my own) turn bright scarlet near-instantly to the background buzz of teenage heckling.

... I mean, it’s true! You could get lost in just how brilliant their eyes are! While Kashizaki’s eyes are luminous, Amal’s are stately, liquid, dazzling- yep I’m doing an awful job of not being a horrible romantic disaster!!! Just my luck!!!

Just as Amal opens their mouth, Atsui slams on the table - the sudden movement, or maybe the noise of it, causes both Amal and Everett to lurch back in wide-eyed surprise. Atsui, however, just points in Amal’s and my direction with a triumphant shout.

Atsui: One week!

Chiyo: Huh??

Atsui: [looking at Chisaki] I give them one week to start dating! That’s my bet!

Chisaki: Oh, you’re ON. I give them less than that.

Chiyo: HEY!!

Amal: WH-??

Chisaki grins ear to ear at our reactions, but pauses at the quiet scuff from the corner of the room.
McRae simply glares at the rest of us, eyes as bitingly cold as his cousin’s just a few hours ago. The smile slides slowly off of my face as he locks eyes directly with Chisaki, whose own grin has frozen.

McRae: So this is what we’re all gonna focus on, huh.

Chisaki: … Oh. Right, dude, we should probably treat this with more gravity-

McRae: Yeah, you probably should.


McRae: Yeah. Me too. And so is everyone else, or at least you say so, anyway.

Chisaki: I-

McRae: Don’t apologize, I’m not mad. Yet. Just extremely annoyed.

He shoves his hands in his pockets, expression set.

McRae: Well, you all have fun with… whatever it is you’re doing, I guess. I’m going back to bed.

Kashizaki: Goodnight.

McRae: Morning, actually. But thanks.

He stalks out of the kitchen, shoulders hunched. I don’t honestly think anyone blames him for what happened this morning and how he’s reacting to it, and I know people want to do better in helping him through it - I want to help him through it, in fact - yet...
With the exception of McRae, no one seems too visibly upset with the loss of Murdock and Bates specifically. Even I’ll admit that my distress is more from guilt than attachment to the deceased. And while Chisaki was close to Valdez and Sumitama and Ekyou to Shionaga, there wasn’t much overlap between their groups. To lose two people so close to you in one day, and then for everyone else to brush past it can’t possibly endear us to him. For the time being it’s probably best to keep my distance so that I can understand the situation better.

But of course that’s what I thought about Murdock, too.

Thankfully, before I can rabbit hole down into some other early morning tangent of could-haves and should-haves, Amal bumps my shoulder with theirs and shakes me back to the present. I blink and meet those same golden eyes I’d just been waxing poetic about a few minutes ago. What I’d give to never have to worry about anything else than an embarrassing crush, honestly.

Kashizaki: So, then. About the new area-

Harai: [suddenly] Bye.

They grab the packed lunch next to them and push past Amal and me to the door. Kashizaki watches them, bewildered.

Kashizaki: Are they always like that?

Chisaki: I mean, I guess?? They investigate pretty much everything.

Chiyoh: Yeah. When the second area opened, they pretty much immediately asked me to go with them.

Amal: You still haven’t sent me the notes from that.

Sekisada: If you have notes from that, shouldn’t you be sending them to the rest of us?
Chiyo: … I mean.

Atsui: Hey, leave her alone. She can do what she wants. [mutters] … Though it would be good if the rest of us could see it, too.

Chiyo: I’ll send it out when I can!!

Kashizaki: So about the new area. Does anyone wonder how big this mansion is, anyway? Surely people would notice a giant building in the mountains, right…?

Bazhanov: If it helps at all, we’re probably on Shikoku, based on the wildlife. It’s not very populated.

Atsui: Oh, shit, you actually got to see some birds?

Bazhanov: It’s not hard. Use your eyes.

Amal: [protectively adjusts glasses] Hey.

Bazhanov: Though I don’t know how much more of the mansion will be eventually made available to us. Assuming that the new area is the size as each one that was previously open, we’ll run out of new areas after the next one.

Everett: What if they let us outside?

Sekisada: Why would they want to do that?

Everett: [shrugs] I dunno, fresh air? I wouldn’t mind it.

Sekisada makes a noncommittal noise but doesn’t make any further indication of responding to her. Lately, all Sekisada’s been doing to acknowledge Everett has been the bare minimum… which, now that I think about it, actually isn’t that much of a change.
Amal: Well, I guess there’s one way to find out how big the new area is. Does anyone want to investigate?

Sumitama: I'm still eating.

Ekyou: Yeah. I'll pass.

Kashizaki: Why don’t you spend time with Kumoshita-chan and have a meaningful bonding experience?

Chiyo: Excuse me??

Chisaki: KISS.

Atsui: No, don’t do that yet. Wait a week. I need to win this bet.

Amal: [bright red] You guys suck.

Chisaki: KISS!!

I take that as my cue to leave, catching Bazhanov muttering something about not seeing it happening as Sekisada lays his head on the table. It’s not until I’m out of the kitchen that I realize that, somewhere in the mess, Ariel seems to have escaped. Not that I’m ungrateful for it, but… man, am I starting to pity that robot bird. Which is maybe not the best idea because of how he also wants us all to die??

I only have to wait a moment before Amal steps out of the room, too, lips pressed together in a tight line and hat drawn so low over their face that I’d be surprised if they can even see.

Amal: Why the hell does everyone think we’re dating?
Chiyo: Uh…

Amal: Actually, you know what? Don’t answer that.

I don’t really trust myself to, anyway. What would I even say?? “I sure wouldn’t mind”?? It’s not WRONG, but…???

And then McRae’s expression, all his resignation and frustration, flits through my mind again and it’s all I can do to suppress a sigh. I don’t think I should really be sorting through my feelings about my closest friend right now. It’s probably better to just focus on staying alive, and more importantly, on keeping everyone else alive too.

Chiyo: Didn’t you want to investigate the new area? Can I come with you?

Amal: Huh? [blinks] Oh, if you want. Unless you wanted to go back to sleep.

Chiyo: No, it’s fine! I like spending time with you, and I can work on sending all of my notes out, too!

Amal: Oh. [pauses] Well, alright. Harai-san said it was probably that wooden barrier, so let’s go over there…

The two of us walk to the Monomachine and to where it appears a barrier has, in fact, been removed. I wonder how they do it so cleanly that no trace of each blockage remains? In contrast, the staircase is remarkably dusty, considering that the barrier was probably meant to keep off some of the grime. Indeed, the air seems thick and just inhaling takes effort, but it’s air nonetheless. Neither of us speak as we walk downward in the loose spiral of the walkway. Though there’s a lot of stairs, they’re fairly shallow, and a slight ramp runs alongside. It seems to clash with the general aesthetic of the building, leaving me to wonder about its purpose.

At the bottom of it all lies a sprawling foyer, almost as large as the lounge above us. While impressive in its size (the ceiling must be at least eight meters high, for goodness’ sake), it’s rather barren. A hallway on the near end of the room snakes towards the first wing of the mansion; judging by the door ajar, Harai must already be investigating. The shaft that encompasses the fireplace-elevator seems to extend all the way down to the center of the
foyer, though the entire area under the second wing of the mansion seems to be blocked off - while a set of double doors is present, they’re locked with heavy chains. Amal tries tugging at a set to no avail.

Chiyo: So they’re locked.

Amal: Obviously.

Chiyo: I mean, yeah. [sighs; takes out Parchment] Do you think that’s even worth writing down?

Amal: If you want. [shrugs] Maybe note the other doors, too?

They gesture to another set of doors, this one much larger than the chained off set. These face outwards to what I can only assume is the outside of the building, but when I push at them, they don’t even budge.

Amal: They’re locked too?

Chiyo: Yeah, obviously.

Amal: Oh, hush. [frowns] So if those doors are locked, what’s the point of putting chains on all of this?

Chiyo: I don’t know… I guess it’s something to write down.

It takes just a second to jot down what I see, including how dusty and threadbare the carpet seems to be. When I look up again, Amal is staring at me, looking somewhere in between inquisitive and embarrassed.

Chiyo: Is, um, something wrong?

Amal: What? [scrubs at face] No, it’s nothing, I just…
Amal: … I dunno, this is a weird thing to say, but I just realized that I know next to nothing about you and your life and I told you all that shit about me a few days ago. So I’m sorry for dumping all of that on you basically unprompted.

Chiyo: Huh? No, it’s fine!! If telling me helped you at all, I’m happy you were able to get it off your chest!!

Amal: Oh, uh, I guess it did. So thank you for that. I just, er…

They take off their hat and turn it over in their hands for a moment before neatly tucking their hair back under it.

Amal: … What’s your family like? I guess that’s a good place to start.

Chiyo: Huh?? They’re not that special, I promise! I’m just-

Amal: “A somebody from nowhere”. I, ah, read your profile. But if you think your family isn’t spectacular, then they must be nice, right? If they aren’t terrible people.

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: … I mean… that’s a really… grim? Way of looking at it?? BUT I GUESS??

Amal: [pulls hat down] N-never mind, then. Sorry for phrasing it like that, I just meant-

Chiyo: No, no, it’s fine! It’s that principle of “no news is good news”, I think?

Amal: Something like that, yeah.

I’m having a really hard time writing things down and holding this conversation. With a
sigh, I slip my Parchment back into my bag. Guess Harai will have to figure everything out on their own.

Chiyo: So what did you want to know?

Amal: Didn’t you mention having an older brother?

Chiyo: Two, actually!

Amal: Two…? I’m sorry, I’m like legitimately having trouble picturing you as the youngest. You just seem way too responsible for that.

I just stare at them in disbelief before pushing past them to the hallway. They follow, wringing their hands in mock offense.

Amal: What? Did I say something wrong?

Chiyo: I’m sorry, have you MET me? Some days I’m surprised I can even dress myself!

Amal: I mean, me too.

Chiyo: I sincerely doubt that. You’re like, the most put together person I know.

Amal: Am I? Am I really?

Chiyo: … You’re pretty up there! I think!

Amal seems to smother a grin as they pull at the door on our right and head into the first room. Their grin only fades once they see the room.
It’s far longer than any of the other rooms in the rest of the mansion, beyond the obvious hallways. The ground is paved not in carpet or tile, but some strange stiff turf peppered with holes and small obstacles. A closet nearby, presumably, holds little plastic clubs to complete the decoration.

In short, this is an entire mini golf course.

Amal: … What the fuck.

Chiyo: This… is totally something my brother would put in a mansion.

Amal: I guess we know who kidnapped us, then.

All I can think to do is blow a raspberry at them. This time, they really do smile, a grin that lights up their whole face. And…

… Well, Ekyou’s grin is what some people call a Gatsby smile. Every time she smiles seems like it’s the first time she’s ever made the expression and that it’s a special gift just for you. It’s a very dazzling feeling, but I think she might have that effect on everyone - if it’s a smile meant to make you feel special, and she makes everyone feel special, then is her smile really for you or for everyone?

When Amal smiles, there’s no mistake - their smile illuminates even the room with the force of life in their expression. Something about the way they laugh makes their eyes into miniature pools of sunlight, warm and affectionate yet soothing to look at instead of scorching. In fact, it’s all I can do to keep staring at them.

When Amal smiles, the expression looks so natural on them that I completely forget that there was ever a point when it wasn’t there. I don’t think I ever want to remember.

… I do, however, think I might be staring.

Chiyo: U-uh, am I that funny?
Amal: No! No, not at all, I’m just… Glad. That we’re both here.

Chiyo: Yeah. In this minigolf room.

Amal: Mhm. Your brother’s torture chamber.

Chiyo: Yeah… Well, the older one. I don’t think the younger one would consider minigolf “torture”.

Amal: Which one’s into interior design?

Chiyo: Oh, the younger one. Takeshi. He’s, uh, 23? At the time I last remember, he was 20. He’s the kind of person who gets a new hobby every six months and then throws himself into it, and then after those six months there’s about an 80% chance that he’ll never speak of it again.

Amal: Geez. That sounds… expensive.

Chiyo: No kidding. He got into competitive trading card games once? My parents got really mad at him for that. [shudders] He spent so much money.

Chiyo: So the interior design stuff was actually something he picked up on in high school. Weirdly enough, he was pretty good at it. Said it spoke to him. And I guess it helps my parents with the family business in that he’s good at arranging decorations, so… good on him, I guess?

Amal: That’s right, your family business is…

Chiyo: My parents run a mortuary, yeah. It’s…

Chiyo: It’s not something that I personally am interested in working with in the future.

Amal: [softly] I figured.
Chiyo: But I’m proud that my family is proud of it, I guess. Though I’m grateful I haven’t been forced to be a part of it.

They nod and don’t pry, which I really appreciate more than I can put into words in this state. Instead, they crouch down to adjust one of the tacky little flags in the course, keeping their tone light again.

Amal: Would Takeshi seriously advocate a minigolf course in a mansion, though?

Chiyo: Oh, yeah, definitely. He would think it’s hilarious. Kiyoshi would kick his ass, though.

Amal: I assume Kiyoshi’s your other brother? What’s he like?

Chiyo: A little like Ekyou-san, really. He acts like he’s all business and keeps acting like he’s all business even while he destroys you at minigolf. When Onii-chan and I were younger, we’d play pranks on him to get him to break his expression.

Amal: I’d bet he didn’t appreciate that much. [frowns] I know I wouldn’t.

Chiyo: Not even from me?

Amal’s frown only deepens with the teasing as they turn towards the door.

Chiyo: Wait, I’m kidding!

Amal: I know. I know you are. I’m just tired of standing here.

After a moment of struggle, they hold the door open for me to walk through. As soon as I step into the hall, I head for the next door and open it without thinking.
My heart drops.

Chiyo: What is…?

Amal: What are we looking at-

And they stop, too, and I feel their hand clasp mine in a cold sweat.

The room is full of guns.

Or, well, that’s not accurate, most of them are mounted to walls or plaques alongside dead-eyed mockeries of animals. A rack of hunting knives adorns one side of the wall, a gleaming sword, the other. It’s…

Harai: An armory.

I almost jump out of my skin as Harai pokes their head out from behind a stand, this one a life-size deer. Possibly an actual deer. They’re tapping away as ever.

Harai: Are you okay? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.

Chiyo: I…

Harai: Not you. Him.

Amal’s hand shakes in mine, their jaw set as they study a rifle fixed behind Harai. Harai glances back for a fraction of a second, maybe guessing at Amal’s unease.

Harai: There's no bullets, as far as I can tell. The only dangerous things in this room are the knives and the sword-
Amal: N-no, that isn’t- that isn’t it, I-

Tentatively, I wiggle my pinky finger out of our hands and tap it against their knuckle. They make something that vaguely resembles a whimper, but hold on even tighter.

Chiyo: I think we’re going back outside.

Harai: [nods] You do that. And don’t worry too much about investigating. I can handle it, and you two look like you need some time.

For once, I don’t even think to argue. I gently steer Amal back into the hallway, dusty though it may be, and crouch down with them as they pry their fingers off my own and bury their face in their hands. The gesture so much reminds me of Everett’s from just yesterday that I can only do what Bazhanov did when talking to her.

Chiyo: Breathe, okay? You’re here, in this mansion, and not in- you’re nowhere close to danger. You’re here with me. Harai-san’s in the other room, they won’t do anything with what they’ve found.

Chiyo: I promise you’re safe now, in this moment, and I-

Before I can keep talking, there’s a sudden movement and tense arms around my shoulders and it’s all I can do to just hold Amal, their head buried in my shoulders, as the moment passes and their breathing stops catching in their chest.

Bit by bit, they loosen their grip, pulling themselves away and settling back. I sit down across from them as they look away, guilt haunting their expression.

Amal: I’m sorry.

Chiyo: You don’t need to apologize for anything. None of that should have happened to you, or to your family, or to anyone who was hurt that day, but especially you. You’re really important to me, Amal, and you don’t need to apologize for being alive.
Amal: …

Amal: You know, I’m really lucky to have you here.

Chiyo: And I’m lucky to have you!

They almost crack a smile at that, but the worry never leaves their face.

Amal: Hey.

Amal: If something happens to me-

Chiyo: Oh. Don’t say that.

Amal: No, you listen to me, if something happens to me, I want you to keep going, okay? You deserve to live through this.

Chiyo: So do you!

Amal: [low] That’s not what I’m saying and you know it.

Amal: [drags in a breath] Just, if I’m gone, I don’t want you to shut down. I don’t want anything to happen to you, Chiyo, you don’t deserve it.

I can’t- I can’t process what they’re saying. I should say something, something reassuring and brave and hopeful, but… What they’re saying just makes no sense to me. They’re not going to die. If anything, they’d outlive me- no, what am I saying, no one’s going to die! The only person with murderous intent was Murdock, right? Unless the next motive is particularly bad, it’ll have to take a lot for one of us to kill each other. But I can’t tempt fate. I won’t tempt fate.

No one should die here. No one should die, and yet I’m so, so lucky that I wasn’t close to the
people who have.

If Amal died… I don’t even want to think about it.

Chiyo: I don’t...

Amal: … I’m scaring you, aren’t I? I’m sorry.

Chiyo: Don’t apologize, it’s just… A lot to think about. And I don’t want to lose you.

Chiyo: We can talk about it later, okay?

Amal: Sure. Later.

Something about their voice makes me sure that they won’t try to press the topic again unless I bring it up myself. And, at this point, I’m not sure if I will. It feels like talking about it makes it more real, and I don’t want to bring myself back to this reality. I just want to be a teenager running around an abandoned mansion with her kind-of crush with no real danger to anyone involved. Is that so bad, to pretend for a moment?

Instead of answering my own rhetorical questions, I help Amal to their feet. The two of us stare at the next closed door, neither of us making a move towards opening it.

Chiyo: I’ll go in first.

Amal: No, I can- [catches self] … Thank you.

I open the door and peek into a poorly lit room. The only thing I can discern is the large table in the center, covered with what appears to be grey felt.

Amal: It’s a pool table.
They peer over my shoulder, despite the whole point of this being to warn them ahead of time if anything would set them off. Although… I guess it’s not really like I’d know what would do that?

As we step into the room, the lights flicker on to illuminate a decorative cabinet by the wall housing billiard balls and cues, confirming their suspicions. I wrinkle my nose.

Chiyo: A whole room… just for this?

Amal: Actually, I think it might be a game room.

They drift over to the table and start fiddling with it. Walking further into the room reveals another table, this one seeming intended for table tennis. As I check in the cabinet for any more game equipment, there’s a loud yelp and a mechanical whir that stops my heart in my chest.

I turn around expecting the worst, only to catch Amal’s look of distinct embarrassment as the pool table turns itself over to reveal… is that poker? A poker table.


Chiyo: I can see that.

I finally find what I’m looking for and lay a set of ping pong paddles on the table. Now that they’re sure that the table poses no danger, Amal seems content enough flipping it over and over until I’m sure that Harai is going to walk in from the other room and ask about all the noise. At least they’re enjoying themselves. It’s only on the tenth flip (or something like that) that I think to say something.

Chiyo: Hey, Amal?

Amal: Huh? Oh, I’ll stop.
Chiyo: No, I was… I was thinking about earlier.

Amal: … Ah. Right. [deep breath] That, uh, doesn’t happen often, but I don’t like sudden loud noises, and guns set me off-

Chiyo: What? No, none of that! You don’t have to talk about that if it makes you uncomfortable!

Amal: I could say the same for you, you know.

Chiyo: No, I mean, it’s good to talk about it, it’s just- it’s just, augh. I don’t mean that earlier.

Oh my god apparently I’m a walking disaster. Who let me get this far in life, actually.

Chiyo: You mentioned how you didn’t know anything about me even though I know about you, and how that wasn’t fair, but I don’t actually know anything about you beyond everything that happened to you.

Chiyo: I guess what I’m trying to say is, could you tell me about yourself and your life? What have you been doing now?

Amal: It’s not terribly interesting.

Chiyo: There’s got to be something, right?

Amal: … I mean, I guess.

They flip the table one more time, maybe just to see if they could, before settling their hands on the table.

Amal: I’ve been moving around a lot since… since all of that. Legally, my parents’ friends adopted me. So that’s kinda neat.
Chiyo: Oh, that’s great!

Amal: … How is that great.

Chiyo: I don’t know, I think I kind of figured that you lived alone up until this point? And it just seemed unfairly lonely to you.

Amal: …. … Chiyo, I need you to know that I care about you and respect you very deeply as a person, but thirteen year old me was a disaster in pretty much every way and I have no idea how they would survive on their own.

**Well, that makes a lot more sense.**

Amal: But I’m… flattered that you think so highly of me?

Chiyo: … Eheh. My bad.

Amal: But yeah. I’ve lived with family friends since my parents passed away, they move house every year or so. I’ve lived in, uh. [ticks fingers] Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, a really brief and wild stint in Texas, and most recently New York.

Chiyo: I honestly only recognize that last state.

Amal: Basically a whole bunch of places where it really sucks not to be white. … Although some people would say that’s most of America, actually.

Chiyo: Still! You’re really lucky that you get to travel around so much! I’ve stayed in the same house all my life.

Amal: Well, that would make sense. Your family has an established business.
Chiyo: Yeah, I guess, but I’d still like an excuse to get out of Kanagawa someday. My family doesn’t go on many trips.

Amal: What, this whole experience doesn’t count?

It doesn’t occur to me until after their face turns scarlet in the silence that their statement was a joke. Amal mumbles some kind of apology and something else about maybe leaving the room. I beat them to the door anyway and glance back at their mortified expression, and to possibly both of our surprises, I’m grinning.

Chiyo: Not that I don’t enjoy being in a mansion in the middle of nowhere, but I’d just prefer somewhere I choose to go with people I care about, y’know?

I head into the hallway and onto the next room, leaving Amal to catch up. The end of the hallway boasts a set of double doors similar to the one leading to the library upstairs, and I push one open to find…

… Well, another library, for some reason.

… … Yeah, if Onii-chan were here, he would totally teach the building designers how to make a better mansion.

When Amal pushes through the doors, I’m already standing at one of the shelves, reading the back of a novel that my eyes are just skipping over.

Amal: Is that any good?

Chiyo: I don’t know. I try not to judge books by their covers. These all seem really old, though. I’m pretty sure I read some of these when I was a kid.

Amal: Really? I don’t recognize any of these.

They pull another book off the shelf and frown at the thin volume, eyes flicking between the
Amal: … I’m pretty sure these are all fiction, though.

Chiyo: Yeah, they are. Why?

Amal: The ones upstairs are all nonfiction. It just seems odd that someone would have a mansion with two full-size libraries just for this purpose.

Chiyo: The more I see of this building, the more I start to doubt anyone actually lived here before.

Amal: Even if this building was made for the killing game, it’s a waste of resources. [frowns] AND creativity. I’m sure the mastermind could have thought of something less redundant to put here than an entire second library.

Chiyo: [grinning] What would you put, then?


A… what?

That doesn’t feel like an obvious answer to me. And definitely not coming from Amal.

Amal: … Listen, I just read- I just read a lot of fantasy novels. Royalty stuff. And balls are a pretty aesthetic, okay?

Chiyo: No judgement! I just didn’t, oh my gosh this sounds really bad, but I didn’t think you’d be into those kinds of books?

Amal slides the book back into place with an audible clack.
Amal: [deadpan] First you think I live by myself. Now you dare tell me that The Princess Bride doesn’t sound like something I’ve read cover to cover at least ten times. You wound me, Chiyo. How could you do this to me and assume I have my life together?

Chiyo: You just seem like you’re this, super mature and respectable person I guess?? Like the kind of person who reads those really long books analyzing historical events!!

Amal: Do I look like Murdock to you.

**Delighted teasing fades to quiet reflection in an instant, but Amal shakes it off after a moment.**

Amal: See, this is what I meant when I said I wanted you to- [stops self] Never mind.

This is what they meant by not wanting me to mourn. That when I discuss them, it’s with a smile in my eyes that isn’t tainted by sadness. That I celebrate their life, not concern myself with their death.

… If I think about this any more than I have to, I will throw up, and I think Amal realizes this, too.

Amal: [abrupt] What kind of books do you like, then?

Chiyo: Oh, uh… [replaces book] I guess… young adult stuff, mostly?

Amal: That’s an intended audience, not a genre.

Chiyo: Well, I really hate realistic fiction, so let’s start there.

Amal: Oh, so do I. All of the problems in those novels are so trivial compared to the rest of the world.
Chiyo: I mean, I guess. I don’t know what American fiction is like, but so much of the books available here for teenagers tend to be light novels in really weird settings. And of course I dislike those gratuitously horny stories as much as the next person, but the better novels can be kind of fun to lose yourself in.

Amal: Mm. I get that.

Chiyo: I don’t really know, though. I haven’t read much since I was a kid. Most of what I look at these days is either online or assigned reading.

Amal: Really? I go through at least one book every week. Not to flex or anything.

Chiyo: I am very intimidated!

Amal smiles slightly, then leans in a little.

Amal: But if you ask me? As a whole, I think realistic fiction sucks, but some of my favorite stories are really bad high school novels.

Amal: I kind of love romances. Even the cheesy ones.

And my face catches fire.

As if they’ve told me some great secret, which I feel like they have, Amal works their way through the library to the door resting on the other end. I hurry to catch up, but before heading into the next room, pause for a moment to linger in the space they just occupied.

Chiyo: So do I.

I push the handle down and step into the next room.

The size of this room is the most noticeable feature - though the ceilings are just as high as the
library’s, it’s just as wide. Rows upon rows of chairs fill the room, all positioned toward a flickering light on the blank side wall, but it’s not until I see Amal messing with a projector that I realize the purpose of this room.

Amal: It’s a movie theater? I guess?

Chiyo: Where are all the movies, then?

Amal: I dunno. Maybe we need to ask one of the birds for them?

Amal: … I’m not even sure how to use this projector, actually.

I take a seat on one of the (surprisingly comfortable) chairs as Amal sits next to me with a sigh.

Amal: So I think that’s the end of this area. What do you think?

Chiyo: It’s… At least it gives us things to do?

Amal: I’m not sure if we should really be using some of this stuff. Is it just me, or is everything in this particular wing old and gross?

Chiyo: More so than the second area? Yeah…

Now that I think about it, this chair is kind of sticky, too. Hopefully we won’t spend much more time in here. For now, though… It’s kind of nice to sit here and relax.

Un fortunately, before I can really settle down, another voice cuts in.

???: Oh! I knew I heard voices!
The door clicks shut as Amal and I spring apart. Sumitama files in, Ekyou close behind her as always. The latter simply waves, fingers fluttering slightly. They each take seats to the left of me, Sumitama bouncing her leg and shaking the whole row.

Chiyo: Hi!

Amal: Hello, Sumitama-san. [nods] Ekyou-san. What are you two up to?

Ekyou: Exploring, or something. It’s a pretty interesting area.

Sumitama: The armory makes me nervous, though… it doesn’t seem safe to have so many weapons freely available.

Ekyou: I think that’s kind of the point.

_In the darkness, I can barely catch Sumitama’s lip wobbling. Ekyou looks away._

Ekyou: Sorry.

Sumitama: No, it’s fine, I just need to get over myself.

_She laughs, a little strained harsh thing that doesn’t disguise what sounds a lot like impatience. At Ekyou, or at herself?_

Maybe Kashizaki’s wrong. Maybe Sumitama is an okay person who just needs to ease up on herself a little!

...But that _still_ doesn’t explain Ekyou looking completely drained every time I’ve seen her in the past several days.

Ekyou: Kumoshita-san? What’s got you so worried?

Sumitama: This whole situation is really stressful… Please don’t worry about everything so much, Kumoshita-chan! You’re really nice, and if something were to happen to you-

Amal: Nothing’s going to happen to her if I have anything to say about it.

Sumitama: [blinks] Wh-

Chiyo: No one else is going to die. Last night will be the last trial.

Ekyou: [softly] We all keep saying that, and yet…

Sumitama: … Yeah. I just, I just keep thinking. About the first case. And what I could have done differently to stop everything…

Ekyou: It was an accident.

Sumitama: You say that a lot.

Ekyou: Because it’s true, and…

She stops, looking at Amal for something. Validation? Acknowledgement? Maybe their absence? Amal stares back, giving the tiniest shake of their head, before sighing and turning to Sumitama but speaking to the girl across from her.

Amal: What happened in the first trial isn’t your fault. What happened in the first murder especially wasn’t. And I made that trial a lot harder for both of you, and I don’t know how I can make this clear, but I’m deeply sorry for saying what I did. Especially about Ekyou-san. It wasn’t fair to jump to conclusions about you or your sister or- or any of that. And we all almost died on my mistake. I’m sorry about that too.
Amal: I’m… [hesitates] Well, I’m not sorry about sentencing Shionaga-san-

**Sumitama’s expression locks down.**

Amal: Hey. Hey, I didn’t… I mean, I’m just sorry he had to die at all. And I’m also sorry. For that comment just now. I didn’t know him as well as you two did, but… He seemed like a nice guy. And a good friend. And a well-meaning person. And I wish I had the chance to know him better.

Amal: And I’m sorry for your loss.

It’s a trolley problem, I think. In order for the innocent to survive, they - or rather, we - sentence the guilty to die. But a situation where any people die is still considered a tragedy, is it not?

**Sumitama stares at the ground. Ekyou is silent for a long time.**

Ekyou: … Thank you. For the apology.

And for once, when she looks at Amal, it’s without any of the past apprehension. Amal offers her a half-smile for her trouble, which is met with a tired smile of her own.

It’s also met with a rough slam of the theater seat sliding up into place as Sumitama stands up.

Amal: Are you okay?

Sumitama: *Fuck you.*

Her hands, balled into fists, shake at her side.
Amal: Wait, I didn’t mean- I’m sorry?

Sumitama: Sure you are. I’m leaving.

**Sumitama turns and stalks out of the room. Amal looks from the door to me and back again, their posture suddenly that of a lost puppy in an unfamiliar neighborhood.**

Amal: Did I- what did I do?

Chiyo: I’m… not actually sure??

A loud sob comes from the hallway. Amal twists over again to stare at the door before abruptly getting to their feet.

Amal: I, uh. I’m going to go apologize?

Ekyou: I’ll go with you. Kumoshita-

Chiyo: I-I’ll be fine! Do you want me to come with you, or?

Ekyou: I think the less people that go, the better. But thank you.

Amal and then Ekyou hurry out of the room and leave me alone in darkness. Slowly, I stand up and look around the rest of the room as the projector continues to flicker, then finally proceed to the other side of the theater and the cracks of light around it. Pulling back the curtain almost blinds me.

On this side of the room is a full length window pointed outside. If I squint against the bright sun, I can barely make out an actual, full size, unfilled pool. Similar glass windows protect it from the rest of the outdoors, leaving what I can only assume is no real way to get into the area. Unless there’s a door outside…?
My foot brushes up against something hard on the floor and I flinch back, only to realize the item is...

... A sledgehammer?

Well, that’s one way of getting outside. But why the hell is there a sledgehammer here to begin with? Isn’t that dangerous?

... ... Right. Killing game.

I still tuck it behind the curtain so that it’s less obvious to anyone seeking a murder weapon. When I finally leave the theater, there’s no sign of Sumitama, nor one of Amal or Ekyou, and the sudden lack of company is... It’s a bit hollowing, to say the least, and leaves altogether too much room for all the things I didn’t want to think about to creep in. Such as, again, the whole. Killing game. And the fact that Bates and Murdock died less than twelve hours ago. And the fact that anyone else might die at any moment.

I keep telling myself that no one had murderous intent. That surely, no one would really want to kill someone else after what happened last night, and what happened not even a week before that.

I don’t know if I can believe myself anymore.

Somehow, I’ve gone back up the stairs to the lounge again. I lean against the railing for a moment, listening to the fire crackle away. As much as I want to go back to bed, to call it a day and just sleep off the shock from this morning (it can’t have only been this morning?), I can’t help but feel restless. If I’m still in shock from this morning, then others must be doing worse, right? Especially...

Murdock did talk a lot about feeling isolated and that being the main reason for her... for her murder. And I can’t imagine anyone more isolated than the cousin she left behind and robbed of a friend. So it’s probably a good idea to check on him. I think? I know I’d appreciate it in his place.

When I knock on McRae’s door, though, there’s no response.
Chiyo: Hello?

Still no answer. The rational person would assume that McRae doesn’t want to be talked to, and they would probably be right to leave now and come back later. But if I leave, and something happens… I don’t think I could forgive myself again.

I let myself in and close the door behind me as McRae glances up from his bed, where he’s simply lying down, headset over his ears.

McRae: … Get out.

Chiyo: O-oh. Right. I’m sorry for the intrusion, I just thought if you wanted to talk to someone -

Wait, right, he probably can’t hear me. What with the headset and everything. As I stutter through another apology, he takes it off with a sigh and glares straight through me with restless patience.

McRae: I’ve been avoiding talking to absolutely anyone in the past day, and I am lying in my room with the door shut, so what did you expect, honestly.

Chiyo: I… No, you’re right. You lost two people really close to you today, and it makes sense that you want time alone. I’m sorry for intruding, and I’ll go now. Take all the time you need, okay?

I turn to leave, already beating myself up over the intrusion, and am halfway through the door when I just barely catch a sigh and an acquiescence.

McRae: … You can stay if you want.

Chiyo: Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.

McRae: Please stay.
Chiyo: Is it okay if I sit on the floor?

McRae: Go for it.

He doesn’t move off the bed as I take a seat. Neither of us say anything for a long while. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s either ignoring me or coexisting peacefully. I want to take the benefit of the doubt and assume the latter, but considering the past 24 hours, it’s… probably the former.

Chiyo: So, um… What should we talk about?

McRae: You probably should have thought of that before you let yourself into my room.

Chiyo: Eheh… Right. I’m sorry.

McRae: It’s whatever. I guess.

I really should have walked away.

Chiyo: Is there anything you want to talk about?

McRae: Like what? My cousin killing my best friend and then dying in front of me while I did nothing to save her?

Chiyo: I mean, yeah, if that would help at all.

McRae: …

McRae: [sighs] I think I’m too tired to really feel anything about it right now. It’s just… kind of a shock, I guess.
McRae: I didn’t know Shionaga-kun and Valdez-kun that well. This sounds awful, but to me, their
dying felt a lot like they never existed to begin with. I mean, I’d have liked to know Valdez-kun
better, but what happened happened and it already feels like such a long time ago.

McRae: But this morning… I guess I figured that Ti and Claude would just… always be there.
Claude especially. He’s got a pretty strong personality. And now that they’re gone, I don’t know
what I’m going to do with myself.

McRae: I mean I kind of wonder if people want to target me now but that’s neither here nor there.

Chiyo: Don’t say that. Why would someone want to kill you?

McRae: [ticks off on fingers] Isolated. No close bonds with people. No one would really mourn
me. No one cares.

Chiyo: I care.

McRae: Kumoshita-chan, you care about everyone.

Chiyo: I’ve been getting that a lot lately, and fair point, but it still stands. There’s always someone
willing to listen and be your friend, okay? Just because you don’t necessarily feel close to people
doesn’t mean it has to stay like that. All you have to do is talk to people! What could go wrong?

McRae: They could shut down my every interest, refuse to talk to me for 5 to 8 years, and then die.
Or they can show genuine enthusiasm about what I have to say, get too close to the truth, and then
also die.

Chiyo: … Also a fair point.

McRae: By the way, you realize I can tell when you’re forcing enthusiasm, right? You don’t have
to keep being so cheesy. I appreciate it, but it’s very transparent.
Chiyo: I’m not really trying to be cheesy, McRae-san-

McRae: Just- just Tristan is fine. Really.

Chiyo: No, I can’t. I don’t think I know you well enough for that.

McRae: I mean, you’re pretty much the only person willing to talk to me at this point, so it’s whatever.

Chiyo: [sighs] McRae-san, I know you’re having a hard time, but people around you want to help you. Myself included.

McRae: Like who? Again, besides you.

Chiyo: Is it seriously a bad thing if I want to be friends with people?

McRae: Well, it’s kind of sketchy. What if you’re just getting close to people in order to kill them?

Didn’t Sekisada say the same thing? I frown and lean my head back against the bed. McRae is sitting up now, though he still sits on the bed and looks down on me. Though he’s been counteracting every point I make, I still get the feeling that he doesn’t necessarily dislike me. It’s more defensive than anything.

Chiyo: … I don’t want anyone else dead.

McRae: Really.

Chiyo: [shakes head] Not just in this killing game. People shouldn’t just, die, for no reason… But I probably can’t convince you on this point, and it doesn’t really matter. I just want you to know that you’re not alone. And that you can reach out, if you need it.

McRae: [vaguely] I’ll try to keep that in mind.
Chiyo: No, I’m serious.

I pull myself up to the bed. He still won’t look at me.

Chiyo: I can’t say I know you that well, and I won’t pretend I know what to say to help you, but this isn’t the end. And you can’t treat it like the end. Or, well, you shouldn’t. You can keep going, and you can make it to tomorrow. And it’ll be hard, but you’re not alone.

Chiyo: I- I know they’re gone. And nothing I or anyone else can say or do will bring them back, and nothing we do will bring Shionaga-san or Valdez-san back, either…

Pressure builds in my throat, threatening to spill sobs instead of words, and I stop for a second until the feeling subsides just enough to keep going.

Chiyo: [shaky] But- but you’re not the only one who’s lost classmates. Friends. Family, even though your cousin- even though Murdock-san-

McRae: Don’t demonize her.

Chiyo: [nods] R-right, those circumstances were just… difficult. But what I’m saying, what I’m trying to get at is that we’re all here together. And we’re all going through this. We’re all going to get through this, one step at a time, and it’s very hard to do that alone. I know some people act like they would rather be by themselves, but they’re probably hurting, too.

Chiyo: You don’t have to be isolated. Take all the time you need to think things over, but in the end, please try to talk to people, okay? And if you need anyone, I’ll be here. And if you don’t want to talk to me in particular, that’s alright too, and…

McRae gently places a hand over mine. Though he still doesn’t look at me, his reply is quiet, the bitterness drained away.

McRae: I know. And I get it. Trying to do everything on my own will just make it harder for me.
McRae: I just don’t know who to trust, or who I can trust anymore. [sighs] Not even in terms of Prospero or a mastermind or whatever, just… I don’t want to spend time with someone who doesn’t value me. I don’t think, um. Ti...

McRae: Ti wasn’t. She wasn’t really the best person for me to talk to. And the past few days, before all of this, weren’t the greatest, either.

McRae: And I don’t think she ever really realized that I’m happy doing the things I’m doing. I don’t know if she even wanted me to be happy, since… I don’t think she was a very happy person, herself, and I guess she was jealous that I seemed to be doing better. But I don’t think I’ll ever know, and it doesn’t matter.

McRae: And I just don’t want to keep on second guessing what people think about me. At least Sekisada-san is honest about hating everyone. And at least Claude was straightforward in saying what he actually meant. To me, anyway. As for what I think everyone else thinks of me… It’s a tossup.

Chiyo: I don’t think anyone here dislikes you. If anything, it might be another case of not knowing what to think of you…? At least, that’s how I see it.

McRae: … Mm. I guess that sounds about right.

He finally looks at me, expression indescribable. I can’t say I understand him - I don’t even know if I got any closer to doing so, today. But at the very least, he seems a little less isolated, a little more hopeful. And in times like these, maybe that’s all I can hope for.

Almost as quickly as he looked up, he’s staring at the ground again, kicking the bed with his heels and brow furrowed.

McRae: I’ve been thinking.

Chiyo: About what?

McRae: What if there’s a way to end the killing game myself?
In an instant, my heart turns to ice in my chest, sending shards of cold down to my stomach.

Chiyo: You don’t mean...

McRae: [shakes head] No. I’m not doing what Ti did. I’m not taking someone away from anyone else. It’s not fair. I don’t want that.

McRae: But this whole mansion... I don’t like it. I don’t like that there’s so many rules that we don’t know about and that the birds can just change them whenever they want. I think there have to be some kind of rules that always stay the same, right...? And there has to be SOME way of escape that won’t be met with punishment.

McRae: [quieter] The other day, when Caliban clarified that we weren’t supposed to cause property damage. I bet we could escape somehow. We could dig a tunnel, cause an explosion...

Chiyo: That...

My voice feels quite suddenly lodged in my throat.

Chiyo: That sounds risky.

McRae: Everything is. Just living here and waiting for someone to kill someone else - everything’s risky.

Chiyo: But we can’t just spit in the face of the birds, can we...? That’s just dangerous. We can just wait for help to arrive, right?

McRae: That’s what we said from the start and now four people are dead.

I... I don’t have a real response to that.

McRae: Help hasn’t arrived, it’s been two whole weeks, and we can’t keep trusting that people are
looking for us - or that they’ll even find us. We’re on a mountain, and we can see for miles around us. There’s no civilization as far as I can tell.

McRae: We’re going to die here if no one does anything.

Chiyo: No, we won’t.

He shakes his head, a flick of dismissal as automated as my response.

McRae: How else do you think it’ll end? There’s no clause in the rules that says the game ends when a certain number of people are left.

Chiyo: I… I just don’t think anyone else can die. Will die.

McRae: You don’t think anyone will die, or you don’t want anyone to die?

Chiyo: Does it matter? If no one else wants to kill, then no one will.

McRae: I guess. But it’s hard to judge people about, y’know, if they have murderous intent or something like that.

McRae: … Though, I agree. I don’t want anyone else to die, either.

McRae: I just need to figure out a way to end the killing game without any more people dying than there absolutely has to be.

I don’t even realize he’s prodded me towards the door until I’m standing outside his room, facing the interior as if I’d never walked in. Still, I can manage one more question.

Chiyo: What if the person who has to die is you?
McRae: Then I’d do what I have to. Wouldn’t you?

He smiles at me, tight-lipped.

McRae: Goodnight, Kumoshita-san.

McRae closes the door. I don’t move to stop him. And, honestly, I’m not sure if I am anything other than sincerely confused and worried right now.

You know what, today’s just. Been an entire day, hasn’t it! And it’s probably just better to go to bed now before I completely self-immolate. Today was, hmmm, not great to deal with on three hours of sleep. And having eaten nothing. The idea of somehow making it to the kitchen and eating something is laughable at best. I’ll just… try again tomorrow, and see what happens then.

Being a teen really is hard in this day and age.

… Okay, yeah, it’s time for bed.

So that’s how I found myself curled up in bed hours before the nighttime announcement, with nothing but my thoughts to keep me awake. Unfortunately, this works extremely well, and what seems like hours and yet seconds pass before I can even start to relax.

When my Parchment finally buzzes, I’m finally half asleep and suffice it to say more than a little displeased at being woken up again. I hit the device three times before realizing that the alert is not a nighttime announcement, but a message. I squint as the letters blur before my eyes.

T. HARAI [21:19]:

By the way, I lied about there being no ammunition.

What ammunition? Wait, from the weapon room - OH MY GOD?
C. KUMOSHITA [21:20]:

WHAT?

T. HARAI [21:20]:

I didn’t think it would be a good idea to bring that up with Khalaf-shi. I hid all of it in my room, though. I doubt anyone else saw it before I did. Don’t tell anyone. Are you still there?

C. KUMOSHITA [21:28]:

Yeah I’m here sorry I’m sorry

T. HARAI [21:28]:

You’re fine. I’ll make sure no one can get to it.

C. KUMOSHITA [21:29]:

Would it be possible to destroy all of it?

T. HARAI [21:29]:

I’m not sure. The only way I can think of to get rid of the ammunition permanently would be to throw it into the fire, and that’s dangerous for obvious reasons. In any case, I thought you should know, at least. I trust you.

But do I trust them with this?
… No, stop. I said I would stop being so suspicious. No murderous intent, right? That’s what we’ve been telling each other. That’s the truth.

Right.

C. KUMOSHITA [21:32]:
Thank you. And I trust you, too.

T. HARAI [21:32]:
Why?
… Ignore what I just said. I’m tired.
I’m going to bed.

C. KUMOSHITA [21:32]:
Wow really??

T. HARAI [21:33]:
Don’t get used to it. Yesterday was a long day.

C. KUMOSHITA [21:33]:
Oh yeah… honestly same I’ve been trying to sleep for a while ghlskflsf
Goodnight!!

I don’t get a response, and at this point I don’t even know what to make of this. I do feel genuinely safer with the ammunition in Harai’s care, but… No, now’s not the time for second guessing. Now’s the time for getting some rest. I put my Parchment down and close my eyes.

Despite my best efforts, sleep doesn’t come easy tonight.
The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found here.
3-2: What I'd Do Not To Worry Like You

Chapter Summary

We keep moving forward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They were a child when they first saw it. Or, rather, that's what you assume - it's so pervasive in today's world that it's no longer a matter of if you saw it, but when. Sad smiles. Guilt. Shock. Rage. Death, murder, dying done twenty seasons between when you saw it and when you live now, each of six cases repeated over and over until it's pounded into your memory, into theirs, until something pushed them off the ledge and onto the screen.

It must have been, right? Why else would they have volunteered - willingly - to throw away their life? Yet something brought them back off the screen, battered and broken; brought back to life but stitched together altogether wrong. Where once must have been life lies only dullness, determination, a drive to finish their life where they'd left off but none of the ability to see it through. When you've spent so long preparing to die, how can you remember how to live?

You want to try. Your efforts will be rejected, of course, as were everyone's in your class, everyone's in the world, but you want to try. You have to.

You call out to them, and they turn, and you recognize their face, and...

...

...

...

I blink, and everything dissipates until I'm left staring at the wall. What was...?
As I study the subtle ridges and swirls of the paint, I want to say that the dream is already fading, but I think I’ve passed the point of saying that I don’t remember anything that I dream about. I think I don’t want to remember anymore. And that scares me.

I’m not sure how much of my dreams are memories, and I don’t know how much of these memories are even mine. I want to say that the ones I’ve had before are pretty firmly rooted in reality, but this most recent one, as well as the one before Bates d- passed away, seemed more… surreal. I doubt those ones have basis in our pasts, anyway. All this time we’ve spent at Hope’s Peak has nothing to do with a TV show.

... Can it?

I scrub at my face and sit up in bed, watching the sun paint lazy dapples across the walls. It would be a perfect day to go back to bed if I weren’t already so groggy from the past few days. What time is it, anyway?

Before I can reach for my Parchment, there’s a loud and enthusiastic knock on my door.

???: WAKEY WAKEY EGGS AND BAKEY, KUMO-CHAN!!

Apparently it’s time to talk to Chisaki!

I stumble out of the door only to be caught by Chisaki’s arm. She tsks at me as she looks me over, actually adjusting my headband.

Chiyo: Wh- why’d you have to wake me up like that?? Where’s Amal?

Chisaki: It’s almost 8, dummy! Atsui-kun’s making breakfast! I’m hungry! Let’s go eat something!

I did not in fact check my announcements. Wait, if it’s almost 8, then… I actually slept ten hours?? No wonder I’m so tired.
Chisaki: As for Khalaf-kun, he was GOING to come and get you, but I volunteered first so you’re welcome.

Chiyo: What’d you have to do that for?

Chisaki: Kumo-chaaan.

She stops and spins to face me, placing her hand on her hip with a pout. It’s kind of striking how much she looks like a cheerleader diva.

Chisaki: Listen, we haven’t hung out in AGES, and Khalaf-kun is hogging you, and when they’re not hogging you then Atsui-kun and Kashizaki-chan are, and I miss you, and also Rett-chan and Rai-san made PLANS without me today and you cannot begin to imagine my betrayal.

Chisaki: Also I’m giving Atsui-kun a fair shot at the dating bet by keeping you away from Khalaf-kun for a hot sec.

Chiyo: We’re not dating!

Chisaki: That’s what they all say. That’s what they always say.

Chiyo: Because it’s true!

Chisaki: [clucks tongue] That is ALSO what they all say. By the way, you look like you’re about to fall over, did you even eat anything yesterday?

Chiyo: Uh. No. But I wasn’t hungry after the trial, and everything.

Chisaki misses a step, expression falling flat.

Chisaki: … Ah. That’s right. I don’t really blame you, or anything, er…
Chisaki: …

Chisaki: … Do you feel up to eating things now?

Chiyo: I think?

Chisaki: Aw HELL yeah. Atsui-kun made fresh rice, so we can eat the hell out of it. Sound good?

Chiyo: Yeah, definitely!

Chisaki: O-kay! Then let’s get that bread! Obtain that grain!

As tired as I am, I can’t deny that Chisaki’s enthusiasm is contagious. I walk into the kitchen with a goofy smile as Chisaki chatters on about something or other that Bazhanov did yesterday. This doesn’t stop me from surveying the room, anyway. Might as well double check on how everyone’s doing, since I forgot to do that yesterday.

Bazhanov and Sekisada sit across from Everett and Harai. Per the norm, Harai doesn’t seem to be eating, or even talking - though neither is Sekisada. Any and all conversation seems to be between Everett and Bazhanov, but Everett seems completely engrossed in some story that Bazhanov seems to be telling. Whatever it is, this has to be the most passionate he’s ever been, and Everett even startles a half-laugh out of him at a few points; despite all the uproar, Sekisada and Harai seem to be very carefully avoiding staring at each other or anything at all. If Everett’s plans with Harai include keeping this up all day, I almost feel bad for them.

Atsui and Kashizaki, as always, are inseparable. Today, Atsui hovers around Kashizaki as the latter cooks eggs. Kashizaki keeps mumbling something about knowing how to cook this much over Atsui’s advice on how to make proper eggs over easy… though, in all seriousness, I don’t think either of them are doing it right. Still. I’m glad they’re as normal as ever.

Sumitama and Ekyou aren’t here yet. If I had to guess, they’re going to come in together. I still don’t know the best way to approach that whole situation, ugh… After yesterday, it’s clear that Sumitama isn’t in a great place emotionally. But neither is Ekyou. But if I were to intervene between them, all I’d be doing is causing more problems, right?
And the doors open again behind us as first Amal, then McRae step into the room. McRae seems drained, but acknowledges Chisaki and me with a nod.

Chisaki: Hey!! Are you holding up all right?

McRae: Honestly no, I kind of cried myself to sleep last night.

Amal: … What?

Chisaki: [nods] Emotional honesty, I dig it.

McRae: Please don’t say that.

Chisaki: Emotional honesty. Not digging it. I mean, I am, I’m just contractually obligated not to admit it now.

McRae: [to no one in particular] Is she always like this?

Amal: Yes. I don’t think it’s a question at this point.

Chisaki: Aw, c’mon, you’re glad to have me in your lives!

Chiyo: Very!

Chisaki beams and takes an exaggerated bow. I manage to snag breakfast for the four of us just as Sumitama and Ekyou come into the room. Neither of them look particularly well-rested, and Sumitama mutters something indecipherable as Kashizaki puts a very messy egg on top of her rice.

Chisaki keeps up a steady stream of banter that I’m only half listening to, to which Amal replies with alternating interjections of disbelief and encouragement. Though they’d never admit it, I know they like Chisaki a lot, too.
... And so did Valdez. And so would Shionaga, and maybe even Bates if he’d just gotten warmed up to her. Maybe Murdock would be stretching it, but I think Chisaki could win her over.

God, this room feels so empty with only twelve.

Our peaceful morning is swiftly brought to an end with the creaking of the door. As usual, Ariel hops up to his table as the class heaves a collective (possibly unconscious) sigh.

Ariel: There’s no need to sound so disappointed.

McRae: Why are you back.

Atsui: Yeah, what did you miss yesterday that’s so important that you have to tell us now?

Ariel: Actually, I was thinking about what you said, Atsui. Since, apparently, I’m “lazy” for handling announcements and motives.

Atsui: Hey, if this is going where I think it’s going, please don’t come near my appendages, I kind of need those.

Ariel: I wouldn’t dream of it.

Next to me, Chisaki stiffens, her smile becoming bared teeth as she almost unconsciously runs her fingers over her still-bandaged left arm. Ariel takes no notice - or, if he does, he thankfully doesn’t comment on it.

Ariel: Now, I thought to myself, if you all don’t care for what I have to say anyway, why don’t I simply announce the next motive now and be done with it?

Sekisada: [sputters] Now?! It’s been a day since the last murder!
McRae: Don’t remind me.

Ariel: Well, look at it this way. You won’t have to see me again unless and until someone else dies! Is that not agreeable?

Amal: I mean, I guess the less we have to see of you, the better.

Bazhanov: I don’t know. I’d like to study him, actually, and write Prospero a strongly worded letter about the anatomy of a dove.

Everett: How do you know that? Are doves even native to Japan? Or Russia?

Bazhanov: Aster, doves are the exact same thing as pigeons except they’re white.

Everett: Oh. [beat] WAIT, THEY ARE??

Bazhanov: Mhm. Ariel isn’t special. Pigeons are better, anyway.

Ariel: You never cease to frighten me.

Bazhanov: I do my best.

Sekisada: Just get to the point already.

Ariel: Aren’t you impatient.

Sekisada: No one ever said I couldn’t be. Come on, I want to finish eating.

Harai: No one is stopping you?
Sekisada: The longer I look at this robot, the more I want to throw up.

Sumitama: I-I mean. That’s fair.

Ariel: Well, fine.

A strange noise comes out of Ariel that fizzes at the end. A... sigh? Or is that just static? He shuffles his wings for a moment before continuing, his tone light and shockingly...

... clinical.

Ariel: You miss your friends, don’t you?

Sumitama stiffens, her chopsticks still in hand.

Ariel: They must have meant a lot to you, good or bad.

McRae wrenches his gaze to the floor.

Ariel: Or maybe you were curious about what secrets they had at hand. So to speak, hm?

Chisaki hunches her shoulders.

Amal: What are you even talking about?

Ariel: That’s what I’m offering, if you were to kill someone.

Bazhanov: Secrets...?

Sumitama: T-that’s so…

Ekyou: [stone faced] It’s disrespectful. Outright disrespectful.

Everett: And useless. I mean, come on, why would someone want to kill for the secrets of some dead person that they might not even get to look at?

Ariel: [grim] Kuhu… I’d be concerned, if I were you, Miss Everett.

Chisaki: [choked] If you lay a hand on her-

Ariel: Hush, Chisaki. If anything, you should fear your classmates.

Ariel: This motive and its definition of “deceased” applies to anyone who dies before the next trial.

Chisaki falls silent. Really, so do the rest of us.

This kind of motive… Unlike the other two, this one is no promise of a reward, no promise that the killer will even get to enjoy their privilege before they die. Yet the wording of this is just ambiguous enough that, if someone were to kill, the people with the most secrets would be most at risk…

My eyes drift to Everett. Though she looks unbothered, her jaw is set and her gaze steely. She, more than anyone else here, has reason to be concerned.

Because, unlike in the first two motives, Everett has a target painted on her back.

Everett: Thank you for that information.
Harai: But what if the killer dies? What happens to the secrets then?

Ariel: Secrets will be given to the killer at some point between the investigation period and the trial. They are free to distribute them to the rest of the class as they wish.

Not even the death of the killer will secure the privacy of the dead. That’s revolting in almost every way I know how - my parents’ lessons about keeping the living’s business away from the dead and vice versa, being respectful so as not to disturb ghosts… Who is Prospero to decide what to do with those who can’t speak for themselves?

Ariel tilts his head, seemingly unperturbed by the lack of response.

Ariel: Are there any other questions?

Another pause.

Ariel: Thank you. That will be all.

As usual, he flutters out of the room. As usual, the atmosphere instantly lightens from a choking fear to a contemplative misery.

Everett: … Well.

Chisaki: We- we can put you under guard, or something! I can stay with you, or Rai-san, or-

Everett: Tsukino, no, it’s fine-

Chisaki: Listen! The past motives didn’t affect you at all, and this one is basically targeting you, and it’s not fair-
Bazhanov: Tsukino, if I may. While this motive is definitely targeting those of us with secrets to hide - and, yes, I acknowledge myself as one of them - I doubt this is unfairly targeting Aster in particular. She’s very open with the fact that she doesn’t know anything.

Everett: Yep. You got me. Known dumbass.

Sekisada: Don’t call yourself that.

Bazhanov: If I had to guess, the person who is most in danger would be Tatsumaru.


Bazhanov: The mask, the standoffishness, and most importantly the explicit lack of a past referred to in your bio. Not to mention that you’re very observant and seem to know a lot about the building and possibly situation.

Chisaki: So… does this mean Rai-san needs a defense squad?

Bazhanov: No. What I’m trying to say is that we all have things to hide.

Ekyou: [softly] Some more than others.

Bazhanov: [continues] And trying to focus all of our efforts on saving one person - or even two people - would be a waste of time. Especially because this motive doesn’t seem particularly harmful or tempting either way. There’s no rush to kill, if at all.

Sumitama: And, let me guess, no one’s going to kill this time, either?

**She glowers down at her rice bowl, arms folded.**

Sumitama: I know we need to stay hopeful, but I’m TIRED of pretending we’re not all going to die here. Four people are DEAD, you know. They’re not coming back. Eventually, we’re all going to die here!
Sumitama: It’s pointless! Everything about this is pointless!

With every word, her scowl loosens, slowly morphing into a neutral expression hiding tired eyes.

Sumitama: I just…

Sumitama: [quietly] I just want to go home.

**Everett sighs. She scoots her chair over and rubs Sumitama’s back gently.**

Everett: Me too. Or, well, to wherever my home is. Still not a hundred percent sure on that one, but…

Everett: All we have to do is just, not kill anyone. Should be easy.

Kashizaki: I hate to break it to you, but Sumitama-san has a point. We’ve been saying that the whole time we’ve been here. I’m pretty sure someone *will* snap and kill someone.

Everett: Kashizaki-san, is it not enough for you just to hope?

Kashizaki: Well, hope doesn’t bring people back from the dead. I’m leaving. Sekisada-san, shut up.

Sekisada: I didn’t say anything. Except, now that you mention it, that was really rude.

Kashizaki: Yeah, hypocrite. Shut up anyway.

**She leaves the room, letting the doors slam behind her.**
Sekisada: Okay, Atsui-san, what do you think we do.

Atsui: [blinks] Uh… don’t worry. She’ll come around. I’m pretty sure, anyway.

Sekisada: I mean about this whole situation. Aren’t you the leader?

Atsui: I hope not. Like, for all of our sakes. [tilts head] Why are you asking?

Sekisada: [sighs] Never mind. I’ll be on the balcony if you need me. Please don’t need me.

And he leaves, too. As people trickle out of the room, Chisaki drifts back to a still-seated Everett. I follow, watching Chisaki settle an elbow on Everett’s head, her posture lighthearted as her expression is still writ with concern.

Chisaki: Are you SURE there’s nothing I can do to help.

Everett: [bats off Chisaki’s arm] Seriously, I’ll be okay. I am okay! I’m not worried at all.

Chisaki: But I am! If I lose you, too, then…

**Everett pulls Chisaki’s arm down and stares at her too-bright eyes.**

Everett: … Hey. Listen.

Everett: You’re not going to lose me, okay? I’m gonna do everything in my power to stay with you. I might only remember knowing about fifteen people, but Tsukino, you’re one of the most important people to me ever. I just have a gut feeling about this, okay?

Everett: I won’t let go of you. I won’t promise you that I’ll live, not here, but I **will not** go down without a fight.
Everett: And hey, worst comes to worst, we’ve both seen my back muscles, I can probably knock someone out if I really have to. So I’ll win that fight.

Chiyo: Your what?

Everett: Apparently I am, as the kids say, fucking built. [shrugs] I haven’t been doing much to keep it up, but it's nice to have.

Chisaki: [sniffles] I heard Rett-chan had an eight pack. That Rett-chan is shredded.

Everett: I wouldn’t go that far.

When Everett pulled that bow, I think I mentioned that it looked like the most perfect example of archery form that I’d ever seen. Like Amal’s smile, it looked like she was always meant to be there, though her posture was practiced - as if she had done it a thousand times before, humanity made mechanical through experience.

... So I guess that explains the back muscles.

Everett: See, Tsukino, it’s fine. And anyway, I’ll be okay without you for one day. Go have fun with Kumoshita-chan!

Chisaki: You’re just trying to get me to go away so you can play minigolf with Rai-san!

Harai: Yeah.

THEY’RE STILL THERE??

Harai: Also yeah. And yes, you said that out loud.

Everett: She didn’t even say anything about saying things out loud.
Chiyo: I- I mean?? No, I didn’t, but- what??

Chisaki: IS RAI-SAN PSYCHIC??

**And more importantly:**

Chiyo: You’re going to WHAT??

Harai: [to Chisaki] No. If I was, I would know what Kumoshita-san is referring to.

Everett: The minigolf? It just seemed stupid that it’s there. Might as well try it out, right?

Chiyo: Okay, yeah, but…

**Harai?? Playing minigolf?? I know for sure I don’t say anything this time, but my expression of disbelief must be pretty extreme from the way Harai stares at me.**

Harai: I’ve never done minigolf before. It seems interesting.

Chisaki: Well, me neither, so count me in!

Everett: [patiently] You’re the one who said you wanted to hang out with Kumoshita-chan today, Tsukino.

Chiyo: Wait, I thought you said that you wanted hang out because Everett-san and Harai-san had already made-

Chisaki: [waving hand] SHH!! Shshsh. All in the past. And I mean, FINE, I GUESS, but what are the two of us supposed to do now??
Everett: You’ll figure it out. You’re smart.

Chisaki: No I’m not!

Everett: I know, sweetheart, it’s an expression.

Chisaki: HH???

She pats a steaming Chisaki on the head before heading to the door, Harai following as always.

Everett: See you around!

I swear Harai flashes us a thumbs up as the two depart. Chisaki only grumbles for a few moments before heading out of the kitchen as well, leaving me to tag behind.

We’re halfway through the new area when she stops in her steps and turns back to look at me.

Chisaki: Where are we going?

Chiyo: I thought you were leading?

Chisaki: Well, I mean, I can try. [blows out a breath] Honestly, I was gonna do the whole minigolf thing, but then Rett-chan and Rai-san are already there, so… I don’t really wanna bother them. And I don’t know about you, but after that whole thing with that stupid bow a few days ago? I’m also not super into the idea of sitting in that weapon room.


Chisaki: What else is there to do down here, anyway?
Chiyo: There’s also the game room, and the theater, and the library…

Chisaki: [frowns] I think I know where to go. Follow me.

She doesn’t even wait for a response before pushing past me again, this time leading me back up the stairs. I guess if I’m supposed to walk ten thousand steps a day, this is… certainly a way I can get there?

Even I’m a little surprised when Chisaki opens the doors to the upstairs library, though. She doesn’t seem to register the books on the shelves, only making her way to one of the tables and slumping over it with a sigh. Maybe she just wanted to hang out somewhere quiet. I guess this counts.

Chiyo: Everything okay?

Chisaki: Ugh. Like, objectively? I don’t even know. It’s been a weird few weeks.

Chiyo: I’d bet. How’s your hand?

Chisaki holds up her left arm for a moment, fiddling with the sparkly fabric wrapped around it. That’s a bit of an odd choice for a bandage, but something about the way Chisaki presses her lips together while scrutinizing it gives me the feeling that it wasn’t her decision.

Chisaki: … Strange.

Chiyo: Huh?

Chisaki: The actual injury stopped hurting a while ago, but… [awkward chuckle] Phantom pain is a thing. I didn’t think it was, but apparently so. And. Yeah! Delightful.

Chisaki: And, uh, it’s strange. I didn’t realize how much stuff I did with my left hand until it was
gone. I just really hope this doesn’t get in the way of my pilot’s license whenever I try for that. If I try for that. If I get out of here alive.

She says it so casually, as if her surviving another day is a question of fate instead of something she can actively control. I watch her lean under the table and pick up a miniature pair of scissors (the one from the fashion room, maybe the one used to cut out Amal’s note?), playing with it as if she didn’t just announce the gravity of her observations.

And maybe she’s right in that regard. Out of the four dead, only Murdock made an active choice to die - the rest were caught up in murder plots they had no say in. Maybe some choices really are just up to fate.

One choice certainly wasn’t, though.

Chiyo: I’d been meaning to ask…

Chisaki: Hm? Yeah, fire away.

Chiyo: Why did you do it?

Chiyo: It seems- okay, I don’t want to judge, but that day with the phone calls. Your hand.

Did she think through running her mouth as soon as she got on the phone? Did she really believe that she would leave that room unscathed?

Chisaki: Why did I…?

Chisaki opens and shuts the scissors a few more times, brow furrowed.

Chisaki: … You know, I’m not actually sure.

Chiyo: Really?
Chisaki: I mean, if you asked me at the time, I guess it was because I thought Rishi could actually do something about all of this.

Chiyo: Your brother, right?

Chisaki: Mhm. [nods] Yeah, I know, the name. Neither of us are from Japan, I’ll leave it at that. It’s a long story.

Chisaki: I dunno. Maybe I thought he could come and rescue us or something, but I mean, it’s pretty hard to do that when you don’t even know where you are…

Chisaki: Oh, or maybe I was just testing to make sure the situation was real! Yeah, no one was talking the whole killing game thing seriously, so I had to take the loss.

Chisaki: Or maybe…

Chisaki: …

Chisaki: … [quietly] Maybe I was just being stupid.

Chiyo: You’re not stupid.

Chisaki: What do you call losing your hand over something totally preventable, then? Being brave?

Chiyo: Y- no?? I mean-

Chisaki: I’m not brave, Chiyo! Just real fuckin’ stupid!

Chisaki: You know what brave is? Brave is taking your baby sister to a country neither of you have been to before in your LIVES, with barely any money, just to get a fresh start on everything!
Chisaki: My brother is brave! I just yelled into a phone and lost my entire hand for basically no reason!

Don’t get distracted by the offhand reference to a difficult past! Focus! Chisaki needs a pep talk! … That is such a weird string of words!

Chiyo: … Well, what do you think bravery is, then?


Chiyo: Well, maybe not, but I don’t think you’re stupid. Sure, you did something really dumb, but so does everyone else from time to time.

Chiyo: And for what it’s worth? I really like talking to you, Chisaki-chan! You’re really energetic and you really care about the feelings of other people. Maybe it isn’t necessarily brave, but you make people happy. And that’s very, er, punk rock of you…? That’s the phrase, right?

Chisaki: Yeah. [perks up] Yeah! Aw yes, Kumo-chan thinks I’m punk rock, that’s the power of gay rights.

I laugh a little at that, and even Chisaki manages a smile, though she still looks contemplative.

Chisaki: But… I don’t know. I guess I just don’t want the whole experience to have been for nothing, y’know? Like, I lost a hand, and I don’t even have anything good to come from it.

Chiyo: It brought you closer to Valdez-san, though, didn’t it?

Just saying his name out loud weighs heavy on my heart, and from the way Chisaki’s eyes drop it must weigh on hers, too. Despite everything, her smile holds.
Chisaki: I guess it did. I’m glad that I met him.

Chiyo: Me too.

Chisaki: [suddenly] Oh shit, you passed out when you saw him, right? I’m sorry for even talking about this, geez-

Chiyo: What? No, it’s fine! I brought it up in the first place.

Chiyo: I think…. I think I’m starting to come to terms with. With death. Because of our situation, and everything. So I don’t mind talking about it as much?

Chisaki just stares at me for a long minute as the gravity of what I just said sinks into both of us.

Chisaki: Dude, that’s not reassuring. That’s, like, really sad. In both the pathetic way and the emotional way.

Chiyo: Yeah. Yeah, that train of thought kind of derailed.

Chisaki: Mhm. Gotta hand it to you, that was kind of depressing.

Chiyo: Hand pun.

Chisaki: Dammit.

Chisaki: … Great, now I’m getting bogged down about this. Thanks, Kumo-chan.

Chiyo: Oh. I’m sorry.

Chisaki: Luckily for both of us, I have a solution!
She stands up quickly, tipping her chair back. I get to my feet, somewhat afraid of what she might say next. I mean, I have no idea what I’m afraid of, but I know that somehow she will blow my expectations away and possibly make me wish for Everett to come and help me. Chisaki points a finger upward, triumphant.

Chisaki: We need to go yell at Sekisada-yogisha!

**I wish Everett would come and help me!**

Chiyo: Wh- NO WE DON’T??

Chisaki: Listen. Listen, I understand you want to assume the best of everyone. I know you’re nice. And I appreciate that! However!

Chisaki: [flatly] Sekisada sucks and I hate him for whatever he did to Rett-chan, which I don’t know much about but am choosing to believe is not good, and also sort of on principle because he’s such an absolute knob to everyone he interacts with.

Chisaki: [brightly] Also, we’ll feel better! C’mon!

Chiyo: I-I mean, you have a *point*, I guess, but we won’t necessarily feel- COME BACK HERE!

I’m forced to chase after Chisaki as she bounds through the halls, laughing as I huff after her. **SOMEONE is being REAL UNAPPRECIATIVE of the fact that I’m running, across an ENTIRE building might I add, while tucking. Frankly, I think I might deserve a medal or something for keeping up for most of it.**

But for all of that, I’m still kind of horribly out of shape, to the point where even Chisaki looks upon me with pity as I stumble into the sitting room. Y’know, the sitting room on the other side of the entire mansion. I appreciate Chisaki and her friendship, but she pains me sometimes.

Chiyo: You- what-
Chisaki suddenly presses a finger to my lips and drags me to the balcony door. At this point, I’m too tired to argue as she edges the screen door just barely open, and while she hovers near the door, she doesn’t step outside. The reason for that is evident: while Sekisada is standing on the balcony, back turned to us and actually wearing his jacket properly to boot, Bazhanov stands next to him, the two engaged in quiet conversation. Their words drift to us with the breeze, and though Chisaki is the one that brought me here “to yell at Sekisada” in the first place, she looks surprisingly solemn as she watches them.

Chisaki: [whispers] I don’t want to make Bazhanov-san upset if I interrupt their conversation.

Chiyo: [whispers] Are you sure you aren’t just having regrets about trying to yell at Sekisada-san?

She wrinkles her nose and swats at my arm, but we both stop talking once Sekisada and Bazhanov’s conversation starts up again. I would feel bad for eavesdropping were I not so intrigued.

Sekisada: All I’m saying is you really need to stop hanging out with me.

Bazhanov: Why would I do that? I like talking to you.

Sekisada: Literally all I ever do is disparage everyone. I’m very negative, Bazhanov.

Bazhanov: I’m well aware. And I told you to call me Lyosha.

Sekisada: That’s too intimate. I can’t do that.

Bazhanov: In Russia, using a diminutive is considered casual. [leans on railing] Sort of like if I were to call you Sekisada-kun, although I do call you Sentarou all the time. Actually, that’s still a lot to say. Is Sen a reasonable nickname?

Sekisada: … I mean. I guess.
Bazhanov: Good. Senik, I appreciate the fact that you’re so straightforward and willing to say what’s on your mind. If what’s on your mind happens to be mean, so be it.

Sekisada: First off, I didn’t agree to- to- whatever you just called me. Second, you’re aware that I also say mean things to YOU, right?

Bazhanov: [continues] And you have a good sense of humor. And you appreciate birds, which is something I respect.

Sekisada: Lyosha.

Bazhanov: What? It’s fine. I told you I’m used to people being harsh.

Sekisada: That doesn’t mean it’s a GOOD thing. Listen, you need friends that are healthier for you. Like Kumoshita-san or something like that. I’m not a good person, okay?

Bazhanov: ... Hm.

Bazhanov: Well, here’s the thing. If you’re aware of it, why don’t you do something about it?

**Even I wince at how cold that statement is. Yet Bazhanov delivers it neutrally, still looking at Sekisada with what I recognize now to be some kind of fondness.**

Bazhanov: If you’re so aware that you’re being the kind of person you don’t want to be, why don’t you do something to change it?

Sekisada: [hesitates] I’m trying. Or, I’m starting to try.

Bazhanov: [claps hands together] See, that’s a start! Now, shouldn’t I recognize that change and help you through it?

Sekisada: Most people, yeah. Me? No. [shoves hands in pockets] I’ve done enough harm already. I
swear I’ll just fuck you up more by being around you. What with your past-

Bazhanov: Shh. The past is the past. All we can do now is move forward into the present.

Sekisada: That’s surprisingly astute.

Bazhanov: I’m a cryptic bird man. I’m allowed to be unexpectedly wise.

Bazhanov: ... 

Sekisada: … Did you just wink at me?

Bazhanov: No. I’m blinking. I do that sometimes.

Bazhanov: Where is all of this coming from, anyway? I didn’t take you to be the type worried about moral repercussions.

Bazhanov: Unless this is about Claude…?

Sekisada: … 

Sekisada: I’m winking at you. That was a wink.

Bazhanov: That really didn’t look like one.

Sekisada: Shit, alright. I’m just thinking.

Bazhanov: About?
Sekisada: About how I could have died if I’d just been an hour earlier to the dining room is all. And I know I try not to care about what people think of me, but if I died tomorrow - or even today - what kind of legacy would I leave behind? I didn’t do anything, ever. Which, okay, I can live with that. But the kind of person I am…?

Sekisada: At the rate I’m going, I’ll be surprised if people aren’t rejoicing in the streets if and when I kick it. I’m kind of a shitty person, Lyosha.

Bazhanov: … Ah. I see.

Bazhanov: And... I think I empathize with that.

Sekisada: Please. You’re one of the nicest people here. And you’re basically the only person I can tolerate half the time, so congratulations and don’t hold onto that.

Bazhanov: Ha. My issues are neither here nor there, anyway. All I’m saying is I’m glad you’re being more self aware.

Sekisada: Oh, so I AM an asshole to you too.

Bazhanov: I told you. I’m used to it. I don’t care.

Sekisada: Then you shouldn’t be around me! I’m just going to make it worse!

Bazhanov: But! You’re trying to be better. Which is a lot more than most people aware of their negative traits can say. Just look at whatever Iris has been doing for the past few days, hm?

Sekisada: Yeah, but I’m not there yet. It’s not fair to you to be around me until I start actually treating you like a- like I should be.

Bazhanov: [taps Sekisada’s shoulder] Senik, listen to me for a moment and stop being so self-deprecating. It’s enormously difficult to be a better person when you don’t have any support, even more so when you don’t know what you’re doing. It’s fine, okay? I’m happy to be your friend.
Sekisada: [pleading] Don’t say that.

Bazhanov: We’ve gone over this. There’s nothing you can do or say to make me stop caring about you.

I… didn’t realize they were so close. At all. Shit, eavesdropping for so long and about something so personal is outright an invasion of privacy, isn’t it. With equal amounts of guilt and reluctance, I pull away from the screen.

There’s a quiet sniffle at my side, snapping me back to reality. Chisaki stares outside, tears in her eyes as she remains motionless.

Chisaki: I can't do this.

Chiyo: ... So yelling at Sekisada-san would make us feel better, huh.

Chisaki: I’m emotionally compromised. You can’t do this to me.

Bazhanov: Do you hear voices?

Shit.

Chisaki: Oh, this is SO your fault.

Chiyo: Literally how??

Chisaki: I’m playing the hand card. I’m a victim. I absolve myself of guilt in this situation. Good luck.

Chiyo: Are you kidding m- you can’t do that!
Sekisada: Can you two stop arguing and just come out here already so I can see who’s getting an unauthorized glimpse into my mortal despair?

I sigh and head outside, Chisaki following. Sekisada takes a step away from Bazhanov and stands alone, red-faced and avoiding either of our gazes. Bazhanov, however, looks mostly curious at the intrusion.

Bazhanov: How long were you listening?

Chiyo: I think, uh, longer than we should have?


Chisaki: We didn’t MEAN to eavesdrop! We were planning to yell at you, it’s not MY fault you decided to have a meaningful heartfelt conversation before we could do that!

Sekisada: You were going to WHAT.

Chiyo: I tried to stop her! In my defense!

Bazhanov: Well, what’s stopping you now?

Sekisada: Honestly? Yeah. Yeah, go for it. Yell at me, you came all this way.

Chisaki: That’s not fair! I can’t yell at you NOW, you’re expecting it!

Sekisada: Do it or you’re a coward.

Chisaki: Fuck off!
For all his confidence, though, Sekisada still looks shaken from the entire conversation with Bazhanov. I can’t say I blame him, either. That seemed extremely personal, and to find out that two people that hate him were listening… It’s messy.

But messy as it is, I’m glad that he at least wants to improve as a person. I think. More than anything, the takeaway from that exchange seems to be that Sekisada isn’t necessarily a bad person. Just… misguided? And mean. Maybe just mean to me specifically, if Bazhanov can stand him.

Actually, considering what Sekisada said about Bazhanov tanking his verbal assaults, I think the takeaway from this is that Bazhanov is braver than any sort of soldier.

Sekisada: The hell did you two do before this that led to the conclusion that you should yell at me, anyway?

Chisaki: None of your beeswax!

Bazhanov: I’d argue that our entire conversation was none of yours, either.

Chisaki: Ughhh fine. We were talking about hands and death and stuff.

Sekisada: So… Valdez-shi?

Chisaki: It was real depressing and that’s all you need to know. What did YOU do to start talking about your deep and meaningful conversation?

Sekisada: I’m not answering that.

Bazhanov: Then neither will I.
Chisaki: It was worth a shot.

Bazhanov: Hm. [closes eye]

Chisaki: Was that a blink?

Bazhanov: No, that one was a wink. Get with the program.

Sekisada: If we’re about done figuring out what we’re all doing here, can you two PLEASE get off the balcony, I like my peace and quiet.

Chiyo: Do you mind if I just look around? I haven’t really been out here before.

Sekisada: Seriously? Why not?

Chiyo: … Oh, you know.

Bazhanov: I don’t see why she shouldn’t.

Sekisada sighs and steps aside. I make my way over to the balcony and look over the edge. It’s a dizzying drop to the first floor and gives me serious vertigo just looking at it, so I take a few quick steps back.

Beyond that, the view is expansive, to say the least. The balcony overlooks what seems to be a massive courtyard in front of the mansion, and the first thing that comes to mind is that this must be what the locked doors in the foyer must lead to. Or, the set facing outward, anyway.

The second thing that comes to mind is just how run-down the whole courtyard seems to be. Broken cobblestones, crumbling statues, a rusted fountain… It looks much more like a poorly designed garden decor emporium than a proper courtyard. Which, of course, begs the question: how long has this mansion been here? Wouldn’t someone take care of it? The edges of the area are barely distinguishable from the vast mountains and greenery beyond the grounds for how overgrown they are.
And the third thought pertains to the fences that line the edges. They don’t look electrocuted, at least, and are simple wrought-iron that looks merely difficult to climb. Despite myself, my heart lifts at the sight. If the biggest challenge we’ll have to face is a few fences, maybe McRae is onto something with his plans to escape after all.

Sekisada: Okay, are you good? Get out.

Chisaki: We’re already outside!


Although Chisaki protests, we leave the balcony. I get the feeling that all parties are relieved. That was… awkward. Heartwarming to hear that Sekisada cares, but extremely, extremely awkward. I’m not actually sure how to recover from getting caught eavesdropping, and apparently neither does Chisaki, because it takes us until we’re back at the living room for her to say anything.

Chisaki: … Well, that sucked.

Chiyo: At least Sekisada-san is trying?

Chisaki: Pscht. [taps chin] Still don’t trust him as far as I can throw him, which is significantly difficult with one hand. Fuck that dude in general.

Chiyo: See, normally I’d agree, but… Maybe we just need to give him a chance?

Chisaki mutters something incomprehensible, shifting her weight. It’s only now that I realize how late it’s gotten. Have I seriously spent all day with Chisaki? Not that I’m complaining, of course, but I just hope everyone else is doing alright.

Especially after the motive this morning. What kinds of secrets do I have to hide? I’m not a particularly interesting person. I guess if someone were to target me, it’d be more of a “what
secrets do they think I have” issue, though.

… You know what, while I might be getting better about contemplating death as a whole, thinking about the possibility of my own is still a little much. I try to focus back on what Chisaki is saying as she points to the stairs.

Chisaki: -so I’m gonna go check, okay?

Chiyo: Sorry, what did you just say? I kind of spaced out for a second.

Chisaki: Oh, mood. Anyway, I’m just gonna go run down and check to see if Rett-chan and Rai-san are done with their minigolf yet, cuz if they’re still there then that’s one long-ass game of minigolf. And maybe I’ll see who else is downstairs. Wanna come with? [nudges me with elbow] You might find your emotional support spouse.

Chiyo: Oh, uh… Wait, my what?

Chisaki: I said what I said.

Do I really want to be heckled about my relationship with Amal for the next who knows how long? Heck, I don’t even know what to feel about them by this point. It’s obviously “close”, but it’s still complicated. And personal. I love Chisaki, but she can be kind of overwhelming sometimes.

Besides, I’m getting hungry.

Chiyo: I think I’m good for tonight, thank you! I should probably eat something.

Chisaki: Oh, yeah. Food is important. Go eat.

Chiyo: Don’t you need to eat, too?

Chisaki: I’ll catch up, don’t worry about me! Shoo!!
And before I can answer, she’s off again, racing down the stairs without a care in the world. I wave at her anyway before entering the kitchen. I close the door carefully as I walk in, because Atsui and Ekyou seem to be deep in conversation over the stove.

What could they be talking about? I know Atsui’s prone to rambling, but Ekyou has always seemed intimidating and untouchable when not emotionally compromised. So that means…

Atsui: Alright, so fried rice is done. Do you care enough to make a whole bunch of eggs?

Ekyou: Not particularly. Especially since there’s egg in the fried rice already.

Atsui: Cool.

He turns off the stove and turns back to her, expression completely serious. I think I vaguely remember something about Kashizaki and Atsui planning to intercept Ekyou and Sumitama’s friendships to force them to set some boundaries. Is this it? Is he going to broach the topic? Should I leave again??

Atsui: Do you ever wonder where all the eggs keep coming from?

… Or he could ask a very Atsui question. That works too.

Atsui: We’ve gone through at least three cartons in the past few weeks, and I don’t THINK we’ve gotten deliveries, so… what do you think?

Ekyou: [frowns; seriously considers this] I don’t know. Maybe Ariel and Caliban lay them.

Atsui: [points spoon] See, I’d consider that too, if not for the fact that they’re robots.

Ekyou: Okay, but are they? Ariel, probably, but Caliban?
Atsui: Hm. Fair enough, but… I don’t know. [turns] Hey, Kumoshita-san, what’s your take?

Chiyo: Wh-what?

**Neither of them look surprised to see me. I guess I wasn’t as quiet as I thought I was.**

Atsui: [patiently] This is a matter of whether or not we’re going to be eating eggs at any point for the rest of our stay, Kumoshita-san.

Ekyou: Is it really? Even if we don’t know where the eggs come from, I’m not going to think so hard about it.

Atsui: Yeah, but I am. Kumoshita-san?

Chiyo: If… if Ariel and Caliban, hypothetically, were to lay eggs, wouldn’t the eggs also be robotic? Why are we talking about this??

Atsui: Oh, so like, if someone were to bite into one then they’d get a mouth full of machinery.

Ekyou: [nods] That makes sense. If they’re not real birds, they wouldn’t be able to lay real eggs, anyway. And I guess Caliban can’t be a real bird, what with its glowing eyes or whatever that was. At least, I don’t think most birds can do that.


**They completely ignored my question of why we’re even discussing the ability of our hosts to lay eggs. Were they arguing about things like this the whole time?**

… After seeing just a few minutes of their conversation, I wouldn’t be surprised.

Atsui: Anyway, welcome to the Atsui-Ekyou kitchen, how can we help you.

Atsui: [pokes her arm] Hey, who’s been in here longer?

Ekyou: If we’re going by who’s spent the most time in the kitchen, then you’ll have to let McRae-san be part of the name, too.

Atsui: Okay, but I have seniority. So boo-hoo to that. I do what I want.

Chiyo: I don’t mean to be demanding or anything, but did you cook dinner?


Chiyo: Didn’t you also, a few days ago, talk about how you were exhausted from cooking all the time?

Atsui: Okay, in my defense, I kind of don’t really trust people to cook. You told me you almost blew up a microwave before.

Chiyo: You actually did.

Atsui: … Alright, touché. [sighs] I dunno. It’s exhausting, but in a good way.

Ekyou: [nods] Yeah, I understand that. It’s a way to help people, right?

Atsui: Well, this is going to sound really mean, but I don’t care as much about helping people as helping myself. Though I guess that’s part of it.

Chiyo: I don’t think I get it.
Atsui: Y’know, it’s just a whole big thing about doing things for other people so you can go to bed tired at the end of the day and say that you did SOMETHING good.

Atsui: Like, okay, maybe I don’t have solutions for the killing game. Maybe we actually ARE gonna be stuck here forever. Maybe someone will die tomorrow! But I made three meals today, and I fed people, and they’re happy about that, so damn right I’m going to be happy about it too.

Atsui: I guess this is how I’m dealing with the situation. You know how your solution seems to be hanging out with absolutely everyone to make sure no one kills each other, figuratively speaking? This is how I cope. It’s cooking. It’s always been cooking. Even when I sucked at it, it’s cooking.

Chiyo: … Woah.

Atsui: Yeah, it’s weird.

Chiyo: It’s not weird! That’s just... a really good way of articulating it.

Atsui: You think?

Ekyou: [folds hands] She's right. You do have a way with words.

Atsui: [blinks] I’m... flattered?

It’s a little less like socializing and a little more like writing, though. Some days, all I can do is write a few hundred words and force myself to enjoy the accomplishment of putting something new into the world. Only, with cooking, you have the opportunity to see other people enjoy what you’ve made. With writing, it’s harder - you have to rely on other people telling you that they’ve read your work, and there’s less of an inherent helpfulness in the task.

… Actually, if Sekisada wants to feel like a better person, learning to cook wouldn’t be a bad place to start. I shelve that away for future reference.
Chiyo: But you’d better make sure not to push yourself too hard, Atsui-kun.

Atsui: [rolls eyes] Yeah, thanks, mom. For real. I’ll keep an eye on myself. I know my limits.

Ekyou: Said the person who took a three hour nap at the kitchen table after lunch.

Atsui: Stop being mean to me and the neck cramp I got after doing that.

I help myself to dinner as the two continue an idle back and forth. Though the conversation flows easily and pretty loudly between them, I catch Atsui shooting nervous glances at Ekyou when she isn’t looking. The food is good, as always, but I can’t help but pick around the egg after the conversation. I don’t want to know where these come from. Chickens, hopefully.

As soon as I leave the kitchen, the conversation stops entirely - and not just because it was muffled by the door behind me. Instead, Atsui seems content to let the threads of conversation drop for a few moments before continuing with less jaunt than before.

... In fact, I can still hear them through the door.

Should I keep listening? I know for a fact that if I do, I may come to regret it, like with the balcony earlier for obvious reasons. Actually, I should really be leaving now and going off to the atrium or to bed or to wherever I can go after dinner before lights out.

But then this is the first time I’ve seen Ekyou apart from Sumitama since that dinner a few days ago. And didn’t Atsui, Kashizaki, Amal, and I collectively agree to keep an eye on this? Yes, Atsui seems to have it handled, but if I can help at all…?

I settle down by the door, acutely aware that this decision may come back to bite me as Atsui starts talking again.

Atsui: Ekyou-san?

Ekyou: Huh?
Atsui: I’m sorry for misjudging you.

Ekyou: Oh, no, don’t worry. It happens all the time. People say I can be pretty intimidating. I promise I don’t hate you, my face is just like that.

Atsui: What? I didn’t mean that in the personality way. I meant that in the cooking way. You’re really easy to work with, and I’m only partially afraid that you’re going to make some kind of gelatin nightmare now. Which is a step up from being entirely afraid. And that’s a step up from being afraid of you burning the kitchen down.

Ekyou: O-oh? Uh, thank you. Don’t tell Kashizaki-chan that last part.

Atsui: Yeah. Yeah, I won’t.

Ekyou: And, er… thank you. For being here, and for letting me do this.

Atsui: You’re literally taking work off me. If anything, I should be thanking you.

Ekyou: You know what I mean.

Atsui: … Yeah. I do.

A silence, punctuated by the clinking of plates and a rush of water. They must be doing dishes.

Ekyou: She must be worried.

Atsui: No, she’s spending time with Kikun. Forcibly, but you know. She’s not allowed to worry about you right now, and you’re not obligated to attend to her every need.

Ekyou: Yes, but- but if I don’t, then who will?
Atsui: Listen, and I understand that this sounds kind of harsh, but there’s a difference between supporting a friend and straight up emotional leeching. And Sumitama-san sounds like she’s been doing a lot of the latter. What has she done for you? Like, at all? Ever?

Ekyou: …

Atsui: … The fact that you’re hesitating is not promising. [softer] Seriously, Ekyou-san, if you’re not happy being around her, and every time you see her you want to burst into tears yourself, then…

Ekyou: … Then I’m not doing enough as a friend and need to be more attentive?

Atsui: What the fuck, no, that’s like the polar opposite of what I’m implying here.

Ekyou: Sorry.

Atsui: Don’t apologize. I know Kikun has been pretty dead set on making sure you never speak to Sumitama-san again - sorry, had to be said - but I don’t really agree.

Ekyou: You don’t?

Atsui: Sure. I mean, if you think the friendship is still worth it, then it’s your life. But that doesn’t mean you keep the friendship alive because you wish it would go back to normal or whatever. You should be doing it because it’s fulfilling to you right now. Okay?

Another pause, the scrape of chairs against the floor.

Atsui: I mean, it’s up to you in the end.

Ekyou: No, no, I see your point, and I do agree that things need to get better. I guess I’m just…
Ekyou: ... 

Ekyou: You know, despite everything in the trial, I miss Shionaga-kun.

Atsui: Why?

Ekyou: I miss Shionaga-kun, because... I don’t know, actually. I don’t know if I miss him so much as I miss when Iris was, um…

Atsui: Less hysterical?

Ekyou: I miss when she was happy. I miss when I was happy, too.

Ekyou: But I think I just miss when no one was dead.

And I stumble belatedly away from the door, guilt finally creeping in as I catch the last remnants of their conversation.

Atsui: Yeah. So do I.

Everything between somehow getting to the hallway and crashing on my bed is something of a blur. Even the check in with Amal (they’d spent the whole day with McRae in the downstairs library, apparently) is more of a smear on my consciousness than a real memory, and they end the text exchange with a message telling me to get some sleep, so I KNOW I need to magically unfuck my sleep schedule. If these stupid nightmares keep up, though, I’m not sure if that’s an option.

Just as I’m about to turn in for the night, however, another message lights up my Parchment. Even as I open it, I have to wonder if I have the mental capacity for this right now. Too late, though.

R. KASHIZAKI [21:21]:
Hiiii Kumoshitachan whom I love and adore

Can my best friend please pretty please eat breakfast with me tomorrow morning

*gratuitous eye blinking, eyelash batting, etc*

*except these don’t work on you because you are head over heels for Khalafkun*

C. KUMOSHITA [21:21]:
I thought Atsui-kun was your best friend?

R. KASHIZAKI [21:21]:
Do I look like I’m blinking my big old eyes at Ryouji to you

*blink blink blinkity blink*

C KUMOSHITA [21:21]:
????????????

R. KASHIZAKI [21:21]
Okay no but seriously we need to talk

C. KUMOSHITA [21:22]:
Why not now? O^O

R. KASHIZAKI [21:22]:
I spent all day with Sumitamasan. Words cannot BEGIN to express how exhausted I am at this time

Actually that’s related to the stuff tomorrow

And by the way Ryouji says he’s not cooking tomorrow morning because there’s so many leftovers that we would in theory be good for the next week. Yet I will still get up at 7 am to make you breakfast if you so decide to show up

*blinks some more and throws in a fucking blown kiss for good measure*

*am I doing this femininity thing right*
C. KUMOSHITA [21:23]:

I’d be happy to spend time with you but PLEASE there is no obligation to make food for me!!

Atsui-kun is right, we have too much food, it’s probably better not to make more!!

R. KASHIZAKI [21:23]:

What are you gonna do. Unplug the toaster while I’m using it

C. KUMOSHITA [21:23]:

I’ll get up at 6:30 and make YOU breakfast!!!

R. KASHIZAKI [21:24]:

Wait really

C. KUMOSHITA [21:24]:

I am as exhausted as you are so don’t actually take me at my word!!!

R. KASHIZAKI [21:24]:

Okay being realistic here. Neither of us are going to do either of these things and we’re just going to eat leftovers

C. KUMOSHITA [21:24]:

… FAIR ENOUGH!!

But I’ll come tomorrow morning! I always like spending time with you!! 8 o clock okay?

Though Kashizaki sees the message as soon as I send it (Bates was right, these do send read receipts), it’s a long time before she responds.

R. KASHIZAKI [21:37]:

Yeah. Yeah, that’s fine
Thanks. You too

And though nothing has ever been anywhere close to normal since I first woke up here, when I fall asleep, I can almost pretend that I’m just living my life - just spent the day with a friend, going to meet a different friend tomorrow morning for breakfast about another friend’s toxic friendship and what to do about it. It would be so easy if these were the only issues I had to weigh me down.

Oh, if only.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found here.
By some miracle of fixing my entire sleep schedule, I manage to wake up a solid hour before the morning announcement plays. By some anti-miracle, I’m unable to actually go back to sleep, and it takes me way too long to decide that I may as well get up now.

No dreams. At least, none that I remember. Maybe I should be worried about that, but it’s more likely that I only remember my dreams when I sleep poorly, which in all honesty seems to be the case. I guess if I really DO want to unlock cool secret dream-memories, I just have to be really emotionally conflicted and have awful nightmares! Haha! HA!!

… I probably need to get out of bed for real.

As always, I end up in the kitchen, which, to my surprise, is sparsely populated. I’m not sure whether I’m surprised at the fact that not everyone is here or the fact that these few are present. No one ever seems to come to breakfast unless prompted by Atsui’s messages or Ariel’s orders. Atsui himself is absent this morning, though a notice on the fridge written in surprisingly elegant cursive reads plainly: “Please someone start eating all these leftovers.”

I guess he’s nothing if not direct.

Harai looks up briefly when I enter, a clean plate and their Parchment in front of them. They don’t react to my wave and return to typing, their mask concealing their expression in a painted scowl as always. Yet given their level of concentration, I’d assume they’re scowling under the mask, too…? Did something happen yesterday?

McRae eats across from Sekisada, which is an odd couple, to say the least. Neither of them seem to be paying the other much heed, and Sekisada especially seems lost in his own world. He grips a cup of coffee, rubbing absentely at the dark circles under his eyes. McRae is
nursing his own mug, though it doesn’t look like he’s touched it at all as he pages through a thick volume. I catch a glimpse of the title - something called “Survive/Redeem”, the first in the Joker Manor series? - and resolve to look into it later. Even if murder mysteries aren’t my thing, I hear that series is pretty good. At least McRae isn’t isolated.

I’m just about ready to question Kashizaki’s presence (or lack thereof) when she bustles through the pantry doors, holding plates of food. Again, the microwave (and really all the food preparation equipment) is in the main kitchen area, so I have absolutely no idea what she’s doing in there. Except… presentation? Maybe that’s it.

Kashizaki: I made you breakfast. Never ask me for anything ever again.

Kashizaki hands me a plate of fried rice, the very same that Atsui and Ekyou had made yesterday. She had absolutely no part in making this except for reheating it. Thanks, I guess.

…Oh, wait. There’s a smiley face drawn on it with ketchup.

Chiyo: I like the personality on this one!

Kashizaki: Thanks. Have a seat.

I sit down across from her as she places her own plate on the table. This one has a ketchup star on it.

Chiyo: What did you want to talk about?

Kashizaki: [blows out a breath] What have I been talking about for the past four days? Sumitama-san, obviously.

I cast a quick glance to the other occupants of the room. McRae and Sekisada don’t seem to be paying us any attention, but Harai stares right at me when I look at them.

Chiyo: [lowers voice] Is this wise to talk about while other people are present?
Kashizaki: In all honesty, I doubt anyone in this room would actually tell Sumitama-san that we were talking about her. Anyway, if she has a problem, she can come to me directly. I figure she’s too much of a coward to, of course.

Chiyo: Right… [winc] I just don’t feel right speaking so poorly of her while she’s unaware.

Kashizaki: It sounds like she’s earned it at this point. [rolls eyes] I spent literally all afternoon with her, Kumoshita-chan. She’s as fake as they come. She spent the whole time griping about HER own problems and HER own worries.

Chiyo: [blinks] Okay, but you can’t be mad at her just because she’s worrying about a lot of things?

Chiyo: When I first talked to her, it sounded like she had a lot of external stress. Her family sounds like they have a lot of expectations for her. And being the number one student in all of Japan can’t be good for her emotional health, either. Plus, this killing game...

Kashizaki scowls, stabbing at her rice with a certain venom that I haven’t seen from her before. Did I say something wrong?

Kashizaki: Alright, fine, so maybe she’s got demanding parents. Big fucking whoop, so do I. She’s got academic pressure. Big fucking whoop! Again, so do I!

Chiyo: People deal with the same problems in different ways.

Kashizaki: Well, YEAH, but there’s no way she can be so weak that she can’t just TRY to overcome it. I mean, I used to- [cuts self off] … Anyway.

Kashizaki: The point is, I don’t so much have a problem with that as much as I do with her overtaking the whole conversation and demanding that I fix all her problems. And we haven’t even spoken before this! It’s a little much to ask from one person the first time you speak to them at length.

Kashizaki: So I think I need to do something about it. Like, get Ekyou-chan to separate from her a
As Kashizaki’s gaze drills into me, I place my fork on my plate and avoid eye contact. It takes a moment to get my thoughts together.

Chiyo: … Okay. Um. Well. Are you sure you want to hear this?

Kashizaki: [frowns] … Do I?

Chiyo: I think… I think you’re not giving her enough of a chance.

Kashizaki: [frown deepens] I don’t catch.

Chiyo: It’s just… I don’t know. Like I said, there’s a lot of things stressing her out, and I don’t think you should be mad at her for trying to fix her problems. Maybe she’s lost and needs some direction, and you’re just the first person she saw that she could talk to about it.

Chiyo: It sounds- I’m sorry, but it sounds a lot like you’re attacking her for having issues at all? And for reaching out for help. And I’m just saying, but that kind of reaction is what makes people, um. Not reach out for help. And makes the problem worse.

Chiyo: … Sorry.

Kashizaki: …

Her expression locks down in the exact same way as when she dropped the food when cooking.

Kashizaki: Yeah. I guess I’m wrong, then.
Chiyo: I’m not saying that, just that you’re quick to-

Kashizaki: Whatever. I just don’t see why Sumitama-san of all people gets pity for barely even trying to fix herself and making other people pick up the pieces for her. The rest of us have problems too, Kumoshita-chan.

Chiyo: I’m not saying we don’t! I’m just saying that it’s not fair to judge her so harshly for something she might not be aware of. Kashizaki-chan, I don’t know how you can get so angry at her.

Kashizaki: I don’t know how you CAN’T. I just- god, you know what? Whatever. Whatever! You have your opinions, I have mine, agree to disagree. Okay? Okay!

Chiyo: Are you really?

Kashizaki: What, do you think I’m going to tell you my problems after I got mad about Sumitama-san bothering people with hers? I can solve it on my own, because I actually trust myself to make the right decision.

I… doubt that. I very strongly doubt that.

Kashizaki: Listen. I’ve been in Ekyou-chan’s position before, and it’s an outright awful one to be in. And all I’m saying is that we- I need to do something about it, okay? I can’t just stand by and let what happened to me happen again. Ekyou-chan doesn’t deserve that.

Kashizaki: So I’m gonna do something about it.

Chiyo: Okay, but if you isolate Sumitama-san, couldn’t that drive her to do something drastic? After all, during the meeting yesterday, she seemed pretty convinced that someone would- that someone would kill. Regardless of what the rest of us did.

Kashizaki: And? Someone probably will.
Chiyo: … [softly] I didn’t need to hear that.

I don’t look at Kashizaki, though I can feel the weight of her silent judgement. Unexpectedly, she sighs and pushes her chair back, picking up her plate. I don’t know if this is a good thing or a bad thing until she speaks again.

Kashizaki: Alright. You can try and talk to Sumitama-san, if you want, and if you can come up with something that’ll get her to stop being so hard on Ekyou-chan, I’m all for it. If not? Then I’ll do whatever it takes to intervene myself.

Kashizaki: See you around.

She drops her plate in the sink with a clatter and spins on her heel, letting the door slam behind her on the way out. That was definitely, definitely a bad thing. And the worst part is how preventable the whole conversation is.

I mean, of course I don’t think Ekyou is happy! I do agree that something needs to be done! I’m just also pretty sure that Sumitama isn’t very happy herself - and doesn’t she deserve help as much as anyone else? AND on top of that, I really don’t want to lose Kashizaki’s friendship, but… I haven’t seen her be this headstrong before. Or maybe I have, and I’ve just overlooked it?? And on TOP of that... Oh, great, morning announcements.

Ariel: Good morning! It is now 8 am, rise and shine and so forth. Ah, it’s been about a week, I assume you know the drill by now.

Ariel: By the way, please heed the pronoun changes under Miss Everett’s profile! Thank you!

Everett? I immediately swipe over to her profile and check.

ASTER EVERETT
Name: Aster Everett
Pronouns: she/they
Talent: SHSL ???
Oh! When did that happen…? No matter, I’m glad they feel comfortable enough to publicly identify as what’s best for them! Congratulating them would be pretty weird, though, so it’s probably best to keep all this pride on the inside.

Where was I? I haven’t finished eating. Maybe I should do that.

But as soon as I turn back to my food, Harai crosses the room to face me directly across the table. They don’t demand anything, merely standing with their arms folded as I try to eat. I make it through all of three bites before they start talking.

Harai: I need to show you something.

Chiyo: Huh?

Harai: It’s important. Really important.

They run their fingers under the edge of their mask, leaving their palm to cup their cheek. More than anything, they seem agitated. More than anything, they seem… fearful.

In all the time I’ve known Harai, I’ve always had a hard time getting a read on them. They exist, yes, but as something of an emotional nonentity; I don’t recall ever seeing them in the throes of any particular passion. At best, they sometimes seem mildly embarrassed or mildly relieved, depending on the situation. In fact, everything about their conduct seems perfectly controlled so that they don’t exude anything to begin with. So to see Harai - no, to know that they’re worried…

… It’s unsettling, to say the least.

So unsettling that I shove the rest of my breakfast into my mouth (and nearly choke) and find myself following them downstairs not five minutes later.

Harai doesn’t say a word as they pass through the halls, so I have no idea where we’re going
before they stop before the downstairs library. They don’t even pause as they head through the doors, seeming only to remember at the last second to hold the door for me. Despite their shorter legs, I almost have to jog to keep up with them as they weave through the stacks. Did they just want somewhere private to talk?

I… didn’t realize how extensive this library is, huh. Making the path to the movie room go through the library as opposed to having a hallway really let the designer maximize the space, and by the time Harai stops, I’m not sure if I’d be able to find my way out again. To my surprise, Amal stands among the shelves, looking at a file in their hands. Neither Harai nor Amal seem alarmed to see the other, and it occurs to me that they must have been investigating together.

What have I missed since yesterday?

Amal: Good. You’re here.


Amal: The Beaumont Society is a mystery fantasy-esque novel about a detective and the company he gets involved with in the search for his mentor. RATS is a multipart series about, weirdly and somewhat Relevantly enough, a group of teens stuck in an underwater base and forced to solve puzzles to learn about their situation.

Amal: … [mutters] I, uh, might have read the backs while I was waiting for you. The Beaumont Society definitely seems like something I’d read later.

Chiyo: Ooh… they sound really good!

Harai: That’s besides the point.

Harai kicks the ground, head still as they contemplate for a moment. I’m not sure what they’re doing until they speak again, voice lower.

Harai: I don’t think there’s any cameras back here, which is good. Khalaf-san, show Kumoshita-
san what you showed me.

Amal: … Right.

They open the folder to reveal…

… A drawing of a bloodied corpse.

It’s that of a girl, about the same age as us, blue-haired and dressed in a school uniform. She’s slumped against the wall, bright blood splattered against the walls and her abdomen, the traces of some number inscribed by her hand in the same bright hue… Looking at it isn’t as hard as looking at a real image, but it’s still so needlessly graphic that I can’t help but wince.

Chiyo: What is-?!

Amal: There’s more.

They page through the folder, each image depicting a similarly drawn character. There’s names attached to each one - apparently, the first is someone named Sayaka Maizono. The second, Chihiro Fujisaki. The names become a blur by the last image, and while I push the folder away without fear, a deep unease has settled in my stomach.

Chiyo: … So is this part of another mystery book from this section?

Amal: …

They step back, revealing the shelf behind them. I blink at the miniature encyclopedia of files before me, and I realize too late that my hand is drifting towards them before I drop the gesture.

Chiyo: How many?
Amal: Forty-seven.

Chiyo: Who has the time- who has the time to draw all of this? To invent all of these characters? [nervous laughter]

Harai: … Kumoshita-san.

Harai: Most of the files contain actual photographs.

Actual photographs…?

My world takes a sharp turn towards nausea. I barely register Amal’s arm shooting out to support me as I stagger forward before regaining my balance.

Chiyo: You- you mean REAL PEOPLE ARE IN THESE SITUATIONS?!

Harai: It seems so. [frowns] Or they had been, anyway.

Amal: It looks like all but three of them were taken of actual people, assuming no photomnipulation was involved.

Chiyo: But that- that’s- [chokes] WHAT??

Amal wraps an arm around my shoulder and gently guides me to sit down. They rub circles into my back as Harai lowers themself too.

It’s all I can do to bring my knees to my chest as my heart pounds against them, so hard that miniature earthquakes must be shaking the floor. I can’t think, can barely breathe, can’t even make sense of the world as it keeps spinning around me.
Forty-seven minus three. That’s forty-four. Forty-four times six deaths, maybe even MORE, is— it’s a lot. It’s a lot of real people, real teenagers, real students like me and everyone else in this mansion, that were— that were robbed of a chance to. To live. To be alive. To keep moving from day to day, just like Valdez was, just like Shionaga and Bates and Murdock were, just like the rest of us might be— oh, who am I kidding, we’re probably all going to die here. We’re all just doomed. There’s no way around it, there’s nothing I can do, I might as well just accept the fact that I’m going to die and fade into the void like all the rest of these forgotten files!

Why isn’t the world collapsing? Shouldn’t it be? Does no one care about the fact that my universe is breaking at the seams with each passing second?

And as I try to stop shaking, I realize that someone does. They hold me close and press a quiet snatch of a melody into my ears and I can feel their heartbeat next to mine, slow and steady despite it all. Amal keeps humming, their breathing level through the pauses and dips in whatever song they’re imagining, and only when I focus on it can I slowly loosen each muscle keeping me stiff. It’s only when that’s done that I realize that they’re still holding me in a loose embrace, and it’s still some time after that when I’m finally able to catch my breath.

Even though I’m pretty sure I’m doing better now, I don’t move out of Amal’s arms, and they don’t make a move to let me go. Harai looks away, seeming willfully ignorant of the moment between us. For a moment, I’m embarrassed, but this quickly melts to gratitude to both of the people before me. Harai for trusting me enough to tell me this, though they seemed rightfully agitated by it, and Amal for… Well. Really, just for existing at this point.

When I can trust myself enough to speak, it comes out quavering.

Chiyo: S-so… what do, um. What do we do about this?

Harai: Huh? Oh. Uh. [adjusts mask] I don’t… I don’t know, actually.

Harai: I was thinking you would know. Since you seem to be good at trials, and people like you, and… [trails off] Yeah.

It’s… weirdly, somewhat reassuring that one of the most capable people I know doesn’t know what to do about this either. It’s also admittedly terrifying. Amal seems to pick up on this,
because they continue rubbing circles into my shoulder.

Amal: I don’t think we can tell anyone about this. At all. I don’t know what any of it is supposed to mean, or how relevant it all is to our situation.

Harai: It’s worryingly obvious to me. These are students like us. It’s not hard to connect the dots.

Amal: [dips head; lowers voice] That’s not helpful.

Harai: [whispers] Sorry. [louder] Khalaf-san is right, though. The less people that know about this, the better.

Chiyo: How would- how can we keep people from, from looking back here? It’s pretty obvious that - that all of this is here. Especially if someone was looking for it.

Harai: That’s why we don’t mention it to anybody unless they need to know.

Amal: [soothingly] We can box in the files by putting books in front of them, okay? That way, no one will see them. Besides, we’re in the very back of the library. Unless someone comes back here and looks hard at absolutely everything back here, I don’t think they’ll find it.

I nod and stare at the books, each title swimming before me. I brush over “Another/Quartet”, the touted spin-off to that Joker Manor series, and my heart freezes in my chest long before I realize the connection. Amal must realize what’s happening before I even say anything and they resume humming, this one a simple tune that reminds me of a lullaby. I try to hang onto it as I force the words out.

Chiyo: I’m not- I’m not sure if someone hasn’t found it already.

I don’t look up, but I can feel Amal stiffen, their song dropping off. Harai, too, seems to have gone quite suddenly silent.

Harai: What do you mean?
Chiyo: The book that McRae-san was reading this morning. Um, from the Joker Manor series. That’s the same genre as the stuff back here. Murder mysteries.

Harai: [quietly] Shit.

Amal: ... I think…

Harai: This is bad. That’s what I think.

Amal: Not that bad. I trust McRae not to do anything dumb, and I don’t think this would affect him much, but…

Amal: [sighs] I don’t know what he’s thinking sometimes. Or what he’ll do with this. If it’s any help, he isn’t the type to gossip. At least it’s not, say, Sekisada-san.

Harai: That’s a fair point. I’d just… really prefer not to have anyone else know about this. Except maybe Everett-san.

Chiyo: D… don’t do that.

Amal: Is something wrong?

Chiyo: No, it’s just…

Chiyo: …

Harai: … Oh. The bow?

Chiyo: R-right. So, um. Amal, did anyone tell you about this?
Amal: Harai-san did after I showed them these files. [points up]

Chiyo: So you, um. Know about… whatever that was. That happened.

I’m so distracted with Amal winding their fingers through my hair that I almost miss their reply, quiet as it is.

Amal: It sounded to me like a flashback. That happens to me sometimes, too.

*Like in the weapons room, is what they don’t say but I can hear. I bring my hand up to theirs and twine their fingers in mine. Harai seems either oblivious or unbothered.*

Harai: But they don’t remember their past. As far as they claim, anyway.

Amal: It doesn’t matter. You can still experience the sensations and the- the feelings. As if you were still in the situation. Even if you’re not necessarily reliving a specific memory.

Harai: …

Harai: I have had an epiphany.

Chiyo: *What?*

Harai: [shakes head] Nothing. It’s irrelevant, I might tell you later.

Harai: I do understand what you’re saying, though. If it has anything to do with them, it might set them off further.

Chiyo: Wait.

Chiyo: *Does it?*
A bubble of something between hope and fear rises in my chest, bursting just as quickly when Amal shakes their head, dislodging their glasses with the sharp gesture. I readjust their glasses on their face and they smile a bit, though they still seem distant.

Amal: I checked all the files. Everett-san doesn’t seem to be in any of them.

Chiyo: Oh.

Amal: Which makes sense, I guess. Since she isn’t dead.

Chiyo: Mm. Yeah, that checks out.

Amal actually laughs this time. Harai lifts their mask a little, and I catch a glimpse of grinning teeth, too, before they let it snap back into place. When they speak again, though, they’re back to business once more.

Harai: By the way, there was… something else I needed to show you two. Khalaf-san, consider this payback for this thing you showed me today.

Chiyo: Wait, YOU found this?

Amal: I may have been looking for a book.

Chiyo: You didn’t seem like the murder mystery type to me.

Amal: … I may have gotten lost. [smirks] Harai-san, what did you find?

Harai: It’s…

They pause, completely still.
Harai: It’s in the weapons room.

Amal: [blinks] Oh.

Harai: You don’t have to come if you don’t want to. I can fill you in later-

Amal: Yeah. Yeah, could you please? I’d really appreciate that.

Chiyo: Do you want me to go with you? Do you have something else you want to do?

Harai: [mutters] That sort of kills the point of me asking both of you to come with me.

Amal: Yeah, they’re probably right. We can talk later, Chiyo, if that’s okay?

Chiyo: Huh? Oh, okay! That’s… that’s fine by me, yeah!

Harai: Don’t sound so disappointed. It’s probably something you really need to know about.

Is it…? Considering the importance of what they just showed me here with the files, it probably is.

Amal: I’ll see you two around. Stay safe.

Chiyo: Will do!

And with a final squeeze of my hand and without further ado, Amal starts towards the door, making their way through the library with ease. They must have spent a lot of time down here to navigate so confidently, but instead of awe, all I can muster is a slight disappointment that I wasn’t there with them.
It takes Harai and me significantly longer to find our way back to the exit, Harai pulling at their mask all the while. I can only imagine how uncomfortable it must be to wear that every day, but they still seem adamant not to take it off. Then again, I’m not the one who has anything to hide, so they’ll probably reveal themselves whenever they’re ready. All I can do is be supportive when they do.

I don’t even realize we’ve reached the weapons room when they hesitate, hand on the doorknob, and turn to me.

Harai: I don’t know how much this is going to affect you.

Chiyo: Wait. No one’s dead in there, right?

Harai: Unless someone died in the past two hours, no.

Chiyo: Then I think I’ll be okay.

Harai: Okay. Good.

I can hear them audibly inhale, then exhale, then open the door.

The room seems no different than the last time I was here - the swords on display, the glass cabinets of garrotes and axes, the weird animal trophies. While I know that most decorative firearms can’t fire live ammunition, I still hold my breath as I pass a rifle painted over with what I recognize as calla lilies. How must Amal feel, looking at all of this, if even I am unsettled?

Harai directs me to a cabinet directly under a lovingly displayed pistol. Just looking at it makes me uneasy - it’s a simple firearm with no other decoration, so despite the display, it’s clearly meant to be fired. Which means that this cabinet must have...

Chiyo: You… you took all the ammunition. Didn’t you?
Harai: Yes. Two days in a row.

Chiyo: … You can’t be serious.

Harai says nothing and only opens the cabinet, taking out one of just two boxes within. They open it to show me the bullets inside, put it back too quickly, and shut the door. As they clasp their hands together, their posture is perfectly still, yet radiates nervousness.

Harai: [rapidly] There were two the first day and two the second day but they keep coming back, Kumoshita-san, I don’t know where they keep coming from, and I’m sorry, and please just let me do better.

Chiyo: [blinks] Harai-san?!

Harai: [bows head] I will make this up to you somehow. Should- should I keep taking them? I don’t think that will- I mean, whatever you decide, I can do.

Chiyo: I don’t… are you okay? Is everything alright?

Harai: Please, just… answer me.

I…

Chiyo: [slowly] If… if it’ll make you, um. If it’ll make you - not me, you - feel better, then by all means. But if the birds, or whoever’s restocking this room, puts out two boxes every day, then there must be a lot of stock. So there might be a point that- that someone else would find it, anyway.

Harai: [draws in a breath] You’re correct. There’s no point in collecting a resource that will be constantly replenished. Thank you for your answer.

The way that they answer is so suddenly robotic, as if to mask the sheer terror they exude. I
didn’t know the bullets were weighing on their mind so heavily.

Chiyo: Right. That’s, uh, that’s what I was thinking. I don’t want you to stress yourself out over this.

Harai: I’m not stressing. I’m not trying to stress. I just want to do what’s best for everyone.

Chiyo: It really isn’t a problem! It’s something you were worried about, and that’s okay. I was worried about it, too, after you texted me. But I trust you enough to make a decision about bullets, Harai-san. You’re really capable! And you have good judgement, and I know you have good intentions, and-

Harai: Stop. Really, just- stop.

They grip their mask, chest heaving. I move towards them but they flinch away, seeming to draw even further into themselves.

Harai: Don’t say that. Don’t say any of that.


Harai: Yes! No! No, I don’t! Listen, I…

Harai: I’m not… I’m not exactly a person.

Chiyo: … What do you mean by that…?

Harai: [hastily] I meant, I’m not exactly a person you should look up to or anything like that. I just- I.

Harai’s knuckles are turning white.

Chiyo: Breathe, here, just breathe with me-

I raise a hand towards them and they flinch back so violently that the cabinet shakes with the impact.

Harai: *DON’T TOUCH ME.*

Chiyo: [eyes widen; jerks back hand] Oh my god. I didn’t mean to- Harai-san-

Harai: I- I’m sorry. I’m sorry you’re seeing this. Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about me. I’m just…

They sink to the floor, wrapping their arms around their knees. I crouch down next to them at a distance, making sure not to move too quickly.

Harai: [shaky] Remember- remember how Khalaf-san was talking about flashbacks, and about how- about how. How. You don’t need to, you don’t need to relive the specific. The.

Suddenly Harai freezes, pressing their mask so hard against their face that I’m not sure if they’re breathing, but they must be from how hard their shoulders shake with each strangled sob.

They don’t finish their sentence. They don’t have to.

I sit with them as their breath slows to a series of ragged gasps and then to something finally resembling evenness, sitting at a distance the whole while. It’s all I can do, to be here and just listen as they fall apart, unable to hold them, incapable of holding them like I would for Amal. What did Bazhanov do, when Everett had their episode? Grounding, right? Describing the situation and everything around us. Maybe that would help. It’s better than doing nothing.
Chiyo: … We’re in the weapons room.

Harai: I know. I know, I’m still here, I’m just- I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be like this. I shouldn’t even exist.

Chiyo: You have nothing to apologize for, Harai-san, and of course you should exist! I’m glad that you’re here, and that I met you.

Harai: [abrupt] I can’t believe that.

Chiyo: You don’t have to.

Harai: No, I mean, I literally can’t.

They pause, maybe trying to find the words.

Harai: I don’t know if I exist as a person sometimes. I’m not - well, I wasn’t allowed to be. When I was younger.

Harai: [shaky laugh] Oh, wow. I don’t think I’ve ever used the word “I” as much as I have in the past fifteen minutes than I have in my- maybe in my whole life. This is new.

Chiyo: That’s enormously concerning.

Harai: Yeah. Yeah, I’m just… having a hard time processing things. My dad…

Harai: Well. My dad is- is a lot.

Chiyo: … Oh my god, what did he DO to you?
Harai sits still, maybe in shock, and I scramble to correct myself.

Chiyo: Wait- wait, no, don’t answer that, you don’t need to say anything if you don’t want to. Especially after what just happened. You can talk when you’re ready, or maybe even not at all, and it’s okay no matter what you do.

Chiyo: But no matter what it was, I’m sorry that he did that to you. You didn’t deserve any of it.

Harai: [quietly] I don’t think I was ever enough for him.

Chiyo: But you’re enough for me, okay? And everyone else here. You’re enough for yourself, I think. You’re allowed to be your own person, Harai-san.

Harai: I’m not sure about that.

Chiyo: But I am. And whether or not you believe it, it’s still true. [shakes head] Don’t try to talk me out of this, it’s not something you can change. You’re good enough the way you are, Harai-san.

Harai: …

Harai: … I need some time to think.

Chiyo: Right, of course, do you want me to come with you? Where do you want to go?

Harai: I’m going back to my room. I need to take this stupid mask off for a while. Don’t follow me.

They stand up abruptly, but pause before they head for the door, and fidget with their mask only once more before dropping their hands to their sides.

Harai: I… I’m still not good at distinguishing feelings. But I think I appreciate it.
Harai: So thank you. For staying.

Chiyo: Take care of yourself.

Harai: I’ll try.

The door clicks shut and I can finally breathe again, sounding all too loud against the empty space. Harai…

…I don’t know if there’s anything I can do. And they said they wanted to be alone, but… you know what I want? I want to help. And I want to make sure that they can feel like a person entitled to their own life. Of course I’m going to give them space, but if I’m ever able to do more for them, I’m going to try.

And with that in mind, I stand up and head for the door. As soon as I reach for the knob, though, it opens; standing quite suddenly before me is Sumitama.

She raises her hand and takes a step back when she sees me, eyes wide.

Sumitama: Oh! I’m sorry!

Chiyo: No, no, it’s fine! Did I scare you?

Sumitama: S-sort of! A little… [eyes my hand] You’re not planning to murder me or anything, are you?

Chiyo: What? No! [shows empty hands] Would you like me to come outside?

Sumitama: Oh, er... could you, please?

I step out of the room, leaving the oppressive weight of all the weaponry behind. Sumitama’s eyes flick to over my shoulder even as I step out of the room, and I notice that she keeps about
a meter’s distance away anyway.

Chiyo: Is something wrong?

Sumitama: [pushes up glasses] What were you doing in the armory if not planning to kill someone?

Shoot. I don’t want to talk about finding the ammunition, I don’t want to talk about the files, and I DEFINITELY don’t want to talk about Harai’s breakdown! So that leaves… distracting her with a question! Maybe about my conversation with Kashizaki this morning! Two birds, one stone, right?

Chiyo: I could- I could ask you the same! What are YOU doing here?

… Not the question I was going to ask about, but that works too!


Sumitama: But I don’t mind hanging out with you, if you have time, geheheh. It feels like we never hang out anymore, Kumoshita-san!

Chiyo: R-right! Is there anything you wanted to do in particular?

Sumitama: Nothing in particular… There’s not exactly much to do in this mansion, is there?

Chiyo: No, not really. [looks around] Unless you’d like to watch a movie?

Sumitama: Ah, um… I’m not much of a movie person myself. Sorry about that.

Chiyo: Oh. Okay.
Sumitama: U-unless you really wanted to see one! Oh, gosh, I’m such a terrible person, I didn’t even consider your feelings!

Chiyo: What? No! There’s no need to apologize, we didn’t have anything formal planned.

Sumitama: Yeah, but… I made you upset, didn’t I? I feel really bad about this…

I wasn’t even upset, but… well, Sumitama seems really miserable. I try to pat her arm, careful not to be too awkward about it - after all, we haven’t spoken much before and we aren’t that close. Yet she leans into the contact a bit more than I was expecting, heaving a sigh.

Chiyo: Hey, don’t worry, okay? I’m not upset at all, I promise.

Sumitama: If you say so.

Chiyo: Yes, I’m saying so! I just replied with a little too much force, and I’m sorry for stressing you out. I don’t want to make YOU upset, okay?

Sumitama: You’re sure?

Chiyo: Of course! I just want to make sure you’re happy.

… That sounds an awful lot like what Ekyou says sometimes, but I’m going to pointedly give myself the benefit of the doubt!

Still, it seems to put Sumitama at ease. She steps away and sighs again, but makes no moves in any direction. We should probably move away from standing in front of the weapons room, to be honest.

Chiyo: So what did you want to do instead of a movie?
Sumitama: I don’t know. Do you have any ideas?

Chiyo: Not really, unless just walking around is okay with you? Actually, now that I think about it, I could really use something to eat.

Sumitama: So that means we have to go to the kitchen?

Chiyo: Unless you put snacks in your room?

Sumitama: … Fine. Let’s go.

Woah!! Her expression just got really closed off. Was it the jokey answer? Ugh, I knew I was just going to mess everything up. I shouldn’t have said anything.

… Again, that sounds a lot like what Ekyou says sometimes. I’m starting to worry.

I try to at least take a few steps in the appropriate direction before trying to start the conversation again. Sumitama follows, her pace a tad slower than I remember it, and she seems to be sulking…?

Chiyo: Is something wrong?

Sumitama: I’m just being weird. Why are you asking?

Chiyo: You didn’t seem all that thrilled to go to the kitchen, is all. Did Atsui-kun do something?

Sumitama: No! [pauses] Well, not to me, anyway.

Chiyo: Not to… you?
Sumitama: I-I mean, I... It’s more about the company he keeps.

Chiyo: Wait, does that refer to me??

Or maybe to Ekyou?? I shouldn’t talk about her, right?? That’s dangerous. That’s uncharted territory. To my surprise, Sumitama stops and faces me, though her eyes still skitter to the floor.

Sumitama: [sighs] Look. I don’t want to assume or anything, but, er...

Sumitama: Do you and Kashizaki-chan talk badly about me? Sometimes?

Chiyo: I...

... don’t want to lie, but.

Chiyo: She does, sometimes.

Sumitama: [mumbles] Oh, I knew it. Everyone hates me.

Chiyo: Everyone does NOT hate you. What about Ekyou-san?

Sumitama: She’s the only one who I can trust to care about me. E-even you admit that Kashizaki-san talks shit about me, and you’re like, her best friend! So you must not like me either!

Her eyes fill with tears. Oh god I fucked up.

Chiyo: Hey, no... Sumitama-san, I’m sorry, is there anything I can do to help you?

Sumitama: N-no, I’ll be okay, just... Ugh. I don’t know. Everything’s just been so hard lately and I don’t know when it’ll get better.
Sumitama: But it has to, right? That’s what the fairytales say. The poor princess ends up married and happy by the end of her suffering. [wipes eyes] That’s how… That’s how it works. That’s how it should work! Right?

Chiyo: [blinks] I, um…?

Chiyo: I haven’t exactly had a fairy-tale life, Sumitama-san. Or like, I wouldn’t know anything about princesses, exactly… But I agree that if you’ve gone through a lot, then you deserve some good fortune.

Sumitama: R-right. Like, um, a Princess Charming to sweep you off your feet!

Chiyo: Or a prince. Or something in between.

Sumitama: Yes, exactly! And I’m doing my best to make sure everyone loves me, or at least likes me, but then Kashizaki-san hates me for no reason and I know she’s making everyone else hate me too! Like Atsui-san, and Khalaf-san.

Sumitama: I just wish I knew why.

Chiyo: Kashizaki-san is, er. She’s frustrated with you, but it comes from a place of concern.

Sumitama: Really? [sniffs] Then, um, I wish she would say that. And help me. Instead of just talking bad about me.

Chiyo: Yeah! I think that’s something you should talk to her about yourself, though.

Sumitama: Can’t you do it? I’m scared of her, and again, I know she hates me, so I don’t know if she’d even treat me fairly if I spoke to her.

Chiyo: Huh? Uh… I could… try?
Sumitama smiles, and her smile is... well, it’s more of a flash than anything, and it looks more perfunctory than genuine. It’s not worth the extreme amount of discomfort I’m currently experiencing through this entire conversation, but it will probably have to do!

Admittedly, I have no idea what to make of this whole interaction. Yes, Sumitama seems like she’s in need, and I really want to help, and I REALLY feel bad that I’m not able to do anything that seems to affect her in a meaningful way, but the way she’s phrasing things sounds... odd. Does she even want to be helped, or does she want me to do everything for her? The least I can do is try to understand and support her, but... well, y’know what, I can see why Ekyou feels obligated to stick around her and help her with her every whim, what with all of this guilt tripping. I can’t imagine doing this all day, every day, without burning out. No wonder she’s desperate for company.

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), I don’t get much of a chance to do much of anything before we arrive at the kitchen. Truth be told, I’d barely registered that we were still walking. I pause to ask Sumitama something inane to change the topic but she pushes ahead with a resolve she hasn’t had since I met her in the hallway. Scary.

When all she sees is McRae at the table, still reading his book, she seems almost disappointed. I wave at him anyway and he lifts a hand in response.

Sumitama: Have you seen Atsui-san or Ekyou-chan?

McRae: All I’ve seen today is this book and the mountain of leftovers in the fridge. Atsui-kun is going on a cooking strike until we eat it all, by the way.

Chiyo: Oh. That makes sense. He’s been working himself too hard.

Sumitama: Mm, I guess... Do you have any idea where they might be?

Chiyo: [joking] I didn’t realize you were so anxious to get rid of me.

McRae: ...Why?

Sumitama: You know what we talked about, Kumoshita-san? I’m worried that she might talk to those people and think some things… about me. And about those other people.

Chiyo: Uh… alright.

I’m pretty sure that’s not her call to make. Anyway, Atsui and Kashizaki are nice people!... Or, Atsui is, anyway. Kashizaki’s just a bit blunt is all.

McRae: I have no fucking clue what either of you are talking about.

Sumitama: [stiffens] F-fine. I guess I can just leave, then, right?

McRae: I mean, sure, if you want to.

Chiyo: Wait, Sumitama-san, didn’t you want something to eat?

Sumitama: [haughtily] I can eat later, thank you very much. I’m gonna go look around for… people. Don’t come after me!

She turns around and marches toward the door, hesitating just a second before calling over her shoulder.

Sumitama: … Unless you want to!!

And then she’s gone. I look at McRae, who simply stares at his book, a blank expression on his face. Even though he doesn’t seem to have moved all day, he hasn’t gotten much farther in the book.

McRae: Ekyou-san’s in the movie theater with Khalaf-san, last I checked.
Chiyo: Wait, really? I thought they didn’t like each other!

McRae: [shrugs] Times are changing, I guess.

I guess it’s a good thing that Sumitama and I didn’t go to the theater after all. I’m a little surprised that Amal and Ekyou were even able to find anything to watch, though they might just have been sorting things out? Maybe I’ll follow up on that. Although, since we’re here…

Chiyo: [lowers voice] What do you think of her, anyway?

McRae: Ekyou-san?

Chiyo: Sumitama-san. Does she seem a little off to you?

McRae: Dunno. I haven’t spent enough time with her to really have an opinion on her either way. [turns page] I guess she’s nice enough. She seems rattled by this whole situation, though. Can’t say I blame her.

Chiyo: Right…

I guess that’s fair. That’s what I said this morning, anyway. It’s kind of weird how in just a few hours my opinion of her soured so quickly, but I guess that’s just how it goes?

McRae turns the page again. Maybe he’s reading faster than I thought and the book is just really long.

Chiyo: How have you been holding up in the past few days?

McRae: Managing.
Chiyo: Are you sure?

He marks his page and puts his book down, then turns to me with a flat glare. For just a moment, I’m reminded of another pair of green eyes.

McRae: Actually, I’ve been stuck here literally all day because executive dysfunction has been kicking my ass. I haven’t eaten despite sitting in the kitchen, ten feet away from the goddamn fridge, because I can’t figure out how to stand up, and I can barely even read this book!

McRae: Because guess what! I keep thinking about this whole killing game and about how my cousin - whom, again, I hadn’t spoken to for somewhere between five and eight years - happened to murder my friend and then die two days ago, in front of me, and every time I close my eyes I can see her as I failed to do ANYTHING to stop it.

McRae: So no. I’m not all that sure I’m doing okay.

I. YEAH, THAT’S ALSO FAIR.

Chiyo: I- that was insensitive of me to keep pressing, I’m sorry.

McRae: …

Sharply, he sighs and opens the book again. With the gesture, his anger seems to evaporate, replaced by that same sort of defeat that always lingers about him these days.

McRae: [shoulders slump] No, you know what, you’re fine. You’re just trying to help, and I get that. I just wish I weren’t so useless sometimes.

Chiyo: You aren’t- McRae-san, you aren’t useless.

McRae: Sure. Explain how I haven’t even eaten. That’s pretty important if you want to live.
Instead of answering that, I go to the fridge and pull something out at random to heat up. McRae looks up when I retrieve it from the microwave and set it on two separate plates, almost laughing when he actually sees it.

McRae: Pancakes for dinner?

Chiyo: Hey, I had fried rice for breakfast! This is just reversing the order! So…

I press a fork into his hand.

Chiyo: … Please?

McRae: I’ll try. No promises.

Bit by bit, the two of us get through our plates. Admittedly, these are starting to taste like clay, though I’m not sure if that’s because of me or if they’re genuinely bad. If they’re genuinely bad, though, I’m not sure how Atsui managed to keep his Ultimate title. So… it probably is just me. Agh.

At least it’s food, though, and McRae pushes his plate aside before I do. He looks a little confused as to how or why he managed to eat everything, but sighs and stands up. I think I hear his bones actually crack with the motion.

McRae: I’ll get your plate.

Chiyo: Huh? Oh, okay! Thank you!

I watch him bring the dishes to the sink and mechanically start to clean them off. What was it that he said earlier, about… executive dysfunction? I haven’t heard that term before, and it sounds pretty serious. I should probably ask him. In fact, I will!

This is of course assuming that within seconds he’s not already headed to the door, picking up his book on the way. Which he is. Dang.
McRae: I’m headed back to my room. Thanks for the food.

Chiyo: Anytime! And if you ever need anything, you can always text me, okay?

McRae: [hesitates] I’ll think about it. Thank you.

And he’s gone, taking with him my opportunity to ask. Although... maybe that’s a good thing? In all honesty, I don’t know how much more serious conversation I can handle today. Between the conversations with Kashizaki and then Sumitama, plus the whole thing with Harai, and the files - ah. I almost forgot about those. Yeah, it’s a good thing that I didn’t ask McRae anything. That can wait for another day.

All of this said, it’s probably a good idea to just call it a night already. I’m standing in front of my door when something moving in the atrium catches my eye. The flight or fight (MOSTLY FLIGHT) instinct kicks in, setting my heart beating faster in my chest, when I catch a second glimpse of... an eyepatch? What’s Bazhanov doing here? Doesn’t he usually spend time on the balcony these days?

Against my better judgement, I let myself into the room. He seems to be trying to prop up two cosmetic mirrors, an unlit candle between the panes. Where did he even get any of this? Judging by the weird jagged red motif on the mirrors, I guess they all came from the gachapon machine. Does he even have matches?

He’s so deep in concentration that he doesn’t even look up when I enter, though I can only assume that he’s actually heard me enter. Sure enough, he greets me when the door closes.

Bazhanov: Hi.

Chiyo: What are you doing?

Bazhanov: Fortune telling. Take a seat.
I do so with hesitation, sitting cross legged on the floor as he seemingly conjures a matchbook from nowhere.

Chiyo: What kind of fortune telling is this?

Bazhanov: There’s a superstition that the day after Christmas is the best day to foresee the future. If you’re a girl, you use this to predict what your husband looks like.

Bazhanov: I’m not sure if it’s anywhere near Christmas, and I’m not a girl, but we also don’t know if it’s NOT Christmas and I suppose I was a girl at one point so it’ll have to do. Now.

He lights the candle, angling the mirrors so I can see each reflect the other endlessly, the candle caught between them transformed into a marching line of little lights. Unfortunately, I’ve always been superstitious, so this is not doing wonders for my nerves.

Bazhanov: You need to look into the reflection of the mirror - you know how putting a mirror in front of a mirror causes some sort of endless paradox? In the dim, confused last square will be a coffin or a man. But everyone sees a man.

Bazhanov: … Or something like that. I haven’t actually done this before. Would you like to try?

Chiyo: Where does this tradition even come from?

Bazhanov: Dunno. My mom was super into it.

Chiyo: Wait, you have a family??

Bazhanov: You don’t?

Chiyo: Y- no- I mean, of course I have a family! It’s more like… you never seemed like the type, to, er…

Chiyo: Y… yeah! All of that, actually??

Bazhanov: Yes, well, only two of those are accurate. Guess which.

Chiyo: Uh.

Bazhanov: Wrong.

Guh.

Chiyo: It’s just odd to hear that you’re… related to people, I guess? And that you didn’t spring fully materialized from a flock of crows?

Bazhanov: Regrettably, no. As much as I would love to live life as a manga character, it’s not meant to be.

Bazhanov: But really. Are you going to look into your future or what?

Chiyo: Me? But you were setting this up before I even walked in!

Bazhanov: You’re the girl.

… He’s got me there.

I sigh and move a little to the left, watching the candlelit reflections spill out into half of an endless parade. It’s a little bit dizzying, to say the least, and I can definitely understand why this is a tradition. If it were the holiest night of the year, and Bazhanov and I were armed only with our wits and a candle against whatever ghosts might lurk in the darkness, who knows what I might see? Who’s to say that no wish can come true?
And I’m not sure if it’s still too light out or I’m not in a good mindset or it’s just not Christmas, but this really isn’t working for me. A minute later, I sit back, shaking my head to clear out the lights.

Bazhanov: What’d you see? A coffin?

Chiyo: Nothing. Just the candle.

Bazhanov: Hm.

Chiyo: What’s the fortune for that one?

Bazhanov: If you see the candle, then…

Bazhanov: …

Bazhanov: … You have functioning eyeballs.

Chiyo: That’s good to know. I mean, I can see you, so that’s a pretty good indicator already. But y’know! Always good to have a second opinion.

Bazhanov: You could always end up like me. Sad and lonely and in possession of one functional eyeball.

He half-laughs in that quiet way of his, the candlelight casting a warm glow on his face.

Bazhanov: But really, don’t worry about it. It just might not be dark enough. You could always try again later tonight if you’re REALLY curious. Perhaps after lights out.

Chiyo: What about you? Bazhanov-san, I saw you putting all of this together before I came in.
Does this fortune telling have another use?

Bazhanov: No, just the one.

Chiyo: So then… what was the point of all of this?

Bazhanov: You’re the one that keeps taking charge during trials, Chiyo. I’m sure you can figure it out.

Well, looking at the evidence: there’s the fact that Bazhanov insists on calling Sekisada a diminutive. The fact that he requests Sekisada to do the same, and that he doesn’t offer this opportunity to anyone else. The strange fondness in his smile yesterday.

The realization is like a shot to the head in its suddenness, intensity, and quite honestly, pain. There is absolutely no way that Sekisada would reciprocate Bazhanov’s feelings, even and especially after witnessing yesterday’s episode. And yet…

… Who am I to berate someone for falling in love?

Bazhanov: … Or, if you prefer, I was waiting for you specifically to walk through that door just so I could ask you about Amal.

Chiyo: Hey.

Bazhanov laughs to himself, an expression of wistful happiness creeping up on his face. He seems softer now than when I’ve talked to him before. Maybe that’s what being in love is all about. Maybe it’s something that I’m going through, too. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised - ever since I met Amal, I feel like I’ve been making a lot of progress towards being the person I want to be instead of wishing I could change. Of course, part of that might be the deaths putting life in perspective. Funny how that works, and how unfair to those that had to die for me to live on.

Chiyo: Hey, um, Bazhanov-san?
Bazhanov: Yes?

Chiyo: When you told me not to talk to you again… What did you mean by that?

Bazhanov: Oh, nothing bad. [shrugs] I just have an annoying habit of getting attached to people who act as if they mean well, then do nothing but hurt me at every turn. I didn’t want that to happen again.

I… wasn’t expecting such an honest answer. Bazhanov simply shrugs again at my lack of response, perhaps picking up on that.

Chiyo: I… see. Does that have anything to do with, um, with Sekisada-san…?

Bazhanov: [considers this] In a sense, sure. It’s easier for me to deal with people who don’t like me, because at least they’re honest with their opinions. And I can admire that in a person. More importantly, though…

Bazhanov: He likes birds. I like birds. What’s not to love?

Chiyo: Uh…

His entire personality, maybe. I probably shouldn’t comment on that.

Bazhanov: Mhm. [nods] No matter where this goes, though, I’m glad I met Senik. He’s got a good head on his shoulders. Even if he can be a little misguided at times.

Chiyo: I’m glad you can find things to admire about him! And that he’s a good friend to you.

Bazhanov: Thanks. [smiles] So am I.

Bazhanov: … Oh, and for the record, I still don’t entirely trust you. Especially not with how friendly you’ve become to the rest of the class. You might be hiding something, too.
Chiyo: Ah. [blinks] Um, that’s reasonable.

Bazhanov: But you’re free to consider me your friend. I don’t mind.

**Bazhanov keeps up his smile, and I can’t begin to express how much that means to me - how someone so determined not to trust people that offer him kindness feels safe enough to talk so frankly to me - when his expression falters quite suddenly. He leans down to the candle, eyes widening as it burns merrily away.**

Bazhanov: Ah, shit, this thing’s half gone already. I only have the one, and I still need to wait until the nighttime announcement.

**He blows out the candle in a short puff. The room feels a little darker without it, and I only now realize how late it’s gotten.**

Chiyo: Do you want to talk about anything else? If not, I’m probably going back to my room. I don’t like being outside during the nighttime hours.

Bazhanov: Hm? That’s fair. We all have good reason to be uneasy nowadays… But, no, I’ll be fine. Enjoy your night.

Chiyo: You too! And if you need anything while you’re here, let me know, okay?

Bazhanov: Of course. Good night.

Chiyo: G’night!!

**And, despite everything, I leave the room smiling.**

There’s not much else to do at this point, and frankly I’m not really feeling like doing anything else anyway so! Back to my room with me! Today has been emotionally exhausting
on a number of levels, but at least it ended on a decent enough note.

When I get back to my room, I open my Parchment to find a mass text and heave an internal sigh. So maybe not.

R. KASHIZAKI [20:22]:

Hey I wanna call a meeting tomorrow. Be there at breakfast for the morning announcement

I thought of something for us to do

Amendment. Atsuikun says you need to get your own food and he’s not cooking

But you better be there anyway

Or else

Thank you

I guess… at least Atsui can get people to eat more things from the fridge? And maybe I can talk to Kashizaki after about my conversation with Sumitama!

... Assuming, of course, she’s not mad at me! Which she might be! She probably is, actually! But with any luck I’ll talk to her in the morning and hopefully (???) smooth things over. Of course Sumitama is probably unhealthy to be around, but cutting her off from everyone entirely would be a terrible idea. Surely Kashizaki can see that, right?

Actually, it may be less of a matter of whether she can see it or whether she can accept it… sigh. That’s something to sort out tomorrow. When she talks about whatever it is she wants to talk about. “Something for us to do” isn’t very specific, and I just hope it’s not bad.

Until then, I guess I should try to get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found [here](#).

This was my designated literary shoutout chapter! I didn't do fangans because wow that'd be hard to explain in the context of "this fangan would be a book existing in the ASLH universe". It'd mean a lot to me if you'd check out the following works!
- Kill The Joker: Survival Game by galakei
- Kill the Joker: AnotheR Game by alcamoth
- RATS: 252 Chances at Redemption by kisikil
- The Beaumort Society by miserynovel
And if you're looking for fangans to read, I have some recommendations here as well!

Announcements!
- Fictober 2019 has been posted! This will be updated with a chapter a day (assuming I remember), skipping the ones with spoilers.
- Reminder that ASLH has a Discord server! I will not be posting a public link because I, too, fear death. Message me on Twitter, deviantART, or Tumblr if you'd like to be let in, but please don't be pushy if I say no! We've had some weird characters.
3-4: What I'd Do Not To Worry Like You

Chapter Summary

And miles to go before I sleep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I can barely make out the two people walking in front of me, one teal and the other vaguely yellow. The latter keeps playing with their hair, seemingly unsettled.

Teal: … You know, we need to bleach your hair even more if you wanted it pastel pink.

Yellow: I know.

Teal: … … And it was kind of a pain to do that the first time. You have a lot of hair.

Yellow: [groans] I knowww. I think I’m just gonna leave it like this. I look so UGLY.

Teal: You look like a princess or something. Maybe Rapunzel, with all that yellow hair.

Yellow: Quit teasing. [bumps Teal] At least there’s one good thing out of all of this. I have a new respect for you and YOUR hair dye, mister.

Teal: Haaa. It’s no big deal. Just happy to help.

Yellow: Thanks, geheh.

Teal pulls out a paper and looks at it for a moment.
Teal: So it says here we need… Wire cutters? [shakes head] She’s crazy. This is crazy.

Yellow: It might… It might be the only way to get XXXXX to stop. I- I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.

Teal: I don’t want anyone hurt, either. [mutters] And this looks like it might hurt XXXXX. [shoves paper away] … But whatever. Are you coming with?

Yellow: Yeah! Always!

… The two fade from sight. I didn’t realize I had stopped walking.

…

…

…

This time, waking up isn’t painful at all. The afterimages of the dream still dance in front of me, flashes of color popping in front of my eyes, and I almost bury myself under the covers to escape.

Ughhh I actually remembered that one. This sucks. This sucks!! Why does my hell brain like taunting me with visions of what could have been? Furthermore, why does my hell brain only unlock these things when I’m asleep? I feel like having any kind of memory of the past three years - or really, the outside world - would be ENORMOUSLY HELPFUL to figuring out our situation. Maybe I should keep a dream diary or something. Yeah, that might be helpful. Mental note to self to find some paper later.

Belatedly, I remember Sumitama’s first meltdown, the one about her hair, and choke back what’s either a laugh or a sob. Well! Guess that explains that one!

I try rubbing my eyes and going back to sleep before abruptly and unfortunately
remembering that I have a morning meeting to attend. That sucks too. Basically, everything sucks right now, but considering the whole situation I think that might be fair.

Still. I need to talk to Kashizaki whether I like it or not, so I get out of bed and walk to the kitchen, regrettably alone.

It seems I’ve actually woken up before just about everyone else, as the kitchen is still empty. I have plenty of time to make myself a sandwich as people walk into the room and the hour approaches eight. It’s not GOOD, but I am… admittedly getting tired of eating the same food, even if we DO need to eat it all eventually. This doesn’t stop Atsui from glaring at me and muttering something about leftovers. This is his own battle to fight.

Amal sits next to me too, though they seem more distracted than anything. They still casually pull me closer to them as they flick through their Parchment. And I’m still dying of glee over here, so that’s lovely.

The fact that people actually show up despite no promises of free food and the mere reason of Kashizaki’s word alone is really impressive. By the time she steps to the head of the table, I think everyone is actually accounted for.

Kashizaki: Okay, so since everyone’s here… wait. [squints] Everyone’s not here. Who’s missing?

Atsui: Oh, uh… I think Sumitama-san and Ekyou-san.

Chiyo: N-nothing happened to them, right?

Everett: Nah, they’re okay. Tsuki and I passed them on the way over.

Chisaki: Wait, wait, woah, since when do you call me Tsuki?

Everett: …Is that a bad thing?

Chisaki: [blushes] NO KEEP DOING THAT.
Atsui: Ew, PDA.

Chisaki: SHUT YOUR UP.

Everett: [pats Chisaki’s head] Sumitama-san said something about not feeling well and going to the atrium, and Ekyou-san went with her. She says sorry that she can’t make it, by the way.

McRae: Who, Sumitama-san?

Everett: Ekyou-san.

Kashizaki: [sighs] Figures. I’m not surprised. And what happened to Sekisada-san?

Bazhanov: [raises hand] Oh, he just didn’t show up because he doesn’t like talking to you.

Kashizaki: … [blinks] Okay, you know what, I’m not sure if I’m impressed that he has the balls to admit that or if I’m impressed that you have the balls to say that to my face.

Bazhanov: I wish.

**Alright, so actually three people are missing and I don’t know how to count. What else is new?**

Kashizaki: I guess… [sighs] I’ll just text them all later and tell them what happened. Okay? Okay. Cool, cool.

Kashizaki: We are gathered here today to-

Bazhanov: Mourn the loss of our loved ones.
Amal: [wincing] Uh...

Atsui: Hey, don’t be rude.

Bazhanov: It’s a joke. Gallows humor, right?

Everett: [frowning] I still don’t think now is the time for that.

Bazhanov: Ah. Sorry, I’ll stop.

Chisaki: [reverently] Holy shit, Rett-chan is magic.

Chiyo: So I’m not the only one that noticed that...

Everett: Noticed what?

Chiyo: N-nothing!

Harai: Can we please not and just get to the end of this. I want to do other things.

McRae: Like… what, investigating even more?

Harai: I want to understand the mysterious whims of minigolf.

Amal: Is that a joke? Since when do you play minigolf?

Bazhanov: Oh, I’m in.

McRae: Can I join too?
Harai: I’m beginning to regret revealing this information.

Kashizaki: If we can FOCUS HERE for five seconds, that would be really great. Please and thank you.

Atsui: If everyone shuts up I’ll make cookies.

Everyone shuts up. Whether or not Atsui will actually make cookies remains to be seen. Either way, Kashizaki is finally clear to speak; she clears her throat.

Kashizaki: So everyone and their mom in this mansion has been complaining since day one about how there’s nothing to do.

Kashizaki: Because there’s nothing. To do. At all.

Bazhanov: You’re just not looking hard enough for things to do.

Kashizaki: Well, you’re entertained as long as you have space to T-pose, so you don’t have grounds to talk.

Bazhanov mimes zipping his lips.

Kashizaki: The other complaint I’ve heard is that people don’t feel like they know each other well enough. I mean, come on, it’s been two entire weeks. You have no excuse not to know everyone in this building by this point!

Chisaki: I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to you individually, actually.

Kashizaki: [points] SEE. SEE EXACTLY.

Atsui: [raises hand] So what’s your suggestion?
McRae: Good question, audience plant.

Atsui: No, really, she didn’t tell me what’s going on. This is news to me too.

Kashizaki: Well, Atsui-kun, I’m glad you asked!

*She claps her hands together, deadly serious despite her declarations of having fun and bonding.*

Kashizaki: We should have a sleepover.

Amal: … A what?

McRae: Technically, a sleepover just involves us all sleeping in the same building… so every day here has been a sleepover.

Bazhanov: This is the worst slumber party ever.

Kashizaki: Alright, I won’t argue with that, but this one will be better. We can all hang out and have fun! No stress, no pressure, and everyone will be there.

Atsui: Have you ever been to a sleepover in your life?

Kashizaki: No. Has anyone in this room?

Atsui raises his hand. When he sees that no one else has their hand raised, he slowly puts it down.

Atsui: Okay, but just so you know, they’re a lot of work, and also whatever you think it’s going to be is probably wrong. When did you plan on having it?
Kashizaki: Uh. Tonight?

Atsui: [nods] Yep, not happening. And is EVERYONE invited?

Kashizaki: Yes, EVERYONE.

Atsui: EVERYONE everyone, or the people here everyone.

Kashizaki: EVERYONE EVERYONE.

Atsui: … Are you sure about that? Because EVERYONE-

Everett: [hurriedly] We get it, we get it. Everyone is invited. What’s so important about the sleepover that everyone comes, anyway?

Kashizaki shoots Atsui a meaningful glance, and the pieces fall into place. A sleepover where everyone has to come and talk to people... that’s a perfect way to both give Ekyou some breathing room and to keep an eye on Sumitama. Plus, hopefully it can take our minds off of everything that’s happening! I haven’t been to a sleepover before, but if popular culture is anything to by, it’s going to be eventful.

Everett: Eh, whatever. I’m sure it’ll be fun if everyone’s there.

Chiyo: I’m in!

Amal: Sure.

Kashizaki: Great! So… when do you think we should have it?

Atsui: Oh my god. Just do it tomorrow night or something.
Kashizaki: Tomorrow night! Thank you.

Bazhanov: I’ll let Senik know. No promises that he’ll actually show up, though.

Kashizaki: Oh! Oh, cool. Could someone please let Ekyou-san and Sumitama-san know as well?

Chisaki: I-

Kashizaki: ACTUALLY ON SECOND THOUGHT, I think I’ll talk to them myself. Any questions and/or objections? No? Lovely. Thanks team! Dismissed.

Harai: Question.

Kashizaki: Dammit.

Harai: What exactly are we supposed to DO during this sleepover?

Kashizaki: Play games?

Harai: … Such as?

Kashizaki: I dunno. Truth or dare. Two truths and a lie.

Chiyo: Could we also do some other game that has nothing to do with truths?

Kashizaki: Uno.

Chiyo: I changed my mind.
Harai: And if we *don’t* want to play games?

Kashizaki: Uh… I can paint nails! I guess.

Harai: And if we don’t want THAT?

Kashizaki: Fuck, I don’t know, YOU come up with something! Don’t one-man kabuki plays exist??

Harai: …

Bazhanov: [whistles] Sister snapped on that one.

Amal: [strained] Please not you too.

Harai: I…

Chiyo: Um, Kashizaki-chan…

Kashizaki: Yeah?

Chiyo: Maybe, uh, be a little less-

Harai: I’ll do it.

**Their voice suddenly has the same determination as it did yesterday in the armory. I throw a panicked glance in Kashizaki’s direction, but she doesn’t seem to pick up on it. Oh my god, what did she just do??**
Chiyo: I don’t think-


SOMEHOW I DOUBT THAT.

Before anyone else can contribute to the situation, Harai somehow gets to the door with their usual food in hand. They simply cock their head in my direction before leaving without another word.

Atsui: So, hey, just wondering, but what the hell was that?


Kashizaki: Huh? Oh. Oh, you’re leaving. Take care, have fun, be there tomorrow.


McRae, then Bazhanov, then Everett and Chisaki leave the room in turn. I catch Kashizaki on the shoulder as Atsui heads to the sink and turns on the faucet. Apparently, his cooking strike doesn’t extend to dishes.

Chiyo: Hey, um, Kashizaki-chan...

Kashizaki: [cooly] Kumoshita-chan. Is something wrong?

Chiyo: I wanted to talk to you. About Sumitama-san.

Kashizaki: Right. Take a seat.
I do so, though Atsui’s very presence makes this a little awkward. As if on cue, he starts
whistling a jaunty and extremely off-key tune, almost to drown our conversation out. It seems
to be working; I can barely hear myself think.

Kashizaki: So did you talk to her or something?

Chiyo: Yesterday.

Kashizaki: And? What did you think?

Chiyo: I think…

Chiyo: …

Chiyo: … I think you’re… still wrong?

Kashizaki: Ah.

Chiyo: W-which isn’t to say TOTALLY wrong or anything! I absolutely agree that she’s unhealthy
to be around, but she also sounds a lot like she needs help, too.

Kashizaki: But you see my point. That Ekyou-san shouldn’t feel obligated to stick with her.

Chiyo: Well, not if she doesn’t want to. But I definitely noticed that a lot of what Sumitama-san
says seems like it’s designed to make people feel bad for her, so…

Kashizaki: Mhm. And if people are aware of it, then they will know to avoid her. Which is why
the sleepover is a perfect idea.

I don’t… I don’t THINK Kashizaki hates me?? I like to think we are friends???. But she sure
seems dead set on this helping Ekyou thing… sigh.
Chiyo: It sounds like it’ll be fun, yeah.

Atsui: Speaking of which, where are we having this, again?

Kashizaki: The… downstairs living room? Maybe?

Atsui: Well, that’s super dirty, so someone’s gonna have to clean it all up. At LEAST move things around so they’re not in the way. And dust, for heaven’s sake.

Kashizaki: I’ll… work on that.

Chiyo: I can see if anyone’s interested in helping out!

Kashizaki: Kumoshita-chan, you are a lifesaver. Thank you so much.

Chiyo: Yeah! It’s no problem! And…

Chiyo: I understand the intentions behind what you’re doing, with trying to make sure Ekyou-san doesn’t get cut off from everyone. I just don’t want Sumitama-san to be cut off at the same time.

Kashizaki: …

Kashizaki: [sighs] You have a point. I’ll think on it.

Atsui looks over quickly at the two of us but says nothing. Kashizaki stands up, though, and heads to the door as soon as Amal walks in. She grabs them by the elbow and drags them with her.

Amal: What are we doing in here?
Kashizaki: Leaving. You’re coming with me.

Amal: What? Why?

Kashizaki: I have social politics to balance for tomorrow night and I trust you to help out with that. So. You’re helping me now.

Amal: ...Hooray?

Kashizaki: Duh. Come on.

The two leave, Amal flashing a quick wave in my direction as they depart. That just reminds me to check in with them after yesterday’s incident in the library, and then the incident in the weapons room…

... Agh. Right. I’d almost forgotten about the ammunition thing. That’s still unsettling, though a gunshot would definitely be one of the worst ways to kill someone in this setting. There would be too much noise, so a killer would have to leave the scene quickly - why am I thinking about this?? How am I able to think about this without getting nauseous?? Am I just desensitized to all of this violence? That’s sad.

But I’d better not think about all of that too hard before I say something in front of Atsui. As it stands, he’s too busy wiping his hands off on his apron to notice.

Atsui: Dude, holy shit, I can’t believe you got Kashizaki-san to admit she’s wrong.

Chiyo: [caught off guard] A-and??

Atsui: And nothing. I’m just saying, that doesn’t happen very often, so savor it.

Chiyo: I’ll try…
Although, based upon how she reacts to making minor mistakes, maybe making her actively uncomfortable isn’t something to be proud of.

Chiyo: What are you doing after this?

Atsui: Just taking inventory of the food that we have. I figure it’s a good idea to see what I have to work with.

Chiyo: [innocent] Why, are you going to bake cookies?

The light drains from his face. I guess he totally forgot about his no-longer-empty promise.

Atsui: [grumbles] I walked into that one. I’ll see what I can do.


Atsui: Why do you ask, anyway? [wide-eyed] Were you going to ask me to help you clean?

… And it looks like I forgot about my no-longer-empty promise, too! Atsui ducks, still snickering, as I reach out to swat him.

Atsui: Maybe find Chisaki-san and Everett-san. They seem like the helpful type.

Chiyo: Oh, good idea! Maybe Harai-san will be there, too.

Atsui: Ah. Yeah, maybe.

Chiyo: Is something wrong?

Atsui: Oh, nah. It’s just kinda weird to me that they went from so closed off to so social in about two weeks. And, like, no one’s ever seen their face. It’s been two weeks. So like, I trust them but I
I don’t really trust them.

Chiyo: Oh.

Honestly, that checks out. I feel like if I hadn’t been trying as hard as I am to make sure that they’re included in the group, I would distrust Harai as well. And their mask… I can’t say they don’t have their reasons. But from Atsui’s perspective, it’s probably kind of scary that they haven’t taken it off in all this time.

Atsui: [flaps hand] But it’s whatever, if you think they’re cool to hang out with, then it’s none of my business. Besides, I know the key to their heart, and it’s cake. So long as we still have strawberry shortcake ingredients, I am in no danger.

Chiyo: Smart thinking.

Atsui: Indeed. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think we’ve both got work to do.

Chiyo: Yep. See you around?

He just flaps his hand at me again and turns to the pantry while I take my leave of the kitchen. Y’know, I haven’t really acknowledged this much, but it’s pretty cool that we vibe so well. That’s the power of trans rights, I guess. I feel like we got closer! But that’s also a weird benchmark to keep track of!

Luckily for me and my no-longer-empty promise of cleaning up the downstairs living room, Chisaki and Everett are quite quickly found. They both sit on one of the lounge couches despite all the empty space around them, Chisaki almost tucked into Everett’s side as the two discuss something or other. Wouldn’t it make more sense for them to be facing each other and talking…? Oh well.

Mysteriously, Harai isn’t with them. Three people are still better than one, though, so I approach them anyway.

Chiyo: Hey! Do you guys have a minute?
Everett: [deadpan] If you’re trying to recruit me to a cult, I’m not interested.

Chiyo: Do cults usually involve cleaning?

Chisaki: Ugh, now I’m REALLY not interested.

Everett: Don’t be rude, Tsuki. Did you need something, Kumoshita-chan?

Chiyo: Yeah, actually! I was going to clean up downstairs so it’s actually inhabitable, and I could use some help. Unless you two are busy…?

Everett nods and stands up, leaving Chisaki to whine on the couch before following suit. She still plants her face squarely in Everett’s shoulder, though.

Everett: We’re good to go. [flashes a thumbs up]

Chisaki: Myaaargh.

Everett: [pats Chisaki’s shoulder] She is, too.

Chiyo: I didn’t know you were fluent in Chisaki-chan.

Everett: It’s a gift.

They flash a grin at me, and the two of us start walking to the staircase. Once Chisaki seems to realize that she’ll fall over if she doesn’t move, she follows along, still grumbling.

Chisaki: Rett-chan I didn’t wanna mooove.
Everett: Well, what were we going to do then? Just sit there for the rest of eternity?

Chisaki: Yeah. You’re warm.

*Everett just laughs and ruffles Chisaki’s hair. Chisaki folds her arms and huffs a bit but doesn’t look altogether too bothered. They’re so casual with each other that I’m a little surprised. When did they have the time to talk so much?*

...Now that I think about it, I hadn’t actually seen the two of them for some time after the second trial. So... maybe I just never picked up on it. Which seems likely. I know I can be kind of oblivious.

Still, and I’m like the last person who should be saying this, after all the teasing I suffer through about my relationship status, but... They’d be cute together.

Chisaki: Yo, Kumo-chan, is something wrong? You’ve got a dopey grin on your face.

Everett: I think she’s thinking about Khalaf-kun.

Chiyo: What? No!!

**CASE IN POINT.**

Chiyo: I’m just thinking about... you guys! And how happy I am that we’re friends!!

Chisaki: [eyes shining] Omigosh, really? That’s…

Chisaki: [deadpan] Cheesy as fuck.

Chiyo: Hey!
Everett: Tsuki. Don’t be mean. [to me] But yeah that’s cheesy as fuck.

Chiyo: [deep breath] Okay! Thank you, Everett-chan, for that vote of confidence.

I know Chisaki well enough by now to immediately recognize that she’s joking, but I didn’t realize Everett has been enabling her lately. Guess they really HAVE been spending a lot of time together.

Chisaki: Naw, but really, Kumo-chan, I’m glad we’re friends too. Even when you drag us out to do work.

Everett: Speaking of which…

We look out at the vast swath of foyer before us. It’s dull. It’s deserted. It’s dank, but not in the fun way. Even if this location was a flash decision, I’m sure Kashizaki could have come up with a better place. Like the upstairs sitting room - no, wait, the fireplace is always burning and no one would be able to sleep. Or the dining room - wait. Bates. Nope, not going down that rabbit hole again! I did that several times in the past few days!!

Ugh… I guess this really was the only option. It’s less than ideal, to say the least.

Everett: We’re sleeping on the floor, right? Do you know where we can find cleaning supplies?

Chiyo: Uh… well, most of the room is carpeted. Unless there’s a vacuum cleaner, I don’t know how much cleaning we can actually do for the floor.

Chisaki: We can dust?

Everett: We can dust. I’m pretty sure I saw some cleaning supplies in the kitchen upstairs, I’ll go grab them!

Everett runs back upstairs, almost effortlessly. Whoever they might have been before, holy geez they aren’t kidding about being athletic. Chisaki stares after them for a moment, too,
before facing me.

Chisaki: I’m gay.

Her wisdom dispensed, she tugs at her arm bandages a little tighter and starts clearing the area of some fallen lightbulbs. I follow suit until Everett comes back with the cleaning supplies.

As it turns out, there IS a handheld vacuum cleaner, which is good because I’m not sure where the outlets are in this foyer. In fact, are there even outlets anywhere in this mansion? Besides the kitchen. Oh, but there must be some upstairs, because the speakers in the music room would need to be plugged in… Is the downstairs area just an older wing of the mansion? I feel like I’d need to ask Harai about that. Speaking of whom.

Chiyō: So where’s Harai-san today?

Chisaki: Dunno. Haven’t seen them since the meeting this morning.

Everett: I’m assuming they’re working on their performance? I don’t think they have a sharp enough memory to retain an entire skit from before this, especially if they’re the only performer.

Chiyō: Don’t you have several piano songs memorized?

Everett: Apparently? [shrugs] I feel like that’s different, though. The ones I played were only like seven minutes long.

Chisaki: “Only” seven minutes, they say. “Only”.

Everett: Some concertos get up to half an hour or even longer, so yeah, only.

Chisaki: So is the lovely and talented Rett-chan perhaps going to perform one of her “only” seven minute long pieces tomorrow?
Everett: [unbothered] Nope. The piano’s too far away. No can do.

Chiyo: Oh, speaking of things to do, that reminds me…

Chisaki: [gasps] Do you secretly know how to tap dance? I knew it.

Chiyo: What? Uh, I can try??

Chisaki: I’m holding you to that.

Dammit.

Chiyo: Do either of you have any ideas about what else we’ll do tomorrow? Aside from the board games and everything else.

Everett: I dunno. I’m kinda digging what we have planned already.

Chisaki: No!! You’re not allowed near the Scrabble board again!!

Everett: Ugh, fine. I guess Kashizaki-san’s nail art sounds pretty cool, too. She specializes in acrylics, right? I’ve always thought those were neat.

Chisaki: Really? They always seemed too flimsy for me. I’d be so worried about breaking them.

Everett: I mean, me too, but when am I ever going to get the chance to get my nails done by the literal Ultimate Nail Artist?

Chisaki: Truuue. [nods] It sounds like fun! What do you think, Kumo-chan?

Chiyo: Eheh… I don’t, um. I don’t really care about makeup, honestly.
Chisaki: Props to that. [nods solemnly] It’s too expensive for me, too.

Chiyo: It’s… not really a money issue, it’s more…

… Ugh. I don’t know how to explain it. Or how I’d even begin to explain it, really. As Everett watches me, she shakes her head quickly, as if to dismiss the thought before I even have to try.

Everett: It’s not a big deal, anyway! You shouldn’t have to cake your face in powders in order for society to accept you, anyway.

Chisaki: Fuck beauty standards! You’re perfect the way you are!!


The thing is, it’s not even a money issue. And it’s not about me being uncomfortable with the way I look, even though dysphoria still comes to bite me if I stay up too late.

It’s more like… Being a girl is pretty hard when everyone tells you that you have to be a girl in the way that society deems is normal. Beauty standards, fashion sense, all of it. And this all especially goes double for me. If I’m not enough of a girl in the way that people think I need to be, then maybe people will be able to expose me as… well, as who I am. And it’s not like I hate myself or anything!! It’s just that I just want to… exist, sometimes?

I’m ready to say all of this and so much more to just try and justify my existence, but in just three or four sentences, Everett and Chisaki have completely dispelled whatever doubts I’d have about their accepting me.

Gosh, I’m lucky to have the friends I do.

Everett: Kumoshita-san? Is everything okay?
Chiyo: I just- I’m fine. Thinking about how much I love you guys.

Chisaki: Aw, Kumo-chan, we love you too! That’s still super cheesy, though.

Chiyo: I’m serious this time!

Chisaki: It’s still cheese fucking fondue!!

Chiyo: Guh.

Everett: But if it’s bothering you that much, we can go look for other things to do, too. Like… mini golf!

Chisaki: Yeah. [to me] Apparently Rett-chan and Rai-san had a terrible time yesterday.

Everett: Oh, hush, I’m getting the hang of it.

Chiyo: Wasn’t there a movie theater, actually? That could be interesting to look at!

Everett: Oh, that’s right! Were there any movies, though…?

Chiyo: I guess I can check. I think we’re done here anyway.

Everett: Mind if I join you?

Chiyo: Huh? [blinks] Yeah, that’s fine!

Chisaki: Ooh! Me too!
Everett: Tsuki…

Chisaki: Yesss?

Everett: I actually, um. Wanted to talk to Kumoshita-san alone for a moment.

Chisaki: Oh.

Everett: Yeah.

Chiyo: Huh?

Everett: …

Everett’s expression doesn’t change. Chisaki mock sighs and drapes a dramatic arm across her face.

Chisaki: Fiiine. I’ll put everything away while you guys are off having a CONVERSATION and BEING MEANINGFUL.

Everett: Okay, you can't do this to me, you had her for an entire day a few days ago.

Chiyo: I’m also right here, you know! Listening to you two argue about talking to me!

Everett: How about you start heading towards the theater? I’ll catch up.

Chiyo: If- If you’re sure??

Everett: Of course!
They wave me off and get to work with Chisaki to take everything upstairs. I try to take a few steps in their direction but Chisaki hisses at me so sharply that I pretty much immediately reconsider and turn the other way.

It’s much easier for me to navigate the library after having been there a few times, so it doesn’t take long for me to get to the theater. As the door shuts behind me, all I can do is wonder and stare at the flickering screen.

The longer I wait, the emptier the room seems, and my heart picks up its pace in my chest. What did Everett even want to talk to ME about?? Since when have we had anything TO talk about?? I can’t help but glance at the curtain and the sledgehammer tucked behind it. If Everett knows it’s there, then she might… She might…

No! She’s not going to kill me! She’s my friend! I trust her… I don’t really trust her. Not after that incident with the bow. Not after the thing with the couch. I’ve asked myself this time and time again, but who IS Aster Everett? And do they truly mean me - and the rest of us - no harm? Do they have a choice in the matter?

And the door opens again, nearly blinding me with the library’s light. Everett themself steps in through the door, blinking as their eyes adjust to the darkness.

Everett: Kumoshita-san? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.

And for just a second, something clicks.

Chiyo: I… You…

Everett: …?

Chiyo: I think… I know… you?

Everett: … Of course you do. I’m right in front of you.
Chiyo: N-no, I mean, like… I recognize you from somewhere before. I think I- this is going to sound really weird, but I’m pretty sure I had a dream about you at some point?

Everett: … Huh.

Chiyo: I-I mean, I’ve been having all these weird dreams about, like, our time at Hope’s Peak? I think? Or some kind of school, anyway, but I can never really remember who’s in them or what they’re doing. But I’ve also been having these kind of surreal nightmares, too…

And for some reason, I’m pretty sure that Everett… might actually be from the latter.

I don’t think I should tell her that.

Chiyo: Have you been having any dreams?

Everett: Yeah. [tired laugh] But mine are nothing like yours, trust me.

Chiyo: What are they about?

Everett: You’re sensitive to violence, right? You really don’t want to know.

Chiyo: Right… If you need anything, let me know, okay?

Everett: Haha, thanks. I appreciate it.

Everett: [brushes back hair] That’s… actually what I was meaning to ask you about, actually. If you’re holding up okay, after the second trial and all.

Chiyo: Oh. Um…

Well, knowing that is MUCH preferable to the possibility of Everett bludgeoning me with a
sledgehammer. Which, in retrospect, would be stupid anyway. Chisaki knows where I am, and if I were to go missing, that would pretty much implicate Everett on the spot. But... am I really doing okay?

Chiyo: I don’t... know. I guess I’m... getting used to it.

Everett: Mm. [presses lips together] You’re not, er, handling Bates and Murdock’s passing away... poorly?

I...

...

... I don’t think I feel as bad as I should. They’re gone. Four people are dead. Yet all I can summon when I think about them, instead of some sort of destructive grief or hopelessness, is just... a void. A sort of numb regret that I hadn’t been able to do more, and that I’m going to have to move on. I mean, some days, I don’t even think about the people we’ve lost.

Is this what I was scared of all these years? Not that grief would destroy me, but that I, too, would forget the people I love after they die? That time crawls on, erasing even those most precious memories?

Chiyo: ... [mumbles] I don’t think I loved them enough to miss them.

Everett: Yeah. I think it’s a proximity thing.

Chiyo: N-no, it’s like...

It’s... it’s... It’s just so frustrating that I know exactly what I want to say, but can’t force it out. All I can do is gesture meaninglessly, almost to grasp at words I can’t articulate, hoping desperately that the fragments I’m stuttering make any degree of sense to the person before me. Everett only watches me for a second, eyes softening as she takes my hands in hers and holds them still. Unlike Amal’s hands, hers are rough sandpaper against my fingers, and I nearly yank them away before forcing myself to relax.
It’s almost painful.

Everett: You don’t have to explain anything, Kumoshita-san. I’m sorry for bringing it up.

Chiyo: [strained] It’s- it’s fine. Please let go.

She drops her hands and I let mine go back to my sides. I try to keep them there as I keep talking.

Chiyo: … I don’t know how to feel about any of this. Or all of it, really.

Everett: Oh, same. [hesitates] I don’t think it’s going to get any better for you while this game is going on, though…

Chiyo: Mm. Can we please stop talking about this?

Everett: Yeah! Yeah, that’s fine. So… movies, right?

Chiyo: Right. Movies.

As I catch my breath, Everett crosses to the projector and inspects it for a moment before crouching down to a cabinet. She opens it to reveal a collection of discs. Most of them are movies I recognize from my childhood, but some of them look even older. She holds up one triumphantly.

Everett: Tada! Movies.

Chiyo: Oh, good! Sorry, I didn’t even notice that cabinet.

Everett: Nah, s’all good. I didn’t either.
She puts the disc back and stands back up. And again, despite myself, I can’t help but look to the curtain and the sledgehammer. I still heavily doubt she knows about it, but if she found the cabinet that quickly…

Everett: Is something wrong?

Chiyo: N-no! Nothing! You’re fine!

I need to get out of here. Not that Everett is a bad person or anything, just… If I’m in here any longer, overthinking and suffocating, I might say something I regret.

Everett: … Would you like to go outside?

Chiyo: Please.

She nods and opens the door. I somehow make it back through the library to the hallway, with only a moment’s pause before Everett follows. All she does is watch me as I catch my breath.

Everett: Um, everything okay?

Chiyo: Yeah. Yeah, I think so.

Everett: Right… Take all the time you need.

Chiyo: … [laughs] I don’t know how you do it.

Everett: How I do what?

Chiyo: How does none of this bother you? You don’t know a single thing about your past, and
you’ve still got all of these nightmares and- and other things to deal with, and you aren’t curious at all.

Chiyo: It’s…

It’s terrifying.

Chiyo: It’s very strong-willed of you, I guess.

Everett: Is it? [taps chin] I don’t really see it as that big of a deal. I think it’s more important that I do things with my life now instead of getting all tied up with the person I used to be.

Chiyo: I guess… [frowns] I guess I can respect that? Still, with the bow and all… Wouldn’t it be dangerous not to know anything about that? Or where it came from?

Everett: Kumoshita-chan, is it alright if I’m honest with you for a moment?

Everett: But I don’t really want to know why I’m like this.

Chiyo: What?

Everett: Think about it. I’ve been having horrible nightmares. I have really bad reactions to sudden movement. Drawing that bow… [shudders] It felt more right than anything else I’ve ever done in all my time here. It was wrong. And I…

She drops off for a moment, expression falling slack.

Everett: So it’s probably more dangerous to know who - or what - I was before I woke up here.

Everett: Is that so much to ask for? To just be normal?
Chiyo: I…

Chiyo: No. Of course not. It’s your decision to make. Thank you for letting me know.

Chiyo: [half-laugh] To be honest, that just makes me think you’re even stronger for it. If it were me, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from looking for it. Especially because of Sekisada-san…

Everett: Honestly, if you or anyone else goes looking for it, I can’t really stop you. What with Sekisada-san being right there and everything.

Chiyo: I’m just worried that he did something to hurt you.

Everett: Him? Hurt me? Are you kidding me? I could snap his neck with my bare hands.

Everett: … Not that I’d want to or anything, of course, but you know. It’s always an option.

Chiyo: There’s a lot of other ways to hurt someone.

Everett: Yeesh… [wincing] That’s a good point, too. And I appreciate that you’re looking out for me, anyway. You’ve got my permission to investigate if it’s what your heart desires. Just don’t tell me anything. I don’t want to know.

Chiyo: I-if you’re sure?? I don’t want to invade your privacy or anything.

Everett: [shrugs] It’s not my privacy, it’s that of the person I was before. I want nothing to do with them. I’m good with whatever.

That’s… surprisingly a lot more apathetic of an attitude than I expected from her.

Chiyo: I’ll keep it in mind.
Everett: Yep. Have fun, dude. [tired thumbs-up]

Before the two of us can keep talking, the game room door opens. Chisaki pokes her head out.

Chisaki: Oh, you’re back. Cool.

Everett: Oh! Hey, Tsuki, what’s up?

*Her demeanor almost immediately shifts. I only wish I were that good at compartmentalizing. Actually, maybe I don’t.*

Chisaki: We’re playing billiards! Wanna join?

Chiyo: You and who else?

McRae pokes his head out from behind Chisaki and waves.

McRae: I’m winning.

Chisaki: Yeah, because I have one hand and it’s REALLY hard to play billiards with one hand.

McRae: I’m sorry. We can go back to poker if you want.

Chisaki: NO.

Everett: I’ll play for Tsuki. Prepare to die.

Chisaki: YES! The playing field is unbalanced in the other direction now! Take that, McRae-kun!
McRae: [deadpan] Oh no. What have I done.

Everett: Kumoshita-chan, will you be sticking around?

Frankly, I think I’ve had more than enough bonding time with Everett for one day.

Chiyo: I think I’m good! I need to, um. Think about life a bit!

Chisaki: [nods solemnly] It do be like that.

Everett: Yeah, it’s no problem! Take care, okay?

McRae: Have fun.

Chiyo: You too! To all of that, I guess.

As soon as Everett closes the door behind them, I waste no time in getting out of the hallway and back up the stairs. They’re nice and all, and honestly they’re not even confusing in themself, but every time I talk to them I think I end up walking away with more questions than I had before. Like… way more.

And I still don’t know if they even know about the sledgehammer! Or what it’s even DOING there to begin with. It’d at least make sense if it were in the armory or something, but… A movie theater?? Unless I need to use the sledgehammer to break the glass and go outside? Which makes sense, I guess, but I also feel like Caliban would yell at me if I did that.

I head upstairs and take a deep breath at the top. Even though I’ve been out of the movie theater for at least half an hour by this point, I can’t shake the suffocating panic that’s set in. Maybe it’d help to go to the balcony...?

Curiously I can make out piano music; this time, it’s a rolling and heavy cadence. I frown a bit as the song plays out - didn’t Everett stay downstairs? - but the longer I listen to the piece the less it sounds like their playing. While Everett played with passion, it was also very
unpolished and rough, and they stumble over notes when playing at high speeds. This? It’s practiced, yes, but also almost… robotic? It’s as if the person playing isn’t playing to make music so much as to hone a skill.

Maybe it shouldn’t surprise me to see Sekisada at the piano, eyes half closed as his fingers glide across the keyboard. Honestly speaking, though, it partially does? I hadn’t actually considered the fact that he might have hobbies, let alone that he pursued them until he was good at them. Vaguely, I remember some statement that Everett made about asking him if he could play piano. Apparently the answer is yes.

Even though he doesn’t play with emotion, the piece is lovely on its own - something quiet and contemplative, so the lack of feeling doesn’t really dull the vibe. Yet as the song progresses and he settles into the movement, each chord starts to resound in a heartbreaking sort of way. Though the piece is somber, by the end of it, Sekisada seems to be pouring his heart into each note.

When I burst into polite applause, he flinches suddenly, eyes snapping open.

Sekisada: Wh- whuh?! [turns head quickly] Who- How long were you there for?!

Chiyo: Ack!! Uh, about three minutes??

Sekisada: Oh. [deflates] Alright then.

Chiyo: That sounded really good! Are you going to play tomorrow or something?

Sekisada: Huh? I mean, only if someone wants me to. I guess.

Chiyo: Cool! I guess!

Mmmm it is SO hard to be civil. I am TRYING but I think it’s a little too obvious. Sekisada must notice, too, because he heaves a short sigh and flashes a sullen look in my general direction.
Sekisada: Did you need something, or.

I shake my head but don’t move. He doesn’t react for a moment, and just pauses before launching into another song. This one is much more emotional than the first, and while it’s obviously rougher - a lot less polished and with a lot more pauses - the sheer power rippling through the piece is palpable. It’s the kind of piece that’s starkly lonely and awe inspiring at once, and I don’t even think he’s looking at the music in front of him. Actually, this isn’t even the same piece as the one on the stand. I’m admittedly jealous.

Chiyo: How long have you been playing piano?

Sekisada: Since I got back from my grandparents’. It kills time. [frowns] I haven’t been playing for a few years, though…

Chiyo: What? You play really well, I can’t tell the difference.

Sekisada: Yeah, well. I have a lot of free time on my hands. Really, though, it leaves a lot to be desired. This is the first time I’ve played in, what, two years? Maybe more.

Chiyo: If you can recall that much about playing after a two year gap, that’s really impressive. Maybe that’s your true calling.

Sekisada: [rolls eyes] I’m no Ultimate-level pianist. That’s some other story. I fill seats. I’m not good for much else.

He drops his hands from the keys, letting the last notes fade to whispers, and then to silence.

Sekisada: Seriously, Kumoshita-san, what do you want? You hate me. You wouldn’t have stayed this long if you didn’t want something from me.

Chiyo: Oh. Am I that transparent?
Sekisada: I kind of hate you, too. I’m working on it - I know you heard my conversation with Bazhanov-san, Lyosha, whatever - but I still don’t really like any of you.

Chiyo: Except Everett-chan.

Sekisada: [clicks tongue] Ah ah ah, and Lyosha.

Chiyo: I... see. And I guess I understand that. Sort of.

Sekisada: You don’t. Believe me, you don’t.

Chiyo: [miffed] I said “sort of”, didn’t I?

I dust off one of the velvet chairs and take a seat. I’m pretty sure that soft whoosh I heard was the wind, but if it’s a sigh from Sekisada I’m not going to be surprised.

Chiyo: I don’t really know what I want from you, though. I heard music, so I came up.

Sekisada: Hm. Alright.

Chiyo: Although, now that I think about it, and now that we’re on the topic… There was something I’ve been a little curious about. And it doesn’t really make sense...


That in and of itself is enough to catch me off guard.

Chiyo: Wh- whuh - no, but?? What ABOUT him??

Sekisada: [reddens] Oh. Nothing really, I’m just curious. I don’t know why he still hangs out with me, honestly. He’s too good for me and we both know it.
Chiyo: Y-yeah, but…

Candles! Mirrors! Fortune telling! Wait, did Bazhanov end up seeing anything last night? I'll have to ask him. But not with Sekisada around!!

Sekisada: [raises eyebrow] Something wrong?

Chiyo: I, uh… that's a secret!

Sekisada: Why is the answer to “is something wrong” a secret? [shakes head] Whatever. What DID you want to ask, then?

Ugh. I’m not sure if I SHOULD be asking, but she said it’s okay, right…?

Chiyo: If you were friends with Everett…

Sekisada: Ah, great. Here we go again.

Chiyo: If you were friends with Everett, why don’t you even want to talk to them? I mean, I understand that it would be awkward, since you remember them and they don’t remember you. But surely you want to reconnect, right?

Sekisada: It’s better that we don’t. I’m dangerous.

And though he doesn’t face me, his shoulders stiffen as if he’s said something that he shouldn’t. I peer to his side, but all I can catch of his expression is a mask of clouded panic.

Chiyo: Care to elaborate?

Sekisada: ...
He lets out a short shudder of a breath.

Sekisada: Alright. Okay. Just give me a second, I don't know where to begin.

Chiyo: Take your time.

I’m honestly surprised he said yes at all. He traces his fingers along the piano keys for a moment, then two, apparently weighing what words to say.

Sekisada: Picture this: two kids in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do. What are our options, here?

Chiyo: … Talking?

Sekisada: The fuck are two six year olds going to talk about? No, we ran around in the woods unsupervised like a pair of hooligans. Which I guess we were, sort of.

Chiyo: Oh. That makes more sense.

Sekisada: She liked doing more daring stuff like climbing trees and stuff. I was the coward that sat at the bottom of the tree and complained about breaking my neck.

I don’t like where this is going.

Sekisada: Anyway. So I mentioned that I lived with my grandparents until I was eight or nine, right?

Chiyo: I remember that, yes.

Sekisada: Ever wonder why I left?
... Oh.

Sekisada: So, some background. Her parents taught English - I mentioned that last time. The thing is, no one really wanted to make a new class for the two toddlers in the town, so we were homeschooled. After whatever we did that day for class, we’d go and have fun for the rest of the day and not show up until sunset. You’re still with me, right?

Chiyo: Yes. Don’t tell me something went wrong.

Sekisada: Something went wrong.

Chiyo: Fantastic.

Sekisada: Specifically, a bear.

Chiyo: A WHAT.

Sekisada: A bear. A black bear. We were too far from home to call for help, and it didn’t see us but we saw it, and... well.

Sekisada: ...

Sekisada: … I did mention I’m a bit of a coward, didn’t I.

It takes me a second to process the implications there.

Chiyo: You... you didn’t leave her, did you??

Sekisada closes his eyes. It’s all the response I need.
Neither of us speak for a moment until Sekisada takes a deep breath, closes the piano, and starts again.

Sekisada: So, I ran. I panicked, and I pushed her, and she hit her head, and I ran until I had the good sense to actually go back for her, and thank God she wasn’t dead. I don’t know what I would have done if she was.

Sekisada: Somehow, we made it home. I didn’t know if she remembered what I did to— to her, and I didn’t want to know. I still don’t. I made the call to my parents that night and demanded to go to Tokyo, and so it was. I just couldn’t face her, after everything I did. I never wanted to see her again.

Sekisada: … And then we woke up here two weeks ago.

What scares me more than what he’s saying is how vulnerable he sounds, so finally stripped of all his self-deprecating bravado. The person in front of me now is so much less than a man, for an instant becoming the child he sought to outrun.

Sekisada: [low] I was a shitty little kid, Kumoshita-san, and now I’m a shitty adult who has to,
quite literally, look his mistakes in the eye every day. I WISH I could give Everett the answers they’re looking for, but what am I gonna tell them? That I fucked up their life? That I fucked up everyone else’s?

Chiyo: Don’t say that about yourself.

Sekisada: Oh, Kumoshita-san. I regret to inform you that I am the bane of each and every one of your existences.

Chiyo: No, you’re not. It’s more that you’re-

Sekisada: Useless? I think that’s a better term for it, myself. [taps chin] Or rather, it’s less that I’m useless as I don’t really trust myself to do anything. [shrugs] It’s better this way, trust me. I hurt a lot less people.

Chiyo: Sekisada-san, could you please shut up and let me finish?

He doesn’t respond, only staring at the piano before him. I take that as a sign to continue.

Chiyo: You keep talking about how you’re a bad person and how you’re going to hurt everyone. And how you’re pathetic, and spineless, and a coward, and whatever else you want to say about yourself.

Chiyo: But… bad people don’t usually realize they’re doing bad.

Snippets of Sumitama’s clinging desperation and Murdock’s perfectionistic indifference flood my mind. I try to push them aside, but they linger on anyway.

Chiyo: You’re aware of what you’ve done wrong, which is more than what most people can say. And you want to make things right with the class - I heard your conversation with Bazhanov-san. You’re on the right track.

Chiyo: I don’t know what I can do to convince you that you haven’t done anything to anyone else. You’re definitely not the reason we’ve been falling apart, that’s on whoever organized this killing
game to begin with. All I can say is that most of the problems I have with you are with your attitude, not your morals. But for what it’s worth...

Chiyo: I think, at this point, if you’ve hurt anyone, and REALLY hurt them… You have the power to fix things. And I trust you to.

Chiyo: You’re not a bad person, Sekisada-san.

Sekisada: …

Something shifts in his expression as he turns to me, all the defenses he usually puts up folding in on themselves until all that’s left before me is someone who looks… well, tired. Which makes sense given the fact that he has insomnia and all, but his exhaustion seems like it carries to a much deeper level. And I think I understand that. To be faced with the person you used to care for so deeply and screwed up on, only to find that they don’t remember the person they were before, let alone who you are… That’s a heavy load to carry for two weeks, especially alone.

But as he stares at me, there’s a quiet relief in his eyes that makes me feel as if I’ve done so much more than share his burden.

Sekisada: Thank you. I think- I think you just cleared up a lot for me. I can’t even begin to get into it all, but thank you. Thank you so much.

Sekisada: There’s… well, there’s a lot that I need to set right. And I need to make sure that I can make up for everything I’ve done. Somehow.

Chiyo: With Everett-chan?

All he gives me is a wan smile.

Sekisada: Something like that, sure.
Chiyo: If you need anything, you can talk to me, okay? I’ll be happy to help you out!

Sekisada: Mm. I don’t want you to stretch yourself too thin, though. I think I can handle it myself.

Chiyo: Still. It’s really hard to get through life by yourself. And I don’t want you making any stupid decisions.

Sekisada: Yeah. Yeah, right. I’m just… thinking about some things. I’ve got a lot to consider right now.

Chiyo: Such as?

Sekisada: Nunya.

Chiyo: … Nunya what?


Chiyo: Heeey. I’m pretty sure I heard that one before.

Sekisada: Oh, you know it.

For once, his smirk isn’t laced with contempt or whatever it is that he seems to hold for me. It fades quickly, though, to a look of quiet contemplation.

Sekisada: … Y’know… I’ve been thinking.

Chiyo: About what?

Sekisada: Eh. [shrugs] Hope. Despair. What does any of it matter? Why do we need to care about changing the world, for better or for worse? We’re pretty much just kids.
Chiyo: … I don’t… [furrows brow] I don’t follow?

Sekisada: [shakes head] Ah, never mind. I’m really tired.

Chiyo: Don’t you just, not sleep?

Sekisada: That’s not how insomnia works, dumbass. If I didn’t sleep ever I would be dead by now.

… He raises a good point.

Sekisada: I fall asleep EVENTUALLY, it just takes a while. And also I’m kind of tired and cranky most of the time.

Chiyo: Wow, really. I never would have guessed.

Sekisada: Oh, hush. But whatever. I probably just need a nap. I’m going back to my room.

And so it is. Sekisada stands up, gently lowering the piano cover. He flashes me a last glance before he leaves the room.

Sekisada: Thanks again.

Chiyo: I didn’t do anything. You’re the one who has the power to change things.


And he closes the door behind him without a single trace of anger.

...I actually think that was the single most civil conversation I’ve ever had with that guy.
Wow.

Oh! I almost forgot what I meant to come all the way here for, wasn’t I going to go outside? Right. Better do that.

I step onto the balcony and take a few deep breaths. Already, I can feel the knot in my chest start to unravel as the wind blows through my hair. No wonder Bazhanov spends so much time out here. Just standing out here is reminding me of how good it is to be outside, not breathing the same air over and over. And, weirdly enough after the whole conversation with Sekisada, I feel… at peace.

It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.

I don’t know how long I’ve been standing outside when I finally decide to come in, but it’s definitely starting to get dark. I’m a little surprised that Bazhanov or Sekisada didn’t come back to spend time here, but that’s just how it is, I guess.

After grabbing dinner (still leftovers, but with the added bonus of two trays of chocolate chip cookies), I end up wandering around. I guess I really don’t know what to do with myself if I’m not with someone else, huh.

For a moment I consider investigating the upstairs library to see if Amal’s notes are still around and, if so, whether I can throw them into the fire before someone else sees them. Unfortunately, I’m pretty sure someone else got there first. Though I scour the room for any spare letters or scraps of paper, they’re all gone. I mean, technically, that’s fortunate since the end goal would be “keeping people from reading Amal’s very personal writing”, but at the same time that kind of robs me of something to do. In the end, I grab a random book off of a shelf and leave. Maybe I can read somewhere.

I make my way to the meeting room and… well, I never quite get around to opening the book because who else might be in the room taking a nap on the couch but Amal themself, their head dangling off the end because of how tall they are and their hair fanned out beneath them.

…
I’m having deja vu.

Amal: … ?

I don’t get a chance to flee the room before Amal wakes up and stretches. They fumble with their glasses but eventually manage to jam them on their face and blink at me upside-down, their hair falling across their face in a tangled mess.

Amal: … Chiyo?

Oh god they’re adorable. Oh god they’re adorable and I’m going to die.

Chiyo: H-hi! I was just, um, looking for somewhere to read, and uh, the meeting room was well-lit, and I- I’m sorry if I woke you up??

Amal: What? No, it’s fine. You’re like, the person I’d want to wake up to anyway, so…

Chiyo: … Oh!


Chiyo: No, no, it’s fine! [points to couch] Do you mind if I sit here, or…?

Amal sits up and scoots over, looking dazed. Which, honestly, makes perfect sense because of their head position and all. Doesn’t that hurt, to have all the blood go to your head for who knows how long? I sit down next to them at a distance that I HOPE is respectful while still being friendly. Chisaki looked super comfortable tucked into Everett this morning and while I’d love to ask to do that I doubt my poor heart can take it.

Amal: [nods at book] So what are you reading?

Chiyo: This? Uh… I have no idea, actually! I just grabbed it randomly.
I look down at the book that I stole. Apparently, it’s some kind of… poetry collection? And not one of the kiddie ones, too, but an entire anthology with English and Japanese translations. Once again, I think to question the weird Eurocentrism of this mansion before sighing.

Amal must catch my confusion, for they hold out a hand for the book. As they flip through the pages, their expression softens.

Amal: Oh, I know some of these. My foster parents… well, really just Aunt Serena, she reads poetry to Uncle Jacques all the time. It’s really cute.

Chiyo: Aww, that’s so sweet. [rests chin on hand] I love poetry! Lately, I’ve been writing it more than I read it, though…

Amal: You write poetry?

Chiyo: Yeah! That’s, er, kind of what a cellphone novel is.

Amal: Oh. [blinks] I, uh, didn’t know that?

Chiyo: Did… did you think I was writing entire novels this whole time?

Amal: I mean, yeah, sort of?? I guess I just assumed that you wrote entire novel-length stories on your phone, which sounded impressive but kind of weird for a talent??

Chiyo: Oh! That’s… a valid interpretation, I guess? If I did that, though, I think my thumbs would fall off.

Amal: No kidding. Still, it’s really impressive that you’ve gotten as far as you have. I hate creative writing.

Chiyo: Really? I thought you like reading?
Amal: Reading is one thing. Writing is another.

Chiyo: I mean… well, true. I think your writing is really good though!

Amal: Chiyo, you haven’t even seen my writing before.

Chiyo: Yeah, but I like you.

Amal: … Really?

Chiyo: [blushes] As- as a person! You’re uh, one of my best friends! Probably my best friend! And I know you’re an Ultimate too, so I’m sure you’re an amazing writer!

Amal: [reaches for hat, seems to realize it’s not there] Oh. Oh, right, we’re- yes, that’s right. You’re my best friend, too. I haven’t seen your writing, either, but I know it’s lovely, because you wrote it, and…

They shake their head suddenly. Since they don’t have their hat with them, it’s intensely obvious how deeply they’re blushing right now. In fact, it’s intensely obvious how deeply my failed attempt at saving my true feelings affected them. In fact… hey. Hey wait a minute.

…

… AND I THOUGHT MY CRUSH WAS BAD, HUH.

Amal: Nevermind. Have you seen this anthology before?

Chiyo: Oh, uh, no. Like I said, I just pulled it randomly.

Amal: Right. Um. Well- well, one of my favorites is in here, or part of it, so…
Amal: …

Amal: Would you like me to read it to you?

Chiyo: WOULD I??

Amal: Would you??

Chiyo: Would I- [catches self] Yeah! I mean, if you want, I would love that!

Amal just smiles and checks the table of contents. They’re remarkably quick with paging through the tome to find what they want. I’d probably be fiddling with the damn thing for ages.

… Why am I in love with the way that a person reads a book?? That’s like, about as cliche as it gets.

Amal: Er. Here we go… “The White Rose”, by John Boyle O’Reilly. He was a Victorian era poet from Ireland.

I settle into the couch as they adjust their glasses and… well, they read.

Amal: “The red rose whispers of passion, and the white rose breathes of love; o, the red rose is a falcon, and the white rose is a…” This feels wildly inappropriate for our circumstances. “The white rose is a dove.”

Chiyo: Oof, yeah. [wincses] I don’t think O’Reilly-shi specified which specific dove, if it makes you feel better?

Amal: Yeah. Ariel is going to come out of nowhere and berate us for reading things about doves out loud.
They pause. In fact, we both pause, maybe anticipating our good old host to actually show up. Thankfully, he does not.

Chiyo: That’s a really pretty poem, though! I can see why you like it, it’s really soft.

Amal: Uh, there’s more. I didn’t, um. I didn’t finish.

Chiyo: … Oh!

Amal: But if you don’t want to hear the rest of it that’s fine too! I realize it’s a little weird to be reading poetry, and… And, uh.

Chiyo: No, I want to hear the rest of it!

Amal: You sure you don’t want to just read it yourself? I can give you the book back if you want it.

Chiyo: Amal, you mentioned that this poem was one of your favorites. And you have a wonderful voice. Please read it.

Amal: … Gh. Alright.

Amal: … “But I send you a cream-white rosebud…” [mutters] Oh god. [normal volume] “With a flush on its petal tips…”

It hits me, maybe WAY too late, that this is a-

Amal: [almost whispering] “For the love that is purest and sweetest has a kiss of desire on the lips.”
… It’s a love poem. I’m a goner.

Amal: [deer in the headlights expression] I, uh… I just think. I just think it’s neat.

Chiyo: Is- is that one of the poems that your foster parents read each other?

Amal: Yeah. Yeah, Aunt Serena says it’s- she met Uncle Jacques in speech and debate team in high school. And he sucked at it. But he read it and she fell in love with him like on the spot or something like that. It’s… really sweet. So I like it a lot.

Amal: And that’s why I’m reading it to you. That, and… and no other reason. Yeah.

They sound like they’re trying to convince themself instead of me. I think I’m trying to convince myself of their true intent, too.

Chiyo: That’s really adorable! It’s a good poem, and it’s… It’s really nice! That you have such a cute story attached to it!

SUDDENLY I CANNOT SPEAK. WONDERFUL.

Chiyo: It… really is a pretty poem, too. Something about the difference between types of love in it, conveyed so simply… It’s very tender.

Amal: [nods] Right. And the fact that, um, love is often… uh. Touched by… longing. And desire. And stuff.

Chiyo: Yeah!

Amal looks away quickly as I’m SURE my face is bright scarlet and that I’m doing a terrible job of hiding my crush. Thankfully they do not call me out on this, nor do they call me out on my sudden inability to speak coherently, and just flip back to the front of the book. Presumably to kill me with more poetry.
So that’s probably not a good thing, actually.

Amal: [frowns] There’s another poet I know in here. I don’t think I know the poems in the book, though…

Chiyo: What’s the first one, then?

**Hopefully it’s not as sappy as the first. I don’t know how much more of this I can take and how long I can fight off my own hell brain falling for them.**

Amal: It’s called “Echo”. Let me just find it…

Amal: [pages through] …

Chiyo: Everything alright?

Amal: Huh? Yeah, it’s just… I don’t know if this is nice enough to read to you.

**Their eyes widen, perhaps realizing what they just said.**

Amal: I-I mean. The quality of the work is… It’s good! It’s just not something I really want to, uh… It’s not the type of message I want you to get. It’s kind of depressing. Not to say that, um, I want to read you anything specific. It’s, uh…

**I quite honestly want nothing more than to take their face between my hands right now and tell them it’s fine but also I realize that would be enormously bold and probably just a terrible idea by all accounts! So I will do one part of that!!**

Chiyo: You don’t- you don’t have to read it if you don’t want to, of course, but you mentioned that this was a poet you recognized, so I’m definitely curious!

Amal: Alright. If you’re sure. But this in no way reflects what I think of you, or- or whatever we
Wh. What is THAT supposed to mean.

Amal: Ahem... “Come to me in the silence of the night; come in the speaking silence of a dream; come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright as sunlight on a stream”...

I don’t know what they were worried about. This is really standard poetry fare. But as they read the next lines, their voice falters, then drops.

Amal: “Come back in tears” ... “O memory, hope, love of finished years.”

Chiyo: Oh. Oh wow.

Amal: Uh, it gets worse.

Chiyo: That’s okay! Not all poetry is happy, and not reading it just because it’s sad blocks off a whole range of human emotion!

Amal: [mutter] Yeah, but the reason I wanted to read you poetry is because- y’know what, never mind.

Chiyo: It’s art!

Amal: Debatable. [clears throat] “O dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter sweet, whose wakening should have been in Paradise, where souls brimful of love abide and meet; where thirsting longing eyes watch the slow door, that opening, letting in, lets out no more.”

To counteract how admittedly depressing this poem is, I focus instead on Amal’s voice as it rises and falls. Earlier, when they were reading the rose poem, their recitation was full of stutters and stammers - which, to be fair, I would have been too. The poem was soft and loving, yes, but perhaps too much so - I’m sure their nerves were shot through reading it. Mine were shot through listening to it.
Amal: “Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live my very life again though cold in death…”

But this poem is a lot more solemn and grounded, melancholic as it may be, and Amal’s tone is much more respectful of it. They speak slowly and softly, pausing at all the right moments, almost savoring each syllable. It’s like listening to a song, really.

Amal: “Come back to me in dreams, that I may give pulse for pulse, breath for breath…”

I wonder if they’d go into music, or if they’ve ever considered it.

Amal: “Speak low, lean low, as long ago, my love, how long ago!”

And yep, there it is. As soon as they mention the phrase “my love” they look even more determined to melt into the couch. It’s kind of adorable, actually.

Amal: … So. Uh.

Chiyo: That was kind of depressing.

Amal: Tell me about it. [sighs and closes book] I’m sorry, her other work is really good.

Chiyo: What? No, it’s good! It’s just also sad. Those aren’t the same things.

Amal: I mean, if you say so. I just prefer…

Chiyo: [grinning] Love poems?

Amal: [deadpan] Ha ha. Very funny.
Amal: I just would rather read something sweet, you know? The world is cold enough as it is. I want to lose myself in a kinder world, not something that reminds me of how rough real life can be.

Chiyo: But I’m not wrong, then?

Amal: … No, you’re not.

Amal laughs, but look instead at the book in their hands, a slight frown tugging at their eyes. If not for their expression, I could almost forget how cruel their life has been to them.

I think… I think, if I were not myself, and instead the brightest, prettiest, best person on Earth, I would… I would do everything I could to show them, again, how much gentler the world can can be. And in fact, regardless of who I am now and given the constraints of our situation, it’s already what I want most.

Of course, they deserve a relationship that can’t end in a heartbeat. I know they like me, and I know I like them, but the fact of the matter is that it just isn’t possible to have a real shot of love in the middle of a killing game. They could- I could die tomorrow and leave them devastated for who knows how long, and that just wouldn’t be fair to them.

But wouldn’t it be nice?

I take the book from them, taking care not to touch their hands. They don’t resist, watching me idly as I flip through the small volume.

Chiyo: Who was that poet? I want to see what else they’ve written.

Amal: Subhanallah, you’re just trying to make me sad, aren’t you.

Chiyo: What? No! I’m not doing that on purpose after you just said that you didn’t want to hear anything sad! I’m trying to see if they wrote anything happier!

Amal: Why??
Chiyo: So I can read it to you, obviously??

Amal gently places their head in their hands. A good minute or two later, they still haven’t raised their face from their palms, which thankfully gives me plenty of time to flip to the back and look up the author - Christina Rossetti, also known as apparently some other Victorian poet. I page to one of her other poems and give it a quick glance over. Amal has good taste.

Chiyo: Okay, this one’s called “Monna Innominata”. It’s, um, from a sequence apparently! But the other two parts aren’t in this book.

Amal: [muffled] I’m dying.

Chiyo: No! Don’t die!! I need to read you this poem!!

Amal: Augh.

Chiyo: I… I guess I’ll start reading then!

Amal: Please.

Chiyo: Right… Um…

**Oh wow suddenly I’m self-conscious. Alright.**

Chiyo: “I wish I could remember that first day, first hour, first moment of your meeting me.”

Chiyo: “If bright or dim the season, it might be Summer or Winter for aught I can say; so unrecorded did it slip away, so blind was I to see and to foresee, so dull to mark the budding of my tree that would not blossom for many a May.”
Though I try to keep my eyes on the text, I can’t help but cast a glance towards Amal. For the barest moment, our eyes meet, and then they look away as quickly as they looked over.

Chiyo: “If”... “If I only I could recollect it, such a day of days! I let it come and go as traceless as a thaw of bygone snow; it seemed to mean so little, meant so much…”

I don’t realize how close I’ve gotten to them, so close that I can feel their body heat next to mine. I can barely force the last lines of the poem out of my throat.

Chiyo: “If only now I could recall that touch, first touch of hand in hand - Did one but know!”

This time, when they look up, they hold my gaze.

Amal: … Wasn’t it in here?

Chiyo: When we first woke up, right?

Amal: [nods] But... I don’t think that’s right, you know.

Chiyo: What do you mean?

Amal: That wasn’t the first time we met. It can’t have been.

Amal: [hurriedly] We’ve met before, in those three years we’re missing, and I- I just know, okay? That we were… We could be… You know?

Chiyo: … Yeah. Yeah, I think I... I think I know.

And my heart leaps in my throat, and I feel electric pulses in my fingertips, and I’m suddenly and acutely aware of just how close their face is to mine. All I can see is their face, the way their hair curls just a bit at the ends and lightens to gold, and the light catching on their glasses, and their eyes, their eyes, their eyes-
Amal: Would you…

Amal: Would you like to…

Chiyo: I-

And the lights go out.

I don’t have time to panic before there’s a quick whiff of motion in front of my face and suddenly we’re a mess of elbows and knees as the two of us scramble in the darkness. And all too quickly, they fall away from me in the void and I cry out, reaching out blindly-

Amal: SHIT.

And there’s a thud opposite my head, and all I can sense is my heart racing in my chest until they speak up again. I nearly faint on the spot when I hear their voice. The couch is- it’s double sided. They just fell over the side onto the other side. How silly of me to think I’d lost them.

Still, it takes me too long to catch my breath, and for them to catch theirs.

Chiyo: [tentative] Are you okay?

Amal: Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine, I just- I didn’t realize it was- it was so late. I’m sorry.

Chiyo: N-no, it’s okay! You’re fine! I didn’t realize either!

Chiyo: It’s just, uh… What we were talking about. Um…

Amal: You know- you know what, talk to me about it some other time, it’s late and I don’t- I don’t
I don’t say what I’m thinking and I don’t see Amal’s expression, but I can hear the panic creeping in.

Amal: No! I don’t regret whatever this is, I don’t regret you, I just- I need time. To think about what I want to say. Okay?

Chiyo: Yeah! Yeah, that’s- that’s fine. I think I need that too, just don’t- don’t do anything reckless, okay? I l-

Amal: Don’t say it. Don’t say that yet, please don’t say it.

Chiyo: … I won’t, if you don’t want me to. But I do, okay? I… care about you. Very deeply. And that won’t change whether or not I say it.

Amal: I- I know. And that’s what I- what I really, really like about you. Thank you for- for being here.

There’s silence for a long time.

Chiyo: … I don’t really want to leave.

Amal: We could just… stay like this. The couch is comfortable.

Chiyo: Like you know, huh?

Amal: Like we both know, yeah. Considering we woke up in this room and- and everything.
Chiyo: Yeah… Gosh, that was a long time ago.

Amal: It’s only been a week and a half. But it feels like so much longer, since… well.

Yeah. Well.

But all of it - the killing game, the deaths, our pasts and what lies ahead - all of it seems so distant and so frail compared to me, and to the person across from me, and to whatever there is between us. It’s only in these moments that I’m finally able to forget the circumstances that brought us to this mansion, and that I’m able to find peace. I can only hope that Amal feels the same. And, well…

I think they do. And somehow that’s more terrifying than the alternative. But we’ll get through it together, right? Starting tomorrow.

Tomorrow, when Kashizaki has her party. Tomorrow, when Harai presents their play. Tomorrow, when we can all just forget our troubles for a little while longer.

But for now, there’s only us.

Chiyo: … [murmurs] I’m glad I met you.

As I slip into a slumber that looks the same as the darkness around us, I just barely make out the response.

Amal: I’m glad that I met you, too.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found here.

Please check out the original poems! I butchered their structure in order for them to fit organically into the dialogue, but as any literature student will tell you, you really do need to look at their structure to truly appreciate them.
1. "The White Rose", John Boyle O'Reilly
2. "Echo", Christina Rossetti
3. "Monna Innominata (I wish I could remember)", Christina Rossetti
3-5: What I'd Do Not To Worry Like You

Chapter Summary

You told me not to be like anybody else...

Chapter Notes

Lots of things to comment on today! First, thank you for 100+ kudos!! Feels kind of like a dream - I could have sworn it was just yesterday that I started writing ASLH. Nope, it was about a year ago that I started writing the prologue, and just about 8 months ago that I started posting. Feels short, huh? In any case, I couldn’t have gotten as far as I have without your support, so thank you all so much for enjoying ASLH!

In addition, I've updated Ariel and Caliban's designs! You can check them out in the profiles chapter (0-X)! I'm planning to retcon the prologue CG, but currently don't have time for it, so STAY TUNED??

Also, it’s Chiyo's birthday today (12/12)! This is actually complete coincidence, I planned out all my birthdays at the beginning of last year with no rhyme or reason as to how they'd line up with the posting schedule, so this is a welcome surprise. Happy birthday, darling!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing you think when you wake up, heart slamming against your ribs, is how stupid it all is. How you’re still tormented by all the things you could have, should have, would have done if only you were brave enough to take that step forward. How you’re stuck here now, powerless as you were five years ago to save the people around you. How you’re not even sure if you want to save people, anymore, if they’ll all be lost in the end.

For a moment, almost instinctively, you consider reaching over the couch to ask for help, or for reassurance, or for anything, really, as long as you’re able to talk to someone about something that isn’t this. But you dismiss that as immediately and unconsciously as it came up. The second thing you think (or rather, have the coherency to put together) is that you shouldn’t bother Chiyo with that and just try to go back to sleep on your own.

She stirs anyway; she can hear your thoughts racing. Or maybe she’s driven by something else. Whatever the reason, you hear her before you see her come around the side of the couch and makes room for herself next to you, eyes still shut as she settles her arms around your shoulders. Perhaps this is supposed to be soothing. All it does is make your heart pound even harder until you’re sure she has to let go from the vibration, but her breathing slows until she’s back asleep.
Something kind of like jealousy stabs at you. What must it be like, to be so naturally in sync with someone that you can just adjust to what they need while you sleep? Not even you can figure out these subtle things about her, and you’re the one who keeps seeing her face in your dreams.

... And she doesn’t remember. You know she doesn’t remember what you used to be to her. What she used to be to you. Which only makes her so much harder to bear. You got close last night, with that half a confession, but you ruined it. You HAD to ruin it, because she has no idea how much she means to you and quite honestly, it scares you to think of what might happen to her or to you if you went any further than the careful balance you have now.

But still she betrays the both of you with how easily she’s worked her way into your heart as if she’d always belonged there (which she does) (but you don’t really want to face that). Your heart betrays you further when she tucks her head into your shoulder, the light in your chest skipping only a beat before slowing enough that your eyes drift shut. This can’t last. You know one will lose the other eventually, so becoming anything more than the other’s missing half will break you irrevocably.

You betray yourself, too, just a little, in hoping that she wakes up first.

...

...

...

For the first time in what feels like forever, I actually sleep well. It’s... odd, to say the least, that I’d sleep so much better on a couch instead of in my own bed. Maybe it’s not so much the location as the company I’m with, though. Except if anything I think that would make me more anxious? Considering, y’know, I almost asked them out last night. On complete impulse. They almost 100%, for certain, think I’m an absolute loser.

I sit up and look over at the other side of the couch to find...

... Hey, when did I get to this side? I’m pretty sure I fell asleep facing the door, but now I’m against the wall? Did I roll all the way over the barrier in the middle last night?
Maybe someone put me here, but I have no idea why they’d do that. Would Amal have done that? Truth be told, I’m not sure if they have the arm strength. Also, more relevantly, I don’t know what purpose putting me here would even serve. So… what gives, I guess!

It’s not like they’re in the room to talk to about this, I realize with a soft pang of regret. Since when have they been sleeping so lightly? Since when have I been sleeping so deeply, really? Not that I’m complaining.

Only after I stand up to leave the room do I notice the hat on the floor. Vaguely, I recall something falling off my chest when I sat up, so I guess… this was… it…?? I have half a mind to put it on my head but just bring it to my face instead, breathing in something like pencil shavings and sweat and whatever the hell kind of Amal Khalaf’s shampoo probably smells like.

Holy shit, I am a goner.

I end up stuffing the hat in my bag and heading out of the room, only stopping to grab my medicine from my room and downing it with tap water. All things considered, I… really am not sure what I’d do if I ran into someone. Apparently I’d been sleeping deeply enough to get onto the other side of this couch and somehow not notice, and for Amal to wake up and leave me with their hat for some reason, so it’s plausible and even likely that someone came into the room at some point and questioned what I was doing there! If I ran into them now, I don’t even know what answer I could give them!

I need to be alone. And do some research. But mostly be alone. I figure I’m gonna see a lot of everyone else tonight, anyway, so! It works out!

At least, that’s my excuse for heading to the downstairs library, heading to the fantasy section, and sneezing the dust off something called “The Rules For Lovers” and settling into the first pages. Honestly, I just picked this up because it seemed in that realm of fantasy novels that Amal mentioned liking, and… well, after about two hundred pages of gay rights and political intrigue and fancy magic and an actual entire dog oh my gosh, I understand now. I understand everything.

Hours must pass as I read behind a shelf, but as engrossing as the book is, I still get startled when the door creaks open. I crane my neck to catch a glimpse of McRae stepping into the
room, holding the same book from two days ago listlessly at his side.

Despite that, he doesn’t look lost, exactly, and maybe that’s what tips me off to something being wrong. What’s even more wrong is the fast pace he takes to the back of the library. Where the murder mysteries are, right? And the files- shit. The files.

He walks through the shelves with a sense of purpose, leaving me to scramble behind and struggle not to be heard. And also struggle not to panic over the prospect of him finding the files and doing something with them. I mean, it should be fine. Realistically it’s probably fine! What are the odds that he found the files before Amal and Harai did? Haha!

(...Likely. The odds are very likely.)

Still, when he stares at the shelf where they used to be, his expression doesn’t change from its slightly puzzled neutrality. From where I’m standing a meter or so behind, I can just barely make out the files hidden behind dusty volumes of a children’s mystery series. Some kind of wild joy rises up for just a moment - if I can barely see it then he definitely can’t - but the fire flickers and dies as he reaches for the shelf.

Chiyo: S-stop!

McRae flinches back at the noise, hand dropping to his side. He doesn’t look guilty or even panicked as he turns to me, though he doesn’t look me in the eye.

McRae: What?

Chiyo: Those- those books!!

McRae: … Again, what?

Chiyo: There’s… you shouldn’t touch those!

Bless his heart, he actually doesn’t touch them as I try and fail to put words together in a
complete sentence. And then he opens his mouth again.

McRae: [patiently] Is this about the files?

Fuck.

Chiyo: Uh.

McRae: … You *know* I saw those three days ago, right? When I got this book. [points to it]

Chiyo: Uhhh.

*I probably should have thought of that.*

McRae: What did you want to know about them?

Chiyo: I just didn’t want more people finding out about their existence- wait, you know something about them?

McRae: … Maybe.

Chiyo: What??

McRae: Keep it down. I don’t want more people finding out about this than there has to be. [frowns] In fact, I’m really not sure if I should be telling you anything...

Chiyo: Me neither! But I’m here anyway, so you may as well tell me? Please?

McRae just looks at me. I get the feeling that he’s more looking through me instead of at me, or maybe… Seeing someone else. I can’t say I haven’t had the same experience. Finally, he
lets out a breath he seems surprised he was holding in.

McRae: Alright. Whatever. I think I trust you most out of everyone left, anyway, so I know you won’t do anything stupid with what I’m about to tell you. Right?

Chiyo: Right! You can count on me!

I don’t actually know if it’s wise to put so much faith in me but I’ll roll with it!

McRae: So. [taps shelf] How much do you know about these already?

Chiyo: These are files. With pictures of dead people in them. And there’s, um, 47 of them…?

McRae: And I assume you didn’t actually look at all of the files.

Chiyo: Eheheh… No. No freaking way.

McRae: Figures. Alright, cool.

He tips back the books, keeping an eye on me as he reaches behind them. This time, I don’t move to stop him as he pulls out a file and taps it with the back of his hand.

McRae: So, fun fact, there’s a roster paper clipped to the back covers of each of these. All of the names have Ultimate titles attached to them.

Like… us?

Somehow, that’s even more scary than our situation is already.

I try to stay standing anyway. I asked him to tell me this, after all.
Chiyo: So… [swallows] You’re saying we’re not the first. What is Hope’s Peak even doing…?

McRae: Dunno. I haven’t actually thought about that part of it too much, but that’s not what I wanted to show you. Here.

**McRae pulls out another file, the one right next to the gap he left with the first. He gives it only a quick glance before flipping to the back covers of both files and showing the rosters to me. I squint at both of them for a long moment before realizing the one similarity.**

Chiyo: This name… Holly Marie Walton. The SHSL Hunter. [taps file] It’s circled on both rosters. It says she’s a survivor on this one, and in this one, she died in the… the second case?

McRae: Right. [nods] There’s that overlap. Even though more than one person might survive, one survivor gets carried over in every game. Except the first three, since they don’t look real… Dunno what’s up with those.

McRae: So I put them in order, and there’s this chain between all of the ones with photographs. Except…

McRae: It’s broken twice.

Chiyo: What do you mean?

McRae: There’s a missing link near the beginning of the chain - in the first third or so, I’d say - and one right before the end.

McRae: Both of those places have a spot where a survivor that goes to the next game is missing.

Chiyo: That’s… unsettling. Do you think they made exceptions, or…?

McRae: I dunno. I don’t think so. If they have a system, why break it? [puts the files back; pulls out more] And see, look, even though this one has survivors, the one that comes after doesn’t have
any of the same people.

Sure enough, the first file he shows me has four survivors, but not a single one is carried over to the next game. Just thinking about how few people walked away from each game is, well... Scary. And not to mention one of them would have to go back and do it all over again...

Chiyo: S-so... If it’s not, um, if it’s not broken on purpose... Why do you think the chain stops there?

McRae: To be honest?

He turns the file sideways, squints at it a moment.

McRae: I think at least two files are missing.

Two more killing games to worry about. Great.

McRae: I have no idea why they’re gone, though. I mean, whoever put these here clearly didn’t care about us seeing them, so... I don’t see the point in breaking the chain. But whatever, I guess.

Chiyo: I... see.

Honestly, I can’t think of why the files would be gone either, but... It makes a lot more sense than randomly breaking the chain. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.

As I ponder this, McRae starts putting the files back. I feel like this conversation might be drawing to a close, but it also feels weird not to have SOME kind of input on all of this that isn’t just “shaken”.

Chiyo: So... what about all of this, then? Are you saying that even if we get out of here, someone might have to stay behind?
There’s a quick pause in his movement, almost too small to notice, and it’s gone before I can ask about it.

McRae: I don’t know. I’d hope not, but…

McRae: …

McRae: If it’s any consolation, I don’t think this game is the same as the ones in the files.

Chiyo: Really?

McRae: Yeah. A lot of those are just gaudy. There’s a case that involves dermestid beetles, which eat flesh-

Chiyo: [quickly] I don’t want to hear about the details.

McRae: Yeah, okay. But still. We haven’t had anything nearly as over the top.

I don’t know. I think hanging someone from a chandelier more than qualifies as over the top. McRae must realize this, too, as his expression turns dark. It’s smarter not to push the matter.

Instead, once McRae puts the files back in order, the two of us reach an unspoken agreement to sit quietly behind the shelves and read our books until someone comes looking for us. I try to focus on the book in my hands, but the text keeps swimming before my eyes, and I close it entirely once I reach the section that involves blood magic. Geez, this author has a really good magic system going on, but now just… Really isn’t the time. McRae, at least, seems to be enjoying his book.

After what’s probably hours, my Parchment buzzes with a copy/pasted message.

R. KASHIZAKI [4:25]:
Ok we’re done with prep stuff. Everyone get to the foyer ASAP

We are having a SLEEPOVER

And if you’re not there everyone else will bully you.

Bring everything you want to force people to deal with!

I close the message and look to McRae, who’s staring at his Parchment and frowning. He seems considerably less enthused than Kashizaki wants us to be. Honestly, I don’t feel all that enthused either, but I figure it’s better to at least have a good attitude, so I smile wide anyway.

Chiyo: You ready?

McRae: As I’ll ever be, I guess. [sighs and shoves Parchment into pocket] Lead the way.

Walking into the foyer is certainly an experience. Not to say that it’s bad or anything, but the amount of decorations that have been put up make the dull room actually look cheerful. I didn’t think that was possible.

But also, how long did all of this this take?? Should I have been doing something to help?? I guess it’s too late now, right?? Guh. Maybe I can help take these down, but if I had a say in things, I’d just leave all of this up. It looks a lot more livable now.

McRae continues to fiddle with a streamer even as Kashizaki approaches the both of us. Unlike the room around us, she looks the same as always, if a little more tired. She throws her arms wide, though her expression doesn’t change much.

Kashizaki: [deadpan] Tada.

Chiyo: Woah! This looks great!!

Kashizaki: Thanks. I cut up this weird fabric I found upstairs for the decorations.
McRae: This green sparkly stuff? [holds up end of streamer] Reminds me of something.

Actually, now that he mentions it… that looks disconcertingly like Chisaki’s arm bandages. Weren’t those green and sparkly as well? I frown, taking the end from McRae. Is this the same fabric? It feels so… crumbly. The color seems to be a perfect match, though. It’s an odd choice for a bandage. It’s even odder that this was just laying around.

Kashizaki: Well, yeah. You probably saw it in that room with the astronomy books. I guess it was some kind of cloak? With all these constellations embroidered on in shiny thread.

Kashizaki: [shrugs] I kind of wanted to keep it, but it’s also kind of old and gross. Plus, the bottom edge was already torn off, so I figured it was marked for destruction.

Chiyo: They do look pretty.

Kashizaki: Right?

McRae: Caliban didn’t stop you?

Kashizaki: No. Why would he?

McRae frowns but doesn’t respond. I crane my neck to see the rest of the party, which… so far, looks to be pretty pitiful. Everett and Chisaki are there as always, snickering together over something or other with Ekyou. Ekyou seems like she’s enjoying the conversation, at least, though she keeps glancing back at Sumitama talking to Amal on the stairs. I can’t say I blame her much. Now that I’m aware of that conversation going on, I’m not sure what to do with that awareness either. In the corner, Bazhanov and Sekisada seem to be consumed in some discussion or other, not paying much heed to the rest of us. Bazhanov keeps stealing looks at Sekisada, who’s either extremely oblivious or extremely determined not to acknowledge a single one of them.

Suspiciously, Atsui is missing, as is Harai. Maybe they both have something to prepare. Maybe it’s a mountain of cake. We just don’t know.
Her greeting dispensed, Kashizaki walks back to the conversation with Ekyou, Chisaki, and Everett. After a moment’s hesitation, McRae follows, lagging a few steps behind. I get the feeling he doesn’t care so much about talking as much as being a part of things, though.

I’m not sure what to do from here, but Amal looks kind of like they’re dying, so I head over to them first. Their pasted-on smile melts into a real one as soon as I sit down next to them.

Amal: Hi.

Chiyo: Hey! I missed you today, where were you?

Amal: Helping Kashizaki-chan with all of this, mostly.

Sumitama: Same! We had a lot of time to talk.

Amal: Mhm. Turns out we have a lot to talk about, too.

Chiyo: Really?

I thought we were supposed to be collectively wary of Sumitama. Right? Uh… I am. Not sure how awkward this is going to be if she’s friends with Amal! … Probably no more awkward than when Amal was friends with Murdock, right??

Amal: Well, for starters, we both like expository writing.

Sumitama: Geheh… I wouldn’t say it’s so much “like” as “I know how to do it”, but even then not really?? Your articles are a lot more impressive than my essays.

Amal: You should give yourself more credit. Literary analysis is really hard. I’m no good at it myself.

Sumitama: Ah, thank you!! [eyes shining] You’re really smart, so that means a lot to me.
Sumitama: … Really, though, it’s no big deal. I don’t see what the fuss is, analyzing literature is just making a bunch of assumptions about the author and then pulling out random lines to make up- [snickers] Sorry, to bull- bullshit some reasoning why the author must feel a certain way. It’s pretty easy once you figure out the basics.

Amal: It feels like the opposite for me. Even the obvious ones. [shakes head] When I lived in Michigan, I had to read Fahrenheit 451 for school, and I just couldn’t figure out any of the symbolism. The whole phoenix thing at the end, for example-

Sumitama: H-hey! I know what that is! The phoenix is about-

And then she launches into an entire spiel about the symbolism of the book, something about an obsession with cheap comfort leading to the death of free thought, the harm in willful ignorance compared to that of blind acceptance, and the nature of destruction as a form of rebirth, and branching off of that, the substitution of violence in pursuit of happiness. To be honest I got lost within about thirty seconds. It’s… really impressive to see Sumitama so animated. But what really amazes me is how Amal keeps track of all of this if they’d been doing this all afternoon.

When I turn my head to look at them, though, they’re sitting back, expression pointedly blank save for a slight smile. I realize with a start that this is what they’ve been doing all day - just setting Sumitama off on one tangent or another so that they don’t have to bother getting a word in edgewise. It’s smart. Way too smart. Especially if Sumitama isn’t catching on…

… I feel kind of bad for taking advantage of her like that, really.

Sumitama: -and so Bradbury is able to portray a world that’s just similar enough to ours that we feel uncomfortable, because in the wrong circumstances, we ARE Montag at the beginning of the book.

Chiyo: That… all… sounds really cool, Sumitama-san, but… what even is Fahrenheit 451?

Sumitama: [blinks] Oh, uh… It’s a book! A novel. It’s about a society that burns books and suppresses knowledge in an effort to achieve a, um… a utopia? Except without knowledge or critical thought or, well, any of that, you can’t really be happy.
Sumitama: So there’s this society of all these people who think they know what life is, that it’s about simple pleasures and television and wealth and all those surface things, except they don’t have anything to live for. The closest thing they have to a purpose in life is to drive around and kill things, um, sometimes people... [trails off; shakes head quickly] The theme. The book. Uh. Um, most of the time people focus on the censorship of ideas in the book, which I think is important, too, but I think it’s more of a commentary on human nature.

Sumitama: See, the protagonist starts off like the rest of his society. He’s a fireman, so his job is to burn books. As long as he can destroy things, he’s happy. But once he finds out there’s more to life than just destroying everything, that there’s beauty in the little interactions, like... like friendship, and leaving a mark on the world, then he starts getting...

Chiyo: Hopeful?

Sumitama: ...Er, not exactly. It’s more like he thinks he’s doing the right thing but does a lot of really dumb stuff that’s mostly destructive to himself in the end.

Sumitama: But! But in the end everything works out fine. [nervous laugh] For him, at least. Everything he’s ever known is dead and gone, and he has to start entirely from scratch, but... He’s got support. He’s got a purpose. He gets that hope, eventually, and he knows what he has to do to make the world a better place than it used to be.

Woah. That’s... quite a lot to hear about a book I’ve never read. Weirdly enough, I found that... interesting? It’s definitely something that Sumitama is knowledgeable about!! And passionate, too, despite her insistence that it’s easy for her and no big deal. I’m pretty sure she’s not kidding about the “easy for her” part, though. None of that sounded rehearsed.

Sumitama: ...Oh. Oh my gosh, I’ve been talking for so long. [paps cheeks] Sorry!! I know I can get carried away, geheheh. I guess I do like talking about books.

Chiyo: It’s no problem! You seem really enthusiastic about it.

Sumitama: Ah... I guess? I-I mean, I am! Sort of. Not sure what my feelings are on analyzing literature are, actually! Geheh... heh...
Sumitama: ...Thank you, though.

She smiles, and this time it seems a little less forced. Amal just watches the two of us, frowning slightly.

Amal: Hey, Sumitama-san, where are you from, anyway?

Sumitama: Huh?

Amal: I’m from the US, and I think McRae-san is as well, then Murdock-san and Valdez-san… [winces] Yeah. You have a Western given name, right?

Sumitama: Uhh… [blinks] I do, yeah, but uh… Technically I’m from Japan, but I think I might be a US citizen? I was born in Okinawa on one of the US military bases there, so I might count as a US citizen, but my dad’s a Japanese citizen. Since I stay with my dad and my mom moves around, I’m not sure if I have dual citizenship or what, to be entirely honest.

Amal: … I see.

Sumitama: I-I live in Osaka now, though!! And my mom can usually visit once or twice a year! She’s um, not married, so she travels a lot, but then neither is my dad, so we don’t have much money, but as of- as of three years ago I’m pretty sure he has a boyfriend?? I’m not certain, though.

Chiyo: You’re not certain if they’re still together?

Sumitama: Or if they’re even dating, honestly. [sighs] My dad is pretty private.


Sumitama: No!

Sumitama: ...
Sumitama: … [squeaks] Is that a bad thing?

Amal: Not necessarily. [adjusts hat] Uh, it’s just weird, I guess. A lot of this class is from outside of Japan, and we’re from America. Aside from Valdez-san, none of us even had reason to be in Japan before getting scouted for Hope’s Peak, yet we can speak Japanese fairly fluently… Doesn’t that seem odd to you?

Chiyo: Now that you mention it, yeah…

I’ve spent so much time with everyone here, I’ve honestly almost forgotten about how a good amount of the class is foreign. And I didn’t know about McRae or Murdock, but now that I DO know where they’re from, I… am not sure what to make of this, actually. That’s weird.

Why would Hope’s Peak even scout so many foreign students? Shouldn’t they be limited to students in Japan? I can’t even imagine having to learn another language fluently, let alone study in it. I’m just fif- *eighteen*. Although the extra three years don’t make me much more confident. Unless for whatever reason they were able to speak Japanese fluently already?? But then???

I think I’m just getting more confused. There’s only so much rabbitholing I can do while Sumitama is still talking, anyway.

Sumitama: I mean, it doesn’t seem like that big of a deal?

Amal: [flat] What?

Sumitama: [waves hands] W-wait! I mean, it’s suspicious, yes, but… what can we do about it? What IS there to do about it?

Amal: Maybe, I dunno, figure out what the hell we’re all doing here?

Sumitama: I don’t… I mean, I guess. I don’t know how much help I’d be at that, anyway…
Amal: Sumitama-san, you’re literally the smartest student in the country. You proved just now that you’re good at putting things together.

Sumitama: H-huh?? Um, thanks??

Amal: [as if they hadn’t heard] Of course you’d be good at figuring out why we’re here, so are you sure you haven’t put any thought into it?

Sumitama: Y-yes! I’m sure I haven’t!

A burst of laughter rises up from the other side of the room. We all look quickly to catch a bottle on the floor, pointing to Ekyou and Kashizaki leaning away from her, her hand pressed to her deep red cheek as the others cheer. At the sight of it all, Sumitama’s gaze grows distantly frantic.

Sumitama: … [whispers] I can’t.

Amal: … You know, I think you can, actually.

Chiyo: Amal-

Amal: You just don’t want to try.

Sumitama stiffens and stands up. Before either of us can stop her, she drifts back to the other group. She settles in next to Ekyou as the bottle spins again, and whatever happens next is lost to me as I focus on Amal next to me, their lips turned in a slight frown.

Chiyo: … That was really harsh.

Amal: Yeah. Yeah, I know. [sighs] I’m sorry, that was going too far.
Chiyo: I don’t know what Kashizaki-chan wants us to do about her.

Amal: Me neither. It sounds like she wants us to isolate Sumitama-san, to be honest, but that sounds… [winces] Much less than ideal.

Chiyo: Is that still what her plan is?? I told her not to do that!! Sumitama-

**Sumitama looks up sharply. I cringe and lower my voice.**

Chiyo: [softer] She could be at risk of doing something dangerous if we isolate her like that.

Amal: Exactly. [looks away] But I see where Kashizaki-chan is coming from, too. I don’t know how someone can talk to Sumitama-san so much without getting exhausted.

**The way they declare that is so bitter, so exhausted. I thought Amal wanted to see the best in everyone… although, I know they’ve said it’s hard for them sometimes. Still, I don’t want to give up hope on Sumitama, and I’m sure Amal doesn’t want to either; just seconds later, even their frown softens a bit.**

Amal: … I should go and apologize.

**They move to stand up, but are forced to sit back down quickly and awkwardly as someone passes us on the stairs.**

Harai: ‘Scuse me.

Chiyo: Oh hey!

Amal: Hi?

Harai: Could you please move? I just- I want to get this over with.
Amal: Wait, what?

I get off the stairs anyway and pull Amal after me. Harai remains on the stairs, their stance set as they survey the crowd.

Harai: [barks] Kashizaki-shi!

The game pauses as Kashizaki looks up, her momentary fright giving way to confusion. She just points to herself wordlessly, quizzical eyes seeking explanation.

Harai: You wanted a play.

Kashizaki: I wanted what? [brow furrows] Oh shit, is this about yesterday morning? Dude, I wasn’t being serious about that, you didn’t have to do anything if you didn’t want to.

Harai: You asked me to do it.

Kashizaki: Jokingly.

Sekisada: Wait, since when were people going to do whole-ass performances?

Chisaki: Yo, Rai-san, how come you haven’t been around in the past two days?

Ekyou: Is everything okay?

Harai: I’m fine.

They draw in a breath, grabbing the edges of their mask, and for a second I think they’re about to rip it off before they drop their hands to their sides and roll them into fists, pretending they aren’t shaking.
Harai: I’ll just do my part and then we can all move on. Okay?

Kashizaki: Harai-san, look, no one’s forcing you to do anything-

Harai: Is that okay, Kashizaki-shi.

Kashizaki: …

She gives a tiny, almost imperceptible nod. Harai breathes in, then out, their tiny frame rattling with the motion.

And they spring into action.

From the very first pose to the final flourish, I swear I can hear music in their motions and sharp gestures. Their performance is clearly an excerpt from a longer piece, some kind of monologue about the 47 ronin and military might, but even though I have no interest in the subject, I can’t help but lose myself in watching. In fact, everyone around me seems to be holding their breath through Harai’s performance; as dramatic, exaggerated, and clearly humorous as their spoken monologue is, it still doesn’t feel right to say anything. This is the one time that Harai has laid anything about themself bare, and it would be criminal to create any distraction.

Still, their mask never changes its expression - and why should it? It’s a mask. You’d think that Harai would take it off, considering kabuki uses makeup and facial expressions, but from the way they’ve been acting lately, they don’t seem like they’re ready to show us their face. Even if it is caked in makeup.

And they pause, lingering on that final pose and holding it for what feels like a solid minute as they wait for applause that doesn’t come. We look to each other, hesitant at who would want to break the fragile tension here as Harai maintains their position, seemingly content to stand for eternity as a living statue. Maybe this realization is what finally breaks the silence, because Sumitama puts her hands together until there’s a cascade of applause from around the room. Harai holds the pose for just a few moments longer before breaking, giving only a stiff bow before taking a quick seat on the stairs.
Sekisada: I’ve never seen a kabuki performance before. I really didn’t expect that to be so good.

Atsui: Yeah, that was super impressive. Like what the hell, man. [shakes head] That was really cool.

Chisaki: Those poses were so fucking lit!!

Everett: [whispers] Does Harai-san know what “lit” means?

Chisaki: [normal volume (loud)] I mean, we’ve hung out so much that by this point I sure HOPE they do!

Everett: [sighs] Thanks, Tsuki.

Kashizaki: You’re a really talented person, Harai-san. Thank you for doing this.

Harai: Thank you for the praise.

Their hands are still shaking.

Harai: I’m glad I could perform for you.

Sumitama: Hey!!

Harai looks moderately confused as Sumitama pushes her way to the front, and I can’t hide my curiosity either. Still, I appreciate Amal scooting a little closer as she approaches, her eyes positively glowing.

Sumitama: That was AMAZING.
Harai: [automatic] I’m glad that you thought so-

Sumitama: No no no!! My dad- my dad’s super into theater, so I kind of know some stuff - the point is!! That was from Kanadehon Chūshingura, right? I loved how-

A babbling stream of technical terms and details flow from her mouth, and it’s all I can do to nod along and pretend I actually know what she’s saying. Even Amal looks really overwhelmed by the deluge of information, though I guess we’d been flooded a bit earlier, too… Geez. How many ideas can fit in Sumitama’s head? I know I’d get tired. The vacuum left by Harai’s performance slowly filling, everyone else goes back to their own conversations, leaving only the four of us in this weird space.

Weirdly enough, Harai seems to have zoned out of the conversation entirely, barely reacting to a thing that Sumitama says. Do they really not care about acting? Now that I think about it, despite how smooth and passionate their motions were, there was that same mechanical practiced feel that Sekisada’s piano playing has. There’s that sense of performing out of habit, rather than for personal interest.

Yet, as I look at Harai, something doesn’t sit right at how listless they are listening to Sumitama drone on about a talent that isn’t even hers. Even if someone were to talk to me about writing cellphone novels and used words I didn’t know, I’d do my best to keep up with the conversation! And I know so many people in this room would do the same if confronted with their own talents.

So to sit there silently, not reacting to praise at all… This isn’t what someone proud of their work would do.

Still, Sumitama’s so passionate about this that it’d be rude not to respond. I keep waiting for a half-hearted remark from Amal to keep her tangent going, but upon re-evaluation, they aren’t even here anymore. I crane my neck and catch them absorbed in a different conversation with McRae, having long abandoned this one. This is why they’re the brains of this relationship.

Sumitama: - and the way you held that mie reminded me a lot of Katsuyoshi Beniya’s performances.

Chiyo: Who’s that?
Sumitama: Oh! Um, sorry, I didn’t realize you were listening. Katsuyoshi Beniya is-

Harai: A famous kabuki actor.

Suddenly, their voice has completely flatlined. In fact, in all the time I’ve known them, this seems like the least emotion they’ve conveyed.

Harai: Nothing to concern yourself with.

Sumitama: “Just” a famous kabuki actor?? He’s my dad’s favorite!!

Harai: [mutters] Lovely.

Chiyo: What’s so great about him?

Sumitama: So!! [claps hands together] So, um, a lot of times kabuki actors take mentors, and then they use their mentor’s names - a lot of really prominent names have been passed down for decades, if not hundreds of years, actually! And even if you don’t have a super prestigious mentor name, you wouldn’t usually use your own. You’re supposed to pay homage to your ancestors and use an older name.

Sumitama: But Beniya-shi used his own name upon his debut! It’s a pretty arrogant move to make, but he was actually SUPER SUPER good!! His name is basically synonymous with his generation of actors. So that’s why he’s kind of legendary.

Chiyo: Woah, that’s really neat!

It sounds really intimidating, though, to use your own name right off the bat. If I had published my own work under my own name, my parents would probably kill me! … Not literally. I know they love me. But they’d maybe be heavily disapproving? I don’t think online stuff is the same as stage acting, though. The fear of messing up and having that attached to your name forever is kind of intimidating, but I guess the shame of messing up and having that attached to your ancestors is pretty bad too.
Sumitama: Actually, wait, Harai-san, don’t you use your own name as well? Why is that?

Harai: I don’t have a mentor.

Chiyo: Wait, you don’t have a mentor and you’re an Ultimate?? That’s so impressive!!

Harai: [hunches shoulders] I’m not that good. I don’t know why they picked me.

Sumitama: It’s because you’re really skilled!! Anyone who knows anything can see that.

Harai: … Thanks. I think.

Harai: But, for what it’s worth... I guess you could say Beniya-shi was… an influence on me.

Sumitama: That’s so cool!! Something that we have in common!!

Harai: … Mm.

**Judging by their tone, they are instantly regretting their decision to say anything at all. Sumitama taps her chin with a delighted innocence.**

Sumitama: Now that I think about it, I think Beniya-shi is about the same age as my dad, if not a bit older…

Sumitama: Do you suppose he had a child? It’d be neat to see his legacy carried on.

Harai: …

Harai: … [barely audible] Wouldn’t… that... be *something*...
Sumitama: …?

… Oh. Oh no. So THIS is why Harai’s father is- oh, fucking shit.

Did she hear that? I don’t think she heard that. I have to say something before Sumitama asks any more questions.

Sumitama: Sorry, what was that?

Chiyo: I, uh-

McRae: -figure it’s time to do something else, huh?

Chiyo: Huh?

Sumitama: Geh??

McRae and Amal have come over from their own conversation to join us. McRae’s expression is as lax as usual, though there’s something sharp glinting in his eyes that remind me a lot not of Murdock, but of Bates. I don’t get a chance to reflect on this before Amal steps in, a lot more fake-cheery than I’ve ever seen them, and turns to Harai.

Amal: We’re going to play mini golf! Like now. Right now.

McRae: Wanna join, Harai-san? You mentioned it a few days ago-

Harai: [stands up quickly] Yes. I’m interested. Let’s go now.

… This has got to be the most blunt and obvious distraction I have ever bore witness to. Yeah, there’s like no way this is going to work. Won’t stop me from hoping.
Sumitama: Wait, I want to play, too! I wanna ask Harai-san more questions!

Amal: Sorry, you can’t come. We only have four golf clubs.

Sumitama: B-but there’s three of you??


McRae: [steps on Amal’s foot] Actually, we already have four people.

Sumitama: Who’s the fourth?

Amal: [whispers] We could invite Chiyo-

McRae: [steps on Amal’s foot again] ACTUALLY, I’ve already spoken to Bazhanov-san and he said yes. [yells across the room] RIGHT, BAZHANOV?

To each of our utter surprises, Bazhanov looks up from where he’s talking to Sekisada and Chisaki and… gives a thumbs-up??

Bazhanov: [calls back] I have absolutely no clue what fresh hell you’re talking about but sure, okay!

Amal: [whispers] What the hell why did that work. Don’t step on me.


Sumitama: But- whuh- wait??
Without further ado, Harai rushes out of the room, McRae and Amal following at a slower pace. Sputtering, Sumitama turns first to me, then to Bazhanov, who starts a slow amble to the door as soon as she looks at him.

I can’t believe that actually worked.

Sekisada looks after the four of them, hands frozen in midair before dropping in a dramatic and very rude gesture.

Sekisada: [to no one in particular] They took my conversation partner.

Chisaki: Hey, uh, Sen, buddy, I don’t know if you noticed, but… I’m still here?!

Sekisada: Don’t call me that.

Chisaki: Okay, well… What are the rest of us supposed to do now that like a fourth of everyone left?

Kashizaki: [hopefully] More party games?

Sumitama: No.

Sekisada: [grumbles] I guess I could perform something, too, since that’s what we’re doing today.

Chisaki: Oh shit!! You act, too??

Sekisada: [rolls eyes] Yeah, sure. [with absolutely no theatrics whatsoever] “Our revels are now ended. These our actors/As I foretold you, were all spirits and/Are melted into air, into thin air.” No, I’m not an actor, dumbass, I play piano.

Everett: Didn’t you think it was weird that I played?
Sekisada: Yeah, because piano is MY thing. I was… surprised, is all.

Kashizaki: Ahem, isn’t seat filling your thing?

Sekisada: I hate you.

Everett: So… what are you proposing? A piano duel? I’m not very good, I need you to know.

Chiyo: That’s a lie.

Sekisada: Eh. There’s no fun in it if I don’t really care. Besides, the piano’s all the way upstairs, and I really don’t feel like dragging it down here, so we’d all have to go upstairs to do that and I don’t think anyone else cares either. [shrugs] But I can play something, I guess.

Chisaki: Sing me a song, you’re the piano man!

Sekisada: …

*Instead of replying, he just starts up the stairs and nearly collides with what appears to be a mountain of sandwiches with legs.*

Sekisada: Watch it.

Atsui: I’m blind, actually. Who wants food?

Everett: That’s… a lot of sandwiches.

Atsui: Yeah I KNOW and they would have been done a lot FASTER if somebody HELPED ME.
Ekyou: I offered.

Atsui: NOT YOU.

Sekisada: …

He delicately takes a sandwich off Atsui’s stack and shoves it in his mouth, then continues upstairs without further comment. Although I’m pretty sure Atsui can’t see him, I’m assuming he’s guessed what happened as he carefully lowers the tray to a waiting table.

Atsui: Anyway y’all better eat these. I worked hard on them. We’re gonna be eating sandwiches for days after this.

Sumitama: Why??

Atsui: Because I want everyone to suffer.

Before Sumitama can respond, Chisaki all but vaults over the sandwiches and grabs one off the top. She’s halfway up the stairs before she whirls around, waving it.

Chisaki: Thanks, Sui-kun! I’m gonna go bully Sekisada-kun! Bye!!

Everett: Wait, Tsuki-

Atsui: Aaand she’s gone.

Everett: … Since when has she been calling him that? I thought she usually calls him “Seki-yogisha” or some variant thereof.

Kashizaki: Dunno, but I’m starting to worry about that guy. Not our problem, though. [cracks knuckles] I kind of feel like painting something. Like nails. [hopefully] Ekyou-chan…?
Ekyou: Hm? Oh, I was actually planning to go upstairs with Chisaki-chan and Sekisada-san! I, er, haven’t talked much to either of them. So I wanted to… uh. Try that…?

Ekyou: [looking to Sumitama] …

Sumitama: I’ll come with you!

Ekyou: Right! Sorry, Kashizaki-chan, but next time, okay?


Sumitama: You too!!

And the two of them head upstairs, too. For a fun bonding activity, this is getting surprisingly secular. Kashizaki looks at Atsui, Everett, and myself with a long-suffering stare until Atsui starts coughing.

Atsui: I’m gonna… go figure out what happened to the other guys. And Harai-san.

Kashizaki: [sighs] Yeah, fair enough. They’re playing minigolf.


Everett: It seemed to be made more out of necessity than comfort.

Atsui: Listen, that particular arrangement sounds completely unnecessary. Whatever, though. Kikun, if you need anything, let me know.

Kashizaki: You got it. We’ll be in the game room.
Chiyo: We will?

Kashizaki: I mean, unless you want to dump all these sandwiches on the floor and use THAT table to paint nails.

Atsui: Please don’t do that.

Kashizaki: See. Go have fun, Ryouji.

Atsui: Fiiine. See ya later.

The four of us head into the hallway; Atsui leaves us at the minigolf room. Through the door, I catch a glimpse of Amal holding their head in their hands as Bazhanov balances on top of a golf club (?????) and McRae watches Harai take a wild swing. I’m pretty sure something shatters.

Y’know, individually I care about these people very much and hold them in fairly high regard, but… I’m a little worried for them being all in the same room.

When we get to the game room, Kashizaki closes the door behind us and breathes a sigh that sounds like she’d been holding it for a while. Everett folds her arms, eyebrows raised.

Everett: So, uh… Nails.

Kashizaki: That’s what I’m here for, yeah. But, uh… Just a heads-up, this is going to take a while. Maybe a few hours. So if I do two sets of nails, they might not be as good as what I usually make.

The request for one of us to opt out is implicit. Luckily, I already have my answer.

Chiyo: I’ll pass! I don’t usually wear makeup, anyway.
And she immediately frowns. Shit.

Kashizaki: You’re sure? I don’t want to put pressure on you or anything. And I’m sure I could come up with something that looks good on you...

Chiyo: No, really! I don’t like the feeling of nail polish.

Kashizaki: … Ah.

Chiyo: I- I mean, I’m sure your work is lovely, and I know whatever you come up with for Everett-chan will be really pretty! It’s just not something I’m into??

Kashizaki: If you say so… Are you just saying this to be polite to Everett-san?

Everett: [raises hand] First off, I’m right here. Second, yeah, it’s fine. Kumoshita-chan and I were actually talking about this yesterday. Some people just aren’t makeup people.

Everett: Incidentally, I’m not a makeup person either, but I’ve been so curious about your work that I was really looking forward to this opportunity. [smiles] I’ll appreciate whatever you make, I promise.

Under Everett’s honest grin, Kashizaki’s resolve seems to melt away into a vague embarrassment. She rips open the pouch at her waist with no small amount of vehemence…

… I’m pretty sure I’ve offended her.

Kashizaki: Alright, that’s fine. By the way, is there a window in here? Nail polish and acrylics have a lot of fumes.

Everett: Yep! I got it.

Kashizaki: Thanks. Here, sit down.
Everett opens the windows, sits down, and then takes off their jacket, mumbling something about not wanting the cuffs to catch on the nails. Kashizaki just nods, stiff as Everett ties the jacket around her waist. I hadn’t seen them without their jacket before, but something about the cold-shoulder top underneath seems weirdly familiar. And also their back muscles are indeed super jacked. I don’t know what I was expecting, actually.

What follows is, as promised, about two hours of nail care basics and subsequent nail care other… stuff? I can’t really follow any of what Kashizaki’s doing, but she spends a lot of time prepping Everett’s nails and then attaching fake nails to them with a kind of glue. Then, after a quick consultation with Everett, she has to file them down to stiletto points and only THEN can she actually start painting… It’s a lot. I hadn’t realized how much effort went into nail art, actually. I think I understand now why Kashizaki gets so curt when Sekisada tries to heckle her.

To my utter relief, Everett keeps up a steady stream of questions and conversation throughout the session, and Kashizaki’s bad mood seems to give way to their genuine enthusiasm. By the time she’s taken out bottles of nail polish, she’s actually smiling again, and I feel like I can breathe.

Everett: -and that’s why Bazhanov-kun is apparently not allowed to enter 7-Eleven anymore.

Chiyo: Okay, but do you think he’s only banned from one store, or is it a blanket ban?

Kashizaki: [snickers] I bet they put posters up at every 7-Eleven across Japan with a caption that says “JAILED FOR PIGEON CRIMES.”

Everett: Oh my GOD. And then if he shows up they pull a glock or something.

Chiyo: And then he raises his arms, and the pigeons with him pull out THEIR glocks-

Everett: [wheezes] NO HOLY SHIT.

Chiyo: [giggling] And- and then they have to call the police but he just, like, flies away or something.
Everett: But not with the pigeons flying. With the concussive force of- ahaha oh my god- the concussive force of the pigeons all firing their guns at the ground at the SAME TIME.

Chiyo: NO.

Kashizaki: [laughing too hard] Everett- Everett-kun, stop moving, I’m gonna break a nail.

Everett: Right, right, sorry. My bad. [holds still] Just- pffft hahaha can you imagine?

Chiyo: I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised?? I don’t want to make fun of him, but-

Everett: No, I actually talk to Bazhanov-kun more than you do. He’s a good kid. He’s just… That is totally, actually, something he would do.

Kashizaki: Wow. [hiding a grin] It’s been a long time since I laughed that hard. And you’re telling me I can watch Bazhanov hold up a 7-Eleven with pigeons for myself, in real life? Incredible.

Everett: Mhm. Assuming he’s not banned forever. [tilts head] You should smile more often, it looks nice on you.

Kashizaki: If I had a hundred yen every time I heard that. [rolls eyes] Thanks, though. I appreciate it. I guess I’m just a serious person. All cold and stonehearted or whatever.

Chiyo: Liar. You have a crush on Ekyou-san.

Kashizaki: [to Everett] Actually yeah, I am a liar, I’m not cold and stonehearted and I’m going on a mission of vengeance to punt Kumoshita-chan out of this building.

Chiyo: Heyyy.

Everett: Ha. Still, though, I didn’t expect you to be so… loose? Open? I mean, I didn’t really
expect a nail artist to be so serious, either…

Kashizaki: Well, I’m full of surprises that way. What color do you want?

Everett: Pink. Always.

Kashizaki bobs her head and hunches over Everett’s hand, working on a minuscule scale with an array of shades. I’m content to watch for a few minutes, and Everett seems to be too for only as long as it takes for the first coat to be done before breaking the silence.

Everett: So when did you get into nail art? You seem like you’ve been doing this for a long time.

Kashizaki: Only about three or four years. It’s no big deal, really.

Chiyo: What? That’s like an entire fifth of your life or something!

Kashizaki: Well, how long have YOU done cellphone novels?

Chiyo: … Also like four years. Maybe less?

Kashizaki: [sniffs] See. I’d probably have gotten into it earlier if I were, y’know, allowed to be a girl for the first twelve years of my life.

Everett: Someone was stopping you?

Kashizaki: [bluntly] I’m trans, Everett-san.

Everett: Oh! Same hat!

Kashizaki: Yeah, I saw your pronoun change a few days ago. Do you have a preference on your pronouns?
Everett: I can do that? [blinks] Uh… I’d like they/them pronouns, maybe? If it’s not too much trouble, of course.

Kashizaki: Of course. [nods] What prompted that, anyway?

Everett: Er… [taps nails; Kashizaki bats their arm to make them stop] Talking to Harai-san, I guess? About their views on gender. They don’t identify with the gender binary thing, and to be honest neither do I, so… Yeah! It seemed cool.


Everett: Thanks! I mean, it doesn’t really change anything about me-

Kashizaki: Yeah, well, none of us are cis here, I don’t think we need that particular talk. [rolls eyes] Y’know, the one about being the same person despite it all, and then begging the other person to please love us despite the fact that we aren’t what they want us to be?

Chiyo: Ugh, tell me about it… [places head in hands] I’m so lucky that my parents let me transition when I was super little, and I don’t really talk to my extended family, so I don’t remember any judgement from my family, at least. And I obviously don’t make a habit of telling people I’m trans.

Except here. Though, in my defense, everyone here seems to be cool with it, or is actually not cis themselves. Maybe it’s the environment of young people forced into imminent danger that makes everyone so laid-back about other issues. think we all just have bigger things to worry about. So I guess?? It’s fine??

Kashizaki: Wish that were me, anyway. I feel like I have too many years of being a girl to catch up on. Everett-kun, do you want a holographic finish, or?

Everett: Whatever you think is best. You’re the one with the talent.

Kashizaki: Alright, none it is. I don’t think it works with this palette anyway.
Everett: Since when does holographic not work with pink?

Kashizaki stops mid-motion, her hands hovering above Everett as she watches their expression. This does not change at all in the silence, and Kashizaki tentatively repeats herself.

Kashizaki: … Look, do you want the holographics or not?

Everett: What? It’s fine if you don’t want to put it on, I was joking. Sorry.

Kashizaki: Yeah. [resumes painting] It’s fine. Whatever. The customer’s always right, but I try not to second-guess my decisions.

Chiyo: With nail art, or everything else?

Kashizaki: Ehhh I don’t really- [eyes narrow] Wait a minute, are we psychoanalyzing me?

Everett: [innocently] It’s a sleepover, Kashizaki-chan, we’re obligated to psychoanalyze each other at some point.

Chiyo: At… [checks Parchment] 6:15 in the evening!

Everett: It’s some point!

Kashizaki: Shut up, you guys, I’m trying to concentrate.

And she sets down another few strokes before pulling out another container of nail polish. Everett and I watch her work in silence for another few moments before she sighs, capping a bottle.
Kashizaki: I dunno. I think I might be after perfection or something like that.

Chiyo: What do you mean by that?

Kashizaki: I mean- [sighs] Oh my god this is gonna sound so dumb.

Everett: Fire away.

Kashizaki: Ugh. It’s just… I really don’t know how to explain it. Or how much I want to talk about it.

Kashizaki: It’s something like, I’m not particularly fond of the person I was before, and I have a goal of who I want to be, and I want to always work towards being that person. You know?

Chiyo: [nods] Definitely.

Kashizaki: No, you don’t. It’s not only about being trans, although that’s part of it. It’s more like…

Kashizaki: [quickly] Holy shit, past me was kind of a fuckup loser on so many levels and I don’t want anything to do with… with him. [wincs] Okay? I’ll leave it at that.

She stabs the cap back onto the bottle with too much force.

Kashizaki: It’s whatever, though. I’m used to high standards. I’ve never expected anything less than the best from myself.


Kashizaki: Eh. But I mean…

Kashizaki: I got this far in my life. I’m capable of a lot of things. I think the least I can do is to be as
best as I can be, right? What’s stopping me from being perfect?

Chiyo: Kashizaki-chan, there’s nothing wrong with having high standards, but you really don’t need to be so hard on yourself. You’re really good at so many things already, that much is obvious, so you don’t need to tear yourself down for not meeting your own standards.

Kashizaki: Ugh, I don’t know. Look, if I don’t push myself, how am I ever going to improve?

Everett: [nods to me] Kumoshita-chan’s right, y’know. And I don’t know in what way your past self was… difficult, but she doesn’t deserve so much frustration from you now. What matters is what you want to do today, not having to make up for your past mistakes or anything like that.

*The way Everett doesn’t look at me, their expression still serene… Do they know?? Do they know about my conversation with Sekisada yesterday?? About how he injured them when they were kids? … Is that what this is about?*

I don’t think it matters at this moment, though, because Kashizaki finally leans back and doesn’t acknowledge any of what Everett said.

Kashizaki: I think I’m done.

Everett: Oh worm?

*Just as soon as Everett raises their hands, Kashizaki’s expression fractures. For a moment, she looks vulnerable and lost and frightened and it *scares* me, more than I can describe, to see her so suddenly out of control-*

*And then it hardens again into an intense scowl as she presses Everett’s wrists back to the table, glaring a hole into the polish.*

Kashizaki: Shit. I messed up on this one, too.

Everett: [examining hands] Honestly, I have no clue what you’re talking about. They look fine to
Kashizaki: Are you kidding? Look! There’s too much glitter on this nail, and then that little charm is WAY too excessive. And the flat colors… I should have used a gradient or something. Here, I can redo it.

As Kashizaki pulls Everett’s hands toward her, I think I might finally understand why she doesn’t wear any of her own handiwork. Given how perfectionistic she is, it’d probably drive her crazy to see her own work every day.

Still, when she cleans up whatever it was on Everett’s nails that was bothering her, I can’t tell much of a difference. Yes, it’s extremely pretty and professional, but… so was the first iteration?? I’m not even sure what changed in the new one, honestly. Even now, Kashizaki stares at Everett’s hands with a heavy stare of consternation as they admire the details.

Kashizaki: … You know what, I might just start over. I’m really sorry about all of this.

Everett: Dude, there’s no need. This is sick as fuck. Right, Kumoshita-san?

Chiyo: Let me see?

Everett shows off the art, one hand displaying a sweeping expanse of sky that goes from a dusky cityscape to a glowing skyline, the other a more natural and bright gradient of night sky to sunrise. It really is pretty, and almost enough to make me consider getting a set myself. Key word being “almost”. I’d be too worried about breaking them. Apparently, Everett struggles with no such dilemma.

Chiyo: Oh, wow.

Everett: Good “oh wow” or bad “oh wow”?

Kashizaki: [mutters] I guess I’d better delete my Instagram-
Chiyo: AMAZING oh wow!! This is so cool, Kashizaki-chan!!


Chiyo: Isn’t this what your screen name is based on? “Sunrise sunset nails” or something, right?

Kashizaki: Yeah. [looks away] It’s dumb. I made the name a long time ago. I didn’t think it would actually gain any traction, and if I did then I would have picked something more creative.

Chiyo: It’s a good name! It suits your work really well.

Kashizaki: … Hah. I appreciate it.

And suddenly every trace of her irritability evaporates, leaving behind what doesn’t seem like happiness so much as the resignation of expectations fulfilled and nothing more. How high are her standards for herself, anyway? She doesn’t even seem like she can take any joy from Everett’s and my compliments. What with her high standards, I can’t imagine how she doesn’t exist in a constant state of irritation with herself. As much as I consider myself generally self-assured, even I admit that I’m far from perfect, and I’m sure she thinks the same of herself… On second thought, now that I think about it, she might actually exist in a constant state of irritation with herself.

Their sentencing to fifteen minutes of drying time served, Everett stands up as if they’ve suddenly remembered something.

Everett: Oh crap, I should go and check on Tsuki!

Chiyo: Did she do something? Is something wrong??

Everett: Not yet. I just thought, y’know, I should make sure she’s alright. And to make sure she hasn’t gutted Sekisada-san like a fish.

Kashizaki: Oh right, gutting him is your job now that you have these nails. Send him my regards.
Everett: They are indeed INCREDIBLY pointy but no! I’d be ruining your hard work on that… and also I don’t wish harm on anyone. [pushes back hair] But now that I think about it, Tsuki’s been remarkably nonviolent towards Sekisada-san lately. Maybe I’m rubbing off on her or something.

Actually, I think her reduced aggression is mostly due to the fact that we watched him have a breakdown like three days ago.

Chiyo: … Yeah! Maybe!

Kashizaki: Well, stop doing that. I’m the chairwoman of the I Hate Sentarou Sekisada Club and I’m always looking for new members.

Everett: [rolls eyes] That’s your prerogative and I can’t really stop you. Just don’t do anything dumb about it, okay?

Kashizaki: Wouldn’t dream of it. See you around.

Everett leaves the room with a smile and a finger gun accentuated by the half inch extensions on each hand. Those are SCARY. I have no idea how she’s going to function at all before she takes them off, considering that personally I get irritated as soon as my nails get slightly too long.

Now that Everett’s gone, Kashizaki and I are left in an awkward silence. It’s not really helped by that earlier incident of her getting upset when I said I didn’t like makeup, and even the explanation of high standards doesn’t really clear up how irritated she seems with me sometimes. And I kinda wish she wasn’t! I honestly consider myself close enough with Kashizaki that, aside from Amal and maybe Harai, she’s my best friend in the mansion, but… sometimes I feel like she’s mad at me?? I can probably just assume the best of her. I don’t want to cause trouble-

Oh who am I kidding pretty much every problem I’ve had in the entire past two weeks has stemmed from NOT TELLING PEOPLE THINGS. I should say it! I’m going to say it!
… She’s looking at me funny, isn’t she.

Kashizaki: Everything okay, or?

Chiyo: I’m fine! Just thinking.

Kashizaki: About what?

Chiyo: [hopeful smile] Would you get mad if I said “psychoanalyzing you some more”?

Kashizaki: …

Chiyo: …

Kashizaki: …

Kashizaki: … [lays down head on table] I give up. Fire away.

Chiyo: I, uh, didn’t really think I would get this far.

Kashizaki: Sounds like a you problem.

Chiyo: Uh, okay, just let me think…

Chiyo: … Do your high standards apply just to you, or to other people?

Kashizaki: [sits back up] Just to myself. I can’t expect everyone to be perfect, after all. And I realize that’s not what everyone else prioritizes, so there’s no point getting on their cases for things they don’t even take into consideration.
Chiyo: Oh.

Kashizaki: Unless, of course, they’re being facetious and dismissive on purpose. Like how Sekisada-san just refuses to look any deeper into my talent aside from “it’s just makeup shit”. Yeah, dumbass, YOU try doing this makeup shit on canvases that are like four square centimeters in size, and then ten times. I thought not, bitch.

Chiyo: I dunno. I’m inclined to give him more of a chance after Bates-san died.

Kashizaki: Just because he’s worried about the possibility of his death? [scoffs] Reality check, all of us are worried about the possibility of dying.

Chiyo: Well, that’s part of it, and... some other stuff. I’m sure he’s a nicer person than we think.

Kashizaki: Mm. Well, do what you want, but I can’t look past how much of a smug prick he is. If someone is going to make fun of someone else for not being perfect, then I expect perfection from them to begin with. Of course, I can’t enforce this on absolutely everyone, but y’know what whatever. Why are you even asking?

Chiyo: How did you just articulate all of that so well?

Kashizaki: Sometimes I go on long tangents in my head breaking down my world views and identity. It’s fine.

Chiyo: So if you’re psychoanalyzing yourself, then how come I’m not allowed to do that?

Kashizaki: I’m allowing you now, right? Look, you’re dodging the question. What’s really up?

Chiyo: Uh…

Chiyo: … This is hard to say.

Kashizaki: Don’t you have a habit of just blurting things out?
Chiyo: Yes, but- WAIT who said that??

Kashizaki: Ryouji. [shrugs] It’s not a bad thing. I’d really prefer you didn’t drag it out, actually, just tell me what’s wrong.

Chiyo: I, um… Okay!

That’s not what I was expecting! Most of this conversation isn’t what I was expecting and now my nerves are SHOT! Great going, me!!

Chiyo: You’re not, um.

Chiyo: … I dunno, sometimes I feel like you’re mad at me?? And I don’t know why?? Does that have anything to do with anything??

Kashizaki: …

Her expression softens.

Kashizaki: You thought I was mad at you?

Chiyo: Well, uh, yeah, sometimes. Like when I said I didn’t like wearing makeup, or that whole thing with Sumitama-san, and then sometimes we’ll just be talking and then you get super distant??

Kashizaki: Oh my god. I do that?

Chiyo: Yeah, sometimes.

Kashizaki blinks, taken clearly aback. From her expression, I don’t even think she realized what she was doing, and for a moment I feel stupid for having assumed she meant ill until she
starts mumbling to herself, sounding mystified.

Kashizaki: How long was I doing that for? Have I been doing that to anyone else? I didn’t mean to-[shakes head] I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you, I promise, but I do get really frustrated with myself or the world if things don’t go the exact way I want them to sometimes. I didn’t realize I was taking that out on you.

Kashizaki: And I don’t know how long that’s been going on, but I’m sorry that it happened for so long and that you were so distressed about it. I’ll make sure it never happens again, okay?

Chiyo: Only if you’re sure!! If you didn’t realize you were doing it, I don’t want you to feel bad or anything. You’re fine!! It’s fine, I promise!!

She stares at me with some combination of amusement and disbelief, the affection still unmistakeable.

Kashizaki: Chiyo- Kumoshita-chan- okay, fuck it, Chiyo, I don’t know how else to put this, but this is causing you concern and affecting your emotional state. You literally told me this. I’m not just going to ignore that.

Chiyo: Oh! … I mean, that’s, um, that’s really good of you! I just wasn’t really expecting this kind of outcome…?

Kashizaki: That is extremely concerning.

Chiyo: Oh no, wait, no one’s ever done anything to me like- like Ekyou-san and Sumitama-san or anything like that! It’s just, uh, a lot of times when I confront people, they take it as a sign to stop being friends with me.

Kashizaki: That is STILL extremely concerning. Do you need a psychoanalysis session?

Chiyo: I’ll pass.

Kashizaki: Still. [smiles a little] I’m glad to get this cleared up, thank you for telling me. I’ll do my
best to be more aware of my behavior.

Chiyo: Th-thank you!! I really appreciate that. But the high standard thing...

Kashizaki: Dude, it’s seriously whatever. I’m not going to fix so many years of whatever the fuck THAT is in a few weeks, unfortunately-

Chiyo: No, I meant about this whole situation. With me thinking that you were mad at me. [swallows] You’re not going to… You’re not going to beat yourself up about this, are you?

Kashizaki: … I make no promises?

Chiyo: I guess that’s understandable. [sighs and smooths skirt] But if it means anything at all, I want you to know that I don’t hold any of it against you. You’ve had a lot to think about lately, we all have, and it’s okay to me that this sort of slipped your mind. Maybe not okay to you, but you’re my friend, and I’m sure it was an honest mistake on your part.

Chiyo: And, for what it’s worth, I think you’re amazing. You’re super driven, super organized, and I know you have the rest of the class in mind. Heck, you’re the reason we’re even having this sleepover! And I’m sure I speak for the rest of us when I say that this is the best sleepover any of us have ever been to.

Chiyo: … Granted, the only other person that’s been to a sleepover was Atsui-kun, but you know what I mean.


Chiyo: No problem! And even if this doesn’t really do anything other than satiate the need for praise, I want you to know that you’re more than what you think of yourself and I’m rooting for you all the way!!

Kashizaki: Are YOU sure that YOU don’t spend your free time coming up with motivational speeches?
Chiyo: … I mean, sometimes if I binge a ton of anime. BUT THAT HASN’T HAPPENED LATELY.

Kashizaki: [snorts] Well, you’re good at it.

I grin with a bit more embarrassment than I’d like, but hey!! Knowing that Kashizaki is so perfectionistic and willing to give compliments anyway means a lot!! And now that we’ve had this conversation - moderate train wreck that it may have been - I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. With Murdock, I never had the sense that she would be honest to my face if it didn’t suit her, so I could never believe that she wasn’t really mad at me. But I respect Kashizaki, and I know now that she respects me too, so I trust that she isn’t actually upset.

… Maybe I should have been more attentive to Murdock. I could have been more aware of who she was as a person and figured out what she needed, too.

A loud buzz startles both of us, and Kashizaki scrambles to pull her Parchment out of her pouch. As she reads whatever message she got, her eyebrows shoot up and she starts shoving nail art stuff back into her bag.

Chiyo: Wh-whuh?? What happened??

Kashizaki: Gotta go! Ekyou-chan said she saw Everett-kun’s nails! She’s waiting upstairs!!

Chiyo: Wait- so she wants you to make something for her? [hands to mouth] Oh my gosh, she’s going to love it.

Kashizaki: Yeah! Yeah, I need to think of something fast!

Chiyo: Good luck!!

Kashizaki: Thanks!! Have a good night!!
She snaps the pouch shut and rushes out of the room, bumping into the pool table. I walk to the door and watch her almost trip as she hurries down the hall.

Chiyo: … You too!!

???: I have never seen her run that fast before.

I glance to Sekisada standing opposite me, leaning against the wall and adjusting his coat, now around his shoulders instead of his waist. He just looks to Kashizaki’s retreat without any of his usual attitude, and all I’m getting from him is a sort of… neutrality? Is this as close as he gets to actual happiness? What the hell.

Chiyo: What are you doing here?

Sekisada: What does it look like? Waiting for you to come out of the game room so I can talk to you specifically.

Chiyo: … Uhh…

Sekisada: No, I’m kidding. Can you even imagine, though.

Chiyo: Okay, good, because then I was going to demand what you REALLY wanted. [sighs] Is everything okay?

Sekisada: Yep. Just waiting for Lyosha to finish his minigolf. You?

Chiyo: I was talking to Kashizaki-chan, and then she… [makes whooshing motion with hand] Yeah.


I watch him carefully for some kind of response, but all he does is shove his hands deeper
into his pockets, otherwise relaxed. Who the fuck died and replaced Sentarou Sekisada with this really nonaggressive person in front of me??

Chiyo: You seem… Different.

Sekisada: Something wrong with that?

Chiyo: No, not at all! I’m just a little surprised to see you so mellow.

Sekisada: Well, do you want me to change that? I can probably insult you or something if it’ll reassure you that I am in fact the same horrible Sekisada-kun you’ve known the past two weeks.

Chiyo: Oh. There we go.

Sekisada: [smirks] Glad to be of service. By the way, do you know if Khalaf-san’s still in this room? [raps wall with knuckles]

Chiyo: I… guess? Since when do you talk to them?

Sekisada: Since now, apparently. I just wanted to check something with them. No big deal.

Chiyo: Um…? Alright, then.

I feel like I should be concerned, but Sekisada rolls his shoulders back with a sheepish grin that does absolutely nothing to put me at ease. Weird. But before I can press him further, the door opens, and Bazhanov steps out. His face lights up even more as soon as he sees Sekisada.

Bazhanov: Senichka! Did the recital go well?

Sekisada: Well, Everett-san’s a lot better of a pianist than I thought they were. I mean, they have a ways to go, but they’re doing pretty good considering they don’t actually know how long they’ve been playing.
Bazhanov: [nods] Yes, she really is quite talented. I’m sure you did great, too, though.

Sekisada: Eh. Not my best. How was minigolf?

Bazhanov: Oh, I won.

Chiyo: … How??

Bazhanov: Carefully. Hi, Chiyo.

Chiyo: Hi, Bazhanov-san, I just- what?? I’ve seen you play??

Bazhanov: Yes, but have you seen everyone else play?

Chiyo: … Should I have?

Bazhanov: [emphatic] Anyway, I won. And then Tristan said that winner had to clean up. So everyone else ran away. And now I’m hungry.

Sekisada: Atsui-san brought down an entire mountain of sandwiches.

Bazhanov: Ew, no thanks. I’m going to scavenge in the kitchen. Care to join me?

Sekisada: I’ll catch up. If nothing else, I can make ramen or something.

Bazhanov: Excellent. I’ll see you two around, then-

Chiyo: W-wait! Did you happen to see Amal?
Bazhanov: Oh?

Chiyo: Uh- um- Sekisada-san was wondering!

Sekisada: Wow, way to throw me under the bus.

Bazhanov: Gh. [to me] You and Amal are such lovebirds, it’s ridiculous.

Chiyo: Hey?!

Bazhanov: They’re in the downstairs library, last I checked. They said they needed to check on something. Can I go and eat now?

Sekisada: Yeah, have fun. I’ll be there in a second.

**Bazhanov casts a puzzled eye at the two of us and gives a one-sided shrug. He just smiles and turns away, cape sweeping with each motion. I catch Sekisada staring after him a long moment before shaking his head, a quick flick that seems more appropriate to dismiss a fly than a thought.**

Chiyo: Did you need something? I- I mean, uh…

Sekisada: Yeah, I know, you don’t like me. You don’t have to pretend.

Chiyo: Sekisada-san, I keep telling you, at least you’re *trying* to do better. I’m just… kind of confused? [shakes head] Today is confusing.

Sekisada: Well, it’s about to get more so. You should really go talk to Khalaf-san.

Chiyo: …
His expression softens to a level of tenderness I could never even imagine of him, something sad and longing wrapped up in the barest hint of a grin.

Sekisada: [quietly] You... You two really care about each other. Everyone can see it. You should tell them how you feel before... before something happens.

Sekisada: In this killing game, nothing is certain, and none of us know if we’ll even live to see tomorrow. You have someone you love, Kumoshita-san, and you should maximize every moment you have with them.

Chiyo: … And you?

Sekisada: …

Sekisada: If there was someone I loved - and if I were free - I would never want them to know how I felt unless it were the most urgent situation I could imagine. But once it hit that point, I’d definitely tell them just so they wouldn’t… leave, without knowing how I felt, or vice versa.

I’m about to press him about Bazhanov, but I stop myself. The sadness with which he conducts himself, the way he seems to be holding himself together... I have to stop myself, because I know in that moment, that as much as he cares about Bazhanov, he could never bring himself to love him.

Yet he looks at me without any sort of anger or jealousy.

Sekisada: Isn’t this urgent enough to you?

Chiyo: I- yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right. I’ll tell them.

Sekisada: You promise?

Chiyo: I promise. Does this have anything to do with what you wanted to talk to them about?
Sekisada: Huh? No. I can talk to them later, anyway. Don’t worry about me.

He shoves his hands in his pockets and smiles, actually smiles at me, and even though I know I shouldn’t trust him - he’s never been this agreeable, he’s asking to talk to someone I KNOW he hasn’t ever spoken to, and this is all extremely suspicious as it is - all my complaints die in my throat as he pushes himself off the wall and for once I can see his face without his trying to duck away. And what I see is…

… It’s the face of someone very tired, yes, but with the weight of Atlas off of his shoulders. Yet what stands before me now is no god, but a man, relief in his outline and release in his eyes.

Sekisada: Thank you, Kumoshita-san. For everything. And take care.

He leaves before I can reply, walking quickly down the hall until he reaches the stairs. For a moment, I almost move to follow him, but instead I just stand and listen to the distant murmur of voices and spikes of laughter and I may not know what exactly runs through Sekisada’s head but think I can understand his relief, too.

So I turn my attention instead to the library doors before me, take a deep breath, and enter. The air is still and cooler than I’d expected, and I spend a moment just standing before going any further. … That really was a lot of nail polish fumes that I was breathing in, wasn’t it.

I let the door click shut behind me and take a few steps forward, but a quick blur of motion stops me in my tracks as Amal peeks out from behind a bookshelf.

Amal: Who’s there?

Chiyo: Just me!

Amal: Oh. [blinks] Hey.
Chiyo: Hi!

I wander over to where they’re seated in the fantasy section. They make space for me on the ground and put down the book they’re reading, and with a glance at the author I can tell it’s the same one I was reading this morning. We both have good taste, apparently. I try to sit a respectful and not at all awkward distance from Amal but a hand reaches up to mine and guides me to sit right next to them, so close that my legs almost tangle in theirs as we both try to fit in the aisle.

Chiyo: Ah!

Amal: [lets go] S-sorry. That was sudden.

Chiyo: No, it’s more than fine! I’ll just, um…

I adjust myself so I’m sitting next to them instead of across from them, and then lean a little against their side for good measure. A comforting weight settles across my shoulders as they sling their arm behind my neck.

Chiyo: Better?

Amal: Much.

I hum in agreement and sink into the touch.

Chiyo: How was minigolf? I hear Bazhanov-san won?

Amal: Are you kidding? No. I don’t think anyone won. I’m pretty sure no one in that room actually knew how to play. [mutters] Including myself.

Chiyo: Oh. Then, uh, what was the point?
Amal: It’s about sending a message. And keeping Harai-san away from Sumitama-san.

Chiyo: Wait, that’s right… How much of that conversation did you overhear?

Amal: Not much. Just that they were uncomfortable and Sumitama-san kept asking questions. Was it anything I needed to know, or…?

Chiyo: I don’t think they’re comfortable talking about it, so it’s not my place to say. But thank you for coming in anyway.

Amal: [nods] Yeah, that’s fair. It’s no problem, really.

They readjust themself so I’m leaning on their shoulder. Their sweater is really soft.

Amal: So what have you been up to?

Chiyo: Just talking to people. Sekisada-san wants to talk to you, by the way.

Amal: Huh? Oh, yeah… I don’t know. He’s been acting super weird the past few days. Weirder than normal.

Chiyo: I’ve noticed. It’s almost like he’s nice now or something, right?

Amal: Mm, yeah. And he keeps approaching me, opening his mouth, and then turning and leaving, so… I dunno, that’s kinda weird.

Chiyo: Yeah… I think he means well, though! Although I’m worried about him. But that isn’t new.

Amal: True. [sighs] It’s a killing game. I think we’re all concerned about each other.
Chiyo: Let’s not talk about that now.

I feel Amal nod rather than see it, and it’s weirdly comforting. I bump my foot against theirs a few times and giggle when they kick back. Amal laughs, too, and eventually the noise peters out to a quiet contemplation.

I need to tell them how I feel before something intervenes as always and the moment is lost again, but what would I even say? Would it even be worth the risk? I’m… fairly certain that they feel the same, I’m not THAT oblivious, but what would we even do from there?

So… I think I’m willing to drag things out a little longer. Just to exist in this intimacy.

I think I doze off at some point watching the fluorescent light on their cheekbones. When I snap back to reality, they’re reading again with one hand, the other rubbing slow circles into my shoulder. I feel like… honestly, honestly if I died here, I wouldn’t be happy and I would certainly be terrified, but I think I wouldn’t NOT be expecting it?? Aaa.

But the longer this goes on, the harder any of this becomes to say, and I know that if I never say anything then the lights will turn off as they always do and we’re going to tiptoe around this more tomorrow and never quite speak of how close we’ve become and I don’t want that anymore. I just want to be with them, and stop hiding how I feel, and even though I’m sure they feel the same way I want to know, okay? Before… before anything bad can happen!! Not saying that it will, and I’m sure that five days later we’re at an all-time death low. But I should be careful!

Amal: Oh, you’re awake.

Chiyo: Yeah! Sorry for spacing out for a bit.

Amal: It’s fine. It’s really cute.

A slight, embarrassed grin lights up their face, accompanying a spreading blush. It’s enough to make anyone overwhelmed. Or, well, just me, maybe. It’s adorable. Fuck you. It also prohibits me from coming up with an appropriate response and I say something without even thinking.
Chiyo: And- and so are you?!!

**THAT WAS POSSIBLY THE WORLD’S WORST RESPONSE EVER ARTICULATED I AM GOING TO DIE.**

But then Amal’s startled expression melts into a genuine laugh, and the sound itself is like angels descending from above and, more importantly, makes me smile too, and honestly? Fuck it. Fuck what they might think of me after this, but I need them to know how much they mean to me and how much this, all of this, means to me.

Chiyo: Amal.

Amal: Hm?

Chiyo: I… I think I…

Chiyo: [quietly] I think I love you.

Amal: …

Their shoulders drop, just a little, and with it my heart.

Amal: … I love you too, but…

*And there it is. The admission that they secretly hate me, and that my weeks of trying to hide how I feel we’re all for nothing. Pack it up, everyone.*

Chiyo: … Just say it.

Amal: But I don’t know if that’s fair to us.
I… Well, that’s not the answer I was expecting.

Amal: [hastily] Like, no, don’t get me wrong, I’ve literally spent the majority of the past two weeks being an enormous loser and daydreaming about- about you, but if we were to date, then… What would happen?

Amal: Yes, we’d be happy - you’d be happy, and I would be just watching you - but what’s the cost? Our lives? Chiyo, if one of us died, then what would the other do?

Chiyo: ...

Amal: I…

They take a deep breath and hold it there, not looking at me.

Amal: I lost you once before, in a way. I don’t know if you remember. I don’t think you do.

Amal: I’ve been having these dreams. You’re in a lot of them. And I think before all of this, before this killing game, we knew each other… It’s just.

Amal: Seeing you, and knowing what we had, and knowing we can’t go back to that in a place that we were safe is absolutely unbearable. And I don’t want to go through with it if I lose you for good.

Amal: I love you, Chiyo, I really do, but please, let’s just… Not act on it.

Slowly, bit by bit, my heart rebuilds itself into something stilted and barely reminiscent of what it was before, but still a beating whole.

I… I know, logically, that there is too much sense in what they’re saying, but this strange beating structure doesn’t want to accept it as true. I know that this will do nothing but hurt us in the long run. And I agree, actually! Being in a relationship would put both of us at risk
for further heartbreak! So it’s wiser not to be! And we can just… care for each other in a noncommitted way, or something like that!

But then why is that so hard to just lie down and accept? And why do I still feel like I’m being crushed?

My voice sounds far away when I can finally think of something to add, and instead of an agreement it sounds more like a plea.

Chiyo: ... What are we, then?

Amal: [softly] I don't know. I wish I knew. I don't know what we're going to do, Chiyo.

Amal: I don't want to put all this hope into something that might not even last.

Chiyo: But it might?

**Before I can even elaborate, Amal shakes their head, shoving their glasses higher up on their face.**

Amal: No, I don't know if you get it, Chiyo. If we stay friends, and if I lose you, then I'll be upset, but I'll be able to move on. [winces] It's blunt, and I'm sorry, but it's the truth. But if we were to date, and then something were to happen to you...

Amal: ...

Their hands curl into fists at their sides, their breathing still steady.

Amal: Then I know it will break me.

The invitation for me to imagine the same is implicit, and... I think I understand their fear more innately than I want to admit to myself. If I had lost so much at such a young age, I
would be terrified of losing anyone else, too. After a moment's pause, they take another wavering breath and continue, voice low.

Amal: But I want to... I want to be with you. In whatever form that has to be. And if it means we can't be closer than we are already, then...

Amal: So be it.

That...

That can't be it. What was all of this between us - the messages, the longing looks, hell, all the dreams - what was any of it for, if we just give up now? Of course what they're saying makes sense. I've known Amal long enough to know that they wouldn't just say something if they didn't think it was sensible. But this, well...

Chiyo: ... It feels too close to giving up.

Amal: I'm not giving up. I'm being logical.

Amal: If we were to- to date. To go out. And then one of us died. What the hell would the other do? End up all angry and mourning and guilty? Or even worse? [shakes head] Chiyo, I know grief. I wake up every day with a weight on my chest telling me that I couldn't save anyone, and saying that I wouldn't be able to save you.

Amal: So I need you to understand, I would love to spend the rest of my life with you, but I don't want that to be just... Whatever time we have in here. I want to be with you somewhere we can both be safe.

Chiyo: I...

Chiyo: ... I think... I can understand.

Chiyo: But.

Amal stops, tension rising in their shoulders as they stare like a hunted, wounded animal for whatever I have to say. I try to keep what I have to say as neutral as I possibly can.

Chiyo: … A relationship is supposed to be multiple people? Any kind of relationship, not just the romantic kind. So I want to have my say. If that's okay?

Amal: … Alright.

I know, already, that their decision has been made and that it'll take a lot to sway their mind. I know too much has happened to them, to both of us, for them to take what's presented to them without a second thought.

And, in a lot of ways, they have a point. Even if we come from extremely different backgrounds, we have the shared experience of all the grief in this building. What about Valdez, who did everything he could right and was still forced to attack an innocent other? Or Shionaga, who was punished for the accident he created? Bates, who was led to his death by that same higher power. Then Murdock... I don't even know where to begin.

Each of these four lives left tragedy in their wakes, and even today their losses affect every one of us, in the way Chisaki's eyes dull out when someone references her hand too often and the way Ekyou's shoulders slump too heavy after a long day and the way that I still can't stand in the atrium without feeling nauseous from the folded flowers or the dancing motes of dust. Not even to mention the sadness we face that have nothing to do with this killing game at all! Kashizaki's cycle of perfection and self-immolation, Harai's father and whatever their current living conditions must be, and then Sekisada…

And even Amal themselves has faced so much in their short time on this earth, something I know I'll never be able to come close to truly comprehending.

And when you've seen so much bad, what's the point of believing in good? It's so, so likely that happiness will be torn away from you the very next instant. So why bother?
Except... That's not all that's happened in the mansion.

We've had afternoons of cooking, board games, exploration, and eavesdropping. I've sat in on fortune telling, counseling, and jam sessions all the same. We've had love, despite all of our best efforts to conceal it and tamp it down and maybe we shouldn't really love each other so freely, but here we are pouring our hearts out regardless of the consequences.

For every bad day, we've had so many good ones. For every tear, a thousand peals of laughter. And for every broken heart, we've mended ourselves anew, and we keep going. Because, despite all of the bad in the world, the point is that there is good.

And that good is why we're still alive, and why we're still here even when all odds say that we shouldn't be. Who's to say that we will be? Who's to say that we can't live for today because we're frozen in the past or the future?

I weigh death against life and realize I've known my decision all along.

Chiyo: It would be worth it.

Chiyo: Even if you or I were to die tomorrow, it would be worth it because we tried at all.

Amal: ...

Chiyo: Just because bad things happen, we shouldn't have to force ourselves to stay away from good things, you know? There's so much in this world, Amal! There's so much that we haven't seen! And we're...

Strange wet blobs fall from my face, and I make no move to hide them.

Chiyo: A-Amal, I think you're one of the best things to ever happen to me. And I really, really want to spend as much time as I can with you acknowledging that, and whatever I am to you. I don't want to just- to just give all of that up because you're scared of what might happen if we even try.
Chiyo: I… I know I asked you what we are, and honestly, I don't know what we're going to do either! But I want to be happy! And I want you to be happy! And I think we've realized at this point that that's very possible together! So, so… So.

Chiyo: I think that's what I'm asking you. If we can... If we can just try this whole romance thing out. Am I asking you out? I think I'm asking you out.

Chiyo: [hurried] But it's your decision, of course, because if you're not comfortable even after all of this I totally understand, and… And…

I know I'm crying now, each breath disrupting the words I keep trying to get out anyway as Amal just looks at me, looks at me with their golden eyes and not a trace of malice or sadness but just this expression of wonder written all over, as if I were the first glimpse of a rainbow at the end of a storm. They reach out to my face, their fingertips soft as they brush tears from my cheek, and then their hands settle against my jawline and stay there.

It doesn't last longer than a second, but by the time they pull away, their cheeks are red and my own are burning so much that their lips must have come away scorched.

Amal: I- I'm sorry. I got carried away, I know what I said, and I should have waited for you to finish, but- you're just, I couldn't stop myself.

Amal: I agree. Completely. I don't think- I don't think I wanted to admit it, because I spent so long telling myself that I shouldn't- that I can't have happiness, although that sounds really stupid now that I say it out loud. And I would be the happiest person on Earth to go out with you. Sorry, I should have said all of this earlier.

Amal: But that was hasty. And improper. And if you're uncomfortable, then I understand, and if it's a dealbreaker I'm sorry but I, uh, I completely… get it...

They slow to a stammering stop as I take their face between my own hands, and everything around the two of us sharpens into perfect focus. As I look at them and brush their hair back like I've always wanted to do, I realize now that they're still so close to me.

I'd never want it any other way.
Chiyo: Hey.

Amal: ... Hey.

Chiyo: Let's try that again.

And it's nothing at all like the movies, where the couple kisses to a swell of music and the perfect lighting shines through behind us to a crystalline moment of scripted passion. In fact, as far as first kisses go, I'm pretty sure we're on the low end. We're just a pair of awkward teenagers tucked behind library shelves.

But from the way Amal grins from ear to ear, their smile a perfect image of mine, I don't think anyone could tell us apart from a fairytale ending.

We spend what feels like hours just sitting there, sharing a book between us and talking idly about the future, about each other, about just being together and no longer being shy about the possibility of living our lives outside of this mansion. How cool is that! That we might be able to build our futures together! And even though Amal may not believe in a tomorrow, the
way that they look at me when I muse upon going to college is nothing short of adorable. They don't light up so much as glow, and they pull me a little closer so they can see me better and I have to keep asking myself, how lucky can I be to be with someone like them?

Also, we kiss. A lot. That part is… I think we've earned it, at this point. None of it is very serious at all, and I can't even break away without giggling and I'm not sure at what. Delight? Fear? Am I just giddy? Who knows! Who cares, when it makes them laugh too?

Eventually, the lights flicker out like they always do, only this time instead of interrupting an awkward conversation all it does is remind us that we have to leave. Amal pauses for a moment as they stand, leaning heavily on my shoulder.

Amal: We could just stay in here. I don't feel like moving.

Chiyo: [pats hand] I would love that, but this room doesn't have any comfy couches. Kashizaki-chan is probably waiting for us, too…

Amal: Mmph. [closes eyes] You're right but you shouldn't say it.

Chiyo: I thought you were the sensible one in this relationship.

Amal: Yeah, well, I get tired sometimes. [opens eyes] … We're dating.

Chiyo: We are. Eheheh… it doesn't feel real to me, either. I feel like I'm dreaming.

Amal: Oh, tell me about it. I've dreamt of you so much that I'm not entirely convinced this isn't a dream either.

Chiyo: AMAL.

They plant a kiss on my head and steer me towards the door, and for all my gleeful protesting I can't shake the seeds of worry that have suddenly sprouted. I know they've mentioned that losing me and our relationship was something they worried about breaking, but I guess I
didn't really realize until now just how much that would mean. If I had known what was possible between the two of us, been aware of how much they meant to me, only to have it torn from me the next instant… would I have had the courage to keep living and try again? Will I have that courage now?

Maybe I should be afraid, but I brush it off even as we walk back to the foyer. I want to focus on the here and now, future be damned. We've come this far. We earned a happy end, at least for this instant. The room's been draped in spare sheets and blankets, and most everyone is already sprawled around the room and in various states of slumber as I guide Amal's steps across the floor to a free sleeping area. I catch a glimpse of Kashizaki in the dim light but she only smiles with me with huge round eyes, surprisingly dark now that she's taken out her contacts. She gives us a single, approving nod and turns over without further comment.

And as the two of us settle down for the night, and the adrenaline finally dies down after all the excitement of today, I think I can finally, truly identify this feeling as happiness. I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I know the two of us can face it head-on.

Just as I'm about to slip away, a soft hand squeezes mine and I smile. It takes an effort, but I manage to free my pinky from the grip and rest it on theirs in an unspoken promise.

Chiyo: [mumbles] I love you.

Amal: I love you too.

The last thing I feel is the pressure of their own pinky on mine, a quiet affirmation.

Amal: Goodnight, Chiyo.

And I fall asleep, their words a warm glow in my chest.

...
I wake up too early, thin light from outside streaming in through the window shutters. I check my Parchment. 5:59. Why am I awake?

I shift, a little more aware of my surroundings now, the dead silence save for gentle breathing from all sides, and slowly, too slowly, I register the absence of warmth next to me.

Not the absence of a source of warmth, mind. Not as if Amal had gone to use the bathroom and was coming back in a minute. A complete absence of warmth in its entirety.

*Something is wrong.*

I sit up quickly and scan the room to see if maybe they moved somewhere else in their sleep. Nearest me is Kashizaki, head resting on her arms. Harai slumped against a wall, breathing shallow and slow. Then there's Ekyou lying flat on her back and Sumitama, arms and legs draped carelessly. Atsui sleeping on his side, McRae close by. On the far side of the room Chisaki and Everett, leaning against each other, and Bazhanov curled up nearby. But then Sekisada- where's Sekisada??

It all comes back in a rush. Sekisada's odd behavior. The fact that he wanted to talk to Amal. The fact that they're both missing- SHIT. SHITSHITSHIT.

I grab Kashizaki's shoulder, aiming to rouse and shoving her over instead.
Chiyo: Kashizaki- Kashizaki-chan. Wake up.

Kashizaki: Hm...? [blinks] I'm awake, what time's it…

Chiyo: Kashizaki- Ririka, Ririka please wake up, Amal and- Amal and Sekisada are gone.

*Her eyes flutter half-shut, then widen.*

Kashizaki: Like... Like. Oh fuck. Oh no. Oh my god.

*Next to me, someone else stirs. Harai shakes themself as if they're breaking from a daydream instead of a slumber.*

Harai: What's happening?

Chiyo: [shaking] P-please, if you could help- help me investigate, I- I...

Kashizaki: [touches my shoulder] You don't have to say a word. Harai-san, check the downstairs area. I'll cover the second wing. Chiyo...

Chiyo: I can- I can check the, the first area. [gulps] Please- please don't wake anyone else up. If you can. I...

*Kashizaki grabs me by the upper arm and lifts me into a standing position. On my other side, Harai breezes past, lifting their mask to get the words out.*

Harai: Meet at the fireplace as soon as you can. Stay safe.

Kashizaki: Right. You too.
And Kashizaki hurries me up the stairs, my legs trembling so much I don't know how I'm still moving forward but I have to be, each step a stumble until we reach the second floor and she looks back to me, brow knit with worry.

Kashizaki: You okay?

Chiyo: Yeah- yeah, I can, I can take it from here, I...

Chiyo: [deep breath] I... I'll be okay. Just be fast. Please.

Kashizaki: ... Right. I'll do my best.

Chiyo: Thank you.

She gives me a tight-lipped smile and leaves quickly. It's all I can do to get my leaden feet to move again and do the same.

Not in the kitchen, not in the hallway; I can barely hold myself together enough to just peek in each bathroom to tell that there's nothing there. The library is just a library, the medical and laundry rooms have nothing of note, and the atrium holds only regret.

I stand for a long time, maybe too long, in the meeting room, before I can bring myself to look at the couch. But no, that's abandoned too.

I wasn't going to look at the personal rooms, but it looks like I have no choice. Carefully, one by one, I crack open each door just enough to see inside and then leave. At the last door, I stop, double check the nameplate, and gently step inside. I'm immediately assailed on all sides by reminders of them - the smell of pencil shavings, the scraps of paper on the floor, an entire fountain pen cracked open and a sweater strewn across the bed - but Amal is nowhere to be found. All the traces of their life, things that I'd be fawning over at any other time, just fill my heart with an even deeper dread.

SOMETHING
And I make it out of the room before the tears fill my eyes, but by the time I get back to the hallway my vision is swimming. Harai and Kashizaki already wait for me, the latter gesturing wildly while the former stands stock-still.

Kashizaki: I don't understand it! There's nothing wrong on my end and nothing wrong on yours! Unless Chiyo found something, there's absolutely no trace of either of them! What the hell HAPPENED?!

Harai: ... I don't know. I don't know, Kashizaki-san, I'm sorry...

Kashizaki: I don't expect you to know, I'm just- [sucks in a breath] God. What. The fuck. And if Khalaf-san's- [shakes head] No. No, no, that can't be happening. We just need to stay optimistic...

She trails off when she sees me and tries to paste on a smile instead.

Kashizaki: Ah, Kumoshita-chan, did you find anything? Anything… at…

I lower my head and pray that my embarrassment can overtake my distress, fill me with something warm and awkward instead of this cold, cold fear. Kashizaki's jaw clenches, then softens.

Kashizaki: Oh my god. We're fucked.

Somehow, it's seeing Kashizaki of all people admit just how lost she is that finally knocks me into perfect clarity. If she doesn't know what to do, then I can't panic anymore because I will surely become lost myself. I can't… I can't afford to be scared, even if it's a hopeless situation. I have to carry on…

Harai picks up something on the ground, white and perfect in their hands. Is that… printer paper? I haven't seen any at all in the mansion until now. And even Amal's fifty two page
dissertation was on yellowed sheets…

… Please, please, please-

Harai: I think someone dropped this. It says, um.

Harai: … “Look at the edges of the fireplace. Tap brick seventeen from the bottom left, and forty-seven from the bottom right at the same time.”

Kashizaki: Shit. Shit, okay. What?

Harai: It says-

Kashizaki: No, I heard. Forty-seven, right?

Harai: From the bottom right.

Kashizaki nods and gets to counting. I try to help her but soon enough the words start swimming before my eyes and I have to step back as Kashizaki and Harai each locate their bricks.


Kashizaki: One. Two, and...

As the two of them push the bricks in, something clicks quietly from deep within the building. Maybe if I cared more, I might hear a whir of machinery or electronic beeping, but all I can do is wait for a response. Something. Anything. Please.

And, with a snap, the flames go out, transforming the space from a fireplace to an elevator.
Kashizaki looks from me to Harai, grasping for reasons to hesitate. Harai, too, seems uneasy. As for myself...

Kashizaki: ... We're not having a trial already, are we?

Harai: No. This hasn't happened before.

Harai: [wavers] You don't think- you don't think the fire's going to start again, do you?

Their hands brush, not their mask for once, but their neck. I think something powdery comes away and a furious red is sketched underneath, but I don't have time to ask. My voice seems distant to even myself.

Chiyo: We have to use the elevator.

Kashizaki just nods, and after a second, so does Harai. Each of them take one of my hands - both comforting, but both so different - and at this point, I can't even disguise my panic nor thank them for the gesture because the world is crumbling to pieces around me and these two are the only things keeping it barely together.

By some unspoken agreement, we all step on the elevator at once, and instead of going up to the trial room...

... the elevator begins to move downwards.

It's both a surprise and not, and I have to suppress a madman's cackle. Of course none of this is normal. Of course not.

None of us say a word as the platform creaks in its downward plunge. Above, the entry to the trial room is a halo of light. Below, through the grates beneath us, I can see only darkness. Mere seconds and an eternity later, counted only in the beating of my heart, the platform comes to a rest on what feels like solid ground. Harai steps off first, almost rushing to get off the platform, and looks at the room around us.
Harai: What is...?

A hallway surrounds us, the air dusty and old. Save for the dim glow of blue at the end, the hall is completely unlit. It's almost as if no one's been here in ages, but through it all I can catch a faint scent of wood, and-

Chiyo: … No. No, no, no…

Each step forward is a battle that I almost win, trepidation giving way once and for all to the anxious rush in my head. Every instinct is screaming to stop, to let the inevitable lie, but that same inevitable realization is pulling me on and on with a force that feels all but physical. The drive for the truth? A wish for justice? Or, perhaps, just the desperate and wild hope that, despite all evidence to the contrary, that crumpled shape before me isn’t… it can't be…

And I reach the end of the hall, and, and…

…

… It’s okay.

They said it would- they said it would all be okay. They said I would have to be, they promised, they promised that I could move on. I’d have to. And- and maybe I should- I could find some sort of comfort, in the fact that they- they aren’t suffering anymore, they aren’t here with us-

But I can’t. I can’t even pull myself together long enough to look at what I know I’ll see, and in the end I’m not brave at all, because I know if I look I’ll never be able to forget it, seared into my eyelids until the day I die.

I will try anyway, and freeze there, something in me refusing to go beyond where you lay now. Where you will lay forever.
And isn’t it cruel, Amal? Isn’t it so fucking cruel that as soon as you, or I, or any of us, finally have some sort of constant in our lives, we have it torn away from us the next minute?

They’re trying to take me away from the last reminder of who you used to be, saying something about investigation and there being more but there can’t be, there just can’t be more than your cracked glasses and your limp hair - I can’t even tell what expression you had in your last moments of life, from how utterly broken your face has become.

And I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, that I wasn’t there for you as the light died in your eyes, and I’m sorry that I had to ruin everything last night by loving you. I promised you that I would be okay if you died, but really I didn’t promise you that and I put it off in the belief that such a thing would never happen. And it still isn’t possible because this can’t be happening, it isn’t happening, the blood will seep back into your face and your bone will knit itself whole until you’re looking at me again, bewildered and reaching out a hand to my heaving shoulders and telling me that everything will be fine-

Harai: Kumoshita.
No. No, I don’t want to- I can’t investigate. I need to stay here, I owe you this much, for- for everything.

Harai: Kumoshita, this isn’t… I know that Khalaf-san- I can’t imagine...

...

Harai: You- you need to see this.

And it feels like an eternity yet no time at all when Kashizaki rests a hand on my shoulder, offering nothing but silent comfort and still failing to deliver as I stare at those hands that had fit so well in my own until they don’t even look like hands anymore, just vague blocks of grey in the dim lighting.

I don’t know how I manage to get to my feet, but I think I must at some point as someone at my side guides me forward, stepping over you as casually as one does an inconvenient log on a trail, and pushes me toward the light at the end of the hall. The light that the people with me have already discovered, apparently, while I was too caught up in the end of my universe.

A shadow sits before the three of us, outlined in the electric blue of idle computers, in such a position of exaggerated comfort that there’s only one reason he can be so at ease in a room so obviously other and none of us want to face it.

Sentarou Sekisada…
...He’s gone, too.

And I know now that you need to wake up, Amal. Please. Just one more time, for me, retract that final bid goodnight and breathe again.

You need to wake up because I can’t do this without you.
Chapter End Notes

... We love you very, very, very, very, very, very much.

Thank you for reading.

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found here.
Chapter Summary

The future's out to get you all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

>You checked out years ago.

>What I'd do not to worry like you.”

---

…

…

…

A chime plays twice. Three Parchments light up, but only two are procured.

Ariel: Two bodies have been discovered! After a certain amount of time has passed, our class trial will begin. Please feel free to investigate to your heart’s content!

Ariel: … Assuming, of course, you’re one of the three in the basement. If not… sit tight, I suppose.

All that’s illuminated between the students is Kumoshita’s haunted expression, drawn taut at the confirmation. With a slow, creaking start, she turns and trudges back to the hallway. Harai and Kashizaki watch her go.

Kashizaki: … We should just… focus on what we can do. [to Harai] You’re good at investigation, aren’t you?
Harai: … People do say that.

Kashizaki: …

She sighs.

Kashizaki: Look, I’m really sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to pressure you into a performance or anything that you’re uncomfortable with, and I didn’t realize how demanding I must have come across as.

Kashizaki: And I’m sorry that we’re stuck here together, but we’re here now, and I need to- okay, we need to get it together. So that we don’t all fucking die, or whatever.

Harai: … It’s fine. That you asked for a performance. I was… happy to do it.

Kashizaki: Listen, the only thing from getting me in a full-fledged argument with you about how you’re obviously not okay right now is that we have bigger priorities. But you’re alright, Harai-san. Just… remember that, okay?

She doesn’t wait for an answer. Her gaze drops back to her Parchment, which casts a strange glow on her features. Harai looks at their own, only finding the new files and a single message from McRae asking about their location. They swipe it aside as Kashizaki opens her own messages, one from Atsui at the top of the list. She frowns at the message and looks to Harai.

Kashizaki: Ryouji’s asking where we are and what Ariel meant by the basement. I’m going to tell him where we are, but not how to get down here. Because…

Her eyes cut again to Kumoshita. Harai nods once, tersely. Kashizaki’s lip curls into a slight frown and she types again, dictating what she’s saying and reading aloud the next message.

Kashizaki: “Harai, Chiyo, and I are in what looks like a control room. Khalaf and Sekisada are dead. We don’t want to overwhelm Chiyo, so we can’t tell you how to get down here. Check everyone for alibis, we don’t have the time.” Sent.
Kashizaki: … And he says, “Sounds good, I’ll let everyone else know. Take all the time you need, but please hurry. Is Ariel with you?”

Oddly enough, there’s no trace of the white bird, although there’s a charge port in the corner shaped like a nest. … That’s a start.

« EVIDENCE: Charge Port »

Harai: The files were sent out, at least.

Failing further comment from either party, they open the first one and read it aloud.

Harai: “The victim was Amal Khalaf, SHSL Journalist. The time of death was 3:04 AM, and the body was discovered at 6:13 AM by Chiyo Kumoshita, Tatsumaru Harai, and Ririka Kashizaki. The cause of death was head trauma. Aside from their cracked skull, the victim has shallow cuts on their face.”

« EVIDENCE: Ariel’s File #3 »

And again, involuntarily, the two look back at Kumoshita kneeling beside Khalaf, completely motionless. She doesn’t react at all to the file.

Kashizaki: What could have caused the cuts? I don’t see any knives down here.

Harai: Maybe the cuts were caused by something else? We’d probably have to look at them.

Kashizaki: [mumbles] I don’t know if we could even look at the cuts from how messed up their face is, though.

At that, Kumoshita’s shoulders stiffen, and Kashizaki turns away quickly, almost guiltily.
Kashizaki: Okay, not touching that right now. Do you have the other file?

Harai: Right. Just a moment…

Harai: “The victim was Sentarou Sekisada, SHSL Seat Filler. The time of death was 3:10 AM, and the body was discovered at 6:13 AM by Chiyo Kumoshita, Tatsumaru Harai, and Ririka Kashizaki. The cause of death was cellular failure through cyanide poisoning. No other injuries are present.”

「 EVIDENCE: Ariel’s File #4 」

Kashizaki: Cyanide?!

She rushes to the table and bats aside papers until she holds a bottle in her hands, straining to make out the label under the dim light.

Kashizaki: [reading] “Sodium cyanide pills. Lethal. For a last resort”...

Kashizaki: What- what the fuck?? Did he kill himself??

Harai: I- I don’t know. From the looks of things, maybe…

The glass on the desk throws light across the room. Harai picks it up in their hands, watching the water swirl.

Harai: What are the symptoms of cyanide poisoning, anyway?

Kashizaki: [typing quickly] I don’t know. I’m asking Ryouji. I don’t know how he even had access to any of this stuff. The poison, the room, all of it.

Harai: There’s really only one explanation.
Kashizaki: I know. It has to do with Prospero, right? The one...

She falters, hands coming to a stop on her screen.

Kashizaki: Sekisada-san was the one behind all of this, wasn’t he.

All Harai can do in response is nod, setting the glass down, then return to rifling through the pages on the desk.

Kashizaki: So what do you think is going to happen? Are we even going to have a trial since the mastermind is dead?

Harai: Since Ariel sent out the files anyway, there probably will still be a trial.

Harai: I’d… I think I would be pretty upset if I were the host and found out that the mastermind had died, too. Assuming the birds have any sense of justice, or anything like that...

They trail off, too. In the lull, Kashizaki swipes at her screen, frowning as the lights flicker around the two. And still, Kumoshita stands silent vigil, eyes open but seeing nothing.

Harai: I’ll look around. We don’t have any time to waste.

Kashizaki: [nods] Thanks. I’m arguing with Chisaki-san as to why she can’t come down right now. Maybe if they have time after we finish here, they can take a look, but I feel like having more people down here will ruin the crime scene.

Harai: [nods] That’s very true. Tell her that we’re okay, too.

Kashizaki: On it.

Kashizaki: [pauses; looks away] … Should I tell her about how Sekisada-san…
They sigh.

Harai: … Yes. Yes, tell them. Tell all of them what happened. So that they know what to expect in the trial.

Kashizaki only bows her head over her Parchment as Harai starts to search through the room.

「 EVIDENCE: Sekisada 」

The first thing out of place… That’d be in the hallway, a fixture Kumoshita probably hadn’t seen as she had come in. Harai’s eyes fall to a shape on the floor, a dark smear stained with shining ones. Kneeling close reveals it to be… a sledgehammer, or something resembling one. A trail of blood connects it back to Khalaf’s head, though Kumoshita doesn’t seem to notice or care.

At least the murder weapon is obvious this time. No more elaborate traps.

「 EVIDENCE: Sledgehammer 」

Kashizaki: … Hey, I just realized. Didn’t you discover the other two bodies, too?

Harai: Yes? Why do you ask?

Kashizaki: Oh. No reason. I’m just surprised by your ability to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Harai: That does seem to be a talent.
Kashizaki: No clue what you’re talking about, but okay. Doesn’t that get taxing? To be the one person who has to see all these dead bodies first?

Harai: Eh. It keeps me out of being accused.

Kashizaki: [eyes widen] Oh, shit, I hadn’t even considered that.

Harai: Most people don’t. I’m just worried about the people who are still suspicious of me.

Kashizaki: I dunno, honestly. You’ve proven yourself to be pretty trustworthy, if you ask me.

Harai: If you say so.

They rub at their neck and sigh, an awkward and terse thing.

Harai: I shouldn’t have left all of this makeup on.

Kashizaki: Since when do you wear makeup?

Harai: It’s… It’s nothing. Just to hide some old injuries. Don’t worry about it.

Kashizaki: Let me guess. The makeup is from yesterday morning?

Harai: Uh… Yes, but-

Kashizaki stares at them flatly for a few seconds, then reaches into the pouch at her waist. She extracts a packet of wipes and gives them to Harai.

Kashizaki: Here. Use what you need.
Harai: You’re sure?

Kashizaki: Listen. My talent is literally makeup. Makeup has gross chemicals in it. I feel pretty bad that you even slept on the sheets with that on, actually. Just… get cleaned up, and let me do some investigation, too.

Harai: …

Hesitant, they take the wipes. They make no move to open them, but when Kashizaki glares at them, their hands start moving of their own accord.

Harai: Thank you.

Kashizaki: It's whatever. You’re welcome. [turns on Parchment again] Now…

She heads to the desk again and picks up the pills, turning them in her hands once more. This doesn’t prove much of anything, only that they exist and were ingested by Sekisada, but it’s important to log their existence, at least.

« EVIDENCE: Pills »

Then there’s the matter of the room itself. Though there has to be at least 7 or 8 television screens in addition to the computer monitor, all of them are set to the same bluish screen with a password prompt. It seems that every part of the system has been logged out. As unhelpful to figuring out Prospero’s methods as this is, one thing is clear - this room is a secret, and likely the hub of the entire mansion.

« EVIDENCE: Control Room »

Still. There’s not much the two of them can access here without a password, and Kashizaki blows out a frustrated breath as she surveys the mess of papers. Not like any of this is relevant to the case at hand, but it’d be good to know what’s going on here.
Harai finishes wiping off the last of the makeup, placing the wipes aside. They simply stand in contemplation for a moment, rubbing at the exposed rawness underneath, until Kashizaki notices them standing and double takes at the extensive scarring on their neck. Without comment, Harai gives her the wipes back.

Kashizaki: Dude. What the fuck. [points to own neck] All of- all of that??

Harai: I don’t want to talk about it.

Kashizaki: The hell are you using to cover those scars? Foundation? [clucks tongue] That’s how you get an infection. Wait, you aren’t using makeup under that mask, too, right?


Kashizaki: Okay, good, but you need to promise me to stop wearing all that makeup, alright? Even on your neck.

Harai: But-

Kashizaki: Don’t “but” me, that’s really bad for you to be wearing every day, especially if you leave it overnight. How long have you been doing that? Actually, don’t answer that. And keep the wipes, I have more in my room. When we get out of here, you’re promising me never to put that shit on your neck again, okay?

Harai: If we get out of here, I’m sure we’ll both have bigger problems than makeup infections.

Kashizaki: I don’t mean “here” as in the mansion. I mean “here” as in this basement. Understand?

Harai: …

Kashizaki: Do you understand, Harai-san.
Harai: … Yes. I understand.

Kashizaki: Good. What are you thinking about? You look contemplative.

Harai: I do?

Kashizaki: You mess with your mask when you’re nervous.

Harai: [drops hands] I do??

Kashizaki: You’d better not be picking your scars.

Harai: Uh.

Kashizaki: [mutters] This is a lost cause. [louder] So what are you thinking about?

Harai: This case. Or what we’ve seen of it so far, anyway.

Harai fiddles with their mask a little more, and almost takes it clean off to breathe before seeming to stop themself. That might cause a distraction, and there’s plenty enough to worry about in this case already.

Harai: It’s way too early to say anything for certain, but I have a theory.

They pick up the bottle of pills and hold it up.

Harai: I think Sekisada-shi killed Khalaf-san, and then killed himself.

Kashizaki: …
Kashizaki: Okay, I’ll bite. What’s the timeline?

Harai: Sekisada-shi was doing… whatever it was here, and Khalaf-san stumbled in some way or another. Maybe they found that note?

Kashizaki: … Alright. That’s a decent enough shot at a theory, but here’s the thing. Why would Sekisada-san have made the note to begin with?

「EVIDENCE: Note」

Harai: … Oh. I see what you’re saying.

Kashizaki: Let’s assume he didn’t want to get caught. Why even make the note? And then why leave it somewhere that someone could find and use it?

Harai: Right. But I’m not sure what alternatives we have. Would Sekisada-shi really want to bring Khalaf-san down here?

Kumoshita: He…

The two turn quickly to Kumoshita as she pushes herself to her feet. As if each step were weighted, she moves towards them, eyes downcast.

Kashizaki: Chiyo, we have investigation covered. You can just rest.

Kumoshita: [shakes head] Sekisada… mentioned wanting to talk to them. To, to- [coughs] You know.

Harai: About what?
Kumoshita: [falters] I don’t know. This, maybe.

Harai: … Ah.

Kumoshita: … I’m sorry.

Kashizaki: No, no, don’t be sorry, you didn’t do anything wrong-

Kumoshita: [shakes head] You- you don’t under- you don’t understand. I was talking to Sekisada a few days ago, and…

Kumoshita: ...

Kumoshita: [quietly] I could have done something about this.

Kashizaki sighs and places her hands on Kumoshita’s shoulders. Kumoshita doesn’t react, only looking at the floor.

Kashizaki: Look, I’m pretty confident that you didn’t put the weapon in the killer’s hands. Khalaf-san’s death wasn’t your fault. It isn’t. That’s like blaming them for killing Bates-san because their note was used or whatever.

Kumoshita: [wincs] I know, but-

Kashizaki: Sorry, bad analogy. Just don’t be too hard on yourself, okay? We’re here for you, you know. Harai-san and myself and everyone upstairs. We’re all rooting for you.

Tentative, Harai reaches out, then gently places their hand atop Kashizaki’s.

Harai: We’ll do our best.
She gently takes their hands and removes them from her shoulders. Without a word, she takes a seat by the wall and buries her face in her knees. Kashizaki watches her go.

Kashizaki: … Fucking hell. [shakes head] I don’t- I don’t even get why Khalaf-kun had to die. That’s just straight-up cruel.

Harai: As if the past deaths weren’t?

Kashizaki: You know what I mean.

She draws in a careful breath and keeps talking, sneaking glances at Kumoshita as she lowers her voice to a whisper.

Kashizaki: Before this… I mean this nicely, but not too many people were close with any of the people who died. Aside from McRae-kun, but I haven’t actually seen much of him lately so I can only assume he’s doing okay. Maybe not great, but okay.

Kashizaki: But Khalaf-kun was- well, they were friends with a lot of people, right? Like- like Chiyo, yes, but also like. Myself.

Kashizaki: And I- I don’t know. I spent a lot of time with them, and I know about some of what they had to struggle with both in and out of this building, and… I just don’t know. Part of me is expecting them to get up and start making snide comments or something.

Kashizaki: I guess I just can’t believe they’re gone. And for something so- something so dumb.

Though Kashizaki lacks her usual luminescent glare, her eyes still look unnaturally glassy in the dim light.

Kashizaki: It’s just stupid. They shouldn’t have died. And it’s not fair to them that they died, but that probably goes for everyone else, too…
Kashizaki: … Whatever. I’m getting off task. We really need to investigate the crime scene so we don’t die. Sorry for sounding like a broken record.

Harai: Don’t apologize. This is…

Harai: It’s a lot to process at once. I’m having trouble accepting this, too.

Harai: But I think the best we can do right now is, as you’ve said, to investigate. It’s what they would want, right? For us to find who killed them.

Kashizaki: Yeah. Yeah, I know. I’ve done enough of these to know that by this point. I just wish it were any easier to accept that.

Kashizaki: But we have a trial, so we need to… We need to actually investigate. I’ll be fine. I can deal with this all later.

Harai watches her kneel to Khalaf’s body, her hands shaking as she gently brushes the hair from their face. Covertly, Harai and Kashizaki both glance to Kumoshita, who hasn’t moved. After this moment, Harai kneels as well and reaches out to help. It’s… probably okay, and in fact essential, to start investigation now.

As the file said, it doesn’t seem that they’ve sustained any other injuries than the blow to the front of their head and the slices across their face, evenly spaced and barely visible from the amount of blood splatter already present.

Then there’s the injury itself. Since it was from the front, the killer would have to have been facing Khalaf. Which isn’t much to go off of, but it’s… Something. And everything means something. Right?

「 EVIDENCE: Cuts 」

「 EVIDENCE: Head Injury 」

「 EVIDENCE: Sekisada and Khalaf 」
And Kashizaki slams a hand on the ground beside her, the resulting noise just a pathetic slap on concrete instead of a resounding bit of theatrics.

Kashizaki: *Shit.*

Harai: What’s wrong?

Kashizaki: This barely gives us any leads. What the hell are we supposed to do with any of this?!

Kashizaki: Shallow cuts? A sledgehammer?? Listen, if you can lift a sledgehammer, you can kill someone with it. It’s not like it’s rocket science with that stupid trap or whatever! This doesn’t narrow down the suspects at all! Not to mention we don’t even know where this even came from!

Kashizaki: And then Sekisada-san’s apparently the MASTERMIND for whatever stupid reason, and we can’t even ask him about any of this because guess what! He’s fucking dead! And we can’t access camera feeds or any of that stuff that Chiyo said the mastermind might be monitoring since he’s dead!!

Kashizaki: AND THEN this was at like, hell o’ clock in the middle of the night! No one has any alibis! If anyone had seen the killer leave, they should have SAID something by now!

She jabs a finger at her Parchment, all righteous vitriol and linear rage, and suddenly all the fury evaporates and leaves behind a shadow. In an instant, she rocks back on her heels, a spark of wishful desperation in her voice.

Kashizaki: [hopefully] What if we don’t have to find Khalaf-san’s killer? What if we just have to find Sekisada-san’s killer, and it’s himself, so we can just have a trial where no one else dies?

And for a second, her words ring true, and Kumoshita looks up, and a wild hope surges between the two only to be crushed as Harai flicks through their Parchment.

Harai: The rules say that the first to die is the body we need to investigate, not the first to be discovered. And… And there’s clearly a time of death in both files. And Khalaf-san died first.
Harai: [gently] So. No, that won’t work.

Kashizaki’s shoulders slump. Across the room, Kumoshita’s head sinks back into her arms.

Kashizaki: Ha. Ha...

Kashizaki: Fuck the rules. That’s- god, that’s unfair, that’s exactly what I thought you’d say. Fuck the rules.

Harai: I’m sorry.

Kashizaki: It’s fine, Harai-san. You just- you can be pretty blunt sometimes. And I guess so can I. Just. Ha.

Harai: … Was that a compliment?

Kashizaki: I dunno. I think I’m just losing it at this point, to be entirely honest with you. It can be a compliment if you want it to be.

Harai: Pass.

Kashizaki: Suit yourself. [frowns] How are YOU so calm, anyway? Can you give me advice? I feel like I can’t even focus on this case without getting frustrated and- and I can’t. I just can’t.

Harai: [honestly] I don’t know. I’m just doing the best I can. I suppose, after I started living on my own, I had to get used to a lot of things very quickly.

Harai: But I…

They trail off, scratching at their neck again.
Harai: I’m only... alive… to do what I must. My own concerns are secondary.

Kashizaki: Sounds lonely.

Harai: It’s better this way. I suppose that’s why you think I’m calm under pressure.

Kashizaki: Are you not actually?

Harai doesn’t have an answer to that; they only turn back to the desk in silence. To her credit, Kashizaki backs off after a moment and helps them look.

There’s not much on the desk that they haven’t seen already, the vast majority of the clutter being things like empty soda cans and crumpled papers. Kashizaki unfurls one only to find the last page of a purchase record, some real estate listing with an illegible signature at the bottom. The listing seems to have sold for tens of millions of yen, the only description of the property being “DR17 Location”.

When Harai wanders over, she shows it to them. Neither of them say anything, only taking it in. There’s nothing to be said that isn’t already implicit in the document’s inherent suspiciousness. It’s most likely that this is the record for the very mansion they’re in, but… What else can be said about it?

「 EVIDENCE: Purchase Record 」

In picking up the record, however, it seems Kashizaki has uncovered a pair of file folders. She picks one up and flips through it.

Kashizaki: Yo, what the fuck is this.

Harai: Huh?
Kashizaki: [thrusts it at them] All these- are these real??

Harai tilts the file toward them to confirm their suspicions. A photo of a dead person fills every frame.

Harai: It seems to be real, yes.

Harai: [hesitates] There’s, uh, more of them, too. In the downstairs library.

Kashizaki: In the WHAT?? How come you didn’t tell anyone about this??

Harai: Er… Safety reasons?

Kashizaki: People would be safer not knowing about these?? [shakes head] Nevermind, we need to keep focused. Just show me them later, okay?


Kashizaki: Thanks. Uh, sorry about that.

Harai: It’s fine.

They lapse into silence again, this one more uncomfortable than ever before. Harai stares at the pages like they hold the secrets of the universe, while Kashizaki pretends to do the same but keeps sneaking glances back to her companion.

Kashizaki: … How many files are there, anyway?

Harai: A little less than fifty. I’d say about forty-eight. And then three of them don’t have photographs, just illustrations.
Kashizaki: Weird, but okay. So if whoever put us here-

Harai: Sekisada-san.

Kashizaki: Yeah, him, I guess. So if they made all of those files available to everyone, then why isolate these two?

Harai: … That’s a good question.

Kashizaki: [mutters] Thank fuck he did, though. Otherwise I wouldn’t know about this.

Harai doesn’t respond to that directly, only flicking the file back to the roster of students and talents.

Harai: Do you recognize any of these names? There’s a Nariyuki Ganka, Emi Kusada, Hyouka Ienobu...

Kashizaki: No. Let me see that. [takes the file; frowns] Why are there so many international students on this, too? Qiongjie Chen? Krystal Anderson? Mallory Jenkins?… Wow, that’s kind of a dumb name. Poor kid.

Harai: Here, give that back. [pages through the file again, pauses] …

Kashizaki: What happened?

Harai: Does that… that picture.

Kashizaki: …?

Harai: This one. In the kitchen.
They tap the photo, a body stabbed a dozen times and slumped over a table.

Harai: Does this kitchen look… familiar, to you, too?

Kashizaki: … Oh my god. Give me that.

Without waiting for an answer, she tears the report from their hands and paws through it, taking in scene after bloody scene. By the end of it, she twirls her fingers in and out of each other with increasing agitation.

Kashizaki: … What the fuck. It’s the same fucking building. What the FUCK.

Harai: And the talents match up with the upstairs rooms, too. Listen to this. SHSL Lion Dancer, SHSL Astronomer, SHSL Tailor…

Kashizaki: Oh fuck. There’s rooms for all of those upstairs, aren’t there?

Harai: Right, and...

Harai pauses, staring at the next line. Isaku Umitsu, age 15. The image above the name shows a sulking teenager with gold feathers stuck onto an enormous black hat. The SHSL Kyūdōka.

They move on.

Harai: There must have been- this must have happened before. This killing game.

Kashizaki: So then this - [points to purchase record in fist] - is Sekisada buying the whole property. Which makes the file… DR17? Since this mansion is obviously its location.

Harai: It… seems so. [frowns] Oh, it looks like there’s a title on it, actually.
As the words ring out in the dull room, the two, perhaps unconsciously, freeze. Maybe something important is supposed to happen, some memory coming crashing back. Perhaps it’s just a simple appearance by one of the mascots. Just announcing the title into dead air gives it life that none of them might be prepared for.

「EVIDENCE: DR17 File」

Yet as the seconds draw out and it becomes clear that the words are just words, Kashizaki lets out an impatient huff of a sigh and returns to the desk.

Kashizaki: So that’s pretentious. And ominous. But it doesn’t help this case at all. Where’s that other file?

Harai: Didn’t you just say that it wouldn’t help us?

Kashizaki: Yeah, but since this file’s important, the other one must be, too. Wasn’t it just here?

But it’s gone, vanished into thin air, and maybe it never existed in the first place. Kashizaki pushes snack wrappers aside until she, too, is forced to admit that she doesn’t know where the file could have gone.

Kashizaki: Well. You’re right, at least, it shouldn’t affect the case itself too much.

Harai: It would have been good to have to uncover some more of the mysteries in this place.

Kashizaki: On the bright side, if we don’t live through this trial - which we actually might not, considering how fuckoff confusing this whole case is - it won’t matter. Hooray.

Harai: It’d be better to remain optimistic- oh, Kumoshita-san, you’re up.
She stands near the desk, swaying slightly, her Parchment in her hands.

Kumoshita: We have to… We have to go soon. McRae-san texted. He said everyone is waiting for us.

Kashizaki: Shit. I think we might need to investigate Khalaf-kun’s body a little more, actually-

Kumoshita: [sharply] Don’t.

She draws in a shudder of a breath.

Kumoshita: I don’t… I don’t want to remember them like this, because. I. They…

Kumoshita: … I’ll tell you later. Not when- Not when they’re here.

Kashizaki: [gently] Of course. I understand. We can go, now, if you want-

Kumoshita: [shakes head] No, don’t listen to me, I’m being selfish. I- I want us to live. Through tomorrow. So do what you can, okay? Please, for- for them. For us. For all of us.

Kumoshita: If you want to investigate more, please do, but just… Remember. Everyone is waiting for us upstairs, and… We have a trial. And if we die…

And she looks quite suddenly tired. Not like a lover in grief, or a student in distress, but just tired, a woman who knows there’s no point in asking God for mercy but setting out to plead anyway.

She leaves the statement unfinished, and knowing her, it was meant to be something about being afraid of death or, perhaps, something encouraging and determined. But going solely off the look on her face, perhaps it would have been an embrace of the end.

Kumoshita: I’ll be… I’ll be by the elevator.
Still, she doesn’t move and simply stares not at Harai or Kashizaki nor even Khalaf but at Sekisada for a moment, draws closer to him until her face is outlined by the glowing screens, and whispers a quiet “I’m sorry” before taking her leave. She doesn’t look back once.

Try as they might, Harai and Kashizaki can’t uncover any other pertinent evidence from Khalaf’s corpse. There are no smeared footprints, no elaborate mechanisms, and Sekisada is just Sekisada, eyes shut and so relaxed that he might be dreaming in his permanent slumber. After less than a minute, they’re forced to conclude their investigation, and even Kumoshita doesn’t seem surprised as the three of them step back onto the elevator and it begins to ascend.

The ride up is in silence.

When they reach the fireplace, it’s to a rush of hands and a singular stump reaching out, meaning to comfort but actually dragging the three of them off of the platform. Kumoshita and Kashizaki are immediately pulled into a hug by Atsui, then Kumoshita immediately yanked into another one with Chisaki and Everett as Kashizaki and Atsui start to exchange information.

Kashizaki: So- you guys saw the files, right?

Atsui: [nods] Right, and not much else. You- you really weren’t kidding when you said that there wasn’t much evidence up here.

Kashizaki: Yeah. Yeah… I don’t… I don’t know how much evidence we even have. [breathes in] But we’ll have to manage.

Atsui: That’s fair, you did the best you could. Thank you.

Kashizaki: Anyone else would do the same.

Atsui: Yeah, I know, but-
In a second, Atsui pulls Kashizaki back to him again, head buried in her shoulder.

Atsui: [muffled] I’m glad you’re okay.

Kashizaki: … I’m glad, too.

And, inexplicably, Atsui starts to cry. Kashizaki looks alarmed, but quickly pulls him closer and closes her eyes.

Failing other interactions, Harai starts to type out each piece of evidence they’d caught onto in the control room, barely absorbing snippets of conversations bubbling around them.

Sumitama: I can’t believe they’re gone.


McRae: And what a way to go out. In the control room, of all places…

Sumitama: Do you think they were involved in all of this?

Ekyou: No, that would be Sekisada-san, wouldn’t it?

McRae: Mm… But Khalaf-san…

Chisaki: [quietly] I didn’t think he would actually die. He seemed…

Everett: They were really grounded. And stable. I don’t know why they’d even go down there.

Kumoshita: Can we please not.
Chisaki: Oh my gosh. Kumo-chan, I’m here, are you okay?

Kumoshita: … Trying.

Chisaki: If you need anything, just ask. I’m here, and I love you-

Kumoshita: [hoarsely] Please don’t say that.

Chisaki: I know. I know, and I… I wish I could do more.

Everett: ...I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

Harai sits down, and they let the words wash over them overlap and blur into a mess. Of grief, of wonder, of shock. Maybe it’s better that only Harai, Kashizaki, and Kumoshita saw the body. Maybe it’s worse.

For the very first time, the class is united in its sorrow, in its conflict and its struggle for understanding. And still…

... It’s extraordinarily clear which death is being mourned, and which is not. And so quietly, a fluttering albatross, Bazhanov lowers himself next to Harai, looking straight through them.

Bazhanov: I…

Bazhanov: Is… Is it true? That Senik…

All Harai can offer him is a nod. Bazhanov lowers his head and says nothing more.

And people are still talking, McRae now raising his voice to be heard above the din. He turns to Kashizaki.
McRae: Are you sure we can’t do more investigation?

Atsui: Do we have the time for that?

Kashizaki: I don’t know if it’s a good idea, anyway.

McRae: Look. If you don’t think we did enough, then you probably didn’t. Our lives are on the line, you know. How did you even get there in the first place?

Kashizaki: There was this note telling us how to reach the control room, but Ryouji’s right. I don’t know if you’d have time.

Sumitama: Can we see the note? What other evidence did you guys find, anyway?

Harai: Just a second, I’m almost done.

Chisaki: Oh, right, Rai-san was with you! I’m sure we’ll have enough evidence for the case!

Kashizaki glances at Harai, biting her lip. They look at her for only a moment before returning to their work.

Kashizaki: Sure. I guess.

After what feels like far too long, Harai stretches their hands and sends the evidence list to each person in the room. Scattered pings and glowing screens light up as morning filters through the windows, casting stark illumination across faces.

Ekyou: Oh. Oh, wow, this is…

Everett: … So Sekisada-san really did put all of this together.
Sumitama: [unconvincingly] We can’t make any assumptions about that, especially since he’s dead. I don’t want to believe the worst of him, anyway.

Chisaki: And- and he killed himself, apparently??

Bazhanov: … Please don’t…

Chisaki: [ignores Bazhanov] Fucking bastard. He acted like he wanted to be a better person, but then he does- he does all of this and has the fucking nerve to kill himself instead of facing his actions??

She gestures in midair, her right hand twitching as if she’d like to strangle someone. Everett places a hand on her shoulder and is quickly shaken off.

Everett: [cautiously] Tsuki, now isn’t the time-

Chisaki: Khalaf-san’s DEAD because of him! And so is Bates-san! And Murdock-san! And Shionaga-san! And, and…!!

Chisaki: Rrgh!! It’s not fair!! And all of this happened because one person was so stupid, was so fucking SELFISH, that they would- they would put all of this together, and then just- just KILL THEMSELVES to escape all their guilt!

Until now, Sumitama has stood aside quietly, lips pressed together, but now she steps forward to address Chisaki directly.

Sumitama: Do you even hear yourself?

Chisaki: Oh, great, now you’re going to talk to me about how he should have lived for some reason.

Sumitama: Not THAT, just the- the whole thing you said a few days ago! At the trial! About how you want to try to understand a killer, but then you turn right around and talk about how you want them to die! That’s not- you don’t have to be so aggressive!
Chisaki: How the hell do you remember that! Why the hell do you CARE!

Everett: Tsuki.

Chisaki: And anyway, what’s even your point? That I SHOULD be nice to Sekisada-yogisha because he’s dead? Might I remind you, he’s ALSO THE MASTERMIND?

Bazhanov: [mutter] No one proved that yet.

Sumitama: I-I’m not saying that at all! I’m just saying that, that you’re jumping to a lot of conclusions here, and I don’t know why you’re being so mean to me-

Kashizaki: [grits teeth] No one’s being mean to you specifically, Sumitama-san.

**Sumitama rounds on Kashizaki, eyes flashing.**

Sumitama: Is that so? Then what the hell was everything from the past few days about? Why don’t you just tell me to my face why you and everyone else here dislikes me instead of just- just dancing around the topic and never saying why??

Kashizaki: You want it said to your face? Okay!

Atsui: Kikun, don’t say anything, just walk away-

Kashizaki: No, you know what, I’ve been having a fucking morning, one of my best friends is dead and I had to investigate their entire corpse, if Sumitama-san wants a fight she can have one!

Sumitama: I don’t want a fight! I just want answers!

Bazhanov: [whispers] Stop shouting.
Ekyou: Sumitama-chan, please-

Sumitama: But you know what, I’m sick and tired of this acting like I don’t exist! Have you all learned nothing from- from last trial?? About isolating people?? I’m not going to kill anyone, but I totally get being alone because- I don’t know if I’m going crazy, but does everyone just hate me??

Ekyou: No! N-no one hates you! I promise!

Kashizaki: Ekyou-chan, this isn’t your responsibility to reassure her about.

Ekyou: B-but-

Sumitama: See! Even now, you’re undermining me! Can’t you just talk to me like a normal person without trying to get under my skin and making all these assumptions about me? You’re just cruel and don’t want me to be happy.

Kashizaki: [voice rising] Me? Cruel? I’m just doing what I have to! Because I don’t know why, but you keep going on about how you’re so nice, and sweet, and innocent-

Ekyou: No-

Kashizaki: But no! You’re just- you’re literally feeding for attention and for compliments literally all the time! And it’s PAINFUL to watch you string along people- people that you should care about, asking them for so much and never giving them ANYTHING in return other than their dependency on you, because you.

Kashizaki: Don’t.

Kashizaki: Fucking.

Kashizaki: CARE.
Sumitama: -!

Ekyou: ENOUGH!!

Ekyou: Stop, stop, stop, just STOP AND SHUT UP ALREADY!!

Sumitama: I-

Kashizaki: But-

Ekyou: BOTH OF YOU!!!

Her shout stops them all cold, freezes both Kashizaki and Sumitama in their tracks. Instantly, both withdraw, each adopting a look of vague guilt. In the lull, Ekyou, too, begins to crumple under the weight of so many eyes, stopped only when another voice speaks up.

McRae: It... isn’t enough.

He says it so softly that the only reason anyone must notice it is because of Ekyou’s scream, but he clicks off his Parchment and stuffs it into his jacket with such force that his gestures, if not his words, are indelible.

McRae: It’s not enough evidence. We barely have anything to go off of other than the time of death, the method, and the location. We could have gotten all of that from the file. [turns to Kashizaki] We have to do more investigation.

Kashizaki: [blinks] I-

McRae: Listen, hear me out. If we get the elevator stuck downstairs, then we can’t have the trial until we can get to the trial room.

Harai pauses in their typing, just a moment. This moment is all McRae needs to latch onto.
McRae: Then… we can put it off as long as we need.

Atsui: [hesitant] Shit. Do you think that’ll actually work?

McRae: We can try. Where’s the note? We can-

????: Actually.

The room is enveloped in a collective shudder as Caliban flies down the chimney, dusting themself off and making themself known for the first time in what feels like months.

Caliban: It’s a bit late for any additional investigation.

Only Chisaki can think to move, raising a quavering hand in a vague affectation of an accusation.

Chisaki: YOU.

Caliban: Me.

McRae: Isn’t Sekisada-san dead? We shouldn’t even have a trial. The killing game should be over.

Caliban: Yes, yes, by all means it should be! But it’s not, so [eyes glint] get in the fucking elevator or so help me I will kill every last one of you myself.

Sumitama: Y-you don’t scare me. You don’t even have razor blades in your wings!

Caliban: Goodness gracious, can you all just TAKE the diversion from that massive spat you just had and focus on avenging Four-Eyes or whatever? I’m sure Daydreamer would appreciate it!
Kumoshita: …

Chisaki: Leave her alone! It’s the rest of us you’re trying to torment!

Caliban: Yeah, you’re right, it’s the rest of you, and- no, nevermind.

**Their voice goes quite suddenly flat.**

Caliban: Look, I’m not in the mood for this, neither are you, but your investigation period formally ended half an hour ago, and Ariel’s impatient. Can we just. Get this over with.

**As if on cue, the flames go out. Still, no one makes a move toward the bird.**

Caliban: Come on. Maybe you’ll live or die, blah blah blah, mysterious hope-despair statement goes here, listen I don’t really care.

Everett: But Caliban, we’re going to die if we don’t investigate more.

Caliban: Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you all started screaming at each other. Just a thought.

Caliban: Confessing is always an option, too, you know. Save everyone the trouble.

Everett: … I hope so.

**Caliban turns to the rest of them. Whatever ocular vitriol they must be facing from the class, all the bird returns is the same dead gold glare.**

Caliban: … Alright. I understand. Two people are dead, including Sekisada. You’re overwhelmed and your investigation was limited. All seems hopeless right now. The trial looks impossible. And I get that. More than you might know.
Caliban: If worst comes to worst, I’ll try to argue with Ariel myself to let you live. This case is under extraordinary circumstances, and I’m sure that even he would understand. And if not…

Caliban: ...

Caliban: I make no promises. But please, just... go.

And with no prompt and no threat, they pile onto the too-empty elevator, Harai taking the very last step. The elevator begins its inexorable climb upward, crushing with it every last hope of resolving the case properly.

At the top, the day has already broken, sending shards of light across the podiums and portraits. Ariel and Caliban watch with no glee as each student drifts to their assigned station, taking their stands with unsteady feet. An impossible case, and impossible secrets, lie before them, waiting to be unraveled. And as for us…

We wait with dread.

Caliban: So, without further ado…

Ariel: The third trial is now in session.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found here.

A list of truth bullets can be found here.
3-7: What I'd Do Not To Worry Like You

Chapter Summary

The game plays us for fools.

Chapter Notes

A list of truth bullets can be found here, if you'd like to follow along.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

「 TRUTH BULLETS 」

- **Charge Port:** A small pad set up in the control room, possibly where Ariel and Caliban are charged.
- **Ariel's File #3:** The victim was Amal Khalaf, SHSL Journalist. The time of death was 3:04 AM, and the body was discovered at 6:13 AM by Chiyo Kumoshita, Tatsumaru Harai, and Ririka Kashizaki. The cause of death was head trauma. Aside from their cracked skull, the victim has shallow cuts on their face.
- **Ariel’s File #4:** The victim was Sentarou Sekisada, SHSL Seat Filler. The time of death was 3:10 AM, and the body was discovered at 6:13 AM by Chiyo Kumoshita, Tatsumaru Harai, and Ririka Kashizaki. The cause of death was cellular failure through cyanide poisoning. No other injuries are present.
- **Sekisada:** Sekisada seems to be Prospero, the figure behind the killing game.
- **Sledgehammer:** A bloodied sledgehammer was found at the scene. Presumably, this is the weapon used to kill Khalaf.
- **Pills:** Sodium cyanide pills, labeled lethal. A few are missing.
- **Control Room:** Both bodies were discovered in a control room hidden under the fireplace. The room is outfitted with files and computers; this is most likely the control room for the entire killing game.
- **Note:** A handwritten note was found upstairs by the fireplace, with instructions on how to access the control room reading as follows: “Look at the edges of the fireplace. Tap brick seventeen from the bottom left, and forty-seven from the bottom right at the same time.”
- **Cuts:** Four shallow cuts are streaked across Khalaf’s face. No weapon at the scene seems to have made them.
- **Head Injury:** Khalaf’s head injury was to the front of their head, so they must have been facing the killer at their death.
- **Sekisada and Khalaf:** According to Kumoshita, Sekisada had been meaning to talk to Khalaf alone for several days.

You have two unsent messages.
Caliban: Let's begin with a simple explanation of the class trial. During the class trial, you will present your arguments for who the killer is, and vote for "whodunnit".

Caliban: If you vote correctly, then only the blackened will receive punishment. But if you pick the wrong person, I'll punish everyone besides the blackened, and the blackened will be able to leave the mansion with no consequence.

Caliban: Except, er, Ariel…

Ariel: … What?

Caliban: … We’ll get to it when we get to it.

Ariel: If you say so, kuhu?

Caliban doesn’t answer that and regards the class. They say nothing more, a silent permissive for the trial to formally begin.

Sumitama: This is… This is so stupid. We don’t even have enough evidence! McRae-san said!!

Kashizaki: Well, if you didn’t spend so long picking fights, then we would have had time to finish investigation!

Sumitama: Me? Picking fights? YOU were the one who went off at me!
Kashizaki: Correction, Chisaki-san started it. You’re the one who started arguing with HER.

Chisaki: Don’t drag me into this?? I’m just upset that Khalaf-kun is dead! I literally don’t care about whatever kind of fight you two are in!

Everett: Look, can you three just save it?

**Chisaki immediately looks away.**

Chisaki: … Yeah. Sorry, Rett-chan, I just… I lost control for a second there.

Everett: It’s fine. I know you don’t mean it. [glares at Sumitama and Kashizaki] But you two should know better.

Sumitama: … Sorry.

Kashizaki: … [grumbles]

McRae: To be fair, Caliban said that the investigation period had ended thirty minutes before he even showed up. So most of the investigation responsibility fell to the people who were actually downstairs.

Chisaki: Don’t tell me that you’re seriously going to blame Kumo-chan for not doing enough?

McRae: No, of course not. The others, though…

Ekyou: … Yeah. I didn’t want to, uh, say this, but. You two… Took a really long time. Disproportionately so considering how much evidence you brought back.

Ekyou: Did something happen downstairs…?
Kashizaki shoots a panicked glance at Harai, who can only shrug in response. Evidently, the messages about the DR17 file hadn’t been sent out. It’d be too much of a diversion, but maybe they’d need one.

Atsui sighs, looking at Harai when he speaks although he addresses the room at large.

Atsui: Okay, I don’t want to hold this against either of you, because- [double takes] wait holy shit what happened to your neck??

Harai: It’s an old injury. Don’t worry about it.

Ekyou: Has that always been there?

Kashizaki: Look, APPARENTLY they were covering that up for the past two weeks with foundation. I gave them wipes to clean it off.

Chisaki: I don’t know what that is but that doesn’t sound good!

Atsui: Foundation clogs your pores, you know.

Harai: My pores are burnt and scarred. They’re clogged anyway.

Kashizaki: It’s still not good for your skin-

McRae sighs sharply, cutting Kashizaki off.

McRae: I knew it. You were wasting time.

Kashizaki: Gh-!

McRae: I don’t know what I expected. I probably should have jumped down the elevator shaft and
investigated myself.

Sumitama: D-don’t do that! That’s dangerous!

McRae: Yeah, you know what else is dangerous? Dying because we can’t find the killer.

Chisaki: But Caliban said-

Ariel: Caliban said what?

Chisaki: [flinches] N-nothing!

Everett: Don’t start anything right now. We have too much to deal with already.

McRae: I’m not trying to start anything! I’m just expressing my frustration! Just because we’re all grieving doesn’t mean that we get a free pass on investigation when our lives are on the line!

Atsui: But, but... it’s Khalaf-san.

McRae: What’s your point? That everyone liked him? I’m pretty sure everyone did, and don’t get me wrong, I’m sad too, but that doesn’t change the fact that we need to NOT FUCKING DIE?

**His declaration is met with a resounding silence as no one meets his gaze. After mere moments, he seems to deflate.**

McRae: Fine. Be that way. [mutters] … I just wish I had this kind of sympathy when Claude kicked it but whatever.

Bazhanov: [blankly] This is... It’s just a mess. No one did anything useful. Everyone’s going to die.
Chisaki: No, don’t say that!! We just need to- we just need to review the evidence! And we’ll be able to figure out who did it! And then- then, they might- they might die, but… I guess. I guess the rest of us will- we’ll still be here! And we’ll live to see tomorrow!

Chisaki: We just need to work together! And… We can do this!

Chisaki: ... R-right, guys?

*She looks to each and every member of the class in turn, eyes pleading.*

Chisaki: Right, Rett-chan? And Ba-kun? And, and Sumitama-chan, and Ekyou-chan, and Atsui-kun?

*As no one meets her eager reply, her gaze grows more frantic.*

Chisaki: Kashizaki-chan? McRae-kun?

*She finally looks straight at Harai, a piercing desperation in her voice. They don’t have an answer for her unspoken question, but still she asks them anyway.*

Chisaki: Rai-san, please?

Chisaki: … Anyone?

*A few podiums down, a figure stirs, and Chisaki turns to her quickly. Kumoshita clutches her bag, as if to steady herself, clearly not mentally present.*

Chisaki: Kumo-chan…?

Yet something stirs behind her eyes - determination? Anguish? Even, perhaps, hope…?
And Kumoshita…

...

...

...

I’m drowning.

That’s the easiest way to describe it. I’m lost without you, and I couldn’t even bring myself to investigate to avenge you or do anything, and here we are without you, fumbling with searching hands through a heavy fog, anticipating a battalion that’s sure to materialize through the mist but hoping against all hope that you will appear instead.

A voice cuts through the haze, steady and reassuring.

Everett: Kumoshita-chan, don’t worry. Everything’s going to be alright.

I focus on their voice, their stable tone, and a deep relief settles in. Everett is the mediator, and they always have been. From the very moment that we woke up here, they’ve been the rock of the class, the reason why we’re all going to survive through this together. If they can keep pushing forward, I know the rest of us can, too.

Everett: [shakily] Everything will be okay. Everything will be okay, because- oh, god.

Distantly, there’s murmurs of concern that someone who hadn’t been speaking for so long is talking. Distantly, my heart flutters in my chest, detecting something wrong with their voice, with what they’re saying, raising red flags that I can’t cognitize. Yet I have to keep pace with what they’re saying, yearning for whatever evidence they have to offer or whatever conclusions they have to make because it’s all I can do to stay afloat, to keep grasping for reason, for justice, for…
For you.

So I take a deep breath and look directly at Everett as they offer the words that will be my salvation. But why is their expression fracturing before me? Why do their eyes fill with tears as they try to fix things? Why… are they…

Everett: Everything will be okay because I know who the killer is, Kumoshita-chan, it’s me.

…

…

…

And for the first time since seeing Khalaf’s body, Kumoshita begins to cry.

And Harai inhales sharply, and Bazhanov buries his face in his hands, and Chisaki stumbles back as if she’s been shot. And still, Kumoshita cries, great racking sobs that heave through her with each breath.

Chisaki: N-no. No, you’re kidding.

Everett doesn’t look at her. They don’t look at any of the other students as a slow, sad smile starts to bloom across their features.

… … …

They can’t be telling the truth…

And yet-
Chisaki: [more insistently] You’re lying. Rett-chan, you have to be lying, please-

Everett: … There’s… Something I have, that Sekisada-san gave me. He shoved it under my pillow
before he left the room with Khalaf-san…

They pull an envelope out of their jacket and hold it out to the class. Not a present, but
simply an admission of guilt. Their name is printed across the front in scrawled, messy
katakana.

「 USE: Note 」

Slowly, Kashizaki pulls out the note and holds it up. The handwriting matches perfectly.

There’s silence, and Everett just closes their eyes.

Everett: I can… I can explain. I should explain, I will, just...

They draw in a breath.

Everett: Here’s what happened.

「 CLOSING ARGUMENT: BEGIN! 」

Everett: I woke up early in the morning. I heard footsteps and whispering, and I couldn’t who it
was until Sekisada put the note under my pillow. Of course I thought it was strange, but I didn’t see
a reason to do anything until I heard the elevator, and I heard it going down, and what was I
supposed to do? At the moment, I was so afraid that something terrible was going to happen, and I
thought I was the only one who could do something to save all of us.

Everett: [bitter] I should have just left it alone. I’m why you all almost died… But I digress.
Everett: A few days ago, I found this- this sledgehammer, in the theater. Behind a curtain. [halflaughs] I don’t know why someone would even put that there. But I was expecting the worst, so I took it with me when I went upstairs. I had the note, so I was able to access the fireplace. [to Harai] When you three went down, the elevator stayed downstairs, but when I saw it, it was back upstairs. So maybe McRae-san’s plan for delaying the investigation wouldn’t have worked after all.

Everett: But then I got to the bottom of the elevator, and…

Everett: …

Everett: And I saw them, just coming out of the hallway.

Everett: I- I have no idea. What came over me. I froze up, and it’s… It’s strange. I felt like I wasn’t looking at them at all, and I was in a nightmare instead, it’s like… [shakes head] Nevermind. You don’t need my excuses. But I don’t think I was fully aware of what I… was doing. What I did. The next thing I knew, I had the sledgehammer in my hands, and there was blood under my fingernails, and…

Everett: And then they were gone. Because of me.

Everett: And I went into the next room, and I saw that they really weren’t the mastermind, and that Sekisada-san… was…

Everett: [closes eyes] He was sitting there. His eyes were half-closed, and his breath was coming in these horrible gasps, and he saw me and he stirred for just a moment. He said something, and he laughed a little, and I…

Everett: … I think he must have fallen into a coma, since Atsui-kun mentioned that’s one of the symptoms of cyanide poisoning. He wasn’t dead, or else I would have been listed as one of the people who discovered him, but I thought he was. So I left. Thank God I did, I guess, otherwise this trial would have been completely unnecessary. Although I suppose it sort of still is.

Everett: And then I came back upstairs and tried to sleep. At five or six in the morning, Kumoshita-chan must have woken up, and then she went to investigate. And here we are now.

Everett: I don’t… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, but I can’t bring them back to life. I know this
doesn’t mean anything to any of you, but I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I took Khalaf-san away from us. From all of us. But…

Everett: [gently] From you especially, Kumoshita-chan.

Everett: So I’m confessing now. The person who killed Amal Khalaf, the person who’s responsible for all of us being here now… [softer] The person about to die.

Everett: Is none other than myself. **Aster Everett.**


「 BREAK!! 」

By this point, Everett, too, is crying. They let the tears roll down their face without scrubbing them away, still smiling through their tears.

Everett: So… So you guys can vote for me already, if you want. It’s all there.

Chisaki: B-but-

**Kashizaki looks at Everett’s hands, and though they’re distant, the bright stains that mar the acrylic nails stand out like… well, bloodstains.**

Kashizaki: … [flat] No. They did it.

Everett: Thank you for these, Kashizaki-chan. I’m sorry that I used them the way I did.

Kashizaki: [sharply] Don’t speak to me. Ariel, start the vote.

Chisaki: You- you guys can’t just- you can’t just vote for them! That’s- that’s Rett-chan-
Kashizaki: What’s your solution? That we vote for someone else? The evidence is all there.

Kashizaki: [looking directly at Caliban] Besides, I doubt we would be able to avoid a mistrial if we all know who the killer is and choose not to convict them.

Caliban: … Fair, that.

Kashizaki: So let’s just get this over with. We can’t take any chances.

Across the room, Parchments go off with their voting screens and announcements. Failing his own vote, Bazhanov simply watches the ground, gripping his stand so tightly that his knuckles must be turning white under his gloves. Kumoshita, too, doesn’t move to vote. No one pushes her to.

After no more than a few seconds, Ariel tilts their head at the response.

Ariel: Discounting those of you who didn’t vote at all, it looks like the vote was near-unanimous, for Aster Everett. Save one, for Tsukino Chisaki.

Everett: Tsuki, you shouldn’t have done that.

Chisaki: What was I supposed to do? Put you- put you to death??

Everett: I won’t sugarcoat it. Yes.

Chisaki: But you-


There’s no relief in the declaration, but what’s done is done. There can be no turning back now.
Ariel: [sighs] A pity that trial wrapped up so quickly.

Everett: It’s better that way. [lifts head] I didn’t want to kill them, and- and it would be wrong to force everyone to die because of my mistake. And I…

**Everett sighs, looking so much older than they are.**

Everett: I’ve genuinely enjoyed every second I’ve had with you all. I still don’t remember anything about the person I used to be, but… I have a feeling that you all were the best, closest friends I could ever have asked for. I had - still have, actually - faith that the rest of you will make it out of here alive.

Everett: I’m sorry that I ended up breaking the faith that the rest of you had in me. But I want to make it up to you.

Everett: So let me go.

Chisaki: NO!

Ariel: Are you sure you don’t have any loose ends to tie up? This is all... rather abrupt.

Everett: I’m fairly sure, yes-

Harai: Wait.

**Everett freezes mid-sentence, but Harai keeps talking.**

Harai: There’s… One. At least one loose end.
Everett: No…?

Harai: Then, what brought you to this point?

They sweep their hand to the room as a whole, with its fluttering portraits and silent students.

Harai: Why are you here, in this mansion? Why don’t you remember anything? Why did you black out and attack Khalaf-san?

Harai pauses and looks at Everett, really looks at them, to see if their expression will change.

Harai: Are you even one of us? Or are you the reason we’re here?

A strangled gasp comes from Chisaki’s direction, but Harai ignores it. Instead, they focus on Everett’s expression as it melts into a blank frown.

Everett: … I can’t answer that. Any of that. And I don’t see how any of us would be able to in the next few minutes-

Harai: But it’s a loose end, right?

Everett: I guess.

Harai: And you won’t die until we tie it, right?

Everett: …

Chisaki’s quiet now; she must see what Harai is trying to do.
Harai: Your past is, without a doubt, linked to everything that’s going on here. Now that Sekisada-shi is gone, you might be the only way to even begin to understand our situation.

Harai: And I know it’s not something you’re comfortable with, but… I’d rather investigate it now with your permission than later without.

Harai: … So may we, please?

It's grasping for straws, really. An outside shot. An attempt at a last hurrah in the storm raging around them. It's a delay, just a desperate hope to let them all live, together, for just a little while longer.

But Everett looks at Harai, gaze piercing through the mask to see the ghost underneath, and they nod once.

And it’s all they need.

「CLASS TRIAL: CONTINUE!!」

...

OBJECTIVE II: Who is Aster Everett?

Around the room, the remaining students come back to life with new resolve. Harai watches them carefully as each turns back to their Parchments, preparing again for the second half of the trial. Or, rather, to stall for as much time as possible and uncover as much as they can along the way.

For a moment, they contemplate spilling absolutely everything they know about the mansion and its inhabitants, from all they know about Everett to the file tucked safely under their cloak. But they discard the notion.
Everett: Oh, and Ariel, before I forget. May I please have my secrets? From the motive.

Ariel: Your…? Ah, that’s right.

They take fluttering hops to Everett’s podium and the panel in their chest slides outwards. Carefully, Everett pulls out a stack of envelopes matching that which Sekisada gave them. As Ariel returns to their perch, Everett clutches the envelopes tight, smiling in what’s probably an apology.

Everett: Sorry. I don’t want to forget about them, and I know it’s awful of me to ask for it-

Atsui: Don’t be sorry. It’s not like they’ll come back to life if you don’t take them.

Kashizaki: … I wish.

Atsui: Something wrong?

Kashizaki: S’nothing. I’ll tell you later.

Atsui squints at her, but she says nothing. It doesn’t look like she plans to elaborate.

Instead, Harai taps their Parchment to call the class’s attention back to them, and they draw in one great breath. It seems that since they called the trial back in session, they have become the designated leader. Quite ironic considering that they aren’t even the subject of said trial, and it’s disappointing that everyone is putting their faith in them of all people, but… Never mind.

Harai: Alright. So for this discussion, our goal is to… Discover everything we possibly can about how Everett-san is tied to this killing game, as well as uncovering what we can about the killing game itself. This is in light of the revelation that Sekisada-san seems to have been the mastermind, and also killed himself.

Harai: Because of his passing, it is imperative that we discuss as much as we can, now that
there’s… No threat of death hanging above us.

They glance to Everett, who only nods at them, solemn. With their approval, they return to the class.

Harai: To start, does anyone have any theories?

Sumitama: … [hesitantly raises hand]

McRae: This isn’t a classroom. If you have ideas, you can say them.

Sumitama: Er, right… [adjusts glasses] Um. I was thinking…

McRae: … I said you can say them.

Ekyou: Don’t rush her.

Sumitama: Doesn’t… Hope’s Peak… have that reserve course program?

Harai: Explain.

Kashizaki: You don’t know?

Harai: I don’t know much about Hope’s Peak. [shrugs] I didn’t exactly want to come here.

McRae: I didn’t know much about this school, either. [frowns] At least, from what I can remember…

Atsui: Aren’t you from the States anyway? And given Everett-san’s ethnicity, is it reasonable to assume she’s from out of country as well? Is she even a Hope’s Peak student?
McRae: I don’t think country of origin has anything to do with this. Apparently, Hope’s Peak scouted plenty of foreign students this year, so we can’t account for Everett-san’s presence on that alone.

Everett: Okay, but what’s this about a reserve course? [to Kashizaki] I know it sounds obvious to the rest of you, but I don’t really remember anything at all about Hope’s Peak, so I need a refresher. Sorry.

Kashizaki only scoffs and turns away, leaving Sumitama to pick up the slack.

Sumitama: Right! And that’s fine! You’re not the only one, geheh. So, um. The talent part of Hope’s Peak isn’t the only part of the school. There’s also a reserve course, for people who aren’t in possession of an Ultimate talent.

McRae: Huh. Sounds bougie.

Sumitama: Yeah, well. It’s incredibly expensive, and the students who attend the reserve course are generally viewed as inferior to the students in the main course. [sighs] Not that any of us hold those views, it’s just… What tends to be perceived, I guess.

McRae: What’s even the point, then?

Sumitama: Well, even though the reserve course isn’t as prestigious as the main course, Hope’s Peak is still an extremely respectable institution. You’d still be considered a cut above the rest if you attend the reserve course. You’re just not… one of us.

McRae: That sounds pretty much pointless.

Sumitama: It’s just what everyone else says! Besides, you’re irrefutably an Ultimate, so you’d be fine anyway!

Kashizaki: Sumitama-san, can you please stop digging yourself into an even deeper hole and just finish your point?
Everett: Yeah, uh… That’s kind of elitist.

Sumitama: I’m just trying to get my theory out and explain what’s going on! You don’t have to come after me for everything!

Harai: So your theory is that **Everett-san is a reserve course student, and doesn’t have a talent?**

Sumitama: Y-yes. [nods] At least, that’s how I see it.

Bazhanov: [murmurs] That... doesn’t sound right.

Chisaki: Yeah! Are you trying to say that Rett-chan doesn’t have talents? They’re super good at Scrabble!

Atsui: [tilts head] The… SHSL Scrabble Master?

Everett: I don’t know how I feel about that one, actually.

Chisaki: No!! They’re also CRAZY good at piano!

Everett: I’m not THAT good.

Chisaki: Yes you are!! You don’t even remember learning to play, and you sound amazing!!

Bazhanov: Aster is right. Senik is better.

**Chisaki pauses with what she was about to say and glares at him. Bazhanov continues, completely unfettered.**
Bazhanov: They can play well, yes, but their performance is still very amateurish. It’s clear that when they miss notes, they hope their passion will make up for it. Senik plays with a lot of technical skill, and if you ask me, it’s incredibly obvious that he’s played piano for years.

Bazhanov: Of course, he’s rusty, and he plays more out of a sense of obligation than a sense of passion, but if you could just see him, you would know…!

Bazhanov: He is, quite possibly, the best pianist I know.

Everett: [gently] Bazhanov…

Bazhanov: Right. [shoulders slump] Right, I know.

He pauses, seeming to just now notice how oddly silent with a strange mixture of sympathy, pity, and disgust the room has become.

Bazhanov: …

Bazhanov: … [pathetically] He was, anyway.

As McRae starts talking again, gesturing to take attention off of Bazhanov’s inward collapse, most students seem glad for the distraction.

McRae: Okay, so aside from Scrabble and piano, is there anything else of note that Everett-san might be good at?

Chisaki: Being a good friend? And I dunno, probably other stuff!

Everett: Like putting up with you, right?

Chisaki’s expression drops.
Chisaki: [quietly] Please don’t joke about that right now.

Everett: Right, of course.

Ekyou: Are you two all right?

Chisaki: [wincs] We-

Everett: -don’t have to talk about it. Not now.

**Chisaki only nods; Ekyou frowns deeper but leaves the two of them alone.**

Ekyou: I don’t know if having skill at things really means that you can be an Ultimate for it, though. I like photography, and I practice it a fair bit more than ōendan, but I’m not the Ultimate Photographer.

Kashizaki: Besides, being moderately good at a lot of things doesn’t discount them from being a reserve course student. Haven’t you heard stories about reserve students who spend years trying to develop an Ultimate talent just to be accepted into the main course? Why wouldn’t that apply here?

Kashizaki: Everett-san could have tried any number of talents to be one of us.

Everett: [shakes head] Unlikely. I don’t know much about what’s going on here, but I really do think the Ultimate system is stupid.

Kashizaki: … I’m sorry?

Everett: It’s just elitist and dumb and I hate it. Talent’s arbitrary, thinking people are only of worth because they have a talent is stupid.
Everett: And I mean, this just goes double now that I know about the reserve course stuff. Like, what? [shakes head] I like to think past me didn’t actually support all of this.

Bazhanov: Not to mention that Aster being a reserve student doesn’t actually explain anything.

Kashizaki: How so?

Bazhanov: Why would their memory be gone if they were just a reserve student? Why even include them in a killing game at all?

Sumitama: Maybe they walked in on our getting kidnapped? Or they did something personally to Sekisada-san?

Atsui: Or maybe they’re actually part of a secret program that develops every talent in a singular untalented student in a vain attempt at saving the world from falling into the clutches of evil, only to be betrayed by that student at the last possible second as they bring about the second coming of said evil?

Sumitama: …

Bazhanov: …

Everett: … Excuse me?

Atsui: [shrugs] Hey, I’m just saying, crazier things have happened.

Harai: So from what I understand, it sounds like the reason for Everett-san’s being here are tied more to their memory loss than to their talent. Or a lack thereof.

Harai: Which means…

「THEORY: Everett is talentless, and attends Hope’s Peak as a reserve student.」
Harai: That’s worthless.

Kashizaki: I knew it.

Sumitama: [eyes filling with tears] I! Okay!

Ekyou: [quickly] But it was a good try, Sumitama-chan! [glares at Kashizaki]

Kashizaki: … Right. [sighs]

McRae: But it does bring up a good point. What caused Everett-san’s memory loss, anyway?

Atsui: Uh, whatever funky memory technology caused OUR memory loss, I guess.

Everett: I think he’s referring to why I, specifically, don’t remember anything. Or something that I might have done to warrant that.

Chisaki: [mumbles] Nothing, because you’re perfect.

Everett: Not the time, Tsuki.

McRae: What could Everett-san do that was so horrible that Sekisada-san would want them to forget everything?

Everett: … Seriously? You’re asking me that now?
Ekyou: If they had killed someone before we woke up here, I don’t think Sekisada-san would have cared enough to make them forget about it.

Sumitama: What makes you say that?

**Ekyou hesitates a moment too long.**

Ekyou: … Eh. I- I dunno. I didn’t know him that well, but he didn’t seem like he cared all that much about… anything.

Chisaki: And he wasn’t a terribly nice person, either, sooo maybe he was petty enough to just wipe Rett-chan’s memory for no reason?

Bazhanov: [emphatically] But he was *trying*.

**No one bothers to argue him that point. He doesn’t seem to notice, anyway, and looks to Harai with a serene authority.**

Bazhanov: I have… an idea. Or the beginning of one.

Harai: Oh?

Bazhanov: So, uh… Senik…

Bazhanov: … Um.

Ekyou: Take your time.

Bazhanov: He wasn’t… a great person, but as I’ve said, he was trying. Especially near the end. And I know he really, really wanted to make it up to you - all of you - by the end, and… And, I don’t know.
Kashizaki: Why would he care? He was the entire mastermind.

Bazhanov: I don’t know! He was acting weird for a while near the end and I just - I probably could have helped him, and he said he wanted to be helped, and I just- I don’t know. I don’t know if I did enough, Ririka, just let me be, okay?

Kashizaki: I-

**Harai recognizes intimately the way Bazhanov recoils. When he recovers, he’s clasped his hands together in perfect robotic posture, his expression drawn in a pointedly blank and painted smile.**

Bazhanov: My apologies. Back to the task at hand.

Bazhanov: Senik mentioned a story involving himself and Aster when they were children. He grew up in Hokkaido with his grandparents, where Aster’s parents had been English teachers. They were childhood friends and spent most of their time together.

Bazhanov: When they were around eight, they went into the woods and found a bear.

Bazhanov: Senik said that he had- he had run away, and left Aster for dead, only returning later in the day. Upon his return, they were unconscious, so he took them back home and made arrangements to leave the town and come to Tokyo with his parents.

Although his voice wavers at the end, he’s maintained the illusion of composure, his face still a perfect mask.

Bazhanov: So that’s my… theory. Or what I have to share.


Bazhanov: It’s what he told me.
Chisaki: I don’t know if I trust that.

Bazhanov: It's the truth. As far as I know.

Harai: Before we get off-topic. Your theory is that Sekisada-shi and Everett-san were childhood friends, and a childhood injury caused them to lose contact?

Bazhanov: Yes.

Ekyou: That makes sense. A head injury could cause memory loss, right?

Atsui: An injury at age eight caused their memory loss at age 18?

Ekyou: [blushes] I guess that’s fair.

Kashizaki: If it were a particularly traumatic experience, and if Everett-san were re-traumatized in a similar experience more recently, they might lose their memory from that.

Chisaki: D-don’t talk about them like that!!

Everett: It’s fine, Tsuki, she’s just trying to help.

Chisaki: Rett-chan, are we ever going to address that-

Everett: [to Kashizaki] And I guess that’d make sense, but I don’t… actually think bears have anything to do with it? They don’t exactly fill me with dread.

They pause briefly, something flashing through their eyes.

Kashizaki: Is everything okay?

Everett: … I mean, I’m gonna die as soon as we figure out what’s going on with my past, so not really, but no big deal. I’m trying to figure out how long I’d last against the lethal injection thing, actually.

Ariel: I’m pretending I didn’t hear that.

Caliban: Hear what?

Ariel: … Are you joking? I can’t tell.

Everett: Oh, shoot. Am I done? Should I wrap things up already?

Ariel: Quite honestly, I don’t much care so long as you die eventually.


Ariel: Some sooner than others if they continue to make wiseass comments. Nonetheless. Carry on.

McRae: True or not, what does the bear story has to do with Everett-san’s being here now? So they were childhood friends, what does that have to do with Hope’s Peak and all of this? Who’s to say that Everett-san even has anything to do with Sekisada-san?

Chisaki: Because… he’s Prospero?

McRae: We don’t even know what that means. We just found Sekisada-san in a [air quotes] “control room”, and he was dead by cyanide poisoning through pills, so we assume he killed himself. He might not even be the person behind all of this, or he might not be the main power at play.
McRae: What I’m saying is that the reason that Everett-san is here might have nothing at all to do with Sekisada-san.

Everett: Except it might, actually. He’s the only person I remember from my past.

Atsui: Wait, he’s what? Why didn’t you bring this up earlier?

Kashizaki: Do you remember what he was to you, then?

Everett: Nope. [shakes head] I just have a name and a face. Not, like, actively “oh no he’s the one person I remember in perfect detail and need to seek out in order to fulfill my destiny” or anything like that.

Everett: It’s more like, I didn’t recognize any of you when I met you, but when I met him I realized he was familiar. I never brought it up because I didn’t think it was important, and, well. [waves hand] You know how I feel about my past.

Kashizaki: Don’t you want to find out about what happened to you?

Everett: [shrugs] Sometimes it’s better just to let things lie. We’re proving right now that whatever brought me here could be dangerous, aren’t we? I just want to live my life.

**Kashizaki says nothing for a while, only staring at the claws on Everett’s hands that even now shine too bright with color.**

Kashizaki: Fair enough.

Everett: … Except, now that I think about it, I don’t… remember Sekisada-san as a child. As in, I don’t have an image of him as a child to connect to him. So I doubt that story was entirely true. Thank you anyway, Bazhanov-san.

Bazhanov: [nods] It was worth a shot.
Harai: Thus…

「THEORY: Everett and Sekisada were childhood friends; an accident led to their memory loss.」

…

「SUPPORT / REFUTE」

Harai: Another dead end.

Atsui: Okay, maybe we need to look at this another way. Forget the memory loss for a hot sec. Why is Everett-san here? Why would they be here in this killing game?

Ekyou: Maybe it has something to do with Sekisada-san having made up the bear story…?

Bazhanov: He didn’t make it up. Senik wouldn’t lie to me.

Kashizaki: He lied to all of us, you do realize.

Bazhanov: … I suppose so.

Ekyou: But what would be the point of having fabricated it? Why even hide the reason for their acquaintance?

Sumitama: Maybe it has something to do with whatever they do know each other from.

Everett: It’s probably no big deal. And who knows if he thought anything of me? I just know he was in my life, I have no idea if we ever spoke or what.
Sumitama: W-well! He must have considered you important! After all, why would he have given you that envelope in the first place?

Atsui: What was in the envelope, anyway? Was it just that note that Kikun and Harai-san found?

Everett: Huh…?

**Everett shuffles their stack of envelopes until the one bearing their name floats to the top. They peer into it for a moment, biting their lip.**

Atsui: Well?

Everett: It’s nothing. Just the note.

**They’re probably lying, but no one says anything - not with Chisaki glaring at Everett so hard that she might actually burst into tears.**

Chisaki: Rett-chan-

Everett: Later, Tsuki.

**Though Chisaki doesn’t say anything to counter that, her eyes flick back to the floor.**

Kashizaki: Okay, so backtracking. You’re absolutely certain that bears have nothing to do with any trauma, and thus Sekisada-san was probably lying about that tragic backstory?

Everett: [nods] Positive.

Bazhanov: Speaking of trauma, though…

Harai: Oh, that’s right.
Ekyou: Huh?

Harai: The bow.

Atsui: Back up, I have no idea what’s going on here.

Harai: A while ago, before Bates-shi died, Chisaki-san and I found this bow in one of the spare rooms upstairs. We were going to set it on fire before someone used it to kill someone, but Everett-san wanted to use it…

Atsui: Shit, THAT’S why we have a rule about not burning a bow??

Chisaki: No, that’s there because Caliban is a bitch.

Caliban: Hey.

Kashizaki: So then what happened?

Everett: I… Sort of blanked out, actually.

Bazhanov: They had some sort of flashback.

Ekyou: So you remembered something?

Everett: I remembered I don’t ever want to touch a bow ever again for some reason, yeah. Which is weird, but… [shudders] I’d just prefer not to think about it.

Bazhanov: See, that’s what I thought too.

Everett: It fucking what?

Kashizaki: PTSD is characterized by dissociative episodes and on-edge behavior, which is sometimes intensified by certain triggers related to trauma. Triggers can also induce flashbacks, and occasionally there’s memory loss related to the trauma as well.

Chisaki: Oh. That makes… sense.

Everett: … Yeah, shit, that checks out. Huh.

_They fold their arms, looking more mildly impressed than actually concerned, which probably speaks to just how much they don’t want to touch their past with a ten-foot pole._

McRae: Okay, with that in mind, I have an idea.

Kashizaki: Should we be concerned?

McRae: [to Harai] Did you see the files?

Harai: …!

McRae: I saw them a few days ago. Kumoshita-san mentioned them like they were supposed to be secret or something like that.

Atsui: … Am I seriously the one person here who looks into absolutely nothing around this building?

Ekyou: Don’t worry, I’ve been preoccupied too.
Sumitama: But what about the files?

McRae: They’re these… folders. Each one of them has a class of Hope’s Peak Ultimates, but…

Kashizaki: But what?

McRae: A significant portion of each class is dead. There’s pictures of their corpses in the files.

Sumitama: Wh-what?!

Bazhanov: [eye widens] That’s horrifying.

Chisaki: Why the fuck would someone do that??

McRae: Look, I don’t know either, but that’s what’s there! I’m just the messenger!

Everett: … That’s…

They trail off, looking uncertain. Harai clears their throat.

Harai: So that’s your theory? That Everett-san was in a previous killing game, and that’s why they don’t have their memory?

McRae: Yes, but-

Atsui: [smacks head] Holy SHIT that makes too much sense. Sekisada-san would want to wipe their memory because otherwise they would remember everything about their old killing game! I mean, I dunno why they’d get wrapped up in OUR game-

McRae: [annoyed] Actually, one survivor gets carried over between each game. So it’d make sense for Everett-san to possibly be in this one, but-
Harai: Wait, really?

Atsui: Yeah, see! It’s the perfect crime! Why would Sekisada-san be involved with them? They could remember him from the time between killing games for some reason because maybe he was the mastermind of their old one! Or, like, they met behind the scenes before their memory got wiped! And then you have trauma related to the bow, which could be from their old talent, or someone else’s talent or whatever!

Atsui: It’s all there! It’s perfect!

**And for a moment, it seems like all will be saved, and that the trial will conclude a second time, when McRae opens his mouth again.**

McRae: Good deduction skills. Except you’re wrong.

**He opens his jacket and pulls out a thick bundle tied with twine, which he holds up.**

McRae: Here you go.

Kashizaki: I. Is that all the files.

McRae: Yeah, why?

Kashizaki: How.

McRae: I dunno. I thought they might be important, and it turns out they are?

Bazhanov: Do you want us to read through all of this?

McRae: Not unless you want to. The gist is that Everett-san’s not in any one of them. The chain of survivors is broken twice, but it doesn’t seem like the missing files are all that relevant. Or that
they’re even around.

Harai: Well, it looks like today’s your lucky day.

**All eyes now on them, Harai carefully extracts the DR17 file. Upon seeing it, Atsui holds his head in his hands.**

Atsui: [muffled] Whyyy does everyone just have evidence up their sleeves. Why couldn’t ANY of this have come up during investigation.

Sumitama: [shaky laugh] What’s the point in hiding this? You guys?

Harai: It seems like this file was removed for a reason. Since…

Harai: This file - this “Danganronpa 17” - took place in this mansion.

**Rather than a shocked silence, they’re met with an explosion of disbelief.**


Sumitama: No way. No way, that’s not real.

Kashizaki: Yes it is! Look, all the scenes involve locations from this building!

McRae: Wait, give me that.

**Without waiting for an answer, he hops off his podium and walks up to Harai. He takes the file from them, flipping it open and frowning slightly.**

McRae: Yeah, this looks… Real. About as real as any of these files can be.
Atsui: Hey, what the fuck?

Harai: I don’t know why the location would be reused, but I think this purchase record might have something to do with it.

Atsui leans over his podium to squint at the document Harai holds.

Atsui: [to no one in particular] I need to do more investigation.

Sumitama: Wait, so this is the newest killing game? Do- do we get a file, too?!

Kashizaki: I don’t… know. [frowns] I don’t see why whoever organized the killing games in these files would reuse a location.

Atsui: Unless Sekisada-san bought this whole property.

Bazhanov: That would make sense, he’s mentioned his family being rich, but… [frowns] I don’t… see why he would even do this. Why he would be part of a killing game as a mastermind, only to kill himself two cases in.

Harai: Maybe the killing game we’re in has nothing to do with these files.

McRae: [going through files; points to the one he took from Harai] Well, regardless of what the hell WE’RE here for, it looks like the survivor from the sixteenth game carried over to this game, and a student from this game was carried over to the eighteenth one, so… Harai-san’s right. This is the seventeenth killing game.

Ekyou: Seventeen… So that means that… We’re… Danganronpa 18?

McRae: More like forty-nine. Or maybe fifty.
Ekyou looks queasy, but wraps her coat a little tighter around her.

Ekyou: Right… But what does that have to do with Everett-san? Are they in the file?

Kashizaki: About that…

McRae: No. No, they aren’t.

And the whole class seems to slump back.

Sumitama: Maybe we should just give up. Unless you have the other file?

Kashizaki: No, we don’t. At least, Harai-san and I don’t have it with us.

Bazhanov: So we’re just going in circles.

Atsui: I really thought that would be it. That seemed like the perfect explanation.

Ekyou: And we’re still no closer to understanding anything about the killing game, or Sekisada-san, or- or anything, really.

Harai: What do you think of all this? Everett-san?

Even when addressed, Everett only stands, hands limp at their sides, mouth half-open.

Everett: I…

Chisaki: Rett-chan, I know this is a really bad time, but-
Everett: [automatic] Not *now*, Tsuki.

Chisaki: But if not now, then when?! Rett-chan, you’re going to *die*, and we’re just going to- what are we going to do about this? About us?

**Everett sighs, a gesture of more resignation than exasperation.**

Everett: Tsuki, I know that- that we’ve got a lot to discuss, but…

Everett: This is… I owe everyone else this much, for what I’ve done-

**Chisaki shakes her head hard, not even trying to hide the tears pouring down her face as each word tears itself from her.**

Chisaki: Forget everyone else! What about me?!

Chisaki: *What am I supposed to do after my girlfriend dies?!*

**There’s nothing but silence and Chisaki’s heaving breaths, each sob disguised as a return to stability. Finally, carefully, Everett steps down from their podium and cups Chisaki’s face in one hand. Chisaki flinches but holds steady, letting Everett brush her hair from her soaked face in gentle strokes.**

Everett: Tsukino.


Everett: You’re not- you’re not the only one who’s losing someone important to you. You’re not the only one who’s lost… someone. Someone close to them.

Everett: And… And everyone else is counting on me, please just… Let me help them. I want to leave behind more good than bad, and I’ve done so much wrong already and I want to make it up
Chisaki: Rett-chan, do you even hear yourself? You are a good person, that’s why we’re dating. You’re like, the number one best person in this whole mansion! You’re so reliable, and you have your shit together, and you’re- you’re a hero, Rett-chan, and you’re nothing like me.

She buries her head in Everett’s shoulder. Everett holds her close, running a hand through her hair.

Everett: [murmurs] Oh, Tsuki…

Atsui: But she’s right, you know. About your being a good person.

Bazhanov: [nods tersely] You’re- you’re easy to talk to, and I worry about you sometimes, but… You’re my friend, too, Aster. No matter what your past is.

Harai: Exactly. You’re… You’re a person, Everett-san, and you matter. No matter what you think of yourself, good or bad, you’ve done a lot for us.

But they shake their head, insistent.

Everett: No, you’re wrong. You’ve got to be.

Everett: I took Khalaf-san from all of us, and now I’m going to die, too, and… Well, I can’t even ask for your forgiveness because I put myself in this situation.

Everett: [sighs] See, this is why I said you should just leave my past alone, it’s going to get all of you into trouble, too. And what if I really did kill someone before, or… something?

Ekyou: Then you’d still be a good person, compared to…

Ekyou: [closes eyes] Never mind.
Everett: But I killed someone. I need to suffer the consequences for it. And it’s sweet that you all want to keep me alive, but I just… I morally can’t let this go on much longer.

Everett: I had a good life, okay? Or I had a good past two weeks. [to Chisaki] And I’ve had an absolutely wonderful past five days because of you, Tsuki, and I can’t thank you enough for that.

Chisaki: But, but Rett-chan-

A thin whir from across the room barely cuts through the conversation, but the class redirects its attention to it near-immediately. Ariel feigns a yawn.

Ariel: [tartly] Just a reminder that you all were already tardy with the investigation. I do appreciate this need for loose ends to be tied, but my patience is running thin.

Atsui: You’re not even in charge of executions!

Ariel: Says who?

Caliban: Me?? And also you, about four days ago??

Ariel: [cooly] Rule number thirteen. Rules can be amended at any time.

Caliban: That’s not how it’s supposed to work?? [to the class] I don’t know what this is! Hurry it up!

Do they sound… worried?

No, they’re just a robot bird. They can’t be human.

Everett: It’s enough.
Chisaki: No it’s not! We still have time!

McRae: We don’t. The clock’s all zeroes.

Chisaki: But we can’t just give up! I can’t just give up! Maybe the rest of you can, but I don’t want to!

Everett: Tsuki, it’s fine.

Chisaki: [dashing away tears] It’s not! It can’t be!

Bazhanov: She’s right, Aster, just take all the time you need-

Everett: No. I’m not going to let you endanger yourselves any more than you already have.

As resolute as they start, their voice keeps wavering, and they turn away, too.

Everett: We can just- we can just stop, I don’t think anything’s going to come of this if we keep talking about it. And I’m sorry. And you did great, and I love you.

Harai: No. There’s still hope. There’s…

Everett: There’s what? There’s what, Harai-san?

They look at Harai with such an expression of wild desperation, but more than that, a pull towards the abyss, and…

It’s the end. They’re right, or at least, they think they are. They’ve killed someone, and by the rules of this mansion, they must die as recompense. All of this sidetracking only delays the inevitable, and the inevitable will occur regardless of what conclusion they make.
Maybe it’s hopeless. Maybe they’re right. Maybe whatever brought them here has nothing to do with whatever brought the rest of them here. Maybe, just maybe, they’re all better off not knowing, paying no heed to the man behind the curtain, or the man in the chair downstairs with his heart stilled in his chest.

And they have nothing to respond to Everett with. No trump card, no deus ex machina to come and save them all. At the end of the day, Everett is still going to die, and the class will still be left in the dark.

Unless the impossible comes true, none of them will ever understand what happened before they woke up here, and another body will be left behind in this room.

Unless, unless, unless…

... ... ...

Chiyo: … I’ve…

Chiyo: I’ve got it.

Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found [here](#).

Just a note - as ASLH has developed as a story, I’ve had to tidy up some previously posted parts. There have been some retcons, especially to the profiles, 1-1, and 3-2. Feel free to check them out if you have time!
3-8: What I'd Do Not To Worry Like You

Chapter Summary

You don't get to make the rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silence.

I think I haven’t so much said something wrong as interrupted at a pivotal moment. There’s something about the weight of it that makes me feel as if I’ve intruded upon a dream, or perhaps a nightmare.

And in the dream, for once I look around the room and see, really see, everyone and everything around me. I look at Sumitama huddled into herself, and McRae frozen in the middle of his files. The way that Ekyou’s gripping the podium too tight, the way that Atsui’s pretending he wasn’t crying two hours ago. Bazhanov stands very still, hands clasped as if that’ll hide how his eye flits around the room. Kashizaki keeps looking to Everett’s nails, still trying to comprehend how her art was used for slaughter. Chisaki still hangs over their shoulder, tears cascading down her face. And even though I can’t see Harai’s expression, I know they, too, wait for me to elaborate. To say something. Anything.

But I take a deep breath and look straight at Everett, watch them as they disentangle from Chisaki and turn to face me.

Chiyo: I… I know why you’re here.

Everett: Kumoshita-san…?

Chiyo: Yeah. Yeah, I’m here. I’m sorry.

Strangely enough, Everett’s eyes turn glassy.
Everett: [softly] Don’t be. I’m sorry.

Chiyo: No, I need to give you this, don’t apologize-

Everett: No. Kumoshita-san, please, hear me out. I can’t apologize enough for what I did.

**For what they…? It all seems so far away now; the control room feels centuries ago. But so does everything else at this moment.**

Everett: I’ll never be able to bring them back. I need you to know how sorry I am, for killing…

Everett: …

Everett: Were you happy?

Everett: [quickly] I’m sorry, that was such an awful way to put it. I need to know, please, that you two were able to… That you could…

**They glance quickly to Chisaki. I get their point.**

Chiyo: … Yes. We did. And- and I was happy, yeah.

Chiyo: I think… they were, too.

**Everett sighs, and closes their eyes, and for a moment they look like anything but a murderer.**

Everett: Thank you. Thank you, and… I’m sorry. Again.
Chiyo: It’s okay. You don’t have to keep apologizing.

Everett: But I do. If I lost Tsuki, I don’t know what I’d do with myself, and that’s so terribly selfish because she’s losing me now and you lost Khalaf-san because of me.

Everett: And I know all the apologies in the world can’t make up for it, but I really need you to know, Kumoshita-san, I would take it all back in a heartbeat-

Chiyo: I know. And it’s okay.

I feel like I’m suffocating, each breath a fight against the weight on my chest. There’s so much going on in my head right now, but I know the moment that I let myself go and process it, I’ll be exactly where I was just five minutes ago.

But, ultimately, Everett is my friend. And what they did was an accident, and they’re genuinely sorry, and that’s so much more than a lot of people get when their loved ones are murdered.

Murdered. That’s what happened to Amal. They did not just die, they were killed. The last moments of their life were spent in agony. Everything I’ve ever learned - from my parents, from society, from my own moral compass - would tell me that a murderer is awful, horrible, never to be spoken to. I’m sure Amal would have felt the same, what with everything they’d gone through, yet here I am forgiving their killer anyway.

Does that make me a bad person?

I don’t know if I care right now.

Chiyo: [shakes head] I can’t really put it all together, but please, Everett-san, just know that it wasn’t your fault.

Everett: But… I held that sledgehammer. I broke their skull with it. I did this.
Chiyo: But that wasn’t you. You’re not the same person that felt like they needed to protect themself in the control room.

Chiyo: It wasn’t your fault.

Everett: I…

Even though I don’t say it, they must understand that I don’t hold anything against them. They have to. And indeed, after a moment, they nod, though they still swipe tears from their eyes.

Everett: … Thank you. Thank you, Kumoshita-san, I can’t thank you enough.

Chiyo: Please don’t feel bad for any of this.

Everett: I can’t exactly stop doing that, but… I’ll try not to let it bother me as much.

Everett: But I still don’t know what happened.

Chiyo: Like I said, I know. Or, well, I think I do.

Chiyo: I have something for you.

「USE: DR?? File」

As I pull the folder from my bag, Kashizaki’s eyes widen. Harai, too, seems dumbstruck by its existence.

Kashizaki: Is that the second file?!
McRae: What do you mean, the second file?

Kashizaki: There were two files in the control room, b-but one of them went missing. We thought that it just didn’t exist to begin with, we didn’t think- Chiyo, you took it??

Chiyo: I didn’t think I was being helpful just standing there, so I wanted to do something to help. Anything.

Kashizaki: You are a horrible genius. Thank you.

Harai: But what is it?

Chiyo: I haven’t had a chance to look. But someone, I think Atsui-kun, mentioned…?

**Atsui stares at the file, frowning.**

Atsui: … If that’s another Danganronpa file, and Everett-san’s in it, that would explain everything. It’d be the reason why Sekisada-san wouldn’t want them to know about their past, the reason he was so cagey, and the reason for their trauma. Basically, it’s pivotal.

Chiyo: Right. So, if it’s okay…?

I look to Everett, who only hesitates for a second before nodding almost imperceptibly. So I open the file with shaking hands, and my eyes land on…

A roster of students, each name unfamiliar and each face even more so. My heart starts a steady sink in my chest until I’m drawn to the sole exception.

A head full of dark pink hair beaming up at the camera, their face dotted with freckles like sprinkles, with seemingly no clue what hell is in store for them.

**The SHSL Archer. Age 15. Aster Everett.**
And everything clicks.

「 THEORY: Everett is a participant of a previous killing game. 」

…

「 SUPPORT / REFUTE 」

Chiyo: It’s all there.

「 BREAK!! 」

Bazhanov: … So that’s it, then. They’re…

Chiyo: A survivor of a previous killing game.

Everett: …

Everett: Ah.

Their voice comes out so very small.

Chisaki: Aster...

Everett: Can I- can I just-

Chisaki nods and holds out her arms. Everett falls back into her embrace, holding to her so tightly that they might just crush her, but Chisaki holds steady and draws her tight. They
need the support.

My own hands are empty of everything save the file.

Harai: That’s… That makes perfect sense. Thank you, Kumoshita-san.

Chiyo: Don’t thank me, I didn’t do anything. I’m sure you would have still seen the file if I hadn’t taken it, anyway.

Harai: Still. Better that you had it than any of us. I don’t…

They take a deep breath, acting as if they aren’t terrified, too.

Harai: I don’t know if I trust the rest of us with that. What with all the fighting. So thank you.

Chiyo: … You’re welcome.

I don’t see why that’s a good thing.

Sumitama: But that’s so sad! They survived a whole other killing game and have been through so much… Who decided that they have to come back to another one?

Atsui: Sekisada-san, apparently. [shakes head] It’s fucked up.

Kashizaki: But that still doesn’t explain why they’re back… If they’re a former Ultimate, what does that make us?

Sumitama: I don’t know about you, but I’M still an Ultimate!

Sumitama: … As far as I know, anyway.
Atsui: Okay, yeah, can I just talk for a second about how Hope’s Peak is apparently recruiting students to do murder games every year? How have they not been shut down yet?

Kashizaki: I’d assume they’re extremely well-endowed with all of their tuition funding, but even that kind of coverup seems unreasonable. Surely, someone would notice students just… not coming back, ever.

Bazhanov: Unless Hope’s Peak isn’t real.

Kashizaki: I’m pretty sure it’s a real school. We all got scouted to it, didn’t we?

Harai: I don’t think it’s made up. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t be here.

Atsui: Hell, if I had a choice, I’d be here as a different talent.

Kashizaki: You literally actually cater.

Atsui: Yeah, what’s your point.

Sumitama: Hope’s Peak can’t be fake! It’s a well-established school that’s been around for decades! Headed by Jin Kirigiri and everything! There’s entire books on it!

Bazhanov: Yes, yes, you can recite history, that’s all well and good, but… I’ve been thinking.

Bazhanov: Do any of you actually remember getting scouted? Receiving a letter saying you could attend, and naming you your talent? Getting any kind of financial aid statement? Anything that literally any private school would normally send?

Bazhanov: Have you gone to the campus for a visit? Spoken to any alumni? Met Kirigiri, seen him on television? Anything?
Come to think of it…

… I don’t think I got scouted so much as being completely sure that I was going to go…?

That’s…

Bazhanov: Yeah, that’s my point.

Bazhanov: I’m not entirely convinced that this school is a thing that actually exists.

Harai: … Well, that’s… troublesome.

Sumitama: L-lies! I worked for my talent!

Kashizaki: Implying the rest of us didn’t?

Atsui: That’s not his point, his point is that Hope’s Peak might not even exist and we just… think it does, for some reason??

Kashizaki: But why would we think it does? What’s the point?

Atsui: Fuck if I or anyone else knows. Shit. [folds arms]

For me, this isn’t a big deal. I’d assume that, for Bazhanov, the possibility of Hope’s Peak being a falsehood is similarly no real cause for concern. But for Kashizaki, Atsui, and Sumitama, I understand that the idea of everything they’ve worked for being a lie is completely unacceptable. And I’ll admit, it sounds unreasonable. How would one fabricate an entire school?

… Ah, that’s right. Whoever’s behind this apparently has memory wiping technology. It’s not a stretch to assume that they could make us believe that a school exists where there is none.
Or, I guess that’s just Sekisada.

Ekyou: [dully] It doesn’t matter. What matters is that what’s going on now, all this… tragedy, just keeps happening.

Ekyou: What number murder game does this make us, then? How many have come before us?

McRae: May I see that?

I let him have the file. His brow furrows as he pages through each folder, comparing rosters and death lists and so many other things I can’t bring myself to stomach.

McRae: It looks like Everett-san’s from the forty-seventh season. And then there’s two more after that…

Ekyou: … Excuse me?

McRae: [nods, flipping pages] Yeah. There’s a Jivan Amin who survived DR47 and went to DR48, but Everett-san doesn’t come up again. It just says they survived.

Ekyou: So that means…

Kashizaki: It’s not real.

She stands, eyes wide, leaning forward as if she’s going to fall into a void.

Atsui: Kikun, what the fuck are you talking about, of course it’s real. Six people are dead.

Kashizaki: That’s not what I mean! The- the purchase record! Sekisada-san bought this property, but this is an old killing game location. None of them seem to be reused but this one is.
Kashizaki: And then there’s the fact that Everett-san is here, and not at home or- or wherever they should be! People don’t return to killing games if they survived! This isn’t real! None of this is real!

Atsui: What do you mean by “real”?

Kashizaki: [gesturing wildly] This killing game isn’t the same as those ones!

Ekyou: And then you said that Hope’s Peak isn’t real, too…

A shudder runs through her, only emphasizing her already grave expression.

Ekyou: What… is real, then? Could I have…?

Ekyou: …

Sumitama: Okay, so what? Hope’s Peak isn’t real. This killing game isn’t real, even though if you ask me, it sure is, since so many people are dead. What do you want us to do about it?

Kashizaki: I don’t know, maybe it’s important for evaluating the purpose of this game? It’s clearly not from the same continuity as the others, so we can’t say that the reason behind those games are the same as this one.

Atsui: Do you think we have enough evidence to figure out this one…?

Kashizaki: Maybe. I don’t know. But we could try.

Harai: What else is there to figure out that we can do with Sekisada-san dead?

Ekyou: If we could go back downstairs, I’m sure we could investigate something.
McRae: She’s right. We could go back and scour for clues.

Kashizaki: [muttering] Fucking hell, we can’t even get kidnapped into a normal killing game, oh no, this has to be killing game deluxe-

Everett: [plaintive] Could you all be quiet?

**Everett draws back from Chisaki’s arms, looking extraordinarily tired.**

Chisaki: Are you okay?

Everett: I… I think so. I’m just- I think I…

**They wince and squeeze their eyes tight, swaying where they stand.**

Everett: … Kumoshita-san’s right. If she says I’m in the file, and McRae-san says so too, and…

Everett: … That. [half-laughs] Really does explain a lot. With the bow, and everything.

Bazhanov: [not unkindly] You’re not the type of person to keep practicing something you love if it hurts you.

Everett: Yeah. Yeah, that.

**Everett takes a step forward, teetering a little.**

Everett: [whispering] There’s so many people…

Harai: Are you remembering anything?
Everett: I don’t want to remember, but the more I think about it the more I think I’m starting to, anyway, and- ah. Ah, shit.

Chisaki: Rett-chan?!

Everett: Don’t touch me for a second, I…

Everett: I need to see something. I have to check.

Chisaki nods, backing off. As if in a dream, Everett walks over to McRae and holds out a hand. He stares at it for a moment, puzzled, before slowly placing their file in their hands.

They flip through the pages, expression unchanging until they reach the very end. Even then, they only stare at the cover.

Everett: ...Bazhanov.

Their voice has taken on a light, peculiar tone, sounding almost inquisitive.

Bazhanov: Yes…?

Everett: Do you know…

Everett: Do you know who Hayato Kikuchi is?

If Bazhanov’s expression changes at all, it goes unnoticed, owing entirely to the perch across the room.

Click.
Ariel droops limply, his beady eyes suddenly dull bulbs, and… shuts down.

This would normally be cause for rejoice, if not for the sheer horror painted across Caliban’s posture - the caution, the shock, and the voice that comes out combine to a sense of sheer disbelief.

Caliban: What… the…

This… shouldn’t be happening. And yet…

All any of us can do is stare, really, as Ariel reboots himself, draws each of his limp feathers back into place. It doesn’t take more than a few seconds, but something is just a little… off, about him, when he comes back online.

He sits a little straighter, a little more stiffly, but what’s most unsettling is the way his head sits cocked just slightly in the sense that he’s watching a particularly interesting fly caught in a spider’s web. When he speaks, it’s with it’s a sickly sweet severity, and-

Ariel: Well, that’s enough of that.

And it’s terrifying.

Ariel: I’m disappointed in you, Caliban. You shouldn’t have let them talk as long as they did.

Caliban: What?!

Ariel: You had one job and it was to kill the fucking bastards. How hard is that? You’ve failed me and the purpose of this killing game.

Caliban: B- bu- you’re not-

Caliban: That’s not even your job! That’s MY job! Stop!

Everett: Wait- wait, please, I’m not ready yet, I have so much more to say now-

Ariel: Why should I care? You voted, didn’t you?

Ariel: You said yourself that you killed Khalaf. Didn’t you tell everyone to kill you?

Everett: I-

Ariel: *Just* die already.
Bazhanov: NO!

A chain shoots out from behind the perch and anchors itself to Everett even as they stand in front of Chisaki’s podium. Vaguely, I think someone’s screaming, and Everett is wide-eyed, and they’re straining against the pull of death-

And- and I can’t move. I can’t even speak. All I can hear is the roar of voices, and one soaring above the rest:

Chisaki: ASTER!!

Everett reaches for their throat, staggering forward even as the chain around their neck draws them back. Chisaki lunges forward to meet their hand but they’re dragged two, three steps away, just barely out of reach.

Chisaki: Stop! STOP!! YOU CAN’T TAKE THEM, TOO!!

Everett: [choked] I love you- just-

They tear something from their neck and throw it out toward Chisaki just as the envelopes fall from their jacket, the file from their hands, and their life from ours.
Chisaki: NO!!!

And Everett - dear, wonderful, blameless Everett - is gone.

「GAME OVER」

EVERETT HAS BEEN FOUND GUILTY

TIME FOR THE PUNISHMENT!

「Reveal Me Everything」

FORMER SHSL ARCHER ASTER EVERETT'S EXECUTION: EXECUTED

It’s a maze of mirrors.

Everett falls into the center, breathing hard, watching their reflections look warily back at
them. They move, and they move a hundredfold as the mirrors stretch back and back and back.

But distantly, there’s the clatter of glass crashing down around them. A second passes. Each reflection grows darker. They don’t have much time.

So they run.

…

…

…

Chisaki: This is so- this is so *stupid*.

There’s no response from anyone, but she still whips her head around. Not bothering to pick up any of Everett’s belongings, she paces the circle like a caged animal.

Chisaki: It’s fake. The executions aren’t real. Why do any of us need to watch them suffer when we know it’s not even what’s happening?

Bazhanov: Tsukino-

Chisaki: Nope, I’m not doing first names right now. I’m also not standing for this. I don’t see the fucking point in watching the person I love be humiliated in some karmic way or whatever the hell.

Chisaki: It’s bullshit! It’s all bullshit! And I’m not going to sit here and watch this bullshit happen!

Chisaki glares at the perch, daring Caliban or this new version of Ariel to just try and stop her. Neither do; Caliban seems more put-out than anything, while Ariel simply watches
impassively.

Chisaki: So I’m going to stand here. See?

She steps, dead-center, on the elevator, and turns to face the rest of us.

Chisaki: Well? What about the rest of you?

...

...

...

And Everett still runs.

Their breath comes in short spurts, their legs still pound against glass, and the shadow in the mirror keeps getting closer.

They slam into a wall at too high a speed and their face fractures beneath their hand, cutting it open in bright detail, gaudy detail. How could something so fake, as Chisaki’s said, seem so real?

And it, whatever it is, is getting closer.

...

...

...

...
Almost everyone has gotten to the elevator, now. It’s our own form of rebellion against the birds, I think, or it could be something extremely foolhardy and they’ll burn us to a crisp as soon as we’re all in one convenient place. Yet Ariel, too, seems to have left. The only mascot in the room is Caliban, who watches us more helplessly than anything else.

When Sumitama steps onto the elevator, only Harai and I are left, and Harai seems to be waiting for me to move instead of actually hesitating.

Harai: You go first.

And I look at Chisaki, whose eyes are still fixated on the door beneath the screen, perhaps imagining Everett fighting off machinery in order to be with her again.

I take a deep breath and place one foot in front of the other.

…

…

…

Everett trips, picks themself back up, and keeps going. There’s no time. There’s never been time.

They keep running, the crashes behind them growing louder and louder, until they stop; they’re forced to stop. Maybe because of the dead end, the panels reflecting them over and over, but more likely because of the reflection they’re ultimately met with.

They breathe in, then out, eyes wild with possibility, wonder, and fear. They stand and look into their own image staring back at them.
Face to face with their former self.

... 

... 

... 

Harai still hasn’t made a move, and Chisaki is glaring holes into their head as they finally step off of the podium. Slowly, they start toward the elevator, stooping to collect all of the evidence we had abandoned in our rush.

The envelopes. The files. The glimmer of gold in their hands, which Everett had thrown out to Chisaki in their last moments and which she had refused to touch.

Their hands full, they start towards us.

... 

... 

... 

... 

Silence. There’s silence, for a mere, blessed moment, as Everett reaches to touch the mirror, to acknowledge the echo of who they used to be

and

it
Only when Harai steps onto the elevator does it finally begin to descend. Still, despite what Chisaki said in her rebellion, despite what I’ve said about forgiveness, my eyes are glued to the screen.

The last thing I see is the arrow shot through Everett’s chest, impaling both them and their memory.

And it’s over.
Chisaki has started to cry again, and by all means I should be comforting her, but I don’t know if I can. I don’t know if I should. Would it make everything worse to help the person whose girlfriend had… Had killed…

… Would that make things worse for me, or for her? I don’t know anymore. I don’t know anything at all. I don’t know why Hope’s Peak wouldn’t be real, I don’t know why so many killing games came before us, I don’t know why Sekisada would want to talk to Amal last night.

… Amal…

I hope you’re not disappointed in me. I hope I did the right thing in forgiving Everett. Because it wasn’t their fault, and it was an accident, and none of it changes the fact that you’re never coming back but I forgive them anyway.

And I think, if you were in my place, you might disagree. The world was too harsh to you, to the very end, and I don’t think I would even blame you for holding it against them. But I just can’t.

The worst part is that I don’t know if you could forgive me for doing this.

Somehow, I step out of the elevator. Somehow, I make it to the hallway first, and I don’t know where I’m going to go but a hand reaches out to stop me.

I turn to find Kashizaki and Atsui with matching worried expressions. It’s taken me this long to notice that Kashizaki doesn’t have her contacts in, and she looks so much more tired without them.

Kashizaki: Chiyo, do you need anything? You look like-

Chiyo: I’m fine.
Atsui: Nooo the fuck you are not. Come on, eat something.

Chiyo: I can’t. I just- I can’t, right now.

Kashizaki: Do you want us to walk you to your room?

Chiyo: No. Don’t worry about me. Go help Chisaki-chan.

Kashizaki: Chiyo-

Chiyo: Ririka.

**She stops.**

Chiyo: I just need to be alone right now, okay? Please?

Atsui: Doesn’t mean you can’t eat-

Kashizaki: Ryouji, let her be. You’re going back to your room, right? We’ll drop off food for you.

Chiyo: Thanks.

I already know I won’t eat it.

Chiyo: I’ll see you around.

Atsui: Take care, okay?

Kashizaki: Text us if you need anything.
Chiyo: I will.

Atsui: Promise?

Chiyo: Promise.

Atsui: Pinky promise?

I walk away from him without another word, legs shaking, and when I get to my room I slam the door behind me and slump to the ground.

Atsui can’t know about Amal and pinky promises, unless for some reason they told him, which I doubt. So he didn’t mean anything by saying that. And if he didn’t mean anything by it, then I can’t blame him for it, so why did I still want to punch him in the face when he brought it up?

Some part of me says to stop being so worked up, that I ought to make peace with myself and let everything go. I’m supposed to be the nice one, aren’t I? So I need to be… Nice. And kind. And better than I am.

But I’m so sick and tired of having to tell myself to be better than I am. I’m allowed to have feelings. I’m allowed to break down, and I’m allowed to just let everything out, I think.

The thing is, I don’t know if I can. I don’t know if I should, maybe, because whatever comes out is going to be ugly and horrible and gross and even now when I’m sitting behind closed doors I don’t know if I want to let it out.

More than that and scarier, I might not have anything left to give. I’ve cried as much as I possibly could in the trial, after Everett confessed, and my throat is still raw and my head still floating. In books I’ve read, the protagonist always cries until they can’t cry anymore, and then find out later that they have more tears to give. Yet I don’t know if I do, and if I’m a protagonist, I must be a terrible one.
Does *that* make me bad? Amal is dead, Sekisada is dead, Everett is dead. Three more people gone, and I can’t cry any more. Mourning feels like it’s the least I can do, but it’s impossible.

What even happened today?

Everett killed Amal. They were in a previous game. Sekisada *was* the mastermind, and is now dead. This location was reused. This killing game isn’t the same as the others. And Ariel…

There’s too much to process. There’s too much going on, far too much to be revealed in one day, and I don’t know if I want to know everything or anything anymore. I just want to go home, is that so much to ask for? I want to go back home to whatever family I can get.

I want to get us all out of here, at whatever cost that may bring to myself. Someone as fucked up as me who can’t even cry anymore is a small price to pay if everyone else can get out of here alive.

And there’s a knock at the door. I swallow too hard, letting any trace of a sob sink back to my stomach, but my voice still shakes too much as I make no move to stand up.

Chiyo: Go away.

Harai: Kumoshita-san?

Ah.

I don’t know why it is that I get up for them, but I rise to my feet and open the door. And for the first time, I *see* them.

Their face is remarkably unimpressive, dark red eyes set into a pale, haunted visage. There’s angry scars that match their mask - a continuation of whatever that is on their neck - but other than that it’s just a face. A human one.
Harai flinches when I look at them, eyes narrowing in a vague image of embarrassment, but steels themself.

Harai: You don’t recognize my face, right?

Chiyo: No, I don’t. I didn’t recognize anyone here when I first met them.

Harai: … Right. That was a dumb question.

Chiyo: Is this a permanent change…?

Harai: [closes eyes; shakes head] I- I’m going to put it back on when I get back to my room, I just wanted to face you now as- as I am. But…

Harai: … Here.
They pull something from inside their cloak and present it to me. It takes me a second to stare at its glimmering golden light to realize it’s Everett’s choker.

Harai: They threw it at Chisaki-san during the trial. I asked her if she wanted to keep it, but she said no. So-

Chiyo: [pushes it aside] I don’t want it.

Harai: You’re sure? I asked Caliban what to do with it, and they said that Ariel gave you-

Chiyo: I don’t want it. Give it to Bazhanov-san. Or keep it. I don’t care. I just don’t want that with me.

Chiyo: I know I said I forgive them, and I really do, but it’s just…

Chiyo: [quietly] It’s too much.

Harai doesn’t say anything for a moment, merely folding the necklace in their hands until they can stow it away again. They still look far too worried, mouth tugging in what might for what I know is a permanent frown.

Or maybe they’re just tired. We all are.

Harai: … Right. I don’t blame you.

Harai: The other thing is…

They give me the envelope, waiting for me to say something. I don’t.

Harai: You should have this. It’s yours. I haven’t looked at it yet, and I’m trusting that if it’s anything important, you’ll tell me. Other than that, you don’t have to tell me what’s inside if you don’t want to.
Harai: And…

Harai: I’m sorry for everything.

With that, they slip back down the hall, head lowered. All I can do is watch them go, their cloak floating behind them.

It’s not until I’m back inside my room with the door safely shut that I can cry again. It’s not until I finally stop and pause for breath that I look at the envelope, read the name written across it, and almost burst into tears again.

But should I open it? Should I really read Amal’s last secret, something they might not ever have wanted us to know?

It’s… It’s not like they’d care. They’re dead, after all. And it can’t be that bad, and it won’t hurt me, it’s just a secret.

And I open it, and I read the words scrawled across it, and I hold it to my chest, tighter than I’ll ever be able to hold them again.

I was wrong.

And for once, I don’t know if I can bear to see tomorrow.

DANGANRONPA: A STORMY LAST HURRAH

CHAPTER 3: COMPLETE

> REMAINING: 9/16 <
Chapter End Notes

The map for Zone 3 (Chapter 3) can be found here.

Next update is January 23, 2020.

End Notes

DR:ASLH updates on alternate Thursdays at 8:00 pm EST starting from April 11, 2019.

Tumblr: https://dr-astormylastthurrah.tumblr.com/
deviantART: https://www.deviantart.com/pkrs-arts
Please message me on one of these sites for a link to the Discord server!

(If you enjoy ASLH, consider supporting me on Ko-Fi or checking out my commissions as well!)

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