Where Talent Goes On Vacation

by Theralion

Summary

Sequel to Where Talent Goes To Die. A seemingly ordinary school trip turns deadly as Monokuma hijacks the cruise ship carrying Class 32 of Talent High School. Trapped in another killing game, the students must uncover the culprit behind each murder, the mysteries surrounding the killing school trip, and the identity of the person responsible for their misfortune.
Prologue

Where Talent Goes On Vacation

Prologue: Like Deja Vu All Over Again... Again

You've probably heard of Hope's Peak Academy, as well as its copycat, Talent High School. If you haven't, all you need to know is that they're two of Japan's best high schools, and there's a reason no one applies to them- unless you're the best there is in your field, your parents have a lot of money to burn, or you're a relative of someone who works for Talent High School, you're shit out of luck.

A lot of people would be disappointed to hear that they aren't cut out for those kinds of schools, but not me. I'd always found the idea sort of weird, and always thought that the schools' only draw is their exclusivity, a bit like a collector's item that commands insane prices because there aren't many of them. Because of that, I used to think that those places didn't have anything to do with me... until Talent High School came up to me and invited me to come to their school.

I'm Akira Azuki, and I've done a lot of work as an actress, from school plays to television shows to a blockbuster film called Magical Girl Sakura, a live action adaptation of the anime series. In my first year of high school, I got the attention of Talent High School's recruiters, and after doing an audition in front of the school's headmistress, the board of trustees, a director and a famous actor, I was awarded the title of the Ultimate Actress.

I had mixed feelings about the development. It was great to be the Ultimate Actress in my generation, but I wasn't sure how much it meant for the people who ran a school like that to give me the title- the director and the actor gave feedback but didn't make the final decision. The fact that they seemed to base the decision on my performance in Magical Girl Sakura didn't help. If my title of Ultimate Actress came from people like them, what did that say about me?

Of course, I talked things through with my mom, who was also my manager. Mom believed I needed the publicity, as well as something that'd boost my resume if my career went belly-up. She also pointed out that it didn't hurt that the school was fairly lenient when it came to talent-related absences, so it'd be easy for me to take time off for acting work. So I accepted the offer, made all the arrangements to transfer, and packed my bags to move in to the dorms.

I might no have been 100 percent enthusiastic about Talent High School, but I decided to make the most of my time there, unaware that...loading ne...ating av...lizing... Complete.

I woke up in a hotel room that overlooked the ocean. It was a reasonably large room with two queen-size beds with a nightstand between them (my bed was to the right of the nightstand, while my roommate's was to the left), a television, a desk, a bathroom with a shower, a closet and other amenities. There were also two suitcases on wheels, near the door but not in the way, and both were a plain and inoffensive brown.

I climbed out of bed and noticed that I was already dressed in my school uniform- a long-sleeved dress shirt with the top button undone and dark trousers. Technically, I was wearing the boys' uniform (not to mention that I should be wearing the top for my gyakuran) but not too many people paid attention to that. Surprisingly enough, I didn't seem to have much of a case of bed head, except for the one strand of hair that always stood up.
My roommate was a girl with chin-length raven hair that was neatly combed. She wore a red plaid skirt, a white dress shirt, a gray blazer and a red necktie. It was pretty obvious we weren't from the same school, since I recognized the crest as belonging to Saint Mary's Catholic High School, an all-girls school that wasn't far from Talent High School. Unlike some Catholic school uniform wearers I could think of, there wasn't a hint of fanservice in this girl's uniform- her shirt and blazer were buttoned up, her tie was properly tied, her skirt was knee-length, and she wore white pantyhose with dark shoes.

"Good morning, Azuki-sama," the girl said, speaking formally.

"Morning," I said. "I don't think we've been introduced. Are you a fan of mine?"

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Chiyuri Nagato, and I'm the Ultimate Tech Support. It's nice to meet you."

As Nagato bowed to me and I hastily reciprocated, I realized that Nagato's family name sounded familiar for some reason, and probably not because of her talent. I couldn't remember any news stories about her, so she probably wasn't very famous for her talent- which wasn't surprising when she'd probably work among countless people who answer questions over their phone, without showing their faces or giving their names.

"Same here, Nagato," I said. "By the way, why're you calling me 'ma'am' and '-sama'?"

"Oh, it's just because I'm a bit nervous about actually meeting you," Nagato said. "Part of it is that I was always told to show callers that level of respect, and I call my mom 'ma'am' when I get in trouble."

"Well, you don't have to be all that formal with me," I said. "Just 'Azuki' is fine with me. You can add 'san' if you want, but don't expect me to return the favor."

I probably came off as a bit brusque to Nagato, but I didn't see any need to change how I acted. In my experience, good manners were the most superficial way possible to get or stay on people's good side. Sure, Nagato probably meant it, but that wasn't always the case- I once saw two studio executives going at it while using polite language.

"I'll keep that in mind, Azuki-sam... I mean, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "The other part is that I'm a big fan of Magical Girl Sakura."

"Magical Girl Sakura?" I said, my voice a mix of incredulity and disappointment.

"Yes," Azuki said. "I really enjoyed the anime, and thought they did a great job adapting the film. You were just the right pick for Sakura herself."

I tried to keep it to myself, but I wasn't entirely happy that Nagato's favorite work with me in it was Magical Girl Sakura. Sure, it was my most famous project, but that didn't mean it was the best. My favorite projects were the Shakespeare plays I'd done in middle school- Julius Caesar and Hamlet- and I hoped to one day do work on a movie that was of similar quality. I also was fond of Summer's End, even though my character died at the end of the first season- showing her trying to conquer her fears and face execution bravely was one of the most challenging yet enjoyable scenes I've ever done.

"Anyway, what's going on here?" I said, hoping to change the subject. "Why're we at a hotel?"

Nagato paused, seemingly taken off guard by my question, but then the answer occurred to her.
"We're taking a cruise for spring break," Nagato said. "It's one last vacation before the school year starts, in which the new students get to know each other."

It took me a moment to remember that I'd heard about the cruise before Nagato had told me, and I could only vaguely remember the fact that we had one scheduled. After my invitation to Talent High School had been finalized, my mom and I had asked many questions about the school, but we hadn't heard anything about a school trip during the spring break. After a moment, I recalled the cruise, as well as the fact that we were going to stay in a hotel, but those seemed like random tidbits, floating in my head without being connected to any other memories.

For the moment, though, I didn't think too deeply about it. Nagato did seem to remember, after all, and I did have some recollection of these vacation plans, so I decided to play along, at least for now.

"Oh, right," I said as the memory came back. "Sorry, I must've forgotten."

"That's all right," Nagato said. "It took me a little while to remember, too, so they must have announced it at the last minute."

Nagato's suggestion sounded fairly unconvincing, so she wasn't too sure of it herself. It seemed kind of odd that a school trip would be so hastily planned, but maybe that said a lot about the kind of school Talent High School was.

"Anyway, is this is all on the school's dime?" I said. "That's a pretty shitty way to use the money that the poor slobs who attend the Reserve Course pay for tuition."

I'd expected the apparently ladylike Nagato to be shocked at my foul language, but she actually nodded.

"I agree," Nagato said, "and in fact, it's highly unusual that they'd go so far as to take us on a cruise. To my knowledge, all of Talent High School's class trips have been in Japan, so they're not nearly as luxurious as this one. Our school is famous, but not for this level of excess."

"Gotcha," I said. "You seem pretty well-informed about our school- why's that?"

Before Nagato could answer, we heard a knock on the door. Nagato went to answer, and we saw a woman in a dark pinstriped skirt suit with a white button-down shirt, black pantyhose and black shoes. The woman looked like she was in her early forties, and she had shoulder-length hair that was the same color as Nagato's.

"Good, you two are also awake," the woman said. "We will meet in the front lobby in an hour, so please get some breakfast first. There's a restaurant downstairs near the lobby, serving a buffet, so I'm sure you'll find something you like there."

"Will do, Mom," Nagato said, in a far more relaxed tone than she used around me.

I remembered now why Nagato's name was familiar- it was that of my teacher, Yukari Nagato. I'd heard that I would be in Nagato-sensei's homeroom, but not that her daughter would be my classmate. This small fact went a long way toward explaining why Nagato knew so much about the school- her mom worked there.

"We've discussed this before, Nagato-san," Nagato-sensei said. "As long as you are in my class, you are expected to show me the same respect you show to any other teacher. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Nagato said. "Please forgive my rudeness, Nagato-sensei."
Nagato bowed deeply, but Nagato-sensei's stern expression gave way to a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about it too much, Chi-er, Nagato-san," Nagato-sensei said. "I know that putting aside our relationship as parent and child in order to work well as teacher and student will be a bit of an adjustment for both of us. Because of that, I appreciate your cooperation, since it makes my job easier."

"I know, Sensei," Nagato said. "This year is a challenge for both of us, so I hope to make it as manageable as possible."

Nagato-sensei smiled and nodded pleasantly. She reminded me of a lot of my teachers in that she didn't hesitate to crack down when people misbehaved, but came off as fairly nice if you followed the rules and kept your grades up. Because of that, I worked to get the best grades I could, even if I wasn't an academic prodigy, and stayed out of trouble.

"I've got to get going," Nagato-sensei said, "since I need to meet up with the other fourteen students. Get some breakfast, then meet us in the lobby. Don't forget your handbooks and suitcases."

"Yes, ma'am," Nagato and I said together.

Nagato-sensei then left our room, leaving us in silence for a moment until her daughter turned to me.

"You seemed surprised earlier, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Well, yeah," I said. "I know your mom's the teacher, but she seems a bit cold to you."

"Because she doesn't let me call her 'Mom' at school?" Nagato said.

I nodded. It wasn't exactly hard to guess, but Nagato hit the nail on the head.

"That's why," I said. "My mom's my manager, but it's perfectly fine for me to call her 'Mom' and for her to call me 'Akira,' even at work. Can't your mom cut you a little slack?"

"Mom- I mean, Nagato-sensei- isn't trying to be mean," Nagato said. "She always said that her job as a teacher requires that her students respect her, and she believes she must earn that respect."

"What does that involve?" I said.

"A few things," Nagato said. "The first is being good at her job, since the students can't learn from a teacher who can't teach them. The second is treating the students with respect, which is why she's always polite, even when scolding people. The third and most important thing is being fair and consistent- if she expects all her students to call her 'Sensei', it wouldn't be fair if her daughter was exempt. There's a few others, but these are the three big ones."

"I guess I get what you're saying," I said. "I don't think my mom would make me call her 'Azuki-sensei' if she was my teacher, but I can at least get behind what Nagato-sensei's doing."

"Nagato-sensei knows she's only human," Nagato said. "She said she might slip up and call me 'Chiyuri' in class, like she almost did just now, so she wants me to correct her if she does. I plan on doing so, of course."

"Why's that?" I said.
"Apart from what I said before about making her job easier, there's a more personal element," Nagato said. "I actually like being treated as one of her students, with all the rights and responsibilities associated with it. It makes me feel as though I earned my place in this class."

"The fact that you earned your spot in the class should go without saying," I said. "I mean, they let you in, didn't they?"

Nagato looked surprised, but nodded.

"They did," Nagato said. "We're both students of Talent High School now, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails."

Talent High School was more like an ordinary school than Hope's Peak Academy was, and students were expected to attend and pass their classes. That said, doing so wasn't all that hard, since the school boasted a 97.5 percent graduation rate, and its students went on to prestigious colleges across Japan.

"Speaking of responsibilities," Nagato said, as if to change the subject, "we should retrieve our handbooks. They should be on the nightstand, along with our room keys."

I checked the nightstand, and saw two tablet PCs- the "handbooks" in question- and keycards. After stashing my keycard in my pocket, I picked up my handbook started it up, and saw my name.

"So, this one's mine," I said. "What's on it?"

"Let's see..." Nagato said. "There's a section with the class' profiles on it, although I only see three- mine, yours and Sensei's. There's a Map section for our current whereabouts. There's also a Documents folder for various things we might need, such as our e-ticket. There's a couple other ones, too, but the one that matters most is the rules."

I looked and saw profiles on myself, Nagato and our teacher. They contained our pictures, names, talents, heights, birthdays, likes and dislikes, and hobbies. Like Nagato said, the only ones there were hers, her mom's and mine, but I suspected more would be added as we met people.

I then opened up the rules, and found only a few entries.

Rule 1: Students are expected to behave themselves and follow school rules while on the trip. Extreme violence against others is prohibited.

"Rule 1's obvious enough," I said. "Does Nagato-sensei think we're gonna start murdering each other or something?"

"School violence is no laughing matter, Azuki-san," Nagato said firmly. "At my old school, there was an incident in which a student stabbed a classmate. The victim was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance- luckily, she survived. As for the perpetrator, she was expelled and arrested- the last I'd heard of her, she'd been sent to juvenile hall."

Despite her polite speech, Nagato gave me a stern glare along with her firm rebuke. I'd only known her for a couple minutes, but I could already tell this wasn't normal for her.

"Sorry, that was in bad taste," I said. "Then again, to people like us, that sort of thing just doesn't seem real, right?"

"No, I suppose not," Nagato said, calmly but gravely. "Everyone in my school was shocked by what happened... except for one of my classmates, who'd come from a rough neighborhood as a
child. She had seen things like this all the time, and said she was lucky to go to a high school like this. Of course, she was glad when the girl who got stabbed made a full recovery, saying that a lot of people she knew weren't so lucky.

The truth was that we, as young people who could depend on our parents and didn't have to worry where our next meal would come from, were extraordinarily lucky compared to many people our age, who often didn't even have food, homes or medicine, much less an education. Since we'd be attending one of the nation's most prestigious schools, living in its dormitory and eating meals in the dining hall, that thought was an important reminder that we should be grateful for what we had.

I then looked over the rest of the rules.

*Rule 2: Work well with your classmates and strengthen your friendships. Only Talent High School teachers and students are allowed on the trip.*

The first part was all well and good, a sort of platitude that wasn't worth making into a rule. The second part also seemed like it went without saying, maybe to prevent people from bringing their boyfriends or girlfriends along, or to stop parents (besides Nagato-sensei, that is) from tagging along.

*Rule 3: Littering is not allowed. Students are responsible for taking their belongings with them.*

"So they say littering isn't allowed," I said. "In other words, we have to pick up after ourselves, and take our stuff with us?"

"It seems that way," Nagato said. "Like they say, take only pictures and leave only footprints."

That answered my question. That said, it wasn't as though we could leave any footprints in the concrete, and I didn't have a camera of my own- although the student handbook did have a camera function. The camera function only seemed to allow one photograph, though, and I was fairly certain I'd find a better sight worth taking a picture of than the view from the hotel window.

*Rule 4: The teacher cannot interfere with the students unless they have violated a rule.*

"Interfere with?" I said. "Don't we have to do what Nagato-sensei says?"

"Within reason, yes," Nagato said. "Nagato-sensei can't tell us to do anything that would be morally wrong or illegal... not that my mom's that kind of person."

I nodded. While Nagato-sensei did seem to be a bit anal about the rules, it was clear that Chiyuri looked up to and respected her mother, hence why she didn't bother correcting herself when talking about her "mom."

"That looks like that's it for the rules," I said.

"It does," Nagato said. "Let's go get some breakfast."

I looked at our suitcases, and saw that one had my name on it, while the other had Nagato's name.

"What about our suitcases?" I said.

"Let's leave them here for now," Nagato said. "We can come back to get them after we're done."

"Got it," I said. "Let's move."

We left the room together, hoping to get some breakfast and meet our classmates on the way.
Something seemed off about this trip, but I hoped it was my imagination.

Outside our room, we checked the room number and saw that we were in Room 530- on the fifth floor of the hotel, one of many rooms in a long corridor. After checking our map, we were able to find our way to the elevator that would take us down to the lobby.

A short way down the hall, we saw two boys together. One of them was a highly muscular guy with short brown hair in a tank top and sweat pants, while the other was a relatively skinny one with unkempt light brown hair, who was wearing a blue gyakuran.

"Hey there!" the boy in the gyakuran said. "You two must be Akira Azuki and Chiyuri Nagato, respectively the Ultimate Actress and the Ultimate Tech Support!"

"Two for two," I said, "You really know your stuff, don't you?"

"Of course I do, since I'm the Ultimate Trivia Champion! I'm Hide Yamazaki- it's nice to meet you!"

I'd done my homework, too, so to speak, and I'd read up on Yamazaki. He was a trivia champion who'd won several trivia contests at his high school, and was a fixture on a popular quiz show for some time. In order to avoid being accused of fixing the contest, the show gave him one last challenge, with the prize being admission to Talent High School, and Yamazaki succeeded.

"Same here," the other boy said. "I'm Kotaro Kumakura, and I'm the Ultimate Weightlifter."

Kumakura was famous for winning a weightlifting competition. When asked what his secret was, he said weightlifting wasn't just about strength, but also technique and proper training. Some people would've come off as stuck-up or full of themselves, but he seemed relatively modest, as if he was hoping to give advice to would-be lifters.

"It's nice to meet you, Yamazaki-san, Kumakura-san," Nagato said, bowing. "I'm... surprised you heard about me, since I didn't think any news outlets really covered me."

"We met the teacher," Kumakura said, "and asked for who else would be in our class. She mentioned that she had a daughter in the class, and that you were the Ultimate Tech Support."

So Yamazaki's knowledge of our names and talents wasn't as strong of a proof of his talent as we thought. Then again, if he'd memorized fifteen other students' names after only being told once, then it stood to reason that he could probably remember all sorts of trivia.

"Ah," Nagato said. "Well, I didn't ask Mo- Nagato-sensei about the names of my classmates."

"That's fine," Yamazaki said. "You've met us, and I'm sure the other twelve are around the hotel somewhere. You'll meet up with them sooner or later. For now, we've got to get going."

The two boys said goodbye for now, but I couldn't help but feel a bit worried. Yamazaki was "pretty sure" that we'd meet up with the others, not absolutely sure, so it was as though he didn't know for a fact where everyone was. For now, I kept it to myself, hoping it was just my overactive imagination.

We took the elevator down, proceeded to the lobby and saw two more boys. One wore what looked like a navy blue suit with a white dress shirt and a nice purple necktie, while the other wore a lab coat over a white dress shirt, red tie and black slacks, along with glasses.
"Ah, it looks like you're in our class, aren't you?" the boy in the suit said.

"We are," Nagato said. "I'm Nagato, the Ultimate Tech Support, and this is Azuki-san, the Ultimate Actress."

Judging from Nagato's decision to not provide our first names, she probably assumed we wouldn't become close enough with anyone to use them. Besides, if the newcomers really wanted to know our first names, they could check the student handbook- I'd taken a quick look after our encounter with Kumakura and Yamazaki, and saw they'd been added.

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" the boy in the suit said. "My name is Nobuhiro Higurashi, and I'm the Ultimate Public Speaker!"

Apparently, Higurashi became PR rep of his old school's student council in his first year of high school. It's easy to assume that he happened to be lucky enough to make a good impression on the winning candidate, but I saw a video of him speaking online, and realized he was the real deal.

"And I am Seita Kirishima, the Ultimate Geneticist," the other boy said.

I'd heard a bit about Kirishima's work, not all of it good. A year ago, he'd published a research paper, and his findings helped made gene editing more feasible. When asked about it, he was fairly blasé about the possible repercussions, saying that knowledge was knowledge, and it was up to us how to use it.

"It's good to see you two," Higurashi said. "There's not a whole lot of people around this hotel."

"Really?" I said.

"To be more precise, no one outside this class," Kirishima said. "How many people have you met?"

"Apart from you two?" Nagato said. "Just Nagato-sensei, Yamazaki-san and Kumakura-san."

"As I thought," Kirishima said. "Higurashi-kun and I have met some of our other classmates- albeit not the two you just mentioned- but have not seen any other guests or hotel staff."

Kirishima's claim was odd enough that I immediately questioned it. Even if the early morning was relatively quiet, you could probably at least see some guests up and about. Talent High School couldn't possibly have bought out the entire hotel. I also had to wonder why Nagato-sensei or the other two students we'd met hadn't mentioned it.

"As strange as it sounds, I can't disprove what you just said," Nagato said. "What do you think that means?"

"I cannot say just yet, Nagato-kun," Kirishima said, "since scientific conclusions require hard evidence that is clearly related to what you intend to prove. At this point, we have nothing but unanswered questions."

"That's right," Higurashi said, "but we shouldn't worry too much, either, or else we might end up losing our heads."

I felt my stomach rumbling.

"I don't know any more than you do," I said, "but we should probably be going to get some breakfast. I'll catch you guys later."
"We'll see you later!" Higurashi said pleasantly.

"Until then," Nagato said, excusing herself with a bow.

As Kirishima simply nodded, Nagato and I took our leave and headed to breakfast

"What do you suppose that's all about?" I said. "And why didn't Nagato-sensei seem at all bothered by the fact that no one else is around?"

"I don't know," Nagato said. "As for Nagato-sensei, I'm sure she's thought of it, too, but has to keep her cool in a situation like this. For now, we should get our bearings, meet up, and then decide what to do next."

That much made sense to me. Even though I was starting to feel uneasy about this school trip, I knew it was still important to stay calm, and this went double for the one that everyone was looking to for guidance. Maybe we'd figure something out once we got together and got our heads together.

We entered the restaurant, and after serving ourselves a Western style breakfast with eggs and sausage from the buffet, looked for a place to sit. Looking around, we saw Yamazaki and Kumakura sitting together, as well as a couple other students.

At that point, two girls sitting across from each other at a small square table waved us over. One was a girl with glasses in a dark sailor fuku with a red neckerchief, whose raven hair was in a side plait. The other was a pre-teen girl with a blue sailor fuku, whose brown hair was neatly done in a bob haircut.

"May we sit here?" Nagato said.

"Go right ahead!" the older of the two girls said. "The more the merrier, right, Miharu-chan?"

Miharu, the younger girl, nodded. Apparently, she not only didn't mind being called by her first name, but was already used to it.

"It is, Sasaki-san," the younger girl said. "Please feel free to sit with us."

Nagato and I sat down at the table- she was across from me, Sasaki was on my left and Miharu was on my right.

"I suppose introductions are in order," the older girl said. "My name is Sayuri Sasaki, and I'm the Ultimate Manga Artist. The young girl with me is Miharu Mihama, and she's the Ultimate Legal Expert."

I'd heard of Sasaki before. She was the manga artist behind Breakneck Canyon, a best-selling and critically acclaimed series about a gay romance. The subject matter wasn't my cup of tea, especially since I always thought of yaoi as for people who thought that sex scenes with a man and a woman had one woman too many, but apparently, a lot of people liked it for its realistic depiction of a same-sex romance.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "I'm Akira Azuki, the Ultimate Actress, and this is Chiyuri Nagato, the Ultimate Tech Support."

"Nice to meet you, Azuki-san, Nagato-san," Sasaki said. "Is it all right if I use your first names?"
Nagato nodded eagerly, as though this was a first for her. I was personally amazed that Sasaki had asked us despite knowing us for only about a minute.

"Go right ahead," I said. "I have a feeling you'd do it anyway if you said no."

"Thank you, Akira-chan, Chiyuri-chan," Sasaki said. "You can call me 'Sayuri' if you want."

"I'll think about it, Sasaki-san," Nagato said.

I nodded to concur.

"Apparently, Sasaki-san makes this offer to everyone," Mihama said. "I thought she was only doing it because I am a child, but it is a relief that I am treated no differently from my older peers."

"Some of them say no, of course," Sasaki said, "like Himemiya-san did. In those cases, I respect their wishes, but let them know that the offer's still open if they change their minds."

So I was wrong about my assumption. Of course, it was probably likely that not many people said yes to her. Nagato probably did so just to be nice, while I did so partly because I'd look like a hypocrite if I got on people's cases for being rude to me when I'm pretty casual with most people—at least Sasaki asked before calling me by my first name.

Now that Sasaki had introduced herself, I turned my focus to her companion. Mihama had made headlines before, but as a girl who'd gotten into high school at the age of 10. She was already an uncommon genius, but was apparently on a whole different level when it came to knowing the law of the land.

"That reminds me, Mihama-san," Nagato said. "I've heard about your being a child prodigy, but don't know much about your talent."

"To put it simply, Nagato-san," Mihama said, "I am exceptionally well-versed in the laws of our nation for someone my age. I am not a lawyer, prosecutor or judge, since I do not have the requisite qualifications to practice law, but the administration believed I had the makings of an exceptional legal career, and thus concluded that my talent was worth studying."

"You got into high school at your age and you still want more?" I said. "When I was your age, my mom was scheduling my acting job around elementary school."

Mihama pouted. For all her seriousness and formality, she could be surprisingly sensitive.

"Now, now, Akira-chan, I can definitely sympathize with how Miharu-chan feels," Sasaki said. "The magazine I write for only reluctantly took me on, partly because they liked my work, and partly because they thought a high school manga artist would draw attention. Even so, there were those who believed that a high schooler couldn't handle a manga artist's incredibly busy schedule, or wasn't suited for my subject matter."

"I get that sometimes," I said, "since some people are a bit hesitant to believe I can keep up with my studies on top of my work as an actress. I guess all I'm trying to say about Mihama is that people aren't always understanding of those who take a path that's a bit more challenging than usual."

"No, I understand what you are saying, Azuki-san," Mihama said. "I do believe that I can keep up with my responsibilities as well as you and the others your age- otherwise, I would not have skipped grades in the first place."
It was an undeniable truth, if a bit of a harsh one. All of us had, in some way or another, stepped off the beaten path in the pursuit of excellence in our fields. We'd worked hard, made sacrifices and in return, ended up in this highly exclusive high school. Even after achieving all this, we wouldn't be set for life- it would be up to us to continue our success and keep our careers alive.

The other two girls finished eating and got up.

"We've got to get going for now," Sasaki said. "It's nice to meet you two."

"Please excuse us," Mihama said.

As the two girls left, I realized that in a class full of Ultimates, the polite and serious child prodigy might not even be the strangest person around. If that was true, then getting everyone to get along seemed like quite a long shot, to say the least.

A few minutes later, Nagato and I were done with breakfast, and got up to leave. We took our trays and dishes to a nearby carousel-like machine, where they would be taken to the dish washer, and then left the restaurant.

On our way out, we saw a girl with long dark hair in a ponytail who was wearing what looked like an archer's training outfit- a white keiko-gi, a dark hakama and a gray obi. She was sitting across from a girl who had her dark hair in a bun, and was wearing a plain brown kimono and a white apron. Since Nagato and I were going to meet everyone sooner or later, we decided we might as well introduce ourselves now.

The archer apparently noticed us first, and leaned in to speak with her companion.

"Here come some more of our classmates," the archer said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Remember, Kanae, treat me like anyone else, understood?"

"I understand, Himeno-sama," Kanae said.

The girl called Himeno facepalmed. It looked like Kanae had trouble following directions... or maybe she really did treat everyone with that level of formality.

"Sama?" I said.

Himeno let off a sigh, probably having hoped we hadn't heard her.

"I might as well explain things so you don't jump to a wrong conclusion. I'm Himeno Himemiya, the Ultimate Archer. She's Kanae Tsukimura, a childhood friend of mine who's the Ultimate Handmaiden."

"It's nice to meet you," Tsukimura said.

The name "Himemiya" was familiar in more ways than one. Not only had I heard about a girl who'd won multiple archery tournaments in her age group, and was the MVP of her team despite being the first year, but I'd also heard much about the Himemiya zaibtsu. They were an extremely wealthy family, in the same tier as the Togami group, and came from very old money.

"It's nice to meet you, Himemiya-san, Tsukimura-san," Nagato said "I'm Nagato, the Ultimate Tech Support, and this is Azuki-san, the Ultimate Actress."

"Yeah, same here," I said. "Pretty much anyone who knows that knows you're rich enough to have
"a maid, so were you trying to hide that?"

"Not at all," Himemiya said. "My hope was that since Kanae had earned her way into the school separately, on her own merits, we could have an equal relationship as classmates and fellow Ultimates."

"I appreciate the thought, Himeno-sama," Tsukimura said. "All the same, I cannot forget our past together or my upbringing. After all, it was because I was raised as your servant that I was able to earn this honor."

Out of all the students I'd met thus far, Tsukimura and Nagato were the only ones I hadn't heard about before, probably because their talents were the least impressive. Then again, I'd once read an article about a girl from my town who'd earned the title of Ultimate Secretary a year before I got into the school, and publicly thanked Talent High School for recognizing those who did exceptional work in unexceptional jobs.

"Fair enough, Kanae," Himemiya said, before looking at us. "That said, Azuki-san, Nagato-san, please treat us the same way you would any other member of the class. Kanae may be the daughter of a servant, and I may be the daughter of a wealthy man, but neither of our parentages should make any more difference than Nagato-san's."

I couldn't help but notice that my mom was left out. She was reasonably good at her job, but a lot of her colleagues said she only happened to get lucky enough to have an actor like me as her daughter, something they probably said because they were jealous of her. Then again, maybe Himemiya only mentioned Nagato's parents because Nagato's mom was our teacher.

"Thank you very much, Himemiya-san," Nagato said. "I'll do my best to treat you and Tsukimura-san just like everyone else."

"Sure thing, Himemiya," I said. "If everyone here is the best at something, I don't think it matters if you're an archer or Tsukimura's a servant."

Himemiya nodded.

"Just one more thing, Nagato-san," Himemiya said. "Do you call all of your schoolmates '-san'?"

"Yes, both boys and girls," Nagato said. "My mother was fairly strict about teaching me good manners, and I went to a respectable all-girls school, so I had to be polite with my schoolmates. I'm accustomed to showing this level of politeness to everyone I know."

Himemiya looked almost disappointed for a moment.

"I see," Himemiya said. "It's just a matter of curiosity. My family expected Kanae to practice good manners because she was a servant, and expected me to do the same to appear respectable and not embarrass our family. I suppose you've had the same sort of thing drilled into your head."

Nagato seemed a bit hurt by Himemiya's blunt assessment of her politeness. One of the unwritten rules about acting nice just to be polite to others is to pretend you don't know that the other person's doing the same thing.

"And what about me, Himemiya?" I said.

"You probably wouldn't last a day working as a servant for my family, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "But you're honest, if nothing else. It might be worth getting to know you better, even if I may never have you over."
I chuckled. Himemiya was certainly blunt, but I could respect that. I then quickly checked my watch— a moderately expensive analog watch.

"Thanks," I said, "but we've got to be going. It's nice to meet you,"

"Same here," Nagato said.

We then exited the restaurant and started making our way back to our room. By my count, we'd met just over half our classmates, so I wondered what sort of people the remaining six—probably two girls and four boys—would be like.

Upon returning to the lobby, we saw two girls who were practically identical to each other, with shoulder-length dark hair in twintails. They had matching uniforms, with navy blue blazers, light gray skirts, white dress shirts and thin blue neck ribbons.

"Oh, hey there," I said. "Are you two in our class, too?"

"We are," the girl on the right said. "I guess it's hard to tell because apart from the two of us, we all have different uniforms."

The other girl nodded. Since Talent High School was highly exclusive, and few schools had sent more than one student to Talent High School in the 32 years the school had been running, the probability of two students coming to Talent High School from the same school in the same year was practically a million to one. Since Nagato probably knew that already, the four of us were most likely in agreement.

"That's right," I said. "I'm Azuki and this is Nagato."

"I'm **Tatsuki Tachibana**, the **Ultimate Guitarist**," the girl who'd spoken to us said. "Come on, Taiga, say hi to them."

"L...Like my sister said, I'm **Taiga Tachibana**, and I'm the **Ultimate Songwriter**," the second said.

"As you can see, Taiga's my little twin sister," Tachibana said. "I was born a few minutes before her."

"Got it, Tachibana," I said. "I think I've heard about you two before."

The Tachibana sisters were the force behind the music sensation known as Dragon Girl. While Tatsuki was the front man as one of the best solo performers in her age group, she often pointed out that she owed her success to her little sister Taiga, who wrote the songs that she performed. Taiga stayed out of the limelight, but pretty much any Dragon Girl fan worth their salt knew her name, as well as the fandom's slogan, "There's no Dragon without the Taiga!"

"You can use our first names if you'd like," Tatsuki said, "since if you call us 'Tachibana,' it might be a bit hard to tell whether you're talking to my sister or to me."

"I understand, Tatsuki-san," Nagato said. "I'll use your first names if I want to make it clear who I'm talking about. Otherwise, I'll just call you 'Tachibana-san'... assuming this is fine with Taiga-san, of course."

"It's all right, Nagato-san," Taiga said. "My sister and I talked to Nagato-sensei about this, and she agreed to do the same thing for us. Of course, she does get the two of us confused sometimes."
Tatsuki- by which I mean the other sister- nodded. The only reason I was sure it was her was because Taiga had spoken.

"I get that," I said. "Of course, it's still a bit odd that she calls you two by your first names while in class, but not her own daughter, even if I get why she's doing it."

"I think I understand where Nagato-sensei's coming from," Tatsuki said. "Our mom was our Composition teacher in middle school; she called us 'Tachibana-san' in class and expected to be called 'Tachibana-sensei' at school. Luckily for Mom, Taiga and I were in different classes the year we had her, so she didn't have to tell us apart."

"That's right, sis," Taiga said. "One day, we switched places and nobody noticed."

I couldn't help but chuckle, and Nagato followed suit. Of course, I also realized that I was having trouble telling the twins apart- I was only sure which was which when Tatsuki called Taiga by name, while Taiga referred to Tatsuki as "sis" or "my sister."

"But there is a way to tell us apart," Taiga said, as she untied her ribbon and unbuttoned her collar. "I have a birthmark on the side of my neck, one that my sister doesn't have."

I nodded, then made note of it. Of course, since it seemed to be covered by Taiga's collar, it would be hard to tell the twins apart while they were in uniform.

"I suppose that's enough for now," Tatsuki said, "since Taiga and I still need to get breakfast. It was nice meeting you, Azuki-san, Nagato-san."

"Same here, Tatsuki, Taiga," I said.

We then let the sisters head to the restaurant, while we continued on our way. We still had a fair amount of time to spare, but we couldn't spend too long chatting.

We returned to the elevator, and saw two boys step off of it. One had an unbuttoned dark gyakuran and matching pants, with a dress shirt that had its collar unbuttoned. The other had a neater black blazer and pants, white dress shirt and black and white necktie.

"I'm Shigeru Kojima, the Ultimate Game Designer," the guy in the loose uniform said.

Kojima was famous in the gaming community for making a hit indie RPG. Not only did it have excellent graphics for an amateur project, but it also had NPCs that acted surprisingly like real people, and multiple solutions to quests. Critics hailed it as a game that would set a new standard for RPGs, and judging from the sales and discussions, the consumers agreed.

"And I'm Hikaru Kurogane, the Ultimate Go Player," the other guy said. "It's nice to meet you two."

Kurogane was a famous go player who'd achieved professional status at a young age. As impressive as it was, I guess go players didn't have to worry about their strength, stamina, speed or looks declining as they got older. Still, he probably had to deal with his contemporaries looking down on him for being a "kid," but had succeeded in spite of that.

"I think I know who you two are," Kojima said. "Akira Azuki, the Ultimate Actress, right?"

"That's right," Nagato said, "and I'm Nagato, the Ultimate Tech Support. It's nice to meet you."
I couldn't help but look dismayed, and it must have shown up on my face, since Kurogane seemed a bit troubled. While most of the people we'd met thus far had heard of me, none of them were quite as forward as Kojima was.

"How did you know my name, Kojima?" I said.

"I'm a big fan!" Kojima said. "I've been following your work for so long. I really wanted to meet you- you look even more beautiful in person."

So he was one of "those" fans, who thought it was appropriate to say shit like that to someone he'd only just met, or to believe that love could blossom between two people who didn't know each other if one of them was famous. My mom had warned me about them, and given me advice for how to deal with them, especially considering that I wasn't allowed to date. I couldn't call security on Kojima, nor could I put much distance between us if we were going to be in the same class, but I could cut this conversation short.

"That's... nice," I said, in a tone that made it clear that I meant "really fucking creepy."

Kojima didn't get the hint, and simply smiled and nodded. I couldn't help but worry that he'd never get the hint... or about what he might do if he did.

"I've actually got to jet," I said, "since Nagato and I need to get our suitcases from our room. Let's go, Nagato."

Eager to get away from him, I quickly stepped past the two boys and into the elevator, but I knew it would only be a temporary escape. Nagato, probably sensing my desire to get the hell out of here, quickly followed me into the elevator, her body between mine and Kojima's. The moment she was inside, I reached for the elevator buttons.

"See you around," Kojima said, clearly knowing that he would.

"Don't mind Kojima-kun," Kurogane said. "He's just excited to finally meet you."

Letting off a sigh, I hit the button that would take us to our floor and watched the door close, cutting me off from Kojima... for now.

"Is something wrong, Azuki-san?" Nagato said, once the doors were fully shut. Now that the elevator was rising, taking us away from Kojima and creating a lot of noise, he couldn't possibly hear us.

"You could say that," I said. "One downside of being famous is you attract the attention of various asshats like Kojima... and that's just your fans. The haters are just as crazy, but aren't half as nice."

In hindsight, I was starting to appreciate Nagato a bit more. While she was clearly a fan of mine, she was far from a rabid fan. Sure, I was a bit disappointed that her favorite movie was Magical Girl Sakura, but at least she had respect for my boundaries. If anything, she was a bit too polite and considerate.

"I know," Nagato said. "Kurogane-san doesn't seem like a bad person, though."

I shrugged, noticing that Nagato hadn't disagreed with me. There was only one question on my mind- was she more afraid of getting into an argument with me or of speaking badly about Kojima?

"I guess not," I said, "not that he got much of a chance to speak."
"I'm sure we'll get to know him eventually," Nagato said. "After all, that is part of the purpose of this trip."

As the elevator reached its destination, I silently concurred, but couldn't help but wonder what we'd learn about him. As important as first impressions were, not everyone was as pleasant as they first seemed, so who could say that Kurogane wasn't a jerk?

We went back to our room to get our suitcases. For a moment, Nagato seemed to struggle with the handle for hers.

"Something wrong, Nagato?" I said.

"It's my suitcase," Nagato said. "I'm not used to this model."

"Thought so," I said. "Then what sort of suitcase did you use when you packed to move in to the dorms? Mine's like this, but it's green."

Nagato paused for a moment.

"To tell you the truth," Nagato said, "I didn't actually pack a suitcase, since I wouldn't be living in the dorm. My mom and I live together, fairly close to the school, so we could just commute to Talent High School together. Mom and I don't really travel very much, so I'd need a new suitcase for this trip."

I nodded, then quickly looked around the room.

"Are you missing something else, Azuki-san?" Nagato said.

"A couple things," I said. "First, my cell phone. You do take one with you, don't you?"

"Actually, I don't," Nagato said. "Students weren't allowed to have cell phones at my old school."

"Well, that'd suck for me," I said. "My mom and employers occasionally text me stuff, and I can't read or respond to the texts if I don't have it. I mean, your job is about answering the phone, isn't it?"

Nagato shrugged.

"I guess," Nagato said, "although I would take calls at the office landline while at work. Anyway, what else are you missing?"

"Everything else in my pockets," I said. "My wallet's one thing, and it has my student ID- for my old school, since I don't think I got one for Talent High School. There's also the keys to my apartment, a bit of pocket change, and my pass for the subway, among other things."

"I don't have any of those, either," Nagato said. "I suppose I'll have to ask Nagato-sensei if she saw them."

I looked over the room, but to no avail. Realizing that I was almost out of time, I gave up.

"No dice," I said. "I guess if the hotel cleaning staff- if they even exist, that is- will return our missing belongings to us if they find them."

"I suppose so," Nagato said, her expression more worried than ever.
While I had a slew of unanswered questions at this point, we didn't have time to track down the contents of our pockets, let alone the answers to those questions. We then took our suitcases and left our room.

We returned to the elevator, and saw the last pair of students just outside. One boy, with short blond hair, wore a blue blazer-style uniform with a white dress shirt, blue and green striped tie and checkered trousers. The other had unkempt brown hair and wore a dark gyakuran. The two were standing together in an uncomfortable and awkward silence - clearly, not all the pairings for roommates had been chosen very well.

"Hi, I don't believe we've met," I said. "I'm Akira Azuki, the Ultimate Actress, and this is Chiyuri Nagato, the Ultimate Tech Support."

The gyakuran-wearing boy glared. I thought it was aimed at me, but on closer inspection, he was actually looking at Nagato.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Nagato said.

The blazer-wearing boy chuckled nervously, at which point the gyakuran-wearing boy shot him a dirty look.

"Oh, don't mind him. I'm Satoshi Karita, the Ultimate Con Artist, and this is..."

The gyakuran-wearing boy finally spoke.

"I'm Yuichi Asakura... and I believe I'm the Ultimate Tech Support."

Nagato turned white as a sheet, her mouth gaping wide open. I had to admit that I'd never expected this to happen, not when, out of all the various other high school age actors who were in my age group or older than me, I was the only one who'd received an Ultimate title.

"Was there a mix-up or something?" I said. "I thought Talent High School gave out only one of each title."

"Some titles do get reused," Nagato, having partially regained her composure, said, "if, for example, they find someone whose ability in a field surpassed that of the original title holder."

"That's right," Asakura said, "but never in the history of the school has there been two people with the same title in the same class. There's usually, at minimum, five years between when a person first gets a title and they find someone 'superior'."

I'd heard about what Nagato and Asakura had been discussing. Schools like Hope's Peak Academy and Talent High School sought to find the most talented individual in any generation, meaning that not only did those who were "good" or even "great" at what they did not make the cut, but neither did many prodigies in the area. Some people thought that Talent High School had somewhat lower standards than Hope's Peak, which was why the former tried to recruit me, while the latter did not. None of this, however, explained why Asakura and Nagato had the same title.

"What are you saying?" I said.

"I'm saying one of us is a fake," Asakura said, "and if you don't realize something's suspicious about a Talent High School teacher's daughter getting in with the same talent as someone else, you're clearly too stupid to understand what I'm talking about."
Karita let off a derisive chuckle.

"So you don't explain things to people who are less intelligent than you?" Karita said. "Even if there aren't that many such people out there, that's not exactly an attitude becoming the Ultimate Tech Support."

"Shut your mouth, Karita," Asakura said. "Unlike you, unintelligent people aren't possible cash cows, but a pain in the ass. I don't want to deal with you or those two jokers any longer, so I'm out of here."

Asakura quickly stormed off, heading for the stairs.

"What a prick," I said, once he was out of earshot.

Nagato laughed out loud, while Karita had an amused smile on his face. It wasn't surprising that neither of them could stand them, but it didn't quite mesh with the initial impression that I had of them.

"You said it," Karita said. "He practically blew his stack when he found out that I was the Ultimate Con Artist, saying people like me would ruin the school's- and more importantly, his reputation. He certainly has his priorities straight."

Considering Karita's talent, I didn't know if this anecdote was a lie, but it definitely sounded like something Asakura would say... at least based on my first impression of him. I had to admit I didn't know the entire story, but if Asakura gave a first impression that was this shitty, he probably wouldn't do anything that'd improve my opinion of him.

"Anyway, Karita," I said. "What's this about you being the Ultimate Con Artist?"

"Exactly what it says," Karita said with a smile. "I'm the best there is when it comes to scamming people."

"Really?" Nagato said. "No disrespect, Karita-san, but I have not heard about you before."

I nodded, but knew that Karita wasn't the only one whose talent wasn't well-known. The same went for Nagato and Asakura, as well as Tsukimura, probably because their talents were among the more humble Ultimate talents, so Karita's obscurity wasn't all that unusual.

"It'd be odd if you had, Nagato-san," Karita said. "Con artists aren't supposed to get caught."

"But apparently, you did anyway," I said.

Karita nodded, with a grin on his face, seemingly not at all embarrassed about his failure.

"I impersonated an 'intern' for Talent High School," Karita said, "and tried to sell people bogus information on how to get into the Main Course without having a talent, but one of the school staff, posing as the mom of an aspiring student, saw through me."

"I'm not surprised," Nagato said. "Talent High School doesn't offer internships to high schoolers. You should have known better, as should the people you tried to scam."

Karita nodded.

"Yep," Karita said. "Still, she was impressed with my skill, and offered me a deal- If I went to the school, she wouldn't turn me over to the police. I accepted in a flash."
"Who wouldn't?" I said. "I'd think that it'd be an easy choice- go to one of the nation's best high schools for two years, or spend who knows how long in juvenile hall."

I didn't know how long Karita would get for his scams- it'd probably depend on how bad his crimes were, but maybe Mihama could guess- but if he was found out, his life would be ruined.

"True," Karita said. "You could say this was my goal in life. After impersonating an employee of Talent High School, I actually got to go there as a student."

Karita looked at his watch, which looked a lot more expensive than those that most high schoolers wore.

"I've got to go," Karita said, "since it's almost time for the meeting and I need to track down Asakura-kun. I'll see you later, Azuki-san, Nagato-san."

"Later," I said, and Nagato followed suit.

Karita set off for the stairs, while Nagato and I boarded the elevator and rode it down. We'd met the last of our classmates, but this meeting only raised more questions. Since Talent High School was apparently negligent enough to admit two people with the same talent, and amoral enough to admit a criminal, I had to wonder- what was I getting into? What kind of school would make those irresponsible choices? And did Nagato and her mother know something I didn't? One way or another, I'd have to solve all these mysteries sooner or later.

Inside the elevator, I took a look at my student handbook again while the encounter with Asakura was fresh in my mind. The number of available profiles had risen from three to seventeen, but the first one I checked was one of the first ones I'd gotten- namely, Nagato's. Taking a glance at Nagato's talent, realized that she hadn't been lying about being the Ultimate Tech Support. Unfortunately, neither had Asakura, since his showed "Ultimate Tech Support," too.

"Is something wrong, Azuki-san?" Nagato said.

"Not really," I said. "I was hoping to prove that Asakura was full of shit, but it looks like he really is the Ultimate Tech Support... well, the other one."

"It seems so," Nagato said. "You sound disappointed, though. Did you think I was the real Ultimate Tech Support and he was the pretender?"

I nodded.

"I guess," I said. "Well, it's probably because I met you first or because you seem more likable than that asshole, but I certainly want to believe you."

"Thank you," Nagato said. "Few people trust me so readily, so I'm grateful for your kind words."

As the elevator reached the ground floor and the doors opened, I wondered why people wouldn't believe Nagato. Perhaps that was an answer she didn't trust me with just yet, so I decided to put the question aside for now. She'd tell me when she was ready if she trusted me enough, and in the meantime, I'd focus on the more pressing matters at hand.

We soon reached a lobby, and within a few minutes, all sixteen students and our teacher were together. All of us had our suitcases with us, and some of us had other belongings that were related
"Good, it seems you're all here," Nagato-sensei said. "We'll be setting out fairly soon."

"Sensei, what about our room keys?" Nagato said. "I don't see anyone at the front desk."

"Neither do I, Nagato-san," Nagato-sensei said. "Please pass them to me and I can drop them off."

We handed Nagato-sensei our room keys, but she didn't seem to understand the situation any better than we did. There didn't seem to be any conceivable reason for a hotel that was still in business to be practically empty, much less during Spring Break. Of course, while I was scared shitless, I realized that worrying wouldn't do any good at this point, since if this was a trap, we were already stuck in it.

"There's something that's bothering me," Kurogane said. "Does anyone else only have a vague idea of how they got here?"

Tatsuki(I think it was her) nodded. Both she and her sister had their suitcases, but Tatsuki was also carrying a guitar case, and the sister with the guitar was the one who spoke next.

"My sister and I do too, Kurogane-kun," Tatsuki said. "The last clear memory we have is of packing at home."

"The same goes for me," Tsukimura-san said. "I was told to help Himeno-sama pack her bags, as well as my own."

"So you don't really remember, either?" I said. "I'm not sure how it's possible for us to forget what happened last night without a lot of alcohol being involved."

"Sensei almost never drinks," Nagato said. "Besides, she'd know better than to serve alcohol to students."

"And I am far too young to drink," Mihama said. "There are perhaps some countries that would tolerate teenagers having alcohol, but all of us, save Nagato-sensei, are below the minimum age of 20."

Nagato-sensei nodded. My comment was only really intended as a joke, since none of us seemed hung over at all. In all seriousness, though, I didn't have any good guesses about why we'd all forgotten arriving at the hotel, since no technology that I knew of had the potential to erase or rewrite memories.

"Speaking of which, Nagato-sensei," Sasaki said, "do you or Chiyuri-chan... er, Chiyuri-san happen to be missing your cell phones, keys and other belongings, too?"

"Unfortunately, Sasaki-san, I am," Nagato-sensei said. "Please raise your hands if you still have any belongings apart from your clothes or your luggage."

"I have my bow and arrows," Himemiya said, "but I do not have anything besides that, my suitcase and my student handbook. Neither does Kanae."

"Taiga and I don't, either," Tatsuki said. "I do have my guitar, though."

As others chimed in to agree, Nagato-sensei furrowed her brow.

"Um, aren't you the chaperone in charge of this?" Asakura said. "Shouldn't you have some idea of
what's going on?"

Nagato shot Asakura a dirty look. She seemed at least somewhat willing to put up with his abuse (or at least not complain about it to his face), but disrespecting her mom and our teacher was another story. That said, I found Asakura's question at least somewhat reasonable.

"I should, Asakura-san," Nagato-sensei said, "but like the rest of you, I only woke up with what I had in my room. While I am still unsettled about this development, we do appear to have a pressing appointment at the port."

The others nodded. Our teacher had given an order, and we had to follow it. If anything, there didn't seem to be any point sticking around here.

"What about the tickets?" Yamazaki said.

"They should be loaded onto your e-handbooks," Nagato-sensei said. "I assume that's right, Nagato-san?"

As Nagato replied with a "Yes, ma'am," I checked my e-handbook and found the ticket.

"Does anyone else have any questions?" Nagato-sensei said.

No one answered.

"Good," Nagato-sensei said. "I'm sure some of you may be a bit confused, but I am looking forward to enjoying this class trip together with you all."

I agreed. While I still had some unanswered questions, I did still remember having the trip with everyone else. Perhaps if we headed to the ship, we'd have a pleasant voyage together, or at least understand what was going on.

We then walked out the front door of the hotel, through the streets and to the port, which was only a couple blocks away. We looked at the street signs on our way, but while they helped guide us to the port, they didn't give us any clue as to which Japanese port city we were in.

The city was as deserted as the hotel had been. While we saw cars parked around the city, no one was actually driving any. At the port, we saw that no one else was there- not people boarding or leaving ships, not dockworkers or sailors. An abandoned hotel was unsettling enough, but an abandoned city made me wonder if we'd slept through the apocalypse.

Of course, even if everyone in the city had fled or died, the city seemed remarkably clean and orderly. The buildings were still well-kept, not having fallen into disrepair or been reclaimed by nature. There wasn't any trash on the streets, and the only cars around were properly parked. Even well-populated cities weren't this pristine, since there were several people making messes for every person who worked to clean them up.

We eventually reached the port, which was just as abandoned as the surrounding city. Only one ship was docked there- our cruise liner, the Ursa Major- and it was pointed so that it was facing the sea, ready to depart at a moment's notice. I couldn't accurately measure the size of the ship, but it was much larger than one would expect for 17 people. A gangplank, which extended and retracted, connected a door on the ship's starboard side to the dock. The seventeen of us climbed onto it, single-file, with Nagato-sensei leading us, and boarded the ship. No one was there to check our tickets, but that wasn't too surprising by now.
Once we were all aboard, we took a look around and saw two doors that looked like elevators to our left and right, as well as another exit to the ship just past us. Security cameras were in place all over the ship, and there were monitors connected to speakers. It seemed as though the latter was common enough that no matter where you went on the ship, you'd be in earshot of one.

Almost immediately, the monitor came on, and displayed a "SOUND ONLY" message on the screen. The voice coming through vaguely sounded like a cartoon character.

"All passengers, please report to the deck of the ship," the announcer said. "Your captain has a beary important announcement for you all."

The monitor then shut off.

"Who was that?" Nagato-sensei said. "I do not recall speaking to that person at any point."

"I can only guess," Mihama said. "Judging from the fact that they appear to know where we are, we can infer that they can access the cameras."

"In other words, they'll know if we try to make a run for it," Karita said. "We might as well do as they say."

We continued walking, and as we did, the feeling of unease within me changed to dread. Before, I'd worried that I'd never find out what was going on, and now, I was afraid that I wouldn't like the answers to my questions.

We proceeded through a hallway on the port side, to the rear of the ship and climbed the stairs, at which point we found ourselves in the dining hall, a decently sized area that would be able to seat all of us. In addition to the stairs going down to where we'd boarded the ship, there was a set of stairs going up to the bridge. We then walked out the front door and found ourselves on the deck of the ship.

The deck was a large open space with a pool that had a good view of the surrounding ocean. Apparently, the Ursa Major had already started to pull away from the dock, as we could see it slowly starting to fade into the distance.

"Wait, we're already leaving?" Kurogane said.

"That's right, Kurogane-san!" the voice from earlier said. "We're on a tight schedule here, and we've waited long enough for all of you to arrive."

A black and white bear, one that was even shorter than Mihama, popped up. He seemed to be some sort of animatronic or robot, but the way he moved and acted was far too lifelike to be possible under current technology.

"Greetings, students!" the bear said. "I am Monokuma, and from this moment forth, I am your captain!"

Monokuma looked at the sixteen of us, all frozen in surprise, until his gaze fell on Nagato-sensei.

"Wait just one minute," Monokuma said. "What are you doing here?"

So Monokuma couldn't just speak, but could also think. His greeting just now and the announcement could have been pre-recorded, but even if he'd anticipated Kurogane's comment, he'd addressed Kurogane by name. Nagato-sensei's presence most likely wasn't on whatever script
"Are you referring to me?" Nagato-sensei said. "I'm the teacher and chaperone for this class. You can't have a class without a teacher, can you?"

"Not anymore!" Monokuma said. "I don't know if you got the memo, but this isn't a plain old school trip anymore. It's a *killing school trip*, and from this moment forth, I'm in charge of your students! Monodrones, please show Nagato-sensei to her room."

A helicopter-like drone, half black and half white, flew out. It then fired what looked like a tazer at Nagato-sensei, sending electricity coursing through her. Nagato-sensei collapsed onto the ground, and as she did, a centipede-like robot seized Nagato-sensei on its back and bounded away to the stairs near the bow, which led below decks.

"MOM!" Nagato said, as she whirled around to face the centipede. She started to move, until she heard Monokuma's voice.

"Not so fast, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "I wouldn't go after your mother if I were you."

"Why not?" Nagato said.

"Because I said so!" Monokuma said, giving his best impression of a exasperated parent. "And because if you don't follow the rules, I'm gonna have to punish you... which means *being executed*."

We looked up and saw that several other flying Monodrones were in the air. In addition to the tazers that one had used to incapacitate Nagato-sensei, I could see Gatling guns that would likely see use if Monokuma had no interest in taking someone alive.

"We should do as Monokuma says for now, Nagato-kun," Kirishima said. "While he is clearly untrustworthy, if you openly defy him, you will die a senseless death."

Nagato's shoulders slumped, and I laid a hand on her left shoulder. While we'd only just met, I could sympathize with her anguish and worry over her mother, but at the same time, I had no desire to see her die.

"Good girl," Monokuma said. "Anyway, Nagato-san, you and your mother won't have anything to worry about from me as long as the two of you follow my rules."

I furrowed my brow skeptically, and I wasn't the only one- even the seemingly less intelligent members of this group didn't seem fooled for a moment. Monokuma's "from me" was a loophole large enough for this ship to sail through, so clearly, harm would come from other sources.

"Now, the basics of the killing school trip are as follows," Monokuma said. "The sixteen of you, plus our captive, will be in this ship together, cruising the high seas. Every so often, we'll stop at an island for a couple days, since it'll get boring if you lot are stuck on the ship all the time."

"When do we get to go home?" Kojima said.

"You don't!" Monokuma said. "You're on this trip until you graduate. I'll only let you do so on one condition- kill someone and get away with it."

The class was silent for a moment. While we'd suspected from the moment we woke up in an all but empty hotel that this was no ordinary trip, we- or at least I- still wanted to believe that Monokuma was playing a joke on us. Like Nagato had said, school violence was both extremely
shocking and something most of us assumed was other people's problems, so being trapped on a ship and told to kill each other didn't seem real.

"Kill someone?!
"Higurashi said. "No civilized society would allow a 'game' like this."

"Indeed, Higurashi-san," Mihama said, "but it would seem that Monokuma does not respect the law or our human rights."

"You have the right of it, Mihama-san," Monokuma said. "As long as you're on the cruise, you play by my rules, and you only get out by winning my game."

No one else spoke up, even though we weren’t any happier after hearing Monokuma's explanation. That was pretty disturbing in and of itself, since once our disbelief, horror and outrage faded, some of us would find a way to play the game. This was seemingly only confirmed when Yamazaki spoke up.

"What do you mean 'get away with it'?" Yamazaki said.

"It's simple," Monokuma said. "After someone commits a murder, there'll be a short period of investigation to find out whodunnit. Then we'll hold a class trial, in which you bastards talk it out and decide who the blackened who disturbed the peace is. If you vote correctly, only the blackened will be executed, and you all get to live... for now. If you don't get it right, the blackened gets to graduate and leave this cruise... and the rest of you get executed."

Everyone paled, and the only sounds that could be heard were the wind and the waves. Being forced to kill each other was bad enough, but this punishment was downright nightmarish. The moment someone committed murder, everyone else's lives would hang in the balance, and we could only survive by sacrificing the murderer. Maybe not all of us were sociopathic enough to let everyone else die to save their own asses, but I knew that if one person was ruthless enough to kill someone and competent enough not to fuck it up, we were in deep, deep shit.

"Even Mom?" Nagato said.

"Of course!" Monokuma said. "Like she said, the teacher's part of the class. If the spotless fail to convict the blackened, then Nagato-sensei will have to share their punishment."

So there was one silver lining to this very large dark cloud. If Nagato had any love for her mother, then she'd hesitate to kill anyone, and if the Tachibana sisters loved each other, then they wouldn't try to graduate as long as they were both alive. Of course, that was a big "if," to say nothing of our twelve classmates who didn't have any family here. Even if Himemiya and her servant-slash-childhood friend Tsukimura don't count, that's still more than enough possible killers to get the killing game going.

"And that wraps up the information," Monokuma said. "All the rules to this game are in your student handbooks, as is the itinerary for our trip, and I'll hand out the cabin keys now. Each of you are gonna share your cabin with one other person, so play nice."

Monokuma went to each of us and gave each of us envelopes with our names on them. Inside the envelope was a small key to our cabin.

"Hold on, Monokuma," Tatsuki said. "You just gave me Taiga's key."

"That's right, sis," Taiga said. "I got your key, too."

"Whoops!" Monokuma said. "Not that it matters, really- you'll be sharing a room, so you got the
same key, anyway."

I got out my key, which had "F-4" on it, and turned to Nagato, who'd gotten a matching card. I wasn't thrilled about sharing my room with someone who could murder me, but at least Nagato was the safest bet around.

"One more thing," Monokuma said. "One member of this class is a traitor. They knew things were going to turn out like this before the trip even began, and let it happen anyway. Since you're gonna have to kill someone to get out of here, it might as well be the person who got you here, right?"

"And who's that?" Asakura said.

"Not telling!" Monokuma said. "That'd kill the fun. It could be any one of you, after all. I'll give you a hint, though- if you have to kill someone to graduate, it might as well be the one responsible for your winding up here, right?"

We looked around suspiciously. The only reason I had to rule out the possibility that someone would snap and try to murder the traitor was that there was no evidence that could indicate that anyone was the traitor. Of course, not only was the traitor free to plot against us, but perhaps someone was irrational enough to not bother waiting for evidence.

"And that concludes my explanation," Monokuma said. "Any questions?"

"Wh...Why?" Nagato said. "Why are you doing this to us?"

"Don't look so down, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "This trip is supposed to be educational, after all! I hope- no, wait, bad choice of word- eagerly anticipate that if you survive long enough, you might just learn to enjoy the killing game and all the wonderful feelings of despair it brings! Later!"

Monokuma then left without another word, leaving us to stand there in silence for a moment, looking at one another. For now, we all seemed horrified enough by the prospect of killing that none of us were willing to draw first blood, but how long would this peace last? A week? A day? Or would the first murder be committed by the time the sun set?

The harsh truth was that I was surrounded by people who knew as little about me as I did about them, and were just as desperate to escape as I was, if not more. How long would this killing game last? Who would die first? Which seemingly trustworthy person would be the first to betray us? And how many would still be around at the end of it? While I strongly doubted that I'd like any of the answers to the questions, I couldn't avoid thinking about them.

I glanced over the side of the ship, and saw that the ship was already far enough out at sea that we couldn't swim back, not to mention the fact that there were amphibious Monodrones in the ocean that would intercept us if we tried to escape. Even if we could make it back, all that awaited us were an empty city that lacked any means of contacting the outside world. We were trapped on Monokuma's cruise, where the only way to go was forward, toward a life and death struggle that would pit classmate against classmate, family against family. With that, our killing school trip began...

End of Prologue

Class Members Remaining: 17
Author's Notes

This is the sequel to Where Talent Goes To Die, starring Class 32 of Talent High School. You may recall some of the students were mentioned in passing at various points of the original fic and its Side Stories- for example, Hikaru Kurogane is Shiro Kurogane's cousin, while Sasaki wrote the manga that Edogawa and Miura read in Chapter II- but how this fic ties in to the first one will be revealed in time.

Akira Azuki is meant to contrast to the previous protagonist, Kaori Miura, in some ways. While Miura is generally polite, good-natured and a bit girly, Azuki is often vulgar, rude and highly tomboyish. While Miura has the pseudo-talent of Beginner's Luck, Azuki has the highly sought-after talent of being an actress. While Miura(a lesbian) gradually falls in love with her favorite author, Sae Edogawa, Azuki(a heterosexual) is the subject of Kojima's largely unwanted attention. There are other ways they contrast, but these are the most apparent one. She's also meant to be a protagonist who takes pride in her talent, like Kaede but unlike Shuichi.

If you're familiar with Where Talent Goes To Die, you may notice that some students don't actually possess talents, and only got in based on family connections. I won't reveal who it is this time, but here's a hint- contrary to what Asakura thinks, Chiyuri didn't get in because of her mother's influence.

If you played the second Danganronpa game, you may recall that the students only seemed mildly suspicious until Monokuma showed up. I decided to have this class wonder what's going on, but not realize it until it's too late to do anything (although the point at which it's too late to do anything may be earlier than you think).

In this fic, as Monokuma says, there is a traitor in the group, and while there are more clues to come, there are already a few possible suspects. Someone is also controlling Monokuma, but the only hint at this point is that the mastermind is not Junko or her AI.

I'll soon post Side Stories for this fic, including Class 32's Free Time Events. Updates may be a bit slow at first, since while the first half of Chapter I is mostly written up, and I have the latter half planned out, I have more work to do when it comes to the murder, the investigation and the trial.

Like the previous installment, this will start with a T rating, but go up to M after the first execution.

What follows is Azuki's profile

**Akira Azuki**

**Talent:** Ultimate Actress

**Birthday:** March 15 (Pisces)

**Height:** 170 cm (5'7'')

**Likes:** Shakespeare

**Dislikes:** Crazy fans.

**Hobby:** Watching movies
Chapter I, Part 1

Chapter I: No Pleasure Cruise

Daily Life

Day 1

After Monokuma left, we stood on the deck of the Ursa Major, at a loss for what to do. Now that the only adult authority figure available to us was gone, we were just a group of fifteen teenagers and one pre-teen whose skills were entirely unsuited to the situation. We were standing on a ship that was heading somewhere none of us wanted to go... with the possible exception of the traitor amongst us. All that was disturbing enough in and of itself, even before you took into account the killing game, which we'd have to deal with sooner or later.

"So... what should we do now?" Nagato said, clearly speaking for all- or at least most- of us.

"We should read the rules and commit them to memory," Mihama said. "Monokuma may not have any legal authority or concern for our well-being, but he does seem to have the power to punish us for disobeying him, and is unlikely to accept ignorance as an excuse."

We all then opened up our handbooks and started looking at the rules. It was obvious that Monokuma could have killed Nagato-sensei if he'd wanted, so the fact that he could do the same to us went without saying.

I checked the handbook and saw the rules that had been there when I first opened it up, along with several new ones.

Rule 5: Students will remain with the cruise until they graduate.

In other words, we were stuck here. Monokuma had made that abundantly clear, but it still was hard to accept it.

Rule 6: Certain areas will be off limits during Night Time, which lasts from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. Students may only sleep in their cabins.

"Certain areas?" I said.

"The pool seems to be one," Kumakura said, "although it's only inside the pool, not on the side of it. Apparently, the areas in question are marked with specific signs."

I saw a square sign with a crossed out crescent moon on the pool.

Rule 7: On days when the Ursa Major is in port, students must spend most of the day on the island. They will be allowed to leave the Ursa Major starting at 8 a.m. and must be off the ship by 9 a.m. They will be allowed to return to the Ursa Major starting at 8 p.m. and must be back on the ship by 9 p.m. Monokuma will announce exceptions to this rule.

Rule 8: Apart from these restrictions, students may explore the Ursa Major and any islands that it stops at freely.

"So we're going to get off this ship at some point," Kojima said.
"Do not expect too much, Kojima-san," Mihama said. "If Monokuma is willing to allow us to leave the ship, it is most likely that he has measures in place to prevent us from getting too far away or calling for help."

Those "measures" were probably the Monodrones that we saw earlier, but they probably weren't the only ones at his disposal.

"You make a good point, Miharu-chan," Sasaki said, "but at the same time, I'm grateful for the opportunity to set foot on land."

Even though I was uneasy about what Monokuma had in store for us, I had to agree. There was no telling how long we'd be sailing- it might be days, but it could very well be weeks- so even the chance to stand on dry land would be a welcome change of pace.

Rule 9: Students may not attack Monokuma or destroy property. The latter includes surveillance cameras and Monodrones. Likewise, Monokuma cannot harm students unless they have violated a rule.

Rule 10: Students may not attempt to free or harm the prisoner. The prisoner may not leave her cell without Monokuma's permission.

As Nagato read Rule 10, she looked despondent. If we were going to find a way to escape this cruise together, we'd have to get Nagato-sensei out of her cell first. Even if we found some way to escape the Ursa Major, we'd almost certainly have to leave Nagato-sensei behind.

Rule 11: If a student kills another student, a class trial will be held.

Rule 12: A Body Discovery Announcement will be sent to all students' handbooks once three or more people, apart from the blackened, find a body.

Rule 13: If the blackened is convicted at a class trial, decided by majority vote, they alone will be executed. If the blackened is not convicted, or there is a tie, the spotless, as well as the prisoner, will be executed and the blackened will graduate.

Rule 14: Only one student will be allowed to graduate. In the event of more than one murder, the blackened may only graduate if they find and convict the other blackened while also not being convicted for their own murder.

Rule 15: No student can kill more than two people.

Rule 16: If there is not a living blackened to execute at the end of the trial, the spotless must select someone to execute in the blackened's place.

The rules related to the class trial mostly were self-explanatory, so no one asked any questions, probably so they wouldn't have to think about it.

"No living blackened?" Kurogane said. "What do you suppose they mean by that?"

"I can think of a few scenarios," Mihama said. "For example, one student might kill another student before committing suicide. Alternatively, two students might kill each other- one might die instantly, while the other would die of their wounds not long afterward."

While it seemed like almost a given that people would end up dead on this trip, I desperately hoped that we wouldn't have to sacrifice an innocent person because the murderer was dead by the time of the trial.
Rule 17: Captain Monokuma may add rules as he sees fit.

As if the rules so far weren't bad enough, the fact that there might be more of them was even worse. The only apparent limit seemed to be Monokuma's imagination, and if the sick bastard came up with the idea of a killing game, there was no telling how horrible the rules could become.

"So it looks like that's it for the rules," I said. "In other words, we're trapped in here for the foreseeable future."

"Yeah," Yamazaki said. "In theory, we could just ride this cruise out for as long as possible, until Monokuma lets us go."

"I highly doubt it," Kojima said. "In any game, there are plenty of incentives to 'encourage' participation. Monokuma will probably give us a push if we don't prove willing to kill each other."

"I don't doubt that, Kojima-kun," Taiga said. "But does anything justify killing a classmate and letting the other fourteen of us, as well as Nagato-sensei, die?"

Some of us nodded in agreement, although I had no idea how many of them were honest. After all, no one could say with a good conscience that they valued their life above those of all their classmates, but no one wanted to die, either. Kirishima, however, shook his head.

"An apt question, Taiga-kun," Kirishima said, "but as long as the status quo goes on, the sixteen of us will remain trapped here. It is not difficult to imagine someone reaching their breaking point and committing murder to graduate."

"Are we really all trapped here?" Asakura said. "Monokuma mentioned that one of us is a traitor, someone who knew the danger and let us come here anyway. When it comes to liars, I can't think of anyone better in here than the con artist."

As much as I hated to acknowledge it, Asakura's suspicions weren't wrong. Of course, considering how little evidence we had, it was likely that at best, he was just making knee-jerk reactions, and at worst, he was trying to stir the shit.

"I will admit that Karita-san is suspicious," Himemiya said, "but I'm less worried about him than I am about someone who would recklessly point fingers in a situation in which anyone could end up committing murder. Even if you aren't the traitor,"

"Yeah, and 'anyone' includes you, Himemiya," Asakura said. "You might not be my top choice for the traitor, but I think you're pretty damn suspicious."

"How dare you?" Tsukimura said. "Himeno-sama would never even consider harming her classmates!"

An argument broke out, and people began talking over each other, apparently not even caring whether anyone could hear or was listening to what they were saying. Initially, it was just Karita, Asakura, Himemiya and Tsukimura, but by the end, everyone else had joined in, too... except Higurashi, who tried to break it up.

"Enough, everyone!" Higurashi said. "This is not the time or the place for bickering!"

Everyone shut up for a moment after hearing that, but while Higurashi had gotten their attention, he hadn't convinced them. What he'd said was nothing more than an empty platitude, and the rest of the class knew that- he'd just said it forcefully and convincingly enough that we couldn't ignore him.
"I don't think so either," I said, "but what do you expect in a situation in which people are scared for their lives, don't trust each other and have no idea what to do next?"

"Azuki-san is right," Himemiya said. "To be blunt, do you really think we can trust any one person here?"

"You both raise good questions," Mihama said, "but at the same time, Higurashi-san is correct. Since we know little about our surroundings, it would be imprudent to do anything rash, especially when a misstep could cost any- or all- of us our lives."

"I think we should listen to Miharu-chan," Sasaki said. "Everyone, let's calm down and take a deep breath."

We stopped to take a deep breath. Doing so didn't change reality- that we were stuck on the Ursa Major, surrounded by people we didn't trust and encouraged to kill each other- but it helped us look at it differently. Rather than assuming we were all doomed, we could see it as a problem to be overcome.

"That's better," Sasaki said. "Nobuhiro-kun, I'm interested in hearing any ideas you may have."

"Thank you, Sasaki-san," Higurashi said. "As Mihama-san said, we know next to nothing about the ship we are on, so the first step should be to learn more about our situation. For the next two hours, we will split into pairs, with each person partnered with their roommate, and all of us will familiarize ourselves with the ship."

"A logical suggestion," Kirishima said. "I doubt we will find any basis for hope, but gathering information about our surroundings should be our first priority. Doing so will be necessary for us to make informed decisions about how to proceed from here."

Some of the others nodded, and Higurashi faintly smiled, as the discussion moved in a more constructive direction.

"That's true," Tatsuki said, "but does anyone have any idea what a good place to start would be?"

"Perhaps we should start by finding our cabins," Higurashi said. "After that, we should look around the rest of the ship and meet up in the dining hall."

"Cabins are a good place to start," Kumakura said, "but we should also find out where we can get our food, water or everything else we need for our life on the cruise ship."

The rest of us tacitly agreed and set off for our rooms, while Kirishima stuck with Higurashi. It wasn't that we necessarily agreed with Higurashi- none of us had seemed to have any better ideas. I couldn't tell what was worse- bickering over what course of action to take passively going along with whatever someone proposed- but I could tell that this group was far from ideal when it came to the killing game.

Luckily, it wasn't hard to find the way to our cabins. Near the bow of the ship, there was a staircase leading down inside the ship, to a corridor that connected the cabins. The girls' cabins were on the left while the boys' were on our rigt.

Nagato and I headed to our cabin, which was near the front of the ship on the starboard side, with the other girls' cabins; from what I heard, the guys were on the port side. The cabins were numbered F1 to F4, in ascending order from left to right, and had windows facing the ocean.
I saw my and Nagato's names on the right-most door, along with crude pixelated portraits of us. The other three doors each had two portraits on them- Cabin F1 had the twins, Cabin F2 had Sasaki and Mihama, and Cabin F3 had Himemiya and Tsukimura. At the end of the hall, there was a bathroom for the girls, which had a sign indicating that it would be off limits during Night Time.

We opened the door with our room keys, and saw that the cabin was decently sized. There were two beds, each on opposite sides of the room- Nagato's was on the left and mine was on the right- along with a desk and chair for each. There was a closet on Nagato's side, and a bathroom and shower on my side. The room was mostly bare of decorations, but there was a calendar, with Day 1 starting on what looked like a Monday, and day 31 on a Wednesday, plus extra blank squares. I didn't know what month it was supposed to be, but it certainly wasn't April, since that month only had thirty days. Like all other rooms on the ship, our cabin had a surveillance camera and a monitor.

"So we'll be staying here while we're on the ship," I said. "It seems decent enough, all things considered."

"I agree," Nagato said. "We have beds to sleep in, a place to store our belongings, a bathroom and a shower. This room has everything we need- or at least everything that Monokuma is willing to give us."

I realized that giving us a place to live probably furthered the killing game. If Monokuma had wanted, he could have dropped some weapons on the deck and told us to kill each other right then and there, resulting in a bloodbath that would continue until only one of us was left. It was obvious that Monokuma wanted the killing game to be a slow burn, and he enjoyed seeing us suffer in despair as we waited for the next murder to occur.

"That's right," I said. "Let's drop off our suitcases here and check out the rest of the ship."

We left our suitcases by our beds, and decided to put off unpacking until we were done investigating the Ursa Major. It wasn't all that large, but we didn't want to drag around our bags any longer than necessary, so we left them in the safest place we could find before continuing our investigation.

We then headed to the hallway near the boys' cabins, which were laid out similarly to the girls'. Cabin M1 had Kumakura and Yamazaki, Cabin M2 had Kurogane and Kojima, Cabin M3 had Kirishima and Higurashi, and Cabin M4 had Karita and Asakura. Like with the girls' half, the boys' bathroom was at the end of the hall.

Nagato groaned as I saw the roommate assignments for the fourth cabin.

"Things look like they'll be fairly... interesting in Cabin M4," Nagato said.

"You said it," I said. "I can only think of one reason why they'd put the biggest asshole with the con artist- no one else would want them."

"Why am I not surprised to hear that from you?" Asakura said.

Nagato and I whirled around and saw Asakura and Karita together. As I did, I made a mental note to be more aware of my surroundings in a killing game.

"Asakura-san!" Nagato said, similarly surprised, adding "...and Karita-san," a few seconds later. Asakura gave Nagato a withering stare, while Karita offered a brief "Hello, ladies." After a
moment, Asakura cleared his throat and replied as though he'd been talking with us all along.

"To be perfectly honest, I'm not thrilled at the idea of having a roommate, period," Asakura said. "No sane person would want to go to bed with someone who could kill them in their sleep."

As if it weren't obvious enough what Asakura was getting at, he gave Karita a dirty look. While I had to admit that Karita wasn't exactly trustworthy and gave me the creeps when I talked to him, if only because of his title, antagonizing anyone in this killing game wasn't a good idea. Between that and openly declaring him a suspect for the traitor while we were on the deck minutes ago, I guessed that Asakura had a death wish. Leaping overboard would probably be an easier way to go, but maybe Asakura wanted to take Karita down with him.

"If it's any consolation, your killer wouldn't live much longer," Karita said, "since if he's the only one who could get into your room, then it's almost a given that he'll be convicted at the class trial. Besides, that goes both ways, which is why I'm at least reasonably sure that you aren't stupid enough to kill me... unless you're in the mood to prove me wrong."

"Karita's right," I said. "You can't put much faith in your classmates' morals, but you can trust that their sense of self-preservation is good enough that if their lives are on the line, they wouldn't half-ass their one shot at graduation."

Asakura shook his head.

"That's assuming that we aren't dealing with a total moron," Asakura said. "I wouldn't give a shit whether my killer gets caught if I'm the one who gets killed."

"I disagree, Asakura-san," Nagato said. "Even if I end up getting killed, then if the killer gets caught, then my mother and all the other spotless can live."

I nodded in agreement. I was tempted to ask "What if your mom's the killer?" but realized that this was impossible. Even if Nagato-sensei was the type who would be willing to kill her own daughter, she couldn't do so as long as Monokuma kept her as a prisoner and spectator in the killing game.

"How touching," Asakura said, "but I do have to wonder how much you'll care for your mother when the pressure is getting to you."

"Spoken like someone who's liable to snap," I said. "Let's go, Nagato."

Nagato and I quickly walked off, eager to get away from this conversation, even though we both knew this would only be a short reprieve. As long as we were on this ship, we'd never be more than a kilometer away from those two. Since Asakura was a total prick who already hated Nagato, and Karita clearly had no qualms with lying to and using others, both of them were ticking time bombs. The only questions were when they'd blow up and who'd be caught up in the blast.

We returned to where we'd come in, and saw that there were two elevators. One looked like a standard elevator, with a steel gray door that was about the usual size. The other had a red set of double doors.

"Looks like we've got some elevators," I said. "Where do they go?"

"Why not take a ride and find out, Azuki-san?" Monokuma said. "At least on the elevator you can use."

I nearly jumped out of my skin upon hearing Monokuma, and seeing him standing almost right
next to me. Nagato, who was standing near me, wasn't any less surprised.

"Monokuma!" I said. "What do you mean 'the one I can use'?"

"You don't need to worry about the red one right now," Monokuma said, "since no one's killed anyone yet. Once that does happen, you'll all meet up there and take the elevator down to the courtroom for the class trial. Once you're done, some of you are gonna take the elevator back up."

Monokuma seemed fairly confident that the killing game would get going fairly soon, confidence that was more well-founded than I wanted to admit to myself. Of course, even as bad as things were, no one was desperate enough to snap and commit murder less than an hour into the "game."

"I understand," Nagato said, "but what about the other one?"

"That takes you to where your mom's being held," Monokuma said. "Feel free to visit her if you'd like, but just remember Rule 10. Ta ta for now!"

Monokuma then vanished. Maybe it was because he was so small, but he had a knack for coming and going without being noticed. It was pretty damn unsettling, even with the knowledge that he couldn't hurt us as long as we followed the rules.

We took a moment to compose ourselves, but once we had, I saw Nagato looking at me with a pleading look in her eyes.

"Azuki-san, can we please go see my mom?" Nagato said. "I'd like to just make sure she's okay."

"Sure," I said. "We've got plenty of time- worst case scenario, we can save the investigation of the ship for later."

Nagato smiled faintly, and said, "Thank you." While it was unwise to take Monokuma's words at face value, it was most likely that we'd be on this ship for days, and it would take, at most, a few hours to completely explore the ship.

We then got in the elevator and saw only two buttons- "Main Deck" and "Prison." Nagato pushed the latter, and the elevator carried us down to our destination.

At the base of the elevator was a small room with a holding cell, which was to our left after stepping out of the elevator and going forward a few paces. The door was barred, except for a small slot that was used for giving the prisoner food. There was a small bed against the wall to my right, a desk and a chair against the wall to the left, and a small shower in the back-left the cell, there was a bench that could seat four people comfortably. It was a bit amazing that there was even a room like this on a cruise ship, although it probably would come in handy if someone committed a crime on the ship and got arrested.

Upon noticing us approach, Nagato-sensei pulled up her chair to the cell door, and we sat down on the bench against the wall. She was still wearing her suit, rather than some kind of prison uniform, probably because she'd been taken straight to her cell.

"Mom..." Nagato said. "Er... I mean, Sensei..."

"You don't have to call me 'Sensei' here, Chiyuri," Nagato-sensei said. "As far as Monokuma is concerned, I'm just a prisoner on this ship, and my position as a teacher means nothing."

Nagato nodded, and relaxed slightly.
"All right," Nagato said. "So, Mom, how are you finding your 'accommodations'?

"If nothing else, my needs will be met," Nagato-sensei said. "Monokuma said I will be brought three meals a day, and he has offered to wash my clothes. I am not allowed to leave the cell as long as the ship is at sea, though, or I will be punished."

"That lines up with what we've been told," I said. "Rule 9 says we aren't allowed to free or harm you, so we can't help you. I'm guessing Monokuma has some reason for keeping you alive."

"Possibly to serve as a hostage," Nagato-sensei said. "The fact that I'll be executed if someone else graduates may be an extra 'incentive' for Chiyuri to find the blackened."

Technically, it was possible for Nagato herself to become the blackened, but to do so, she'd have to be willing to sacrifice her mother. Considering who I was talking with, though, I hesitated to openly raise that question.

After a moment, the conversation ground to a halt, so I decided to ask about something that had been bothering me since we were at the hotel. It was probably insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but I still wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"By the way, I'm curious about something," I said. "Why does Nagato have the same Ultimate title as Asakura?"

"I honestly don't know," Nagato-sensei said. "I may work for Talent High School, but I play no role in admissions decisions, and was not on the panel that evaluated Chiyuri or Asakura-san. The administration doesn't have a rule against board members judging their own relatives, but teachers generally play no role in admissions decisions unless they have a related talent."

Nagato nodded to concur.

"In other words, Asakura-san was wrong," Nagato said. "I didn't get the title just because Mom's a teacher at the school."

I smiled, vindicated, even if Nagato didn't seem to feel entirely the same way. It wasn't conclusive proof, so I couldn't rub that in Asakura's face, but it was nice to see that he was full of shit. Of course, something else was bothering me.

"Then again, Sensei, something's weird," I said. "As teacher, shouldn't you have gotten a list of students before the year started?"

"I did, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said. "By that point, though, both Chiyuri and Asakura-san had been officially enrolled, and it was too late for the administration to rescind either. I... didn't know how to tell her."

"So the administration fucked up," I said. "In any case, it doesn't seem like either of you are at fault."

Both of the Nagatos seemed uncomfortable, whether because of my foul language or because I'd somehow hit a nerve.

"You seem disappointed, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"I was hoping for a clue of some sort," I said. "Maybe if one of us wasn't on the class list, or was lying about having gotten a title, that person could be the traitor."
"Maybe," Nagato said. "Of course, Monokuma did say that only people connected with Talent High School could come on the trip."

"True," Nagato-sensei said, showing us her own handbook, which had the same rules ours did. "In any case, I suppose it hardly matters whether Chiyuri or Asakura-san is the 'real' Ultimate Tech Support."

"I guess," Chiyuri said, "but Asakura-san certainly feels otherwise."

Nagato-sensei turned to Chiyuri.

"Chiyuri, please at least be polite to Asakura-san," Nagato-sensei said. "Even though tensions are running high now- or rather, especially because of that- it would be best for you to remember that you are classmates."

"I will, Mom," Nagato said.

Nagato-sensei smiled.

"The same goes for you, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said. "It's probably too much for you to ask him to like him, but he's as much your classmate as he is Chiyuri's."

"I'll do what I can," I said, "but given what an asshole is, I can't promise too much."

"I respect your honesty," Nagato-sensei said. "I will ask him to try to behave if I see him."

I appreciated that Nagato-sensei was willing to hold Asakura to the same standards as us, but to be frank, I didn't see him coming down to visit her, much less listening to her.

"There's something else that's bothering me," Nagato said. "I don't clearly remember what happened in the days leading up to the trip. The last memory I have is going to bed in our apartment."

"I can't remember anything else from just before the trip, either," I said. "Sensei, what about you?"

"Unfortunately, I'm no different," Nagato-sensei said. "I do remember knowing about the trip, but only a vague suggestion. It's possible that someone has tampered with our memories, and all of us have been affected."

So assuming Nagato-sensei was telling the truth, she was as much in the dark as the rest of us. If this was true, then Nagato's comments about her mother's leadership made perfect sense. Nagato-sensei, despite being confused, still strove to be the kind of teacher her students could rely on.

"Well, almost all of us," I said. "It's possible that the traitor is lying."

"Or maybe they aren't, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "It's possible they erased their memory along with everyone else's to avoid arousing suspicion, or because Monokuma didn't make exceptions."

"Possibly," I said, "although only the traitor would know."

I checked my watch and saw that almost 20 minutes had passed since the start of our investigation.

"We should probably get going for now," I said, "since we've got the rest of the ship to check out. Are you ready to leave, Nagato?"

Nagato nodded hesitantly.
"I... I am," Nagato said. "I'll come back to see you soon, Mom."

"Thank you for coming, Chiyuri, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said. "I'll look forward to seeing you again."

As we left, I realized that while it was possible that Nagato-sensei was our traitor, that was only one possibility out of sixteen (or seventeen if I counted myself), none of which we had any hard evidence to prove. Of course, considering how things were, maybe some of us wouldn't wait for definite proof, and that worried me more than anything.

Past the elevators, there were two corridors leading toward the aft-most part of the Ursa Major, and we started with the starboard side. Each corridor ran along the side of the ship and had several portholes looking out at sea.

First, we saw a laundry room, which had several washing machines and dryers, as well as what looked like a computer. We found the Tachibana sisters there. One was holding her nose, and her blazer was off, while the other was standing by, watching her sister with a concerned look on her face.

"Are you all right, Tachibana-san?" Nagato said.

The sister who was holding her nose said "Uh-huh."

"She's fine," Tatsuki said, "since it's just a nosebleed. But why don't I do the talking, Taiga?"

"Ogay," Taiga said.

Taiga seemed like she'd loosened up a bit since we'd first met. She was probably one of those types who was unused to strangers but got along well with her friends, even if it was a bit soon to be calling anyone here that.

"So, what've you found?" I said.

"The laundry room," Tatsuki said. "Just drop your clothes in there, and within a day, they'll be delivered to your room, completely clean."

The computer screen showed a spreadsheet listing everyone who had used the service so far- only one person, apparently- as well as the items they brought in to be washed, and what time they were received and returned. Most of the spreadsheet was black text on a white background, but I noticed that the "Navy Blazer" descriptor for Taiga's clothing was in red, and since it was still in the washer, the "Time Returned" slot was blank.

"Why's Taiga's blazer in red text?" I said.

"Because it has blood on it," Tatsuki said, "otherwise it would just be black like all the other clothing. Monokuma explained that this was meant to make things fair in case someone committed a crime and washed blood off their clothing."

I chuckled bitterly.

"Yeah, it's not like half of us bleed out of our vaginas once a month," I said.

"Good point, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said, "but I'm sure we'll be fine. I don't think anyone would find it strange for you to put your bloody underwear in the laundry, since it's not as though you'd get
blood on it if you stabbed and killed someone."

"True," I said. "Of course, I bet someone's going to be dumb enough to try to wash their bloody clothes in the laundry, and it'll be easy to find out who."

While some items of clothing were fairly common, such as button-down shirts and blazers, they were easy to tell apart by color. Some of us even had unique styles of clothing that nobody else did, such as Tsukimura's kimono or Himemiya's archery attire.

"You're talking like someone's going to get murdered," Tatsuki said.

"Am I wrong?" I said. "You know what's at stake and how much pressure we're under, so I know someone's going to crack."

"I can't argue with that," Tatsuki said, "but at the same time, I hope things will never come to that."

"Me too, Tatsuki-san," Nagato said.

I nodded, since it wasn't hard to see why each of them felt that way. No person was an island, and not only would Tatsuki or Nagato die if someone graduated, but they'd also lose their sister and their mother, respectively. Of course, while I was an only child of a single mother, I realized that not only would my mother be heartbroken if she lost me, but everyone here was someone's child, and some of us had siblings, too. I had no desire to cause pain to other people by murdering one of their loved ones, even if I couldn't trust the others to do the same.

Down the hall from the laundry room was a nurse's office, which seemed to have two beds, a cabinet full of medical supplies and other equipment. Kirishima and Higurashi were investigating it.

"Ah, hello, Azuki-san, Nagato-san," Higurashi said. "How goes the exploration?"

"We've looked into a few places around the ship," Nagato said, "and I got to see my mother for a little while."

Higurashi smiled approvingly.

"Good," Higurashi said. "Unless there's something we absolutely need to know about, you can share your findings once we meet up."

"Thanks," I said. "What about you guys?"

"As you can see, we found a trove of medical supplies," Higurashi said. "The good news is that no one will die due to lack of equipment that could be used to save them."

"Assuming anyone possesses the skills necessary to use them," Kirishima said. "That is the bad news, and the worse news is that it is entirely likely that most murder victims will perish before encountering anyone who could help them. As such, it is not realistic to hope that we can save the murder victims."

"Perhaps not, Kirishima-kun," Higurashi said. "But we can work together to stop murders from occurring."

I sighed and shook my head.

"If you say so," I said. "Don't get me wrong; I don't want any murders, but that isn't up to us. It's up
to whoever snaps and decides to graduate."

"I suppose so," Higurashi said, "but ask yourself this- will they succeed while acting alone and trying to outwit all of the spotless?"

I had to think about that for a moment. As tempting as it was to say "Yeah," or "Probably," this question was too serious to be dismissed so flippantly.

"I... actually don't know," I said, "but it's easy to pose as a spotless and try to throw the investigation off. It isn't always easy to tell the difference between someone who's wrong and someone who's trying to mislead us."

"That may be so," Kirishima said, "but all of us have the capacity for critical thinking, and the ability to discern truth from lies."

"I'm a bit surprised, Kirishima-san," Nagato-san said. "I didn't think you'd take Higurashi-san's side."

Kirishima frowned and shook his head, almost offended at what I was suggesting.

"I do not share Higurashi-kun's optimism," Kirishima said, "merely his belief in the power of rational thought to solve the problems that will undoubtedly arise. I doubt that he, or any one individual, can help convince us to put aside our differences and our fears to cooperate."

"I suppose we'll have to agree to disagree, then," Higurashi said. "That said, Kirishima-kun, I'll be counting on your help when the time comes. Same goes for you, Azuki-san, Nagato-san."

We nodded. Since this was a difficult situation, it would be in our best interests to work well with others. The only question was whether we could count on our classmates to do the same.

We left the nurse's office and returned to the hallway. After reaching the end of the starboard hallway, we saw the kitchen and the stairs to the dining hall. Before going there, we decided to go back and check the port corridor first.

While in the corridor, we found a small lounge, and next to it, there was a pair of bathrooms- one for the boys, the other for the girls.

The lounge had a sofa and a few comfortable chairs, scattered around. There was a vending machine that had a variety of drinks, but didn't seem to accept- or need- money, as well as a water cooler. There were a few magazines that seemed fairly recent, including one magazine with Junko Enoshima, the Ultimate Fashionista, on the cover. There were also some bookshelves nearby, with a good amount of reading material. I could see at least one book related to each of our talents on it, from a collection of short plays to a textbook on genetics. There was also a surprising amount of murder mystery stories and crime novels, including a few of the Aiko Aizawa books, by some girl called Sae Edogawa. They also had a copy of the New International Version of the Bible, which Nagato seemed interested in.

While we were looking, Sasaki and Mihama stopped by.

"Ah, it looks like you've found the lounge," Sasaki said.

"Yeah," I said. "It's got a little bit of everything when it comes to reading material."

Sasaki then looked at the shelf intently.
"Wow, it looks like it has my manga," Sasaki said. "But wait a minute...I don't think I've actually gotten this far yet. Around the time I was recruited, I was only up to Chapter 33. Judging from the amount of volumes, at least two years have passed."

"Maybe someone else took over and wrote your work," I said.

Sasaki shook her head, then opened it up.

"This looks like something I'd have drawn," Sasaki said, "or at least someone who's very skilled at imitating my style. But why is it here?"

I shrugged, and the other two stared blankly.

"I do not know, Sasaki-san," Mihama said, "but it is strange that they would leave something like this lying around where anyone could find it. The only explanation I can think of is that two years have passed since we first got here."

"That's possible, Mihama-san," Nagato said, "but you're still growing, aren't you? If you turned thirteen, you should have grown at least a few centimeters."

Nagato was certainly on to something, assuming Mihama was actually eleven, after all. She was certainly mature for her age, but maybe she was older than she actually seemed.

"An astute observation, Nagato-san," Mihama said. "My proposal was only a theory, after all. If we forgot the past two years, it would explain why we did not remember arriving at the hotel, but we would be missing many other memories, such as our high school graduation."

"Good point," I said. "We'll probably have to look into this more."

We dropped the subject for now, since Sasaki's manga was the only piece of evidence we had right now that could explain anything, but it left us with a lot to think about. If we wanted to get out of here, we'd have to find out how we ended up here in the first place, since depending on the circumstances, escaping could prove a lot more difficult than we anticipated. Of course, considering that right now, the only reason we considered it "virtually impossible" rather than "completely impossible" was that we didn't want to believe it was the latter, that wasn't much consolation.

At the rear of the ship, there was the stairway leading up to the dining hall, as well as two rooms. The first we investigated looked like a warehouse. It was two stories tall, and there was a small staircase down from the door to the floor of the warehouse.

The warehouse had a surprisingly good selection of items, from tools to pieces of clothing and other gear. Most of the stuff was what you wouldn't expect to find on a cruise ship- either they expected you to bring it with you, or you wouldn't need it.

Of course, knowing Monokuma, there was no shortage of potential murder weapons in here. There were toolkits with heavy metal objects that could be used as bludgeons. Ropes could be used to strangle people or made into nooses. Canisters of household chemicals could be used to poison people. The list went on and on.

Unfortunately, while there were many things that could harm us, there wasn't anything that could help us in the way we'd hoped. Obviously, there wasn't anything that could be used to sail away from the ship, but they also were careful to avoid leaving things that could be used to call for help- cell phones, signal flares and the like.
I picked out a notebook and a pen, and jotted down some of my observations so far into the notebook while they were still fresh on my mind. After all, one could never know when a small tidbit of information could become vitally important. I grabbed a tote bag and put some of my supplies inside it.

As I was searching the warehouse, I found Monokuma… or at least what looked like him. It was probably half his size. A moment later, the real Monokuma popped out.

"Congratulations, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "You just found the first Hidden Monokuma out of six!"

"Thanks," I said. "What do I get if I complete the collection?"

"I won't let you graduate, if that's what you're asking," Monokuma said, "but if you find all six- the one you found in the ship and one on the first five islands- you get a sense of accomplishment. Happy hunting!"

Monokuma then left.

"So in other words, there's no reward," Nagato said.

"Doesn't look like it," I said, "but at least I'll have something to work towards… assuming we live that long."

It was odd what the killing game could do to a person's sense of time. In my old life, not only did I have to meticulously plan my life in the short term, but I also had to think ahead to the future, from when my shooting my latest project would begin to entrance exams. Here, I realized I could be dead by tomorrow, so I didn't even have the luxury of thinking about the future.

Of course, thinking about that scared me shitless, so I put that thought out of my head, and got my head back in the game. Right now, my job was to investigate this ship and learn everything I could.

Across from the warehouse was the kitchen, a decently sized facility with everything you'd need- a refrigerator, a freezer, a good selection of utensils, a cutting surface, a stove, an oven, a sink. Tsukimura and Himemiya were busy investigating it.

"So this is the kitchen?" I said.

"It is," Tsukimura said, "but like all the other facilities around here, no one is around to operate it."

Tsukimura sounded like she'd know a lot about what it took to run a cruise liner like this. She'd probably worked with the other staff at the Himemiyas' place, and maybe she could get a job on another cruise ship if she ever got out of this one.

"What about the actual food?" Nagato said. "I'm worried about running out, since Monokuma might want us to run short and fight over the food."

"Apparently, Monokuma will see to it that the ship has adequate food supplies, and will regularly replenish the food on the ship," Tsukimura said. "However, it is up to us to prepare our own meals."

So that was another piece of evidence supporting my belief that Monokuma didn't just want to force us into a deathmatch until one person was left alive. Of course, Monokuma wasn't stupid, so every decision he made clearly was done for the purpose of furthering the killing game.
"So in other words, he wants to give our cook the chance to poison someone," I said.

"That's possible," Himemiya said, "but at the same time, if there is only one cook, then we would easily be able to identify a prime suspect. All we would have to do is identify the cook, and determine whether anyone else touched the food before the murder."

"Quite true, Himeno-sama," Tsukimura said, "but even a best-case scenario would involve the murderer being executed, in addition to the person who was killed."

"Better one killer than the rest of us," Himemiya said. "But I do agree that I'd rather not see it come to that."

"Neither do I," I said. "Of course, we'll probably have to prepare ourselves for dealing with a murder."

We fell silent. Of course, while saying that we'd have to be ready to deal with a murder was all well and good, none of us knew what we'd actually do to be ready for that- and it certainly didn't help that none of us could really accept that it would happen.

"Speaking of the kitchen," Tsukimura said, "Higurashi-san volunteered to cook our meals, which is good. I know some cooking, but since the Himemiyas have a chef, I don't get the opportunity to use my skills very much, so I'm glad he stepped up."

"That's good," Nagato said. "I would recommend my mom, but... you know..."

The others nodded. I didn't know whether Himemiya and Tsukimura had stopped by Nagato-sensei's cell, but they clearly knew about her predicament... and ours. All of our lives had been put on hold, and we didn't know when- or whether- we'd be able to get back to our homes, our schools, and our families and friends. There was no benefit to dwelling on this, though, so we did the only thing that could help us keep focused- getting back to the task of investigating the ship.

We went upstairs, into the dining hall, and took a look around. There were four square tables around, each of which could comfortably seat four people. It seemed as though the dining room had been designed specifically for the sixteen of us.

We saw Kurogane and Kojima. Luckily, the latter was in less of a mood to woo me.

"So it looks like we have our meeting space here," I said. "If nothing else, it's got enough seats for sixteen people."

"Yes, it does," Kurogane said, "but in my experience, putting this many wildly different individuals in the same room can yield some... interesting results. I know it from my family gatherings."

Nagato and I looked at each other and shrugged. I guess neither of us had nearly as many relatives as Kurogane did.

"You said it," Kojima said, "but a lot of projects, like video games, can't be accomplished without a big team working together."

"And movies," I said, "at least the big-budget blockbusters, or even anything that would be widely released. I don't have anything against student films, but they're just stepping stones to launch a bigger career."

Kojima grinned, evidently quite pleased that I'd agreed with him. Maybe it was just me, but he
"I know," Kurogane said. "I'm sure we have our differences- life experiences, skillsets, personal beliefs, you name it- but we all have a shared interest in getting out of here."

"I guess," I said, "but that means that everyone's desperate to get out. Monokuma's counting on us to compete with and sacrifice each other to achieve that goal."

"That's true, Azuki-san," Nagato said, "but it's up to us to prove him wrong."

As we got back to our investigation, I was left to think about how we could get along as a group. Obviously, working together was a bit much to ask for, but we could do what we could to get along. I'd at least try to get along with Kojima, who was one of the more reasonable members, even if I'd still make it clear that I was out of his league.

We climbed to the top of the stairs at the back of the dining hall and saw the door leading to the bridge. It was a thick, sturdy door that had a small porthole and was guarded by ceiling-mounted Gatling guns. A small porthole was nearby, and gazing through it, we couldn't see anyone. A sign on the door said "OFF LIMITS TO STUDENTS", and there was a keypad controlling the lock.

"Well, there goes any hope of turning this ship around," I said, glancing out a window behind us. By now, the city where this ship had been docked was completely out of sight.

"Do you mean because the door is locked?" Nagato said. "Or because there doesn't seem to be anyone operating the ship?"

"Both," I said. "We obviously can't get in, and even if we could, the controls for the ship are probably not designed for humans to operate. It doesn't help that we don't have an Ultimate Ship Captain or Ultimate Navigator among us."

While pretty much anything could become an Ultimate title, to the point at which I wouldn't be surprised if the administration made up Ultimate titles for their kids, there obviously had to be limits. A lot of titles were in occupations that only adults could practice, which was why Mihama couldn't be recognized as the Ultimate Lawyer.

"Still, something's odd," Nagato said. "When we were on the deck, meeting Monokuma for the first time, the ship had already started sailing away, didn't it? How could Monokuma do that if he wasn't up on the bridge at the time?"

"Maybe he started the ship just after the announcement, then went out to greet us," I said. "He didn't necessarily have to control it."

"That's possible," Nagato said, "or maybe someone's up there, out of sight, controlling Monokuma and this ship."

"In other words, a possible eighteenth person on this ship," I said. "There's a lot we don't know about our situation."

While we'd explored the entire ship, we'd only answered a small fraction of the questions we had. Maybe we'd figure some things out by discussing our findings with the rest of the class, but we felt like we were a long way from the truth.

Having examined all the areas of the Ursa Major that were available to us, Nagato and I dropped
the Hidden Monokuma off in my room, then returned to the deck, and sat down for a little while. Eventually, Yamazaki and Kumakura passed through.

"Oh, hello, you two," Kumakura said. "How goes the search?"

"We've thoroughly investigated the ship, Yamazaki-san," Nagato said. "What about you and Kumakura-san?"

"We're just passing through," Yamazaki said, "trying to see if we can learn anything else about this ship. Have you seen any lifeboats?"

Nagato and I shook our heads.

"No," Nagato said. "Why do you ask?"

"Personal curiosity," Yamazaki said. "I wanted to see if we'd have any way to get to safety if the Ursa Major hit an iceberg and sunk, or if only the women and the children could be saved."

"I don't think anyone would survive if that happened," I said. "And don't even think of asking me to stand at the bow with you, saying 'I'm flying!'"

Yamazaki chuckled. If nothing else, he was different from Kojima, who would've eagerly taken me upon that.

"Not at all," Yamazaki said. "I guess that when I'm on a ship like this, I can't help but think of that movie."

"I know," I said. "This situation doesn't feel real, almost like it's a manga or anime. But in the end, we have to accept that it's happening to us, and understand what it means- even if we don't want to admit it."

"I know," Yamazaki said. "You can hope for the best if you want, as long as you don't let that keep you from doing what you have to do."

Kumakura checked his watch, and I followed suit.

"We should head back to the dining hall," Kumakura said. "The others should be meeting there soon."

"I agree," Nagato said. "We'll have time to investigate the ship more later."

Nagato and I got up and followed Kumakura and Yamazaki into the dining hall.

We met up again in the dining hall to discuss our findings. By this point, Taiga- the sister who wasn't wearing a blazer- had gotten over her nosebleed, but she still had a tissue handy. Most of the others had seen everything we'd seen, since we covered the same ground, so there wasn't too much difference in what we brought to the table.

Each of us shared our findings, primarily focusing on the basics- the rooms where we were staying, how we'd get our food and the supplies we could get from the warehouse. Several people had noticed that the bridge was not only locked, but also was apparently unmanned, although no one had any idea for how to get the door open or see whether anyone was inside. Some of us, like Yamazaki, pointed out that there was no way to leave the ship apart from jumping overboard and swimming with it, which would probably result in us drowning or being killed by the Monodrones.
"So in conclusion, while we are trapped on this ship, all our needs are provided for," Higurashi said. "While this is undeniably a bad situation, as long as we follow the rules, the only immediate danger to our lives comes from each other. Because of that, we must stay calm and work together."

That was all well and good, if a bit much to ask from us, since the killing game was obviously meant to discourage us from doing either.

"Something seems odd about this ship," Tsukimura said. "Apart from this level and the top deck, there don't seem to be any stairs up and down. There are only two elevators- the one to Nagato-sensei's cell, and the one Monokuma said will take us to the courtroom. It seems as though these are the only areas we have access to."

Now that I thought about it, the accessible portion of the Ursa Major was fairly small for a ship this large. While the passengers of a normal cruise liner obviously couldn't fool around in the areas of the ship reserved for the crew, there were a lot more areas.

"It is certainly strange that the ship's vital machinery cannot be reached," Kirishima said. "This ship appears to be moving itself, but we would be in great peril if the machinery broke down."

"I agree, Kirishima-san," Tsukimura said. "If the ship stopped in the middle of the ocean, we would eventually die of starvation or dehydration, unless a passing ship rescued us."

Now that I thought about it, Monokuma ran the risk of the Ursa Major running into ships out at sea, and us being rescued. It was a massive hole in his plan, one he had to have thought of in advance. But how could he eliminate that risk? I honestly didn't know, so I kept quiet for a moment, until Mihama changed the subject.

"Speaking of which," Mihama said, "I believe Monokuma mentioned something about an itinerary for the trip, did he not? We should look at that."

We got out our handbooks once again and opened up the documents page.

_Killing School Trip Itinerary_

_The Killing School Trip is meant to be a fun and educational opportunity for the students of Class 32 of Talent High School._

_The First Half: Fun_

_Island 1: Inn Holiday. Students go to a traditional tourist attraction and stay a night in a traditional inn with an onsen._

_Island 2: Party City. Kick back, relax and celebrate in a city that's known for holding awesome parties!_

_Island 3: Back To Nature. Camp out, relax on the beach and take nature walks on this beautiful island paradise._

_The Second Half: Education_

_Island 4: Career Planning. Explore a variety of career options and find the best way to use your talent to make a living._

_Island 5: Higher Education In A Changing World. Visit a college campus and see how it can help you achieve your career goals._
I shuddered. All this seemed fairly normal, but it was easy to give a technically honest description that hid each island's true purpose, if not outright lie. Monokuma likely would have more than a few nasty twists in store.

"Why is the 'Higher Education' island after the 'Career Center' island?" one of the Tachibana sisters said.

"Probably because not all of us are planning on going on to college," Sasaki said. "People tend to find out what career you want first, then figure out whether they need a college degree for it."

It was a reasonable enough point, but largely irrelevant to our situation. We didn't have the luxury of thinking about where we'd be two years from now when any of us could die today.

"I am personally curious about the 'surprise' island," Tsukimura said, "and why it is part of the 'educational' portion of the trip."

"Me too," I said. "We can only assume that it's going to be a pretty nasty surprise... assuming we last long enough to make it there."

Of course, at this point, we knew next to nothing about the other five stops on our cruise, so we didn't have all that much to go on when it came to speculating about those. In fact, since we had yet to arrive at the first island, we were probably getting ahead of ourselves.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder why the sixth island was different, and noticed that according to Monokuma, it was the only one without a Hidden Monokuma. Maybe he didn't think we'd make it that far, or maybe he had something big planned for us, and didn't want us to be distracted.

"So essentially, this is our situation," Higurashi said. "We are trapped on this ship as it sails the high seas, told that the only way out is to graduate and encouraged to kill each other. If a murder does occur, one of two outcomes will result- either the spotless will sacrifice the blackened to live, or the blackened sacrifices the spotless to survive and escape."

"That's about right," I said. "It's not exactly an environment that's conducive to cooperation or where it's safe to trust each other."

"Maybe not," Higurashi said, "but if you try to graduate and fail, you will only get yourself and your victim killed, causing us to lose two members and gain nothing. Besides, it's in the spotless' interest to work together in a trial, since it is highly unlikely that any one of us can uncover the truth alone."

I agreed with Higurashi, but probably not for the reason he'd intended. If only one of us was capable of solving the mysteries, then it would likely only be a matter of time before that person betrayed the group and committed a murder, confident in the knowledge that their intellectually inferior classmates couldn't figure it out.

"Of course," Karita said with a grin on his face. "And it's in the blackened's best interest to pretend to play along. All of us working together is all well and good if we can manage it, but even if we achieve that, then at least one of us betrayed the group... to say nothing of the actual traitor."

"That may be true," Higurashi said, "but since those seeking to graduate are motivated by self-interest, then they have no choice but to act alone. Since they would be the only one to benefit from their schemes, no one would help them."
What Higurashi was saying made a certain amount of sense. The rules of the killing game, particularly what was at stake, discouraged cooperation, and encouraged everyone to be out for themselves. If we managed to unite as a class, then there was no way a single blackened could deceive all of us... or was there?

"You have a point," I said. "No rational person would willingly help a blackened get away with murder... at least not knowingly. It's possible for a blackened to manipulate people into unwittingly helping them in some way or another, like laying the groundwork and hiding evidence."

"I agree with Azuki-san," Taiga said. "Besides, if the accomplice might be willing to help someone else graduate if they valued that person's life more than their own... or everyone else's."

"I'm not so sure, Taiga-san," Karita said. "I don't know if we have anyone that selfless around here. Most people are out for their own survival."

I didn't really think "selfless" was the right word. Sure, the accomplice might be willing to die for the sake of another person, but screwing over everyone else to save the one person they cared about could be seen as them sacrificing a hell of a lot of people to get what they wanted. Besides, who could say that the beneficiary actually wanted their help?

"You have a point, Karita-kun," Higurashi-kun said. "Because most of us want to live, it is in the spotless' interest to work together and find the blackened during the class trial- or better yet, prevent it from coming to that. Committing murder gives you a chance to graduate, but it will more likely get you killed."

"Fair enough," I said, "but then we're going back to the idea of thinking rationally. If someone was willing to risk their life to get out of here, they'd be willing to do whatever it took. A lot of us here aren't good at thinking on their own, so it's only natural that they'd get desperate and... do something rash."

Higurashi nodded, unable to contest that point. Of course, since he didn't seem all that put out, he was ready to make a point of his own.

"That leads me to my next proposal," Higurashi said. "I would like to serve as your leader, someone all of you can rely on and look to for guidance. I know it is not prudent to trust any one person, but I would like to help moderate group discussions, serve as a liaison to the teacher, and be a person the rest of you can look to for guidance."

"This is all well and good," Kirishima said, "but the only question is whether you can, in fact, provide that guidance."

"I believe so," Higurashi said, "but it isn't up to me. In keeping with the principles of democracy, I would like to suggest that we choose our leader through popular vote, and also make our decisions that way. If anyone would like to announce their candidacy for leader, please do so now."

No one, not even those who'd expressed skepticism about what Higurashi was saying, spoke up. That was hardly surprising, since most of their objections had been to the ideals he expressed, rather than his ability to live up to them.

"I see," Higurashi said. "Please raise your hands if you would like me to lead you. I will only become your leader if at least eight out of the fifteen of you choose me- if not, I will rethink my approach and try to come up with a proposal you will support."

Nine of us raised our hands- Nagato, Tsukimura, the twins, Sasaki, Mihama, Kumakura, Kurogane
and Kojima. It was a majority, but a pretty crappy one. Higurashi had won by his own rules, but actually leading the group would be another matter. If he'd gotten the other fourteen students' votes, I would have raised my hand as a belated vote, but if five of us agreed with me, then it'd be best for me to keep my hand down.

Higurashi didn't seem to mind, though, and bowed gracefully.

"Thank you," Higurashi said. "I will do my best to live up to the expectations of those who voted for me, and win over those who did not."

"Knock yourself out," Karita said. "I don't really expect much of you, so I won't be disappointed if you fail."

Higurashi winced. While Karita seemed friendly enough, this was just one reminder that he wasn't actually a good person. I was actually grateful for it, since it reminded me not to let my guard down around him.

"This meeting is adjourned for now," Higurashi said. "Nagato-san, please come with me. I would like to discuss this with our teacher, and would like you around to verify what we discussed."

Nagato nodded eagerly, and it wasn't hard to see why she was chosen. She was probably one of the more upstanding and honest-seeming members of our class, at least going off first impressions. It also didn't hurt that this way, she'd have a chance to see her mother again.

"Yes, sir," Nagato said.

Nagato and Higurashi got up and headed downstairs, and after a moment, I followed him.

I caught up with Higurashi in the corridor near the kitchen.

"Do you have a minute, Higurashi?" I said.

"Certainly, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "I was hoping I could talk with you. You can go on ahead, Nagato-san."

"Understood, Higurashi-san," Nagato-san said. "Please come see us when you're done."

Nagato nodded, and walked down the hall.

"Let me guess," I said. "This is because I didn't vote for you, is it?"

"Partially," Higurashi said. "You don't have to like me, but I would appreciate your trust and your support, so I would like to know how best to win it."

I thought over what I had to say for a moment. Clearly, Higurashi didn't see me as a lost cause when it came to approval, and was willing to listen to me, so I could possibly get through to him. Then again, I also didn't want to mince words, either.

"You're a pretty good public speaker, I'll give you that," I said. "It's just that your sales pitch sucks."

Higurashi nervously chuckled.

"That's certainly blunt," Higurashi said. "Could you please elaborate?"
"It's simple," I said. "Us getting along and working well as a group requires all of us to pitch in and work together... and it only takes one person to screw us over by committing murder, causing us to end up in a class trial."

"I'm well aware of that," Higurashi said, "which is why I'd like to make sure that no one ends up killing any of their classmates."

I sighed. I didn't disagree with his goals, merely his belief in his ability to achieve them.

"I feel the same way," I said, "but you're only human, after all. Six people, including myself, didn't vote for you, so it's obvious that you can't convince everyone to do what you say. It's entirely possible that the first killer will be one of the six who have no faith in your ability to lead... or maybe one of the nine who said otherwise."

"That's possible," Higurashi said, not commenting on how, in hindsight, it was technically a tautology. "Then again, I do hope that I can win them over."

I shrugged. As things stood now, no one would win in an argument between us. Higurashi's optimism was groundless, but at the same time, while our circumstances were certainly bleak, I didn't have any evidence he didn't know about. He wasn't stupid enough to not know that a lot of people hadn't voted for him, or that the killing game encouraged betrayal, so there wasn't any point in reminding him of those.

"Maybe you can," I said, "but like I said earlier, it's not like you're a bad speaker or even a bad leader. It's just that the task you've taken is doomed from the start. You remind me of an actor I once heard of, who got a starring role in a rather stupid kids' movie. He gave a great performance as the lead, but the movie was a pile of shit, so it flopped and his career never really recovered."

"So in other words, you believe that my goal is a lost cause?" Higurashi said.

"I believe so," I said, "since you can't win this battle by yourself, and not everyone's willing to fight it with you."

Higurashi shook his head.

"I don't think you're wrong, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "but it's still a fight worth fighting, even if I'm doomed to lose. If nothing else, I have to do something about this situation."

I sighed. I still thought Higurashi was naïve, but at the very least, he knew his limits.

"I guess I can't talk you out of this," I said. "Just... don't do anything reckless, or you might end up making things worse for everything else."

"Deal," Higurashi said.

I parted ways with Higurashi not fully reassured. Obviously, the selfish pricks who were only out for themselves gave us enough to worry about, but what about the well-intentioned but misguided types? Would it be possible that at least one murder might result from the actions of the latter group, not just the former group?

Not long after talking with Higurashi, I headed to the deck to get some fresh air, and saw one of the Tachibana sisters (I think it was Taiga) on the deck. She was wearing her blazer, but since I'd seen Taiga heading to the laundry room, maybe she'd picked it up after it finished being cleaned, or got a spare blazer from her suitcase.
"Oh, Azuki-san," Tachibana said.

"Is something wrong, Tachibana?" I said.

Tachibana nodded.

"Think about our situation for a moment," Tachibana said, "namely, the graduation rule. Either the status quo is upheld, with the gradually dwindling class remaining trapped in here, or one person graduates and everyone else dies. Do you have some idea what I'm getting at?"

"Yeah," I said. "There's no way you and your sister are getting out of here together."

"That's part of it," Tachibana said, "but also, neither of us would be willing to let everyone else die so that we could graduate. We know what we have to do, but all the same, it's difficult to do."

"I know," I said. "Of course, you're not the only one in this situation. Nagato's stuck in here with her mom, and Himemiya and Tsukimura have known each other since they were little."

Tachibana nodded.

"Exactly," Tachibana said. "Even if there was a way for me to graduate with my sister, we'd be selfishly prioritizing our own survival over a lot of other people like us. Our only solution is to hold together, and realize that we're all in the same boat together- literally."

"That's right," I said. "Is that why you voted for Higurashi?"

"It is," Tachibana said. "I know that it's not realistic to believe that uniting under one leader will solve our problems, but it's our only hope. Even if you disagree with Higurashi-kun, please at least try to support him."

"Got it," I said. "I talked with him just now, and while I still don't agree with him, he does at least seem honest."

Tachibana smiled.

"I'm glad, Azuki-san," Tachibana said. "I don't think Higurashi-kun's asking too much of us- just that we cooperate and trust him- so I think it's only fair that we work with him."

As I parted ways with Tachibana for now, I realized that maybe, Higurashi's supporters weren't as naïve as I'd thought. It wasn't enough to get me to change my vote, but at the very least, I could cut him some slack.

I headed back into the ship and stopped by the lounge to see Yamazaki, one of my fellow "no" voters (the others being Asakura, Himemiya, Karita and Kirishima). He was sitting in a chair and reading an entertainment magazine, evidently trying to brush up on his facts.

"Hey, Yamazaki," I said. "I wanted to ask you about your thoughts about Higurashi."

Yamazaki looked up, shut the magazine and thought over his answer for a moment.

"It's not that I don't trust him," Yamazaki said, "or maybe it's more accurate to say that I don't distrust him more than anyone else. It's just that I don't think people like us can achieve much through cooperation."

"Because we could turn on and kill each other?" I said.
I expected Yamazaki to say "Yes" immediately, but surprisingly enough, he actually had to think about it.

"That's only part of it," Yamazaki said. "To use an analogy, a movie requires a lot of talented people working together- not just the actors, but also the production crews, the directors and writers, the business executives and promoters... you name it."

I didn't need my professional experience with making a movie, or the earlier discussion with the Kojima-Kurogane duo to know what he meant. One of my first memories was seeing a movie together with my mom and dad, back when the latter was still alive, and being amazed at how many names were in the credits. I couldn't count high enough to get all the names, but I knew that movies were big projects.

"Yeah," I said. "Kojima and I talked about this earlier. He said that big undertakings require a lot of people working together."

Yamazaki frowned. He could probably tell from my tone that I wasn't nearly as sanguine about the prospect of working together as Kojima was, but I wasn't sure whether he agreed.

"He's right," Yamazaki said, "but as I'm sure you know, a movie doesn't just need a lot of people, but also people with a wide range of useful skills who are good at their jobs. What's more, they also need to work well together- they don't have to be best friends, but they have to at least be able to tolerate each other."

"Which rules out a lot of people," I said, "Asakura and Nagato, Asakura and Karita, Asakura and Himemiya...hell, we could just say Asakura's the problem. As for talents, I can't think of any sort of undertaking we could do together that would involve all our talents."

Yamazaki nodded.

"Anyway, my point is this," Yamazaki said. "If anyone can get through the killing game, it isn't me- I mean us- not with our hodgepodge of talents and conflicting personalities."

"Maybe not," I said. "Still, while I'm not optimistic about Higurashi's chances, we may as well try."

Yamazaki didn't argue with me, and we soon parted ways. While I couldn't fault him for feeling the way he did, not after I also refused to vote for Higurashi, he seemed remarkably pessimistic, even for the killing game. Our circumstances were bleak, and it was dangerous to cling to false hope, but if we fully bought into the belief that graduation was our only way out, then the worst-case scenario would be inevitable.

We met up in the dining hall for dinner. By this point, Nagato and Higurashi had returned from our teacher's cell.

"Nagato-san and I met with our teacher," Higurashi-san said, "and we'd like to propose some rules."

"In case you weren't paying attention to the vote, not everyone wants you to lead us," Asakura said, "so you can forget about telling us what to do."

"I'm fully aware of that, Asakura-kun," Higurashi-san said, "and, in fact, I won't be 'telling' you to do anything. Rather, we will discuss and agree on all rules as a group, and decide them by majority vote. I will admit that following them is up to you, but if you understand what is at stake for
yourself and everyone else, you should comply."

So Higurashi was smart enough to know that not everyone would listen to him. Of course, while it was obvious enough that a slip-up would get someone killed in here, not everyone was necessarily aware of that. If I had any money on me, I'd bet it all on the first murder happening because someone- whether the killer or the victim- still didn't realize that they were in a killing game.

"Our first proposal relates to the Night Time rule," Higurashi said. "Nagato-sensei suggested that we all stay in our cabins during Night Time for safety's sake, not just the areas that are off limits during Night Time- namely, the pool and the bathrooms-. Since there is unlikely to be anyone else out at that time, if you go outside, it is likely that someone will murder you, with no one around to witness the crime, much less stop it."

"Because of that," Nagato said, "we won't give out any punishments for violating the rule- not that we have the authority to do so, anyways. If you go out during Night Time, you do so at your own risk. Is everyone in favor of that?"

The vote passed unanimously, although not everyone seemed to vote. Everyone- even Higurashi's supporters and especially Higurashi's critics- knew that he didn't have much power, so we didn't have to worry about getting in trouble with him. In fact, whether or not we supported him came down to one question- how much faith we had in people's common sense and ability to think rationally. Then again, I don't think anyone thought our classmates were stupid enough to needlessly invite danger.

"Next up is the issue of roommates," Higurashi said. "Nagato-sensei, Nagato-san and I discussed this at length, and we concluded that while there is a risk of being killed by one's roommate, as long as only the inhabitants of the room are able to access the room, it will be easy to catch the perpetrator."

"And what if someone wants to have a guest over?" Kojima said.

"We're getting to that, Kojima-san," Nagato said. "Mom had a suggestion- if you want to visit a person in a room, it would be one-on-one, and only with the approval of that person and their roommate. For example, if you wanted to visit Azuki-san in her room, the two of you would need to get permission from me- as Azuki-san's roommate- and your roommate... Kurogane-san, right?"

As Kurogane said "That's right," I barely stifled a bitter chuckle. I knew Nagato was just trying to give an example, but there was no way in hell I was going to let Kojima come over.

As for Higurashi's suggestion, it was a decent idea, since it meant that at least two people would know about any person visiting another's room- two people who would be unlikely to be in cahoots with each other if the visit resulted in the death of the host or the guest. Of course, the more cautious (or paranoid) individuals wouldn't accept any invitations, while nobody but the most stupid would accept invitations from the most untrustworthy people. Because of that, this one also passed more or less unanimously.

"That said," Higurashi said, "we suggest that if you want to see someone besides your roommate, you do so in one of the common areas, so one of you can leave if you so desire. The dining hall, the lounge and the deck would be good choices."

"I think so, too," Sasaki said. "Of course, said locations may not be private."

"That'd be a problem," Karita said, "especially if you and the person you were meeting with were, say, plotting murder."
Sasaki gave Karita a disapproving look. He'd had a point, but a murder plot was only one reason why one of us might want privacy. If she had to meet with her editor to discuss her manga, then the editor's office would be a much better place than somewhere in public, like a diner, considering her subject matter.

"Next up is cooking," Higurashi said. "I will be responsible for cooking for all of you, so if anything... unfortunate happens, it will be my responsibility. Please let me know if you have any dietary restrictions or food allergies."

Nobody spoke up. I wasn't sure whether the others didn't have anything to report, or if they were scared about Higurashi trying to kill them by feeding them something they were allergic to. This proposal also passed almost unanimously, but I heard "Nay" votes from Asakura and Karita.

"We also discussed the dress code," Higurashi said. "Not everyone has a school uniform—much less this school's uniform—so as long as you're not doing anything that would count as indecent exposure, feel free to wear the uniforms and other clothes you have."

"Like we need your permission," Asakura said. "This uniform's the only 'real' clothing I have."

"I'm well aware, Asakura-kun," Higurashi said. "The purpose of this meeting is to clear up any questions we might have about the minor details."

Nagato turned to Higurashi and nodded, seemingly ignoring Asakura's remark.

"I agree, Higurashi-san," Nagato said. "As a teacher, Mom believes it's important that people understand the rules, so if she sees someone breaking a rule, she lets them know. If it's clearly a case of their not understanding the rules, she'll let them off with a warning, unless she's required to punish them."

Asakura nodded. Since he was more or less letting us do what we wanted here, there wasn't any real need for a vote.

"Indeed, Nagato-san," Higurashi said. "Speaking of Nagato-sensei, as you may have heard, she is no longer the official teacher and chaperone in charge of this trip, so you are no longer obligated to treat her as a teacher or do what she says—more specifically, it's fine for Nagato-san to call her 'Mom.'"

"That's right," Nagato said, "but Mom still deserves our respect. Not only is she older than us, but she also is trying to keep us safe, which is why she is working with Higurashi-san and I to guide you all. Because of that, if you have any questions or would like to talk to an adult, please don't hesitate to visit her. I spoke with her, and she'd be glad to see all of you."

Higurashi nodded approvingly.

"Those are all the rules I can think of for right now," Higurashi said. "I'll let you know if there's anything you need to know, but you shouldn't expect any other rules."

"That works for me," Yamazaki said. "I already had to memorize all of Monokuma's rules, so I'd rather not have to memorize yours."

I wondered if Higurashi could have sent us all a list of the rules for our records, but a cursory glance at our handbooks showed that we didn't have any sort of messaging program. I wasn't sure why that was, but maybe it was so that we couldn't clandestinely communicate without the surveillance cameras catching what we said.
"I agree with Yamazaki-san," Mihama said. "Monokuma has already given us his rules, and has threatened to execute rulebreakers, so this class should have guidelines to help ensure that we live peacefully together, rather than ironclad rules."

"I agree, Mihama-san," Nagato said. "What's most important is that we all work together. Essentially, our rules are merely a means to an end, and if there should come a time when breaking them is necessary for the good of our class, those rules should be broken."

Higurashi didn't disagree, although I couldn't think of any scenarios in which the rules could get in the way of our working together. Still, what mattered most was the principle, and for all I disagreed with our leadership, at least they had their priorities in order.

"One last thing," Higurashi said. "During our discussion with Nagato-sensei, we decided to appoint Nagato-san as the vice-leader for the class. If I die, or am otherwise unable to serve as leader, Nagato-san will serve as an interim leader while we hold elections."

No one said anything to that, probably because Higurashi was the only one who wanted to lead us. Maybe some of us imagined that Nagato would kill Higurashi to take his position, but there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of this happening. Even if Nagato was that kind of person, her killing Higurashi would end in one of two ways- either she'd die or all of us would- and if she somehow survived after killing Higurashi, we'd never trust her again.

Of course, the fact that Higurashi, who'd struck me as a bit idealistic, was acknowledging and preparing for the possibility of his own death said a lot about how serious our situation was.

"That's all," Higurashi said. "Remember, the most important thing is that we work together, so I'll be doing my utmost for the sake of the class, and I'll be counting on all of you to do the same."

We spent the rest of the evening going over the various rules Monokuma had set, making sure everyone knew what they were expected and not allowed to do, which didn't take very long. Higurashi finally decided to adjourn the meeting an hour before Night Time, to give us some free time before we bed.

After dinner, I went to Nagato-sensei's cell, taking up her daughter on her offer. She'd apparently just finished eating, so I had her full attention.

"Oh, good evening, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said. "Can I do something for you?"

I nodded and sat down across from Nagato-sensei.

"I'd like to ask something, Nagato-sensei," I said. "Did you really greenlight Higurashi serving as your rep?"

Nagato-sensei nodded.

"I did," Nagato-sensei said. "He explained his proposal, and the fact that most of the class was behind it, so I believed it would be the best possible way of keeping order in our class. Chiyuri came down with him, and will accompany him when he sees me every evening, so no one will suspect that he is lying about what I said."

Technically, there was a possibility that Nagato and Higurashi could be in cahoots, lying to us about what Nagato-sensei said, and vice versa. That said, while Higurashi and Nagato seemed to get along, they weren't exactly friends, and neither seemed to be the sort to lie.
"Fair enough," I said. "To be honest, I'm kind of skeptical about this plan, but at least we aren't placing too much trust in one person. I doubt it'll prevent any murders, but it probably won't cause any, either."

Nagato-sensei silently concurred, but noticed that I was looking at her funny.

"By the way, Azuki-san, I'd like you to be honest with me about something," Nagato-sensei said. "Do you suspect me of being the traitor?"

I shook my head. Even if I thought so, and was willing to say it to Nagato-sensei's face, I didn't have any proof.

"Not exactly, Sensei," I said. "For one, you're stuck in there and can't manipulate the outcome of class trials. For another, it'd be too obvious for the mastermind to act like a goody-two-shoes to deflect suspicion from themselves. It'd be safer to keep a low profile."

"I'm glad you think so," Nagato-sensei said. "It may not narrow down the candidates for the 'traitor' much, but I'm glad you don't suspect me."

Unfortunately, out of the sixteen people besides myself, we could only rule out three people—both Nagatos and Higurashi—on those grounds. In fact, it might even be premature to rule out anyone, so we'd be back to square one.

"You're welcome, Sensei," I said, "but let's be honest. Are you prepared to consider the possibility that one of your students betrayed you and their classmates? Even if it isn't your daughter?"

Nagato-sensei shook her head.

"No," Nagato-sensei said. "It's difficult to accept the idea that someone would do something so horrible, especially when I can't even imagine why."

"Neither can I," I said. "I mean, I could imagine one of us killing to get out of here, but not someone setting up a killing game. Hell, Nagato said most of her schoolmates were shocked when one girl stabbed another."

"So was I," Nagato-sensei said. "As a mother, I'm disturbed by an incident like that happening at my daughter's school. As a teacher, I want to protect my students, which I can't do while I'm stuck in here."

"Higurashi's doing what he can in your stead," I said. "To be honest, I'm not optimistic about his chances, but at least he's trying."

"I suppose that's all he can do," Nagato-sensei said, "but I'm grateful for that. Do your best to ensure that there won't be any killings."

I nodded.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

I parted ways with Nagato-sensei wondering if the quest to find the traitor was even worth it. As long as the traitor's identity was unknown, we'd live in fear of being betrayed, and once we found out— or worse, when the traitor struck— we'd have to endure the horror of being betrayed. Only one thing was clear— Monokuma would win either way.
As I emerged from the elevator, I saw Karita carrying a can of paint and a brush toward the boys’ cabins.

"Evening, Azuki-san," Karita said.

"Hey, Karita," I said. "You mind telling me what you plan on doing with that can of paint?"

"Setting some boundaries," Karita said. "Asakura-kun and I agreed to divide the room into thirds. One is the area with his bed, the other is the area with mine, and the third is the common area, with the shower, closet and door. Obviously, we have to keep to our own halves, and only one of us can be in the neutral area at any given time."

I chuckled softly after I heard "Asakura-kun and I agreed," a phrase I never thought Karita would ever use.

"So you can at least get along with him well enough to make decisions together," Karita said.

"You could say that," Karita said. "We don't exactly trust each other, but we realize that we have an interest in not murdering each other. That's why I try to be at least somewhat civil to him."

"Got it," I said. "But have you ever considered getting a new roommate?"

"Not a bad idea," Karita said, "but who do you have in mind?"

I stopped to think for a moment, and realized that I couldn't think of an answer to his question. The Himemiya-Tsukimura duo and the twins were probably close enough that they wouldn't want to be broken up for any reason, while most of the others seemed content with their choice of roommate. As for me, I couldn't think of anyone besides Nagato that I'd rather have as a roommate.

"You got me," I said. "Sorry; it looks like you guys are stuck together."

"That's all right," Karita said. "Not everyone gets what they want here, you know?"

"You got that right," I said, "otherwise we wouldn't be here."

"Well, most of us," Karita said. "After all, not only does the traitor probably want us to participate in the killing game, but maybe they enjoy participating in it themselves."

"Who knows?" I said. "I guess we'll find out sooner or later, assuming we live that long."

"That sounds right," Karita said. "I've got to get going, so good night, Azuki-san."

I said good night to Karita, and left with a lot on my mind. So far, he'd given me no concrete reason to distrust him, apart from his reputation, but I couldn't help but be wary around him, and everyone else. Not everyone was untrustworthy, but in a place like this, trusting the wrong person would likely be the last mistake I ever made.

I returned to my cabin, and saw Nagato there, sitting on her bed and unpacking her suitcase. Apparently, she'd stopped by the warehouse, since I could see that she'd pinned a Magical Girl Sakura poster to the wall on her side.

"Welcome back, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Hey," I said. "Are you getting unpacked?"
"I am," Nagato said. "Obviously, my suitcase has a few changes of clothes for various occasions."

I looked through my suitcase. Like Nagato said, there was a spare uniform or two, a set of pajamas, socks and underwear, and a swimsuit. The selection wasn't great, but we had clothing for every occasion.

"Looks like we're stuck with our uniforms for most of the time," I said, "unless you'd rather come to breakfast in a swimsuit."

"Then I'll wear my uniform," Nagato said. "Luckily for me, it's useful for everything that doesn't involve exercise, require protective clothing or events that I have to dress up for."

I unpacked my suitcase, and we put our clothes into the closet, dividing the space between us. Once we were finished, we took turns taking showers, and when we were done, we put our night time clothes on- Nagato had a pink nightgown, while I had pajamas.

"What's it like to work with Higurashi?" I said.

"I think he's an intelligent and good-hearted young man," Nagato said. "He seems like he'll do his best as our leader."

"I thought you'd say that," I said. "I talked to a couple people after dinner- people who voted for him and people who didn't- so I guess the real question is whether 'his best' will be good enough, or if it even matters."

Nagato sighed.

"I suppose it seems hopeless if you frame it that way," Nagato said, "but Higurashi-san and I think of it differently. In a situation in which we could end up killing each other, do you passively sit by and do nothing, selfishly try to graduate, or try to help your classmates?"

"The latter, I guess," I said, "as long as your efforts actually do end up helping. Like you said, it's all a matter of perspective."

Nagato nodded to concur, and our discussion ended for now. Of course, I had to wonder- how would our perspective change once the killing actually began?

Soon afterward, the monitor came on. This time, we saw Monokuma sitting in the ship's bridge, and could recognize his voice.

"It is now Night Time," Monokuma said. "At this time, certain areas of the ship will be off limits. Good night, and sleep tight."

I checked my watch, and saw that it was a few seconds after 10 PM, showing that my watch had the correct time. In the past, having the correct time was important to keep my appointments, but in here, knowing where I was at what time could become important to solving a murder.

"Well, that sounds like our cue," I said. "Want to call it a night?"

"One minute, please," Nagato said. "Before I go to bed, I'd like to say my prayers."

"Ah, right, you're a Christian," I said. "I could tell from your Catholic school uniform."

Nagato nodded. While blazer-style uniforms were fairly common, hers had a visible cross on the school crest.
"My mom and I are Catholics," Mom said. "For us, being Christians means being the best people we can be, even if we can't be perfect. Both of us are sinners, just like everyone else, but I don't intend to become a murderer."

"I see," I said.

Nagato looked a bit uncomfortable.

"I can tell you don't entirely believe me, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "I don't blame you, though... considering the circumstances."

"Actually, I don't doubt that you believe what you say you do," I said, "but beliefs can be fragile things. Maybe it's because I'm not religious, or maybe because I'm a cynical bitch, but I probably couldn't hold onto my belief in God in a situation like this."

"Fair enough, Azuki-san," I said. "What do you believe in?"

I paused for a moment.

"Tough question," I said. "I guess I believe that my life isn't worth more than that of anyone else here, much less all yours combined, and I don't want to see anyone get killed just because someone's desperate to graduate. I'd like to believe that most of us feel the same way."

"Me too, Azuki-san," Nagato said, before stifling a yawn. "Good night."

"Night, Nagato," I said, and climbed into my bed while Nagato knelt down beside hers to pray.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night. While Nagato wasn't stupid enough to kill her roommate, for all I knew, self-preservation was the only thing staying her hand. Sure, Nagato's graduation would result in her mother being executed, but who said she wasn't fine with that?

There were so many unanswered questions about our situation- why we were here, who was responsible for this and how everything would turn out, among others- and the only answers I could think of depressed the hell out of me. Perhaps mercifully, I was tired enough that I fell asleep before too long.

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Monokuma Theater

The term "first time" is really relative, you know?

If you've never heard of something happening before, then the first time you see it may as well be the first time ever.

So it doesn't matter if a work rips off a previous work as long as people see the ripoff first.

In fact, you should probably have your memories erased every night, so that each new day feels like a brand new experience.

Remember this- as long as you can't remember anything, you'll never get bored.

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Author's Notes

Thank you for the comments.
This chapter turned out a bit longer than the equivalent in Where Talent Goes To Die, since the ship has more facilities than the first floor of the school does, and I included interactions with each of the other characters this time.

Since Azuki, as a first person narrator, narrates based on her own perspective, there are times when she's less than infallible. For example, she can't give exact measurements as to how large the Ursa Major is, and there are times when she's confused as to which Tachibana sister she's talking with.

I have some bad and good news. The bad news is that while I have a good amount of progress on Parts 2 and 3 of Chapter I, the latter half of the chapter, including the murder, may take longer to write up (although once I finish with the first half, I'll more easily be able to focus on the latter half). The good news, though, is that in the mean time, you'll get to see some of the characters' Free Time Events in the Side Stories for this fic- Nagato's has been posted already, and you may see Higurashi, Karita and Tsukimura's Free Time Events, among others, in the near future.

Next up is a daily life segment.
Day 2

I woke up, wondering what sort of dream I'd just had, since Monokuma had been talking to me in my sleep. Unfortunately, as I looked around, I noticed that I was in the cabin I shared with Nagato, not my family's apartment or the room I'd receive if I went to Talent High School. I then realized that yesterday hadn't been a dream- I was still stuck on the ship.

"Oh, good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Morning, Nagato," I said.

I checked my watch and saw that it was a few minutes before 7 AM. At 7 AM sharp, the monitor in our room came on.

"Good morning, students," Monokuma said. "It looks like you're going to have another beautiful day at sea. Just a quick announcement- you can check your handbooks to see the day's forecast whenever you want."

On the screen with Monokuma, there was a chart showing the weather with a 3x3 grid of three hour intervals- 7 AM, 10 AM, 1 PM, 4 PM, 7 PM, 10 PM, 1 AM and 4 AM. The first four had sun icons for a sunny day, while the latter half had moon icons for a cloudless night. The temperatures were standard for a spring day in the Tokyo region, so at the very least, the weather was good.

We checked our handbooks and saw a new option for viewing the weather forecast. The only real point of it was to let us view it outside of the morning announcement. It didn't even have an extended forecast, but since we weren't thinking that far in advance, it wasn't much of a problem.

The two of us got dressed. By the time I put on my pants and buttoned up my shirt, I could see that Nagato was still tying her tie. It didn't take her that long to finish, though, and after checking the knot, she slipped on and her blazer.

"You seem like a real natural with the tie," I said.

"Thank you," Nagato said as she buttoned up her blazer, "but it's only because I wore it every day at my old school, starting in high school. My mom taught me how to tie it, even though it'd been a long time since she graduated."

I noticed that while Nagato often talked about her mom, she hadn't once mentioned her dad. Maybe she never knew him, like I never knew my dad, or maybe she was too polite to say what she really felt about him.

"Just in high school?" I said.

"That's right," Nagato said. "In middle school, I wore a blue sailor fuku, a bit like Mihama-san's. When I transferred to my elementary school at the start of fourth grade, I wore a blouse with a skirt and suspenders- my previous elementary school didn't have a uniform, so it was a bit of an adjustment."

Every time I talked to Nagato, I had more questions about what happened to her in the past. I suppose that was only natural when I'd known her for about 24 hours,
"In any case," Nagato said, as if to change the subject, "when you have to wear a tie six days a week for almost all year, you learn how to tie it. My mom went to the same high school I did, so she got the same practice - so much that she still remembers how, even after all these years. She sometimes finds herself looking for a tie whenever she puts on her suit."

"I get what you mean," I said. "When I was filming Magical Girl Sakura, I got used to wearing Sakura's neck ribbon by the time filming ended. Of course, it seems kind of odd that they don't make the girls wear neckties, like the guys do."

Nagato giggled softly and nodded.

"Well, you'd learn how very quickly here," Nagato said, "since the girls' uniform has a necktie. The only problem is that we- or at least the two of us- apparently never got our uniforms."

"Why not?" I said. "Because we're on a school trip?"

Nagato shook her head.

"That's not it," Nagato said. "If this were a trip, we'd be expected to wear our uniforms, since we'd be representing Talent High School. Obviously Monokuma doesn't see this as a school trip anymore, but that doesn't explain why no one packed their Talent High School uniforms- Mom wouldn't have let me forget mine."

Nagato raised a good question, but unfortunately, one that I couldn't answer. While it was obvious that something was very wrong with Talent High School, it was still a bit too soon to conclude that they were involved in this killing game. Something had happened in the time between when we got accepted and when we arrived at the hotel, and the key to solving the mystery behind the killing game would be to find out just what that "something" was.

Nagato and I headed to the dining hall. Once there, we saw Himemiya and Tsukimura sitting at a table together, dressed the same way they'd been when we first met them - the archer training clothes and maid kimono, respectively.

"Good morning, Azuki-san, Nagato-san," Tsukimura said.

"Good morning," Nagato said, and I followed suit.

We then sat down across from them. Before long, Higurashi served up some food. We hesitantly dug in, knowing that he wouldn't be stupid enough to serve poisoned food to us after telling everyone that he'd be cooking.

"I'm curious about something," Nagato said. "Does anyone here have the Talent High School uniform?"

"Evidently not," Himemiya said, "since Kanae and I looked in our luggage and couldn't find one."

So it wasn't just us. I could probably ask the other six pairs of students whether they'd gotten their uniforms, but it'd probably be a waste of time, and I didn't have any desire to speak with Kojima or the Cabin M4 duo.

"Judging from your asking this, I suppose the two of you don't have the uniform, either," Himemiya said.

"That's right," I said. "Nagato said that her mom, being a teacher, wouldn't let her leave for a
school trip without her uniform."

"Neither would my mother," Himemiya said. "In fact, the school Kanae and I used to attend wouldn't have allowed any students to go to class or a school trip without properly wearing the uniform."

The fact that Himemiya and Tsukimura had been schoolmates wasn't too surprising. Assuming Himemiya and Tsukimura lived in the same area and had similar academic skills, I could see them passing the entrance exams for the same high school. What was surprising was that we got two Ultimates from the same school from the same year—since a little over 500 people had ever attended Talent High School over the past 32 years, most schools hadn't even sent one student there.

"What was your school like?" Nagato said.

"It's a former school for rich girls," Himemiya said, "one that reduced its tuition and offered scholarships due to declining enrollment. Despite that, it's still fairly strict. Students couldn't make stops on the way home, much less work part-time jobs. I can only imagine how they'd have reacted to Kanae working as a maid for my family."

"Technically speaking, I did nothing wrong," Tsukimura said. "I went straight home after school and passed all my classes, even if my grades weren't as high as Himeno-sama's. None of our teachers could report anything unusual."

I chuckled. Tsukimura gave me the first impression of a "good girl," so it was kind of nice to see that she wasn't above using loopholes.

"The school was also quite particular about manners," Himemiya said. "While in class, students had to call each other by their last names and '-san', even if they were friends, and Kanae and I were no exception. That was a bit difficult to get used to, and I slipped up from time to time—luckily for me, the teachers only said 'You mean Tsukimura-san.' when I did."

"Me too," Tsukimura said. "Then again, while the teachers corrected me whenever I called you 'Himeno-sama,' they didn't think it was unusual for me to call you that... or at least they didn't say anything about it."

I'd definitely say it was the latter. Most of my old friends just called me "Akira" or "Akira-chan," generally only switching to "Akira-san" when talking with my mom, so I couldn't imagine any of them speaking as formally with me as Tsukimura did with Himemiya.

"I'll be honest, Kanae," Himemiya said. "While I'd rather not have you call me '-sama', even if I know it's not an easy habit to break, I actually like that you're using it on my first name. I'd rather you treat me like your mistress than as a stranger."

Tsukimura nodded.

"I know, Himeno-sama," Tsukimura said. "While I was at that school, wearing the same uniform as you, and even expected to show you the same respect you showed me, I felt like we were equals in a sense. That's why I was glad to come to the same school as you... even after what happened."

"I feel the same way," Himemiya said. "As much as I wish you were somewhere safe, I must admit that I'm actually happy to have you around."

I could sense a bit of awkwardness between Himemiya and Tsukimura. The former wanted the latter to treat her as more of an equal, and while the latter wanted to accept, she was hesitant to do
so. Still, they obviously liked and cared about each other, which would help them deal with their issues.

As everyone came in, Higurashi stood up and called us to attention.

"May I please have your attention?" Higurashi said, at which point we quieted down immediately. "Thank you. I am glad that all of you could come here today, since meal times may be one of the few periods in which all of us are in a room together. Because of that, I have a suggestion—every time we gather for a meal, you should try sitting with someone different. It's fine if you want to stay with your roommate, especially if they are a close friend or a sister, but I would like to see you make the effort to spend time with and get along with other people."

Karita snickered.

"Works for me," Karita said.

Asakura nodded grimly. While Karita seemed to be the more pleasant half of the Cabin M4 duo, it was clear that he didn't care for Asakura any more than Asakura cared for him.

"Is that such a good idea, Higurashi-kun?" Kirishima said. "It may be unwise to develop attachments to people who may die easily."

"I think of it differently, Kirishima-kun," Higurashi said. "Few would be willing to kill or sacrifice those they cherish as friends. By valuing our companions in the killing game, we make it less likely that any of us will harm one another."

While I thought that idea was too damn naïve, and wasn't too keen on the idea of making friends with everyone, I also didn't think much of Kirishima's belief that by closing yourself off from people, you could avoid being hurt. You couldn't choose when and how people died (unless you killed them yourself), but you also couldn't choose whether to become emotionally invested in someone. I'd learned that lesson long ago, at a younger age than I should have had to face it.

No one else contested Higurashi's assertion, but I couldn't help but once again notice that Higurashi's own roommate was among his critics. Not all of the roommates were necessarily close, but I had to wonder how things were in Cabin M3.

"I also have another proposal to discuss with you," Higurashi said. "Our schedules are apparently completely clear while the ship is at sea, so some of you may start feeling restless or bored. In order to combat that, I would like you to spend your time productively, and look around the ship for possible ways to escape, access the bridge or free Nagato-sensei. However, because Monokuma's rules are still in play, I will ask you to be careful."

"Fair enough, Higurashi," I said. "I'll take a look around the ship, assuming I don't have anything better to do, but I doubt I'll find anything that useful."

"I admit that I don't have high expectations of any of you succeeding, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "but the search is most important. Even if you don't find a way out, you may find useful information, and even by trying, you signify your commitment to working together."

Once again, I had to wonder whether Higurashi was overly invested in false hope, but there was some merit to his proposal. He wanted us to have something to work towards, and for which we could work together. Perhaps that was overly idealistic, but if we believed that the only way to graduate, the killings would probably begin soon. We had little use for false hope, but perhaps it might be the one thing keeping us alive.
After breakfast, Nagato and Higurashi went to meet with Nagato-sensei. While Nagato and I had been practically joined at the hip since we'd woken up in the same hotel room, I'd made it my policy to give her time to herself, especially when it came to spending time with her mother. The times she came with Higurashi were purely business, but I hoped they could have some family time.

I headed up to the deck and looked out at the open sea, trying to see if there were any islands or passing ships, but all I could see was the clouds in the sky, the vast, seemingly endless ocean all around us, and the sun off the starboard side. There weren't even any seagulls or other birds overhead, nor could I see any fish in the water. I was slightly disappointed not to see anything, but it was a nice and peaceful day.

While I was watching the horizon, I heard footsteps on the deck, and turned around to see who was coming. Because I was in a killing game, I was careful not to get too close to the deck or too wrapped up in observing the sky that anyone walking up to me could stab me, whack me on the head, strangle me or shove me off the deck. Luckily, it was only Kurogane, one of the seemingly harmless members of our class.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Kurogane said.

"Morning, Kurogane," I said. "You need something?"

"Not really," Kurogane said. "It's just that after everything that happened, we didn't get the chance to be properly introduced, apart from learning each other's names and talents back at the hotel."

Technically speaking, we could say the same about almost everyone else here. If you asked me about my classmates, I could give their names and talents, their cabin numbers and roommates, a brief description of their appearance and clothing, and my impressions of their personality. Of course, while I couldn't do the latter very well, considering that I'd met everyone yesterday, I was especially short on information about Kurogane.

"True," I said, "but if you're roommates with Kojima, you probably know everything there is to know about me by now. I bet he never shuts up about me."

Kurogane shook his head.

"He did mention that he was a fan of yours," Kurogane said, "but apart from that, we didn't discuss you much. We've mostly been talking about our current situation, as well as the games he made and played. Since I'd played shogi until I got sick of it when I was a kid, I was interested in hearing about more complex strategy games."

"Shogi?" I said. "I thought you were the Ultimate Go Player."

Kurogane nodded, and I let off a sigh of relief. Since I'd met him yesterday and he'd made less of an impression on me than Kojima did, I was worried that I'd already forgotten his talent. I could have used my student handbook to look up his talent, but I wanted to make sure that I could memorize his information on command.

"I am," Kurogane said, "but my family is quite big on playing shogi, and our relatives often compete with each other, in hopes of raising a shogi champion. My cousin Shiro's a prodigy in the game, even among our family, and he's probably Ultimate material. Shiro's a year younger than me, so he just started high school, but I'm pretty sure he'll get scouted. He's a bit like a younger brother to me, so I hope he also makes it in."
"I hope not," I said, "or else he'll probably end up in the same situation as us. Maybe they'll hold another killing game with him and the rest of our kouhais."

Kurogane paused, but looked a bit worried.

"Well, I know that Talent High School is a legitimate school, as well as a prestigious one, at that," Kurogane said. "It doesn't have as long of a history as Hope's Peak, but getting in is still a great honor, in that you're recognized as one of many in your field. In fact, I heard that in its early years, Talent High School identified and recruited students in some fields that Hope's Peak hadn't yet considered, particularly obscure talents or new lines of work."

That was a reasonable attitude to have. At my old school, my history teacher, who also did a lot of work with career counseling, taught all his students that professions could rise and fall, with technological and social advances creating some jobs while rendering others obsolete. For example, print media were in a decline, but there were opportunities for journalists on the Internet.

"They're definitely open-minded," I said. "Why else would they have someone like Karita in here?"

"You said it," Kurogane said. "But seriously, Hope's Peak somehow recruited the Ultimate Yakuza this year, so it's not as though criminal talents are off the table."

"Guess not," I said. "Maybe that makes sense, since the school's about researching talent, but I don't get how they're actually going to achieve that goal."

We talked for a bit about the school, until we realized that either of the Nagatos would probably be more knowledgeable about it. Kurogane didn't seem to mind that I didn't know anything the others didn't, since he was happy to have someone to talk with about it. I felt the same way, even as I set out to get to the heart of the matter.

A little while late, I decided to stop by Nagato-sensei's cell, once I was sure Nagato and Higurashi were done with the meeting. As I passed by the elevator, I saw Mihama get off.

"Oh, hello, Azuki-san," Mihama said. "Are you also here to see our teacher?"

"Yeah," I said. "Were you just in?"

Mihama nodded, then stepped out of the elevator.

"I went to inquire about how she was being treated," Mihama said, "and I was saddened by the answer I received. I have heard that Monokuma will not allow Nagato-sensei out of her cell to exercise as long as she is on the ship, and she will never be able to contact the outside world... just like the rest of us."

I sighed. This entire cruise was wrong on so many levels, so it seemed kind of weird that Mihama was nit-picking the treatment of prisoners.

"Well, it's not like Monokuma is bound to follow the real world's standards of how to treat prisoners," I said. "After all, Nagato-sensei hasn't even committed a crime, nor has she been charged with one, so she doesn't even deserve to be locked up."

"You have a point," Mihama said. "Still, I believe that even if there is nothing civilized about this killing game, we should strive to behave in a civilized manner."

"Yeah," I said. "I might not feel sorry for the scumbags who fill our prisons, but the seventeen of
us didn't do anything wrong—well, except for the traitor, anyway."

Mihama looked a bit bothered.

"Japan has a roughly 99.9 percent conviction rate," Mihama said. "Some would find that impressive, but do you not think it too good to be true?"

I nodded. Maybe Mihama was playing to my cynical personality, but I'd heard all the nasty rumors—as well as about a lot of countries that were even worse in that regard.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess people can't necessarily be trusted to make a perfect justice system."

"Not at all," Mihama said, "which is why I am worried about how the class trials will proceed. None of us have any legal training, and despite my knowledge of the law, I am no exception. There seem to be few rules apart from the requirements to convict the blackened, and the stakes. With no official judge, jury or other positions, it will be a chaotic free-for-all."

"That's right," I said, "and I'm sure it's what Monokuma wants."

Mihama nodded grimly, apparently thinking my point went without saying. While I knew things were bad right now, I had to admit that I'd hoped she'd disagree with me.

"By the way, Mihama," I said, "you seem remarkably pessimistic for someone who voted for Higurashi."

"I have no illusions about how this will turn out," Mihama said, "but I believe we need an authority figure to rally behind. Ordinarily, Nagato-sensei would be the best choice, but I believe Higurashi-san, a young man with strong principles and good leadership qualities, would be the next best thing."

"Got it," I said. "Well, I'm going to talk with our teacher, so I'll see you around."

Mihama and I said goodbye for now. As I got on the elevator, I was once again reminded how surprising it was that Mihama was only eleven years old. Of course, as smart as she was, and as mature as she seemed, I hoped she could hold together, even as things inevitably got worse.

I then took the elevator down and decided to speak with Nagato-sensei. This time, she was by herself.

"Good morning, Sensei," I said.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said. "Have a seat, and let me know what I can do for you today."

I sat down, then cleared my throat.

"I have some questions about the school," I said. "Is it possible that they're somehow connected to this killing game?"

Nagato-sensei shook her head firmly. In hindsight, there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that she'd say, "Yes, they are," not when it'd make her, an employee of said school, seem all the more suspicious. Even a "Maybe" was a bit too much to ask for.

"No," Nagato-sensei said. "I think Chiyuri told you this, but we don't usually take our students on cruises, or even out of Japan. We hadn't yet finalized our plans for this year's trip, but we were
considering choosing Okinawa, Kyoto or Hokkaido, three of our most popular destinations."

"So there's no evidence that Talent High School holds a massive bloodsport on a yearly basis," I said, "but there also isn't any evidence that they aren't criminally incompetent- the fact that they have two people with the same talent proves that they aren't terribly organized."

Nagato-sensei remained quiet for a moment, making me wonder if I'd gone too far.

"I can see why you would be suspicious," Nagato-sensei said. "You and your classmates were brought to a school that only admits students through invitation, only to end up trapped in a killing game. It's only natural that you would consider this a trap and see our administration as complicit."

"I didn't say I was blaming you, Sensei," I said. "You're just as much of a participant in this game as the rest of us. Then again, maybe your bosses threw you under the bus. If they don't care for the lives of their students, maybe they don't care for their lower-ranking employees."

"I understand," Nagato-sensei said, "but I believe in Talent High School. My husband, whom I met while we were in college, went to Talent High School as the Ultimate Tutor, and he had nothing but good things to say about his alma mater. Because of that, I hoped my daughter could go to that school, and was glad that they granted my wish."

I wracked my brain for a moment, but while the "Ultimate Tutor" sounded familiar, I didn't recall anyone named "Nagato" who had that title. Nagato-sensei seemed fairly young for a woman with a teenage daughter, but her husband probably graduated at least twenty years ago, so maybe it was before my time. I decided not to ask about that, though, since something else sounded a bit weird.

"What do you mean they 'granted your wish'?" I said. "I thought getting in was a matter of talent."

"Yes, that's what I meant," Nagato-sensei said. "They chose Chiyuri to come to this school based on their belief that she deserved the Ultimate Tech Support title, something that apparently went for Asakura-san."

"Apparently, huh?" I said. "How well do you know Asakura?"

"I only met him yesterday, just like you did," Nagato-sensei said. "I had heard that he had been invited to the school for an interview, but not that he was being considered for the Ultimate Tech Support title."

I paused to think for a moment. It was a bit strange that Nagato knew that Asakura had an interview, but not what his title was. Then again, since I hadn't heard about him, either, maybe he wasn't famous... or wasn't actually a student at the school.

"I see," I said. "I do have to wonder if he could be the traitor. A guy showing up with the same talent as someone else is definitely suspicious."

"You may be right, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said, "but please don't do anything rash."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'm just going to have a talk with him."

"Fair enough," Nagato-sensei said. "If you don't have anything else to ask me, then feel free to go speak with him."

I then stood up, bowed and excused myself, before leaving Nagato-sensei to seek out Asakura. I didn't have any real hope of finding any proof, but hoped that he'd share something I could use.
I got some lunch in the dining hall around noon, then went to search for Asakura. I eventually found him in the lounge, not long after 1:30 PM. I wasn't at all happy to see him, but since he might know something, I decided to suck it up and talk to him.

"What do you want, Azuki?" Asakura said.

"I had a few things I wanted to ask you about, Asakura," I said. "Is there any way to test whether you're actually the Ultimate Tech Support?"

Asakura glared at me. While he had a shitty temper, I didn't expect him to get this defensive.

"N-None that you'd accept," Asakura said. "I know you're on Nagato's side."

"Gee, I wonder why," I said. "Maybe it's because she isn't a total pissant like you."

Asakura bit his lip. I realized I was a bit out of line with that remark, even if I wasn't sorry about it, so I took a deep breath and calmed down.

"But seriously, this isn't about her," I said. "I'm trying to find out if there's any proof that there's a traitor in our midst, and wanted to see if your talent is real. If it is, then I can cross you off my list of suspects... for now, anyway"

"Of course it is," Asakura said. "I realize I may not be able to prove it to your liking, but I sure as hell am not going to give you evidence you can use to frame me."

Asakura stormed off.

I realized that while my handling of him left much to be desired, I'd likely get nowhere pursuing this lead. While it was possible to prove some of our talents, such as by asking Tatsuki to play one of her songs on the guitar, or challenging Kurogane to a go match, it was harder to prove others. Perhaps I'd be hard-pressed to determine whether Nagato and/or Asakura was a "fake" Ultimate Tech Support, and if either was fake, whether that could be used to determine the traitor's identity. In any case, I was out of ideas, so I decided to clear my head and think.

Not long afterward, I went up to the deck again for a little sun. After a couple minutes passed, I saw Karita walk through. When he stopped and waved, I could tell that he wasn't merely passing by, but was looking for me.

"Oh, it's you," I said.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Karita said. "Asakura-kun told me about your little dispute with him a while ago."

I chuckled bitterly.

"I'm honestly surprised," I said. "I didn't think he was the type to go crying to you."

"He isn't," Karita said, "but he also isn't the kind who really cares about whether others listen to what he has to say, so he vented at me for almost ten minutes."

While Karita punctuated his remark with a giggle, as if to play it off as a joke, his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. Since he kept up his façade of affability almost constantly, this was probably the most indication that I'd ever get that he didn't really care for Asakura.

"Anyway, what about it?" I said. "You're the last person to lecture me about getting along with
Asakura.

"Oh, I admit that we aren't on good terms," Karita said, "but I do at least try to avoid making him angry enough that he'd want to murder me. Think about it- how would people who are seeking to graduate choose their targets?"

I thought about his question for a moment.

"It would depend," I said. "Since there's a chance that your target could fight back and possibly even kill you, you should probably go for whoever's most vulnerable. That'd rule out Kumakura or Himemiya, at least if the latter has her bow and arrows. I'd say the weakest of us is probably Mihama, although she's probably smart enough that she isn't completely helpless."

"That's a good answer," Karita said, "but what if the person in question had some foolproof method of killing a person?"

I paused, and realized that Karita clearly wanted a specific answer from me.

"I guess they'd kill the person they hated most," I said, "since even if they got caught and executed, that person would also be dead. Then again, people would obviously suspect you if your worst enemy ended up as the next murder victim."

"True," Karita said, "but just as you said, it would be too late to save that 'worst enemy.' That's why I try to make nice with Asakura-kun, even if I don't exactly like him- I'd rather have one less person hate me badly enough to kill me."

I sighed. Something seemed disingenuous about it, especially since Karita had no problem with badmouthing Asakura when we'd first met.

"Well, it probably isn't just him," I said. "I'd guess that a fair number of people dislike and distrust you."

"Because of what I am," Karita said, a cynical edge to his voice. "It's only natural that honest law-abiding citizens would hate me, since I reject everything they claim to stand for. Still, even if they pride themselves on their goodness, it'd be too risky to assume that they won't kill me, so I won't give them any extra reason to do so."

"Good point," I said. "And what about being a possible suspect for a traitor? It'd make sense for a liar to be a suspect."

Karita shrugged.

"I guess people have their own theories," Karita said, "since the traitor is a liar, among other things. Still, I will take your suggestion that Asakura-kun might be the traitor into consideration."

"Go right ahead," I said, "as long as you don't do anything stupid, that is."

Karita agreed, and we parted ways, leaving me with a lot to think about. Not everyone liked me- for all my legions of fans, there were those who were jealous of me, disliked me as a person, or enjoyed spreading nasty rumors- and I could live with that. At the very least, the idea of lying to make people like me, apart from acting nice in public, rubbed me the wrong way.

As for the traitor, all we had to go on was that they were probably the odd one out of our school, but that didn't give us much information. Could they be the one of the two Ultimate Tech Supports? The con artist? The eleven-year-old? Our teacher? Or someone with a secret none of us
knew about? I honestly didn't know what was worse- the fact that we didn't have nearly enough information to deduce the culprit's identity, or the fact that someone would think that they did, and kill the person they had in mind.

At dinner, Nagato and I sat with Kirishima and Higurashi. Once everyone was here, Higurashi stood up and addressed the group.

"By now, I hope you're all familiar with the Ursa Major and somewhat used to your life on the ship," Higurashi said, "since I would like to focus our attention on our unanswered questions. Let's start with how we got here"

"An apt question, Higurashi-kun," Kirishima said, "but I doubt anyone besides the traitor remembers anything from between when we were accepted into the school and when we woke up in the hotel. As for the traitor, they could simply claim ignorance."

"What Kirishima-san said is possible," Nagato said, "but Mom, Azuki-san and I discussed this earlier, and considered the possibility that the traitor has indeed lost their memory."

"Possibly," Karita said, "or maybe the traitor may let slip something they couldn't know without their memory."

"And how would we know that?" I said. "We wouldn't remember if anything they said was true or not."

Karita nodded tentatively.

"Perhaps, Azuki-san," Karita said, "but it may be possible that they may not know what we've forgotten. For example, if the traitor says 'Oh, this reminds me of something we saw on the bus ride to the hotel', or something like that. Since none of us remember getting to the hotel, that'd raise suspicions"

"Karita-kun raises a good point," Higurashi-kun said. "Please be sure to keep an eye out for anything that seems suspicious."

"Oh, I certainly will," Asakura said, "and I'm sure the traitor appreciates the reminder to be extra careful."

I had to actually agree with Asakura, for once. By giving us an example, Karita had effectively warned the traitor of a possible way they might get caught. On the other hand, maybe Karita had a more effective method that he was keeping close to his chest... assuming he wasn't the traitor, that is.

"Maybe the traitor does," Higurashi said. "On the other hand, they are also most likely a participant in this game, just like anyone else, one who can be murdered or executed."

"I am sure they are aware of that," Kirishima said. "In fact, anyone who willingly participates in a game like this is almost certainly willing to give their life. The only question is how little they care for their own life."

None of us had an answer to that, so the conversation shifted to how we were transported to the hotel without our knowledge. The general consensus was that we were drugged and transported there while asleep, with our memories being erased coming in a close second. While no one was willing to back any theory as more than a tentative guess, it was easier to figure out the circumstances under which we got here than the reasons the psycho responsible for this killing
Not long after dinner, I saw Kojima on the starboard side of the deck, scanning the horizon. Despite my efforts to leave without being seen, he turned around and noticed me.

"Hey there, Azuki," Kojima said.

"Oh, Kojima," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Just looking out on the horizon," Kojima said, "trying to see if there's anything out there."

I looked off the starboard side, then at the port, but couldn't see any islands in the dark. While it was nice to actually be out in the fresh air, and actually see the stars that you couldn't in the middle of a city, I wondered if Kojima was just wasting my time.

"So it says the first island's an 'Inn Holiday,' right?" Kojima said. "I wonder if it's got any romantic getaway spots."

"Hell if I know," I said. "I've never had a boyfriend, so I haven't put much thought into romantic outings."

Apparently, it ran in the family. My mom said my dad was always a bit clueless when it came to how to plan romantic outings, as their first date was at a restaurant that was barely above "diner" caliber. Then again, he did always take his dates seriously, since he wore a suit to said restaurant, even though he hated dressing up. Mom concluded that he was "a nice guy, not a 'nice guy,'" which was why she fell for him.

"Oh," Kojima said. "Well, there's no time like the present, especially when we may not have much of a future."

I let out a long sigh. While I was aware that I might die in the near future, that didn't motivate me to go out with someone like Kojima. At the very least, he wasn't saying things like "You don't want to die a virgin, do you?", or he'd probably get a kick to the crotch.

"I've got a question," I said. "You do realize that under Monokuma's rules, only one of us can graduate, right?"

"Yeah," Kojima said. "Don't worry, I know that my graduation would mean you'd have to die, so I'm not gonna kill anyone, least of all you."

I wasn't completely happy with that. It was a bit much to ask Kojima to care about the lives of fifteen strangers, not just the one he had a crush on, but I'd hoped that he'd gotten the hint that I wasn't interested in him.

"Besides," Kojima said, "there's no way you'd choose to go out with me if you knew I was a murderer, right?"

"Not a chance in hell," I said. "Of course, it's not as though your chances are exactly great right now. Out of all the guys, the only ones who made worse first impressions are Asakura and Karita-the latter because of his talent."

"Ah, those two," Kojima said, clearly disgusted. "But it's not as though you won't change your mind, will you?"
"Maybe," I said, 'but don't get your hopes up."

"Got it," Kojima said. "Well, I'll do my best."

As Kojima left, I shook my head. It would probably be simpler if he hated me, like Asakura did, since I could just hate him back, but Karita was on to something when he said enemies were the last thing I wanted in a killing game. On the other hand, just because he was infatuated with me didn't mean I had to return the favor. He wasn't as much of an asshole as Asakura was, and was probably a bit more trustworthy than Karita (not that it was saying much), but there wasn't much of him I could like. In fact, his rather unabashed pursuit of me had the opposite effect, and I had little desire to spend time with him compared to most of the others.

With any luck, he'd give up on me, but then what? Would he shift his attention to some unfortunate girl (or maybe boy), possibly one of our fourteen other classmates (or, God forbid, our presumably married teacher)? Or would he seek to graduate now that I, the one person he cared about, spurned his affections? If it would end up as the latter, then I was almost glad he apparently hadn't gotten any of my hints that I wasn't interested.

All of us had our weak spots, and if Monokuma was smart, he'd target those and push us until we reached our breaking points. The only question was who'd break first.

After Nagato got done with seeing her mother, we went back to our room together. Since Nagato had already taken a shower, I followed sui. Once I got out and changed into my bedtime clothes, I decided to strike up a conversation with her.

"Just wondering, Nagato," I said, "has anyone ever asked you out?"

Nagato shook her head.

"No," Nagato said. "My old school was girls-only, so I couldn't have gotten a boyfriend there."

"Ah, of course not," I said, "but maybe you could've gotten a girlfriend."

"Probably," Nagato said, "but considering that a lot of the people who attend our school believe homosexuality is a sin, I doubt many people would have wanted to confess to a schoolmate. After all, not only might the girl you like not feel the same way, or not even be a lesbian, she might just be disgusted and cut ties with you."

"That'd be a problem," I said, "but would you react the same way?"

"I don't think so," Nagato said. "While I am a heterosexual, I wouldn't get mad at any girl who asked me out. I'd let her down gently, though, and say it's not about who she is, but about who I am. I'd also tell her that I'd like to just be friends, if she's open to it."

A part of me wished that either Kojima or I were lesbians (but obviously not both of us), so I'd have an easy way to shoot him- or her, as the case might be- down.

"Figures," I said. "You're a nicer girl than I am."

Nagato blushed, then shook her head. It wasn't much of a compliment, but she seemed too modest to accept it.

"I've actually never had the opportunity to put this to the test," Nagato said, "since not only have I never gotten any confessions, but I've never had any friendships that I might ruin by rebuffing my
friends' confessions."

I paused. Once again, Nagato decided to change the subject once she got to an uncomfortable topic.

"But anyway," Nagato said, "this is about Kojima-san, isn't it?"

I chuckled, knowing that Nagato had hit the nail on the head. That was pretty impressive considering that apart from meal times, she'd only seen us together twice.

"Who else would it be about?" I said. "But yeah, it is."

"I thought so," Nagato said. "I may not be the best person to give you advice, but please at least be nice to Kojima-san. You are not obligated to reciprocate his feelings, or even seriously consider going out with him, but if you reject him, the least you can do is to do so politely."

"Fair enough," I said. "Of course, being polite for the sake of others' feelings does remind me a little bit of Karita- he doesn't necessarily care about people, but he does act nice to stay on their good side."

"I don't blame him," Nagato said. "I think that's one thing he and I have in common."

"I suppose," I said. "You did seem fairly polite to Asakura, at least more than I am."

"It's not just Asakura-san," Nagato said. "It's also... never mind."

For a moment, I considered asking a question, but then I heard the Night Time announcement. Nagato then said her prayers, and we got into our beds.

I couldn't help but wonder about Nagato. Was she nice to everyone, or just me? Was she nice out of the goodness of her heart, or to make people like her? She hadn't said anything unkind about our classmates, even while we were listening, but that didn't mean she didn't think unkind thoughts. Only a saint would be able to put up with Asakura without hating him, but maybe she'd become known as Saint Chiyuri, patron saint of tech support professionals, if she ended up as a martyr in the killing game.

On the other hand, while there was a chance that Nagato wasn't nearly as good of a person as she seemed, I wouldn't mind if she had at least a few flaws- in fact, I'd probably like her better that way. Even if there was something dishonest or selfish about her kind and well-mannered personality, she'd done right by me so far, and I hoped nothing would happen that would disprove that.

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**Monokuma Theater**

The term "first time" is really relative, you know?

*If you've never heard of something happening before, then the first time you see it may as well be the first time ever.*

*So it doesn't matter if a work rips off a previous work as long as people see the ripoff first.*

*In fact, you should probably have your memories erased every night, so that each new day feels like a brand new experience.*

*Remember this- as long as you can't remember anything, you'll never get bored.*
Day 3

As Nagato and I woke up today, the morning announcement played, just as it had the previous day. Today, however, there was a rain icon at the 4 PM slot.

"Looks like we're getting some rain this afternoon," Nagato said. "I forgot to mention this earlier, but I saw some umbrellas in the storage room, and took the liberty of getting one for each of us."

I looked in the closet, and saw two umbrellas. Nagato had a hot pink umbrella on her side, while I had a dark blue one.

"Thanks, Nagato," I said. "Of course, it'll probably be easiest if we just stay below decks when it's pouring, but staying inside might not always be an option when we get to the islands."

While it was hard to tell what Monokuma had planned for us, since all the island except the third and sixth seemed to have at least a few buildings, we could probably spend most of our time indoors.

We had breakfast with Sasaki and Mihama, and shared small tidbits about ourselves.

"I'm curious about something, Mihama-san," Nagato said. "Are you usually this formal with others?"

"Not always, Nagato-san," Mihama said. "All of you are older than I am, so I feel obligated to show respect. I'm actually comfortable talking casually with Koyomi and Ayumu, who are my age."

Sasaki nodded.

"I did say it was fine to just call me 'Sayuri-chan' if you want, Miharu-chan," Sasaki said, "but I do understand where you're coming from. Not only are my editors at least a decade or two older than me, but even my assistants are significantly older than me."

"You need people to help draw your manga?" I said.

"Of course," Sasaki said. "Deadlines are tight, especially for a high school manga artist, and I need all the help I can get when it comes to inking the pages. So several fledgling artists help me out, in order to earn money and get experience."

I had to admit that I was a bit surprised to hear that, having thought of manga as a one-person enterprise, or two in some cases. Of course, a lot of people probably underestimated how hard it was to make movies and TV shows, too.

"So how old are they?" I said.

"Somewhat older than me," Sasaki said. "The gap in my age and my assistants' ages is at least the same as the gap between my age and Miharu-chan's age. Because of that, I do have to address them with respect, even though I'm the boss."

"How do they take working for a kid?" I said.

"Surprisingly well," Sasaki said. "They know what they signed up for, and that I know what I'm doing. They also show me respect, generally calling me 'Sasaki-san' or 'Sasaki-sensei.' One of my assistants, Mashiro-san, who studies art at a local college, said that I've already achieved what they
set out to do at a much younger age, so it's only natural that she and the others would want to learn from me."

While I had a lot of fans who were even younger than me, I had to admit that I'd never thought of myself as a role model. Most of my admirers saw me as someone who'd achieved what they couldn't, but the idea of my inspiring others to follow in my footsteps was something else entirely.

"I am glad for you, Sasaki-san," Mihama said. "I hope to one day become as respected as you are, even among people who are older than I am."

"I hope so, too," Sasaki said, "but personally, I don't want to be put on too much of a pedestal. I generally would rather not be addressed as anything more formal than 'Sasaki-san'- except for the affectionate 'sensei' that fans use- simply because I find social interactions more pleasant when they're relatively casual. While I appreciate the fact that my assistants respect me and do what I tell them to, I hope that one day, they can get serialized, too, so we can be fellow manga artists and friends."

"I see," Mihama said. "I shall take you up on your offer once I feel as though I can truly call us equals."

"No problem, Miharu-chan," Sasaki said, "since I did say 'if you want.' In the meantime, why not try a compromise- 'Sayuri-san'? 'Sasaki-chan'?"

Mihama chuckled softly. Even if she did feel a bit out of place among older classmates- to say nothing of what might happen when we started killing each other- she could still get along with Sasaki and laugh at her jokes. Friendship was unlikely to thrive in here, but it wasn't off the table where those two were concerned.

I headed to the deck, and saw that there were some clouds overhead, while Kumakura and Higurashi were going for a run around the deck. The latter was wearing a sweatsuit rather than his business suit, and seemed surprisingly buff now that I'd gotten a better look at him.

Eventually, they stopped, and sat down on some chairs near the pool. Once they were seated, they waved me over.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Kumakura said. "Want to join us?"

"Not really," I said. "While I do need exercise while on this ship, I'm more a fan of taking a walk than a run."

"Got it," Higurashi said. "If you need clothes, stop by the warehouse. They have sweatsuits and the like in there."

I nodded.

"Anyway, you guys, I'm curious about something," I said. "Aren't you worried about someone swooping in and killing you while you're all worn out from your workout?"

"Not exactly," Kumakura said, "because while building your strength and physical fitness requires hard work, it also requires knowing your limits. That means pushing yourself harder all the time, but not to the point where you get injured or die."

I almost wrote it off as hyperbole, but I'd heard that it was a very real danger among athletes. Kumakura not only was willing to bust his butt to become the Ultimate Weightlifter, but was smart
enough to not get himself hurt in the process.

"Yeesh," I said. "Higurashi, I bet you're glad that public speaking isn't this hardcore, aren't you?"

"It can be," Higurashi said. "My uncle, who lives in Hawaii, is a big politics junkie, and he told me about the United States' legislation. They've got a thing called a filibuster, in which one person from the minority party keeps talking as long as he or she can to delay the passage of a bill- it goes on as long as the Senator keeps talking and the other side can't get the votes to stop him. The longest one went on for just over 24 hours."

My jaw dropped.

"Holy shit," I said.

"My thoughts exactly," Kumakura said. "It can't be easy to stand for all that time."

"That's politics for you," Higurashi said. "My uncle tells me that lot of people in the States say politicians are corrupt and only care about money or power, but I'd like to think that at least some of them actually believe in what they say, and get into politics because they want to make their country a better place to live. After all, some debates over policy can get quite heated, which wouldn't happen if they didn't actually believe what they were saying, would it?"

I was tempted to disagree, but wondered what exactly I could say to that. Even if I could prove that many politicians only cared about playing the game, staying in power and raking in money, Higurashi could easily assert that not all of them were like that.

"Considering what's at stake, that's easy to believe," Kumakura said.

"Indeed," Higurashi said. "Take, for example, the death penalty. Supporters of the death penalty may argue that it's the best way to give murderers what they deserve and serve as a deterrent to crimes, whereas opponents might not like the idea of killing criminals, especially when they might be innocent. My family has... strong feelings on this issue, so when my aunt and uncle come over, we never talk politics."

I could imagine that it would be a sensitive topic among people like us, even before we'd end up having to execute one of our own for murder. I wouldn't feel sorry for any bastard or bitch who'd sacrifice us all to save their skin, but I could tell that people might feel differently, especially if the bastard or bitch was someone important to them.

"That's a sensible plan," I said. "I'm not saying that people should never talk about stuff like that, but if it'll just result in a fight, then you're probably better off not talking about politics, religion and other stuff."

Higurashi shook his head.

"Maybe you have a point, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "but at the same time, I think that we can learn something from one another if we debate, or even argue. Because of that, a part of me had hoped that someone would emerge as my rival for the position of leadership, with a platform of their own to challenge mine."

"Even if that resulted in people being divided into factions?" I said.

"If I came to that, I would talk things out with my rival," Higurashi said, "and step down if need be. But to be honest, I'm aware that I'm not always right."
I shrugged.

"If you're expecting me to disagree, forget it," I said. "But I guess that if you acknowledge that, that's good."

"I agree," Kumakura said. "I may no be a leader, but humility is a mark of wisdom. I don't know if you're the best man for the job, but at least you won't be blinded by your belief that you're right."

"Thank you, both of you," Higurashi said. "I'll do the best I can."

It wasn't much of a promise, but it was the most we could hope for under these circumstances. Maybe Higurashi couldn't deliver, but if nothing else, I appreciated his honesty.

Not long after lunch time, I went to the lounge and saw an unusual combination- Sasaki and Tsukimura.

"Hello, you two," I said.

"Oh, hello, Azuki-san," Tsukimura said. "Would you like to join me and Sayuri-chan?"

"Sure," I said. "You two are using first names already?"

Sasaki nodded.

"Kanae-chan asked nicely," Sasaki said. "I was thrilled that she took me up on my earlier offer, so I said yes."

"That's nice," I said. "I'm kind of surprised, though- you've only known each other for three days now, right?"

Both girls nodded.

"We do," Sasaki said, "but it's not as though there's any sort of required waiting period on friendship or using first names."

"I'm not saying there is," I said. "It's just that I prefer to gradually get to know someone, figure out if they're worth hanging around with, and if they are, then I make the effort to befriend them."

At this point, pretty much everyone was in the "undecided" category when it came to making friends, with only two exceptions- I already hated Asakura's guts and I knew I couldn't expect an equal friendship with Nagato-sensei. While I got along pretty well with the younger Nagato, it was possible that she'd do something that would ruin any prospect of us becoming friends, and while Kojima got on my nerves, he seemed like he'd be at least somewhat tolerable if he gave up his crush on me. Considering that I sometimes learned new things about friends I'd known for years, anything could happen.

"Fair enough, Azuki-san," Tsukimura said. "I think you and Himeno-sama have that in common, while I have more in common with Sayuri-chan. Because of that, I'm not surprised that Himeno-sama and Sayuri-chan aren't close."

"I personally think of my relationship with Himemiya-san as a work in progress," Sasaki said. "We might not be friends now, but that doesn't mean we can't become friends. It's a bit like what you said, right, Akira-chan?"

I nodded in agreement.
"That's right," I said. "After all, who knows what the future will hold for us?"

Sasaki and Tsukimura shared a few stories from their schools, which were apparently similarly strict, but were in separate prefectures, while I also shared about mine. There didn't seem to be much point in talking about the past, but at least it kept our minds off our uncertain future. We didn't know how soon we'd reach the first island, what we'd find there, or how long it would take for us to start dying... and we didn't really want to find out, either.

Shortly afterward, I found Himemiya standing by herself on the deck. Some gray storm clouds had come overhead, but it hadn't started to rain just yet. Himemiya had set up a target on the deck and was practicing her archery.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Himemiya said, after nailing a bullseye. She'd probably noticed me already, but didn't turn to greet me until she was done.

"Hey, Himemiya," I said. "Mind if I join you for a bit?"

"Please do," Himemiya said.

I sat down and watched Himemiya for a little while. Judging from her perfect accuracy, she didn't seem to have gotten rusty at all in the three days we'd spent on the trip. After a few minutes, she took a break, retrieved her arrows and sat down next to me.

"I noticed that Tsukimura seems to be hanging out with Sasaki," I said. "Have you heard?"

"I have, and I'm glad," Himemiya said honestly. "We might go back a long way, and we might be roommates, but that doesn't mean we have to be joined at the hip. In fact, Kanae wouldn't have many friends if she only spent time with me, so this is for the best."

"Glad to hear that, Himemiya," I said.

Himemiya paused for a moment and furrowed her brow.

"I've meant to say this for a while, Azuki-san," Himemiya said, "but where I come from, it's extremely impolite to address others without honorifics."

"Fuck where you came from," I said. "You, Tsukimura and everyone else are stuck here on Monokuma's ship now, where the rules are different. Didn't you get the hint when your old school made you play by their rules?"

Himemiya snickered, then began to laugh uncontrollably.

"Is... something funny?" I said.

"You are, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "There aren't a lot of people who are willing to talk to me that way. Most people I know are too concerned for their own image or what I might think to be honest with me. I can get along people like them, but wouldn't become friends with them."

"So in other words, any prospective friends need the stones to stand up to you," I said. "I can actually get behind that.

Himemiya nodded.

"In any case," Himemiya said, "I'll give you carte blanche to call me what you want... not that you need it. However, I hope you're fine with my calling you 'Azuki-san' for now, since we aren't
friends just yet."

"Got it," I said. "Speaking of which, I notice you're the one girl Sasaki doesn't call by her first name. Do you not get along?"

"It's merely that we have differing expectations for friendship," Himemiya said, "not unlike how Kojima-san persists with his feelings in spite of the fact that you don't reciprocate them. Whenever two people have different expectations for a relationship, discord is inevitable."

So word about Kojima had spread on the ship's "grapevine" of sorts. At least Himemiya's tone clearly indicated disapproval of Kojima.

"Got it," I said. "So do you think that Sasaki should forget about you two becoming friends?"

"Not exactly," Himemiya said. "I'm grateful that she's willing to forgo calling me by my first name for now, and even more grateful that she became friends with Kanae. While Kanae was somewhat more popular than I was at school, that was only among those willing to get to know her. Some people dismissed her as unworthy of their time because she didn't come from a wealthy family... and I dismissed them as unworthy of mine, since they obviously didn't care about me as a person."

I had to agree with that, since there were certain people who'd never give me the time of day if I wasn't a famous actress. Perhaps I wouldn't attract the attention of people like Kojima if I weren't famous, but I had enough confidence in my ability to sort the good from the bad that I didn't regret becoming a celebrity.

"I do the same thing," I said. "Of course, the fact that anyone could become a killer makes it hard to tell who you can trust, doesn't it?"

"It does," Himemiya said. "Because of that, Azuki-san, I hope you live long enough to earn my full trust, and never do anything that would betray that trust."

"Me too, Himemiya," I said.

Himemiya decided to end her archery practice for the day and get some tea from the kitchen. I saw her off with a "Later," hoping that despite the circumstances we were in, this wouldn't be the last time we saw each other.

Not long afterward, I returned below decks. I was glad that I did, because shortly before 4 PM, a rainstorm started. Walking through the port corridor, I saw Kirishima standing out the portholes, writing in a notebook.

"Ah, hello, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said, adjusting his glasses.

"Hey, Kirishima," I said. "You taking notes, or something?"

"I'm recording the weather," Kirishima said. "I wanted to test the accuracy of Monokuma's weather forecast systems, so I record each day's weather inside here, along with the forecast."

Kirishima showed me his notebook, with a page titled "Weather Observations: Day 2." The right half of the page contained the weather forecast, while the left half contained the actual weather. On the opposite page, there were other observations he'd made, from the state of the various facilities on the ship to our classmates' habits and daily routines. I wondered what he had written about me in there, but didn't think he'd be willing to share.
"It matches up so far," I said, "which I suppose means Monokuma's telling the truth."

"Indeed," Kirishima said, "but he seems unusually prescient. Meteorologists offer a prediction of what might happen, along with the likelihood thereof, rather than saying with absolute certainty what the future holds."

"Yeah, it's not so easy to predict the future," I said, "so no wonder fortune tellers have a pretty shitty success rate. I think there's this up and coming clairvoyant with something like a 30 percent success rate, and he's supposed to be the best there is."

"Those charlatans' 'success' rests on two factors," Kirishima said, "namely pure chance and simpletons who are willing to believe anything. But that is beside the point. I believe that if Monokuma can perfectly predict the weather, he must have some method of controlling it."

I laughed out loud.

"Now who's spouting crazy talk, Kirishima?" I said. "Weather control is impossible with current technology."

"Perhaps it is, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said, "just like building a robot that can think and speak like a human being is. If Monokuma can control the weather, that would explain why he is able to know for certain what any given day's weather would be like. We would only need to deduce his method."

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said. "If there's a machine like that, it'd have to be on the ship, probably somewhere high, but we can't see anything like that. Maybe the controls are hidden in the bridge, but unless I'm mistaken, nobody's found any actual machinery that could work as a weather control system."

"Fair enough," Kirishima said. "I suppose I shall simply have to search for that."

Kirishima didn't seem put out at the fact that he hadn't uncovered the truth yet. Maybe he wasn't surprised by the fact that he hadn't made much progress in only three days. Maybe he was used to the truth seemingly being out of his reach. Or maybe he was that confident that he could find the answers he sought. Since he didn't emote much, it was hard for me to tell what he was thinking.

"By the way, I have been meaning to ask you something," Kirishima said, seemingly changing the subject. "What day do you suppose it is today?"

I was caught off guard for a moment.

"What do you mean?" I said. "The day of the week? The date?"

"All of those," Kirishima said. "You may have noticed the calendar in your room, which does not correspond to this current month. Obviously, April only has thirty days, whereas the calendar has thirty-one, but there is no telling whether the supposed days of the week correspond with the actual days of the current month... whichever month that may be."

I realized what Kirishima was talking about- for example, one year, April might begin on a Monday, while the next, it might begin on a Wednesday.

"I get it," I said. "So are you saying Monokuma or whoever's responsible for this doesn't want us to know the actual date?"

"That is most likely," Kirishima said. "When I woke up in my hotel room, my watch, a digital
watch, no longer showed the correct date. It had reverted to its factory settings- just after midnight on January 1 of the default year."

Kirishima showed me his watch, which showed the date as January 3. The time was correct, probably because he needed to know what the right time was for his data gathering and other things, and because it was easy to verify with Monokuma's announcements at 7 AM and 10 PM every day. Of course, we didn't know the actual date, or Monokuma's reasons for keeping it secret.

"You could be right," I said. "But how do you propose we find out the truth?"

"I do not know yet," Kirishima said, "but we must never stop searching for it. This search for the answers to long-standing questions lies at the heart of science. Perhaps my skills will be of little use to us, but I believe that possessing a scientific and rational mind is absolutely necessary if we hope to solve the mysteries behind this killing game."

While I agreed with Kirishima's proposal, I had mixed feelings about Kirishima's mindset. If he kept a cool head and thought things through, he was less likely to snap and kill someone in the heat of the moment, but on the other hand, he could still make a premeditated decision to kill someone, thus leading to a better-planned and thus more difficult to solve murder. In the killing game, our most valuable allies could become our most dangerous enemies, so I had to keep an eye on Kirishima... just like everyone else.

At dinner, Nagato and I sat with the twins.

"I'm curious about something," I said. "Have any of you wondered what date it is?"

"I have," Nagato said, "especially since Mom and I go to Mass on Sundays. Obviously, we have more important things to worry about, but it makes me uneasy not being able to go to church."

"Well, I'm sure your god will understand," I said. "After all, you've been keeping up with saying your prayers religiously- no pun intended."

Nagato giggled softly.

"Taiga and I might not be religious, but we sympathize with Nagato-san," Tatsuki said. "I have quite a busy schedule as a musician, but whenever I have a free Sunday, our parents take us somewhere fun."

So all of us had things we did regularly- school, clubs, sports, part-time jobs, hanging out with friends, family outings, religious observance and stuff we did for fun- and the killing game had disrupted our schedules. That was merely an inconvenience compared to getting killed, but it still sucked that we couldn't do the things we wanted or had to do.

"That's right, Sis," Taiga said. "I can only imagine how Mom and Dad are taking this."

"Same here," I said. "By now, our parents must have realized that we've gone missing, and notified the authorities. Of course, considering that this ship's wandering the high seas, I don't know if anyone's actually going to find us."

"Maybe not," Tatsuki said, "but it's not as easy for a ship this large to just vanish."

I shrugged. It wasn't good to get our hopes up too high.

"Then again," I said, "even if they never find us- or should I say especially- Talent High School's
in deep, deep shit. If all of Class 32 goes missing on a school trip, there probably isn't a snowball's chance in hell of Talent High School having a Class 33. Sound about right, Nagato?"

Nagato nodded.

"I believe so," Nagato said. "A single student dying is a tragedy, but an entire class being forced to kill each other is unthinkable."

"You said it," I said. "If, by some chance, the school's in on this, wonder if they took away our phones so we couldn't post information to the internet. Even if we couldn't call for help, maybe they'd get in trouble if word got out."

"That's a good point, Azuki-san," Taiga said, "but I don't know of any Wi-Fi hotspots on this ship. Of course, maybe Monokuma was thinking ahead."

Taiga raised a reasonable suggestion.

"That's certainly possible, Taiga-san," Nagato said, "but surely if Monokuma has allies outside the ship, he has some way to contact them, doesn't he?"

"He probably does," I said, "and if so, it's on the bridge. I'm sure we could prove it for certain... once we have the passcode, that is."

We ended the discussion for now. Shortly afterward, Higurashi called us together to share our theories, but none of us had made much progress. At this point, it seemed as though all the answers to our questions were beyond our reach- behind a locked door, outside of the ship, or perhaps somewhere back in Japan- and as a result, talking it over would only get us so far.

As dinner ended, I caught up with Higurashi and Nagato before the two headed downstairs.

"Just a minute, you two," I said. "Mind if I sit in on your meeting with Nagato-sensei?"

The two of them looked at each other and nodded.

"Certainly, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "Everyone, feel free to come along if you'd like to see our meetings in action. I'm sure Nagato-san and I can accommodate another person or two, for the sake of transparency, or if there's something you'd like to say to our teacher."

We walked to the elevator and took it down to Nagato-sensei's cell. The three of us sat outside the cell, and saw that there was room for one or two more.

I sat and listened as Higurashi shared the results of the dinner's discussion.

"I see," Nagato-sensei said. "I'm sorry to hear that you didn't make more progress, but I'm glad that you're putting your heads together. Chiyuri, I think you, Azuki-san and the twins are on to something when it comes to your missing cell phones."

"Thanks, Mom," Nagato said. "It's kind of amazing how much technology changes the world, doesn't it?"

Nagato-sensei nodded.

"Your father certainly agreed," Nagato-sensei said. "As a teacher, he had to adapt to new and changing technologies, which gave rise to new possibilities and new problems. The internet could be a powerful teaching tool, but it could also be abused- students could use it to plagiarize papers"
or engage in cyberbullying against their classmates. It's only natural that Monokuma would seek to remove our modern communication technology from the killing game, since I'd do that if I were in his position."

"So would anyone else with half a brain, Sensei," I said. "I guess it wouldn't be too surprising for a teacher to say that, considering that schools don't allow cell phones."

"Talent High School is the exception," Nagato-sensei said, "since students need some way to keep in touch with their parents back home. Of course, if your phone is on in class, you can expect the teachers to confiscate it. It's important to teach responsible use of technology, after all."

The three of us silently agreed.

"Because of that," Nagato-sensei said, "I'm sorry that I can't play a more active role in chaperoning this trip. Apart from speaking with Higurashi-san, Chiyuri and anyone else who chooses to come down here, all I can do is believe in you."

Keeping Nagato-sensei in a cell in an isolated part of the ship was fiendishly brilliant. She was able to speak to individual students, but not the class as a whole, and even those individual students had to specifically seek her out. Who could say how long they would keep doing that as the killing game went on and our trust in each other waned?

"Just believe, huh?" I said. "That's certainly not very encouraging."

"I know, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said, "but even if this belief is all I have, I believe in all of you wholeheartedly. I've taught many students before all of you, and none of them were the type who'd kill at the drop of a hat, even in circumstances like these."

"Quite true, Sensei," Higurashi said. "I will do my utmost to see that it happens."

"Thank you, Higurashi-san," Nagato-sensei said. "I'll be counting on you, Chiyuri, and everyone else."

I didn't have the heart to argue with Nagato-sensei or Higurashi. As tempting as it was to dismiss their feelings as naïve, they actually had a basis for what they thought. Perhaps in the end, they'd be proven wrong, but it was easier to cling to hope than to fully accept how terrible our situation was. Even I still thought of the threat of killing as like a dark cloud looming over us, blotting out the sun, so I could only imagine how hard it would be when the thunderstorm that was the killing game truly began.

Nagato and I decided to retire to our room early that night. After taking our showers and changing into our pajamas, Nagato sat down on her bed and struck up a conversation with me.

"Is something on your mind, Azuki-san?" Nagato said. "You've seemed troubled ever since the two of us and Higurashi-san finished meeting with Mom."

I sighed.

"Yeah," I said. "Like I said earlier, I don't really share your mom and Higurashi's belief that everything will work out if we work together. On the other hand, I do get why people like those two think that."

"I see," Nagato said. "And what about your reason?"
I paused to think for a moment. In a situation like this, you didn't really need to justify cynicism and pessimism, so I'd never thought too hard about why I thought what I thought.

"Apart from the rules of the killing game?" I said. "I guess you can say that it's because of my work as an actress. Everyone in the business has their public and private faces, much like those in the killing game hide their true motivations, and nobody's as good as they seem. The competition can be fairly cutthroat—figuratively speaking, that is. When you consider that people's dishonesty and ruthlessness rise along with the stakes, you can imagine how much worse things will be when we're fighting for our lives."

Nagato nodded.

"I don't think you're wrong," Nagato said. "In fact, I'm sure Mom and Higurashi-san agree with me on that. Just because none of Mom's students ever killed each other before doesn't mean all of them were necessarily good people."

"I didn't think so," I said.

"But Mom always said that if your students were perfect, they wouldn't need teachers," Nagato said. "After all, it's a teacher's job to teach the students what they need to know. If they knew that already, or could learn by themselves, she'd be out of a job."

"And it's the students' job to learn the material," I said. "I guess the question now is whether your mom and Higurashi's guidance or Monokuma's temptations will prove stronger."

We let the conversation go there, despite—or perhaps because—we both knew the answer to that question, and neither of us had the guts to say it out loud. Even if I found excessive optimism foolish, I couldn't fully accept the idea that I was going to die, along with the rest of us here. And so, as I drifted off to sleep, I did so silently wishing that my class could live another day, and hoping it wouldn't be too much to ask for.

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**Monokuma**

_The first ti- ah, forget it. I know you won't fall for this again._

_After all, if you're still reading, does it really matter what you believe?_

_People who want you to buy stuff—whether literally, for a product, or figuratively, for an idea—need you to believe them, but not me._

_If you buy my book, that's all that matters—the only thing that counts. I don't care if you liked or agreed with it._

_Too bad I can't charge you for admission to the Monokuma Theater, right?_

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**Author's Notes**

This chapter mainly served to develop some of the characters and show them acclimatizing to their setting. The days when the ship is at sea will be periods of downtime, which include character development and foreshadowing. I realize it's a bit slower paced than the first chapter of my previous fic (in which the first murder happens on the third night), but that's also because no one's so desperate to escape that they'd kill someone right off the bat.
It also establishes that unlike Miura (who's a lesbian) and Edogawa (who's bisexual), Azuki and Nagato are both heterosexual. They do become closer over time, but maintain a platonic friendship.

I've noticed that as I'm writing this up, Himemiya's turning out as less of a jerk than I'd originally envisioned her as, partly because she spends most of her time around Tsukimura (her best friend), and Azuki (whom she respects for her honest and straightforward demeanor). This may be because her original version was more sharp-tongued and vulgar, a bit like Azuki.

In the next chapter, the Ursa Major will arrive at the first island, and it will be a fairly short chapter. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on who's likely to be the next victim and killer.

Here's a brief omake showing what would have happened if Sasaki had transferred to Nagato's Catholic high school. As a bit of trivia, here's what each cast member would call their siblings in Japanese

Akasaka: Generally called "Onee-chan" or "Kuro-nee-chan."

Miura and Edogawa: Call their sisters "Onee-chan."

Katsura: Calls her brothers by their first names and "-nii-san," and her sister "Onee-san."

Yuuki: Uses "Aniki" on her elder brother.

Himemiya: Uses "-nii-sama" and "-nee-sama" after her siblings' names.

Taiga: Uses "Onee-chan" on Tatsuki.

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**Omake**

**Nagato's POV**

Ever since the killing game began, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if things had turned out differently. For example, what might have happened if the rest of the class had come to my school?

I sat at lunch with Sasaki-san, who'd transferred over to my school at the start of our second year of high school.

"Thank you for having me for lunch, Nagato-san," Sasaki-san said, "or Chiyuri-chan, if it's all right with you."

"That's fine with me, Sasaki-san," I said. "How are you finding our new school?"

Sasaki-san sighed faintly.

"That's fine with me, Sasaki-san," I said. "How are you finding our new school?"

Sasaki-san sighed faintly.

"It's not at all what I expected for of a Catholic school," Sasaki-san said. "First, we're wearing blazer uniforms rather than sailor fukus, and neckties rather than neckerchiefs- I made my tie a bit crooked in the hopes that one of my senpais would help me tie it, but instead, one of the nuns scolded me and made me adjust the knot myself. Second, when I asked people about exchanging rosaries, they looked at me oddly and told me that rosaries 'don't work that way.' Third, I had lunch with a first-year yesterday, but she insisted on calling me 'Sasaki-senpai' rather than 'Sasaki-sama' or 'Onee-sama.'"

"I guess not," I said. "Did you really think it'd be like out of a shoujo manga?"
Sasaki-san giggled and shook her head.

"Just kidding," Sasaki-san said. "I'm not a Christian, but my mom gave me some idea of what to expect. In all seriousness, though, I did hope to find a girlfriend here."

"Ah," I said. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not a lesbian, so..."

"No worries," Sasaki-san said. "Technically speaking, neither am I- I'm bisexual. I'm just as likely to have a 'Ms. Right' as I am to have a 'Mr. Right', as long as that person feels the same way about and is willing to take the plunge with me. Unfortunately, that doesn't apply to many people here."

I nodded sadly.

"Probably not," I said, "but I do wish you the best of luck, Sasaki-san."

"Thanks, Chiyuri-chan," Sasaki-san said. "When I do find my special someone, I'll think of you when I choose bridesmaids."

I smiled appreciatively. My mom had served as her best friend's maid of honor when I was four, and was grateful for the opportunity, as well as the fact that her friend had good taste when it came to the dresses. If nothing else, I was glad to finally have someone who'd consider me for that honor, as well as for someone I might eventually call a friend.
Chapter I, Part 3

Day 4

Nagato and I woke up, exchanging a "Good morning, Azuki-san," and a "Morning, Nagato," respectively. This exchange of morning greetings was starting to become a familiar ritual.

As we got dressed, we saw the announcement come on.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "We will be arriving at the first stop on our cruise today by 8 AM, and will stay at this island for a while. Luckily for you, it'll be sunny and warm all day today."

The monitor shut off.

"So... we're finally here," I said. "The first stop on this killing school trip."

"That's right," Nagato said. "How do you feel about it?"

I shrugged. Pretty much everyone could tell where they stood on the killing game, but now that we'd actually arrived at the first major event of our trip, I had a hard time deciding how to feel.

"I honestly can't say," I said. "I'm definitely not excited, since Monokuma probably has something nasty in store for us. On the other hand, I know we can't just go on sailing the seas forever."

Nagato nodded. As anxious as we were about the prospect of the killing started, what would happen if it never did? Would we keep sailing the seas forever, until we grew old or the ship broke down? Obviously, this cruise had to end someday, and the only question was how.

"So do I," Nagato said. "We should head to breakfast, and meet with Higurashi-san and the others. I'm sure we'll come up with some plan together."

Before leaving our room, I wrote "Arrived at Island 1" on Day 4 of our calendar. Keeping track of data would likely prove useful in the long term, in case we started noticing patterns. Perhaps there might not be a "long term," but there was no better time to start collecting data.

We arrived at breakfast and, at Nagato's request, met up with Higurashi, who'd started serving breakfast. We could see the island out the dining room's windows, although it was still some ways away, so it was hard to make out specific details.

"Good morning, Higurashi-san, Kirishima-san," Nagato said. "I suppose you've heard the announcement?"

"We have, Nagato-san," Higurashi said. "Once everyone's here, I'd like to discuss it."

The rest of the class entered the dining hall two at a time and sat down. Once everyone was seated, Monokuma arrived, jumping onto the table Nagato and I shared with Higurashi and Kirishima.

"Why hello, class," Monokuma said. "I'm grateful that Higurashi-san is able to bring all of you together first thing in the morning."

"Don't give him too much credit," Asakura said. "I only come to the dining hall because I'm hungry, and I'm pretty sure some of the others do so, too."
Asakura's tone made it sound as though he meant "any credit," but he probably conceded that there were at least a few people who bought into what Higurashi was preaching.

"No matter how it happened, this is convenient for me," Monokuma said, "since there's some stuff I'd like to go over with you. As it said in your handbooks, you can leave starting at 8 AM, and got to be off the ship by 9 AM. You can return to the ship starting at 8 PM, and have to be back by 9 PM. Anyone who stays on the ship after 9 AM or on the island after 9 PM never has to leave... since that'll be their final resting place."

"Why are you forcing us to get off the ship?" one of the sisters said.

"Because I'm sure you're sick of staying on the Ursa Major by now," Monokuma said, "and we hope that you'll enjoy the locales where you'll be stopping."

"Of course you do," Karita said. "I'm sure you have some sort of nasty trap in place for us."

"How rude, Karita-san!" Monokuma said. "In this killing game, you students are the ones who are supposed to do the killing. The only people I'm allowed to kill are those who do something that violates the rules... which, as I said before, includes not getting on or off the Ursa Major when you're supposed to."

So getting off the ship could potentially lead to our deaths, but staying on the ship definitely would. It looked like we were fucked either way, and were only slightly less fucked by going along with Monokuma's instructions.

"Anyway, I won't keep you too long," Monokuma said. "Eat up, kids- just be sure to remember to leave the ship on time!"

Monokuma then left.

"So it looks like we have no choice but to get off," Yamazaki said.

"It seems so," Mihama said. "Karita-san raised some valid concerns, but Monokuma made it quite clear that staying on the ship would be certain death."

"Indeed," Higurashi said. "After breakfast, please take whatever you may need and exit the ship in a timely manner, meeting up at the end of the dock."

We ate our meal in silence. The past three days had been relatively peaceful, but they had merely been the lead-up to the main event. The status quo was fragile enough, and it would likely soon be shattered.

Once we were done eating, we took a moment to gather any supplies, while Nagato and Higurashi met with Nagato-sensei. Luckily for us, we didn't really need to change our clothes, since the weather was just right for our uniforms- not so hot that those of us with blazers would need to take them off nor so cold that we'd need to put on extra layers.

We exited the ship through the port side. As we stepped off the Ursa Major and onto a long wooden dock, we saw an island that was a couple kilometers across, and seemed to be like a traditional Japanese town with a few modern buildings thrown in.

By roughly 8:30, we all met up in what looked like the parking lot of the docks, standing on dry land for the first time in roughly three days. The others found their way to the meeting location. According to the map I'd just received on my handbook, I could tell that the dock was on the south
"Thank you for coming, everyone," Higurashi said. "Nagato-san and I met with Nagato-sensei. While she is concerned about what Monokuma has in store for us on the islands, she believes we should still disembark, if only so that none of us will be senselessly punished for breaking a rule."

"That's good to know," Asakura said, "not that it matters now that we're actually off the ship."

I, along with a few others, glanced back at the dock and saw that the gangplank had already been retracted, meaning that we couldn't return to the ship, even though the deadline hadn't yet passed.

"I do agree with Nagato-sensei, though," Tsukimura said. "I don't want to see anyone come to harm if we can help it."

"That's all well and good, Tsukimura-kun," Kirishima said, "but while strictly following Monokuma's rules will help us prevent him from punishing anyone, simply going with the flow will almost inevitably result in a murder."

When it came down to it, the rules of any game encouraged participation. Even if one side didn't care to win, time limits and other rules discouraged people like them from sitting there passively, causing the game to grind to a halt. Clearly, Monokuma had some incentive to get us to kill each other, and the only question was whether it was a carrot or a stick.

"Mom thought of that, Kirishima-san," Nagato said, "and to that end, she asked us to use our time productively. We should spend the day investigating the island and finding whatever information we can."

"Knock yourselves out," Karita said. "Of course, whatever you're planning, I'm sure Monokuma already knows about it."

Karita gestured overhead, and I could see a Monodrone flying in the sky, a camera pointed at us. A closer investigation of the parking lot revealed a few surveillance cameras, which looked identical to the ones found all over the ship.

"You raise a valid observation, Karita-kun," Higurashi said, "but we aren't 'planning' anything just yet. We simply need more information, and to that end, we will investigate this island, like we did with the Ursa Major on the first day. We should especially focus on finding ways to contact the outside world, possible escape routes or even information on where we are."

"I doubt we'll find any ways out of here," I said. "Even if we did find, say, a boat, we'd need a map, a compass, and enough provisions for days at sea."

"I concur with Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "Monokuma's decision to confiscate our cell phones clearly means that he has considered the possibility of us calling for help, and is taking all steps necessary to prevent us from doing so."

"Perhaps he has thought this through," Higurashi said, "but I highly doubt that he could have thoroughly cleared the entire island of anything that could be used against him. Please investigate the island thoroughly and meet back here at 6 PM."

We split up and fanned out throughout the island. Some of the pairs stuck together, while others split up. Since not all of us were entirely on board with Higurashi's suggestions, it was a bit much for him to ask us to stick together or give us specific assignments as to where we should investigate or what we should look for.
I wondered how things might have gone if Higurashi was at least a decade older and had the title of a teacher. Would he have had as much trouble getting us to listen to what he said? Would he have even bothered holding an election? Would he have demanded that those who didn't use honorifics on him (hell, even those who did) address him as "Higurashi-sensei"? As curious as I was about whether he'd considered any of that, the answer probably was that he hadn't thought about it much. He simply did what he could with what he had, so for now, I decided to do the same, and set about exploring the island.

I walked through the streets, which seemed large enough for a two-lane road- not that there were any cars driving on them. While there were plenty of empty cars scattered throughout the city, there wasn't anything to suggest how many people were supposed to live in, or how densely it was populated. Maybe a fair number of the buildings here were tourist housing, so the population could fluctuate depending on the season... assuming anyone was meant to come here, after all.

I noticed that just like before, there wasn't even a scrap of trash on the streets, at least none that I could see. Maybe this was because of Monokuma's "no littering rule," but it was more likely that it was because no one was on the island. No one was around to clean up the trash, but no one was around to litter, either. On the other hand, there wasn't anyone around to fix stuff when it broke down.

Of course, the buildings looked remarkably well-kept for an abandoned area, which made me wonder who built them and when. Had they just been constructed? Had they been occupied until now, but abandoned recently? Perhaps only Monokuma knew the answer, and he didn't seem like he'd tell me. It was up to me to find the answers myself.

I entered the first building I could find that wasn't locked, which looked like a gift shop. The shelves were stocked with all sorts of merchandise with Monokuma's likeness on it, from T-shirts to mugs to plushies. Tucked among the latter was a hidden Monokuma.

Moments after I picked it up, Monokuma popped up behind me. Even considering that "Congratulations, Azuki-san!" Monokuma said. "That's two down, four to go."

"Thanks, I guess," I said. "Of course, I'm probably going to have to lug this thing around all day."

"Then let me take it off your hands," Monokuma said. "I'll drop it off in your cabin."

Monokuma then left with the Hidden Monokuma, and I resumed looking at the merchandise. While I was browsing, Kirishima showed up.

"Hello, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said. "Have you found anything useful here?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm guessing you're looking for a map or something like that?"

"You could say that," Kirishima said, "or anything that would give us a clue as to where in the world we are. As far as I can tell, we have been traveling east all this time, so we are presumably somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Judging from my calculations, we have potentially traveled as much as 2,000 kilometers."

From this, I could gather two things. First, we were probably in international waters by this point. Second, and more obviously, we were a hell of a long way from home. If anyone was looking for us, they'd probably be hard-pressed to find us unless we ended up staying on the island for a long time.
"And we ended up on an island in the middle of nowhere," I said. "Great place to build an inn resort."

Kirishima simply nodded, but didn't laugh or even smile. I had to wonder if he considered anything funny, but then again, I might be disturbed by what he did consider funny.

"Seriously, though," I said, "I honestly don't get why the hotel and this island are all totally abandoned. All these places that were designed to look like a tourist town without actually being one kind of makes this place look like a movie set."

"An apt comparison, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said. "Perhaps, if this killing game is like a show, these buildings were specifically built for us to use in the course of it, a bit like a set for a movie or TV show. After all, just as boxers and wrestlers need a ring, we need an arena to participate in this so-called killing game."

"True," I said, "but I can't imagine any construction crew that'd willingly take on a job like this, or anyone who'd shell out that much money."

"Try thinking about it differently," Kirishima said. "Perhaps the construction crew was deceived about their projects' true purpose, or perhaps enslaved. The latter would account for their cooperation, and mean that Monokuma would not have to pay for the labor costs of such an endeavor. Alternatively, it is simply possible that Monokuma killed the workers when their job was finished."

Kirishima coolly recounted each increasingly disturbing scenario, giving me the chills in the process. It was as though he'd forgotten that his life was on the line, too, or that he didn't care about it.

"But you don't know that, right?" I said.

"No, unfortunately," Kirishima said. "Monokuma is clearly working hard to keep us in the dark, or perhaps is planning on revealing the truth when the time is right."

I parted ways with Kirishima, once again having conflicting feelings about him. On the one hand, he seemed a bit too at ease and knowledgeable about the killing game, possibly because he was the traitor. On the other hand, if he wasn't the traitor, then we could make use of his insights...assuming that he didn't end up betraying us and killing someone to graduate.

I proceeded to the Kumasutra Inn, a large building in the middle of the island that looked a bit like a plus sign. The south end of the building was the entrance, and there was a small lobby with a check-in area. The center of the building was square-shaped, with a hallway going around the area, with a dining and common area in the center. On the western side of the building, there were two rooms for the boys, each of which could house four people, as well as a laundry room in the southwestern corner. The eastern part of the hallway was somewhat similar, with two rooms for the girls, and a bathroom in the northeastern part. At the north end of the inn, there was a door leading to a changing area and an outdoor hot spring, as well as a corridor leading to a nearby gymnasium.

Once inside the inn, I found Sasaki in the common area, which had a few tables and a ping pong table. It was decently sized, but too small for the sixteen of us. Sasaki was busy investigating.

"Hello, Akira-chan," Sasaki said.

"Hey, Sasaki," I said. "I see you found the inn."
"Of course," Sasaki said. "It's not too surprising that I'd seek it out, since it's apparently the main attraction on the island. Naturally, I plan on inspecting the rest of the island but I decided to start here."

"Good plan," I said. "Monokuma mentioned that this was all about the 'Inn Holiday.'"

"Exactly," Sasaki said. "Having seen trips to places like this in various anime and manga, I've always wanted to go to an inn like this, even though I wish the circumstances were different."

I nodded. As fishy as the circumstances behind the trip were, it seemed like it'd be pretty fun if it were actually real.

"Yeah," I said. "Then again, it's kind of odd when you think about it. Why didn't Monokuma have us end up into the worst hellhole possible, to make us so desperate to get out that we'd want to kill each other?"

"Good question," Sasaki said. "If I had to guess, I'd say that he wants us to get comfortable enough that we aren't on edge all the time, possibly enough to become complacent and vulnerable. He seems like the kind to take things slow and savor the killing game. After all, if we ended up killing each other in a bloody free-for-all, he'd run out of players for this killing game."

I often had to remind myself that while Monokuma was a psychopath who looked like a cartoon character, he wasn't stupid. He'd clearly thought out this killing game quite well.

"That makes sense," I said, "but in the end, he expects us to kill each other, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Sasaki said. "I suspect that he'll realize graduation isn't enough of an incentive for everyone, and start getting creative."

Shortly afterward, Mihama came back to get Sasaki, having investigated the rest of the inn, and they went on their way. As if our situation was bad enough, the sole person in charge of the rules made no secret about his desire for us to kill each other, and had no concept of fair play. When it came to survival, we all had similar chances, but when it came to outsmarting Monokuma, he had the overwhelming advantage.

The inn had a weight room inside, with various athletic gear, as well as a small gymnasium. As expected, I saw Kumakura inside the former.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Kumakura said.

"Hey, Kumakura," I said. "You seem right at home in here."

"You bet I am," Kumakura said. "It's not often that one finds an area so well suited to their talent. I believe Himemiya-san would be happy to find an archery dojo, and Tachibana-san- both of them, probably- would be glad to find a music venue."

I had to admit that the Kumakura and the two girls he mentioned were lucky in some ways. They and some of the others could practice their talents alone with the right equipment and facilities. As for me, practicing my lines by myself was the most I could do without costars or an audience. Practice was an important part of the job, albeit a boring one, but it was ultimately just preparation for the real thing.

"I get that," I said, "but aren't you concerned that these weights could be used as murder weapons?"
"Yes," Kumakura said, "but so could any large and heavy blunt object - not to mention anything that's sharp, poisonous, able to be wrapped around someone's neck, and so on and so forth. Virtually anything could be used for murder, and it's possible to kill someone with your bare hands."

"That's a comforting thought," I said sarcastically, "especially from the guy who's best suited to the job."

Kumakura nervously chuckled.

"It has to be said," Kumakura said. "At least we don't have any hand-to-hand combat specialists here."

I had to agree. It was bad enough that a lot of stuff could be used as murder weapons, but it would be even worse to have people whose bodies had become deadly weapons.

As I talked with Kumakura, I took a look around the weight room. Inspecting the rest of the equipment, I saw various other pieces of gear. There were dumbbells, medicine balls, baseball bats and other equipment. Picking up a shot put, I was amazed by how much it weighed.

"Wow, these are heavy," I said.

"Of course they are," Kumakura said. "Throwing the shot put is a test of strength and technique. It wouldn't be any fun if it was easy to throw."

"I guess not," I said, "but would it be possible to throw one and hit someone in the head?"

Kumakura shrugged.

"Yes, it would be possible," Kumakura said, "but I'm not so sure it would be feasible. Shot put balls are thrown as far as possible, not at a specific target. Still, where there's a will, there's a way, and a killer could think of another way to use this."

"As they say, an ounce of prevention's worth a pound of cure," I said. "Why not seal the room?"

"We can't," Kumakura said. "There's no lock on the door, and if we tried to dispose of the weights, it would be littering. I checked with Monokuma, and he said that if anything is 'not in its proper place', it would count as littering. He then asked me if my mom ever taught me to pick up my toys, saying he'd be sure to do that if he had a kid."

"Sounds like Monokuma," I said. "Then again, as you said, where there's a will, there's a way. If one of us snaps and decides to kill someone, I'm sure they'll find a way to do so - the only question is whether they'll get away with it."

Kumakura nodded, and I soon left him in order to continue my investigation. In the end, we were our own worst enemies, and all Monokuma could do was provide us with the reasons and the means to kill each other - the killing part was up to us.

I headed to the laundry room and saw Yamazaki inside. Since none of the machines seemed to be running, he wasn't here to wash any clothes.

"Hey, Azuki," Yamazaki said. "Here to check out the laundry room?"

"I am," I said. "Is it like the one on the ship?"
"Yeah," Yamazaki said. "Monokuma stopped by earlier, and he said any clothing you wash here will be delivered back to your cabin on the ship once it's done."

"That's pretty convenient," I said.

"You said it," Yamazaki said. "After all, if your laundry finished after curfew, then you wouldn't be able to get it."

I doubted a situation like that would ever arise, unless someone wasn't good with monitoring time. Since we had eleven hours on the island assuming we left as late as possible and got back as early as possible, then it would be easy to fit laundry into there somewhere. Alternatively, we could just use our laundry room back on the Ursa Major.

"I guess it's nice to have these facilities around," I said, "but really, we won't be staying here forever."

"Maybe not," Yamazaki said, "but you never know how things are going to turn out, especially in a killing game like this. Maybe one of these days, we'll get off the ship, and Monokuma will never let us back on."

"Depending on the final destination, that might not be so bad," I said. "You have to admit that Monokuma could have chosen a much worse place for us to spend the day than this."

While it was obvious that Monokuma wanted us to kill each other, I was actually glad that there was less chance of us dying by accident, as a result of the natural hazards on one of the island. Yamazaki, however, didn't seem to share the feeling.

"Maybe," Yamazaki said, "but I really can't imagine how things could get much worse than they are now. The short answer is that we're trapped here until we're all dead or someone gets away with murder, and the only question is how soon that'll happen."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I let the subject drop. I'd always been pessimistic about this entire killing game, but at the same time, I found it difficult to say it out loud and destroy what hope my classmates had left. Maybe Higurashi didn't have all the answers, and was overly optimistic about our chances, but any classmate spending all their energy in working to find a way out of here was one who wasn't plotting murder.

I exited the inn, and found a clothing store. It was a relatively small venue, the size of a mom-and-pop store, but even those would need more customers than the sixteen of us to stay afloat. Most of the clothes were traditional Japanese clothes, such as kimonos and haoris. Himemiya and Tsukimura were there, browsing.

"Hello, you two," I said. "Is this supposed to be a store?"

"Apparently so, Azuki-san," Tsukimura said, "but it doesn't seem to work like one. You seem to be able to take what you want out of it."

"Wow," I said. "I guess it'd be hard to stay in business."

Himemiya giggled softly.

"Quite true, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "I did some digging, and I found some documents. Apparently, the inn ordered sixteen yukatas- eight pink and eight blue- but the document doesn't have any names on it."
Himemiya passed me the document, and I skimmed it over to confirm that she was telling the truth before handing it back to her.

"That's weird," I said.

"Indeed," Himemiya said. "I had hoped to figure out whether there were any human employees working for this company, so I could tell how many people were involved with the killing game—maybe the traitor's name was on it. At this point, the only thing I can glean is that the yukatas seem to be out of stock, since the inn got the last sixteen. There doesn't seem to be any fabric around to make any more, unless the store has a supplier somewhere else."

"Could be," I said. "Of course, it'll probably be hard to afford the materials if you don't charge for your merchandise."

I had to wonder how much this killing game would cost and who ended up footing the bill. Movies were insanely expensive to make, which was why a box office bomb could be very, very bad for everyone involved in it. Because of that, it seemed hard to believe that they'd keep this killing game going if no one was paying for it.

We looked around for a little while, but couldn't find any information about where or who the money was coming from. It definitely wasn't coming from the customers, as the cash register seemed to be completely empty.

"By the way," I said during a lull in the conversation, "you two really seem like you're in your element."

"Oh, because of our traditional clothing?" Tsukimura said. "I guess you'd make that conclusion just by looking at us. Himeno-sama sometimes wears a kimono, too, but hers are more expensive than mine. I don't know the details, but her best one cost upwards of a million yen."

"Whoa," I said. "I once rented a kimono for a New Year's Day television appearance, but the studio picked up the bill, and hadn't told me how much it cost."

I wasn't too much of a fan of wearing kimonos, and not just because of the cost— the kimono I wore was pretty damn uncomfortable and hard to move in. My mom wore a suit to her Coming of Age Day ceremony, so I'd probably follow in her example.

"What Kanae didn't mention is that I only wear it on very special occasions," Himeno said. "My family doesn't let us wear casual clothing, but my other outfits aren't that expensive. They may be beyond most girls' price range, but I don't think they're more than 20,000 yen."

"You're damn right that most girls can't shell out that much for clothes," I said. "You really were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, weren't you?"

Himemiya nodded.

"I can't deny that, Azuki-san," Himemiya said, "but at the same time, I don't think I'm necessarily pampered. My parents ensured I would not want for anything, but expected me to work hard in school. Even so, I've prepared for an adulthood in which I live more modestly than my childhood. Maybe that sounds naïve coming from someone who's never wanted for anything, but I've known I couldn't coast by in the lap of luxury forever... even before I wound up here."

"You're no more naïve than I am, Himeno-sama," Tsukimura said. "Even your family's servants are taken care of, and don't have to worry about starving, much less being murdered."
In a twisted way, the killing game was a great equalizer. Wealth, reputation and social status didn't matter - only what you could bring to the table.

"I don't blame either of you," I said. "I think all of us came off as naïve to varying extents before we wound up here, because we never imagined something like this was possible...most of us."

"That's true," Tsukimura said. "Maybe even the traitor didn't realize what being in a killing game would be like."

While I personally thought that the only thing that might be surprising about this killing game was how long we'd gone without killing each other, maybe the traitor thought they could coast through it, surviving all attempts on their life, solving all murders, or even getting away with the one they ended up committing. One thing was certain - we'd need to find out why the traitor had led us here and what they hoped to accomplish.

For lunch, I stopped by a restaurant next to the inn, where you barbecue your own food, and ate with Kurogane. As we barbecued beef skewers, we made small talk.

"It's quite impressive that they have a restaurant here," Kurogane said. "I can only imagine how they got all the necessary materials and services."

"True," I said. "First, the beef is gotten by raising cows on a farm, and then sending them to a slaughterhouse. Afterward, you probably need a meat processing plant, and some way of shipping the meat over to the restaurant."

"That's right," Kurogane said. "My father works for a large chain of restaurants, so he has some idea of all the work needed to keep one going, even those that people dismiss as incompetent. He once joked that the 'links' in the chain aren't the restaurants, but the various suppliers that get the food to the table, and you know what they say about the weak link..."

At times, it could be amazing how far the apple could fall from the tree when it came to talent.

"Yeah," I said. "Monokuma really thought things through."

"He certainly did, as did whoever he worked with," Kurogane said. "It wouldn't be possible for him to obtain all these supplies and the ship without help... which is what worries me. Who knows how well this killing game is supported?"

That was a truly scary thought, so much that I barely had the appetite to finish my meal. Dealing with Monokuma was bad enough but what if the killing game was backed by a giant corporation or NGO, or even the Japanese government? If either was true, then opposing them would stop being extremely difficult, and become practically impossible.

"I agree," I said. "I talked with Himemiya and Tsukimura earlier, and neither of them know where the money's coming from."

"Neither do I," Kurogane said. "All I can say is I'm guessing that whoever's paying for this definitely wants us to stay ignorant."

We let the subject drop. It was possible that if we escaped the killing game, our lives would be in no less danger than they were in here. As long as we were in the killing game, our deaths would further the game's purpose, but outside, we were a danger to the conspiracy in charge of the game as long as we were alive and aware of the secrets they'd kept hidden. The only thing that was any consolation was the knowledge that they were right to fear us, since all of us undoubtedly would
stop at nothing to see whoever was responsible for this brought to justice.

In the afternoon, I took a walk around the neighborhood. Most of the doors that I saw seemed to be locked, and when I looked inside the windows, I couldn't see anyone in there. As I walked through the streets, I found the twins peering into the window of an apartment.

"Hi, Tachibana," I said.

"Oh, hello, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said. "Taiga and I were investigating the neighborhood."

Taiga nodded.

"We can't find a single person around," Taiga said, "just like it was back at the hotel. We thought we'd break a window and get in, but Monokuma would probably see that as destruction of property."

"You've got that right!" Monokuma said, appearing before us. "Throw a rock through the window, and a Monodrone will put several thousand rounds of ammo through you!"

I looked up and saw a Monodrone overhead, as well as a camera mounted on the wall of the building, likely intended to watch anyone entering or exiting the apartment. No matter where you were on the island, there were probably at least a few sets of electronic eyes watching you.

"Anyhow," Monokuma said, "I don't get why you ladies are so desperate to get into those houses. There's literally nothing inside."

"Talk about counterintuitive," I said. "You lock your house when you're away to keep your valuables safe, but there isn't a point if there's nothing inside, is there?"

"Not at all, Azuki-san," Taiga said. "I noticed that no one's living in these apartments, but you'd think that some of these places would come furnished."

"There's no need for it," Monokuma said. "If no one lives there, no one needs the furniture. Just think of it as part of the scenery."

Monokuma then left.

"So no one actually lives here," Tatsuki said. "Maybe Monokuma's telling the truth, but I doubt they'd just build an entire neighborhood just for show. Our dad works in construction, so he has some idea how much it costs and how long it takes to build buildings like these."

"Good point," I said. "It's one thing to build a set that seems real when you view it through the camera, but another to actually build an entire resort town from scratch and only invite sixteen people there, none of whom have any money to spend."

While Himemiya was rich and Sasaki, the Tachibanas, Yamazaki and I probably had a lot of money from our jobs, if we couldn't access it, we were poorer than the panhandlers who hung out at the subway stations in my city.

"Maybe they didn't build it," Taiga said. "Maybe they bought it from the person who did."

'Maybe," I said, "but buying or even renting all these buildings would take an insane amount of cash. Who'd go to all that trouble, or why?"

Having asked a question we couldn't answer yet, we decided to split up and look for more
information. The answer probably wouldn't be one we'd want to hear, but pressing on and learning more was all we could do at the moment.

At the north end of the island, I found Kojima, standing at a scenic overlook and looking out at sea. "Looks like this is as far as we can go, isn't it?" Kojima said.

"Seems that way," I said. "Of course Monokuma would never let us leave."

Kojima nodded, and I glanced into the water. There were some Monodrones- sharks and octopi, swimming the water, while a few aerial Monodrones flew through the sky.

"You know, in video games, there's always some sort of barrier or another to prevent you from going where the game designers don't want you to go," Kojima said, "even in the games that offer a wide open world. You run into an invisible wall of some sort, or some natural barrier, like a high mountain range."

I nodded. While my acting career didn't leave much free time, I'd played a few video games at my mom's encouragement, since some of my voice acting roles were for video games.

"That makes sense," I said. "It'd be a hell of a lot of work to make an entire world, so it's only fair that they'd limit you to the areas you're supposed to go."

"Yeah," Kojima said, "I noticed something pretty interesting about a lot of the open world video games. Often, the region you play in is only a few square kilometers wide in actual distance, even if it's supposed to be the size. Even my hometown- a town with less than 100,000 people- is larger than some of the worlds in MMOs."

"Like you said, it'd be difficult to populate an entire virtual world," I said. "That's probably why a lot of big cities in games tend to have at most, a couple dozen NPCs."

"You said it," Kojima said. "Of course, this town doesn't even have anyone like that, and neither did the hotel we woke up in. Maybe we're inside one big virtual reality world while our bodies are used as power sources, like that one movie."

"Now that's crazy talk," I said, "but considering everything weird that's happened, it might just be possible."

We spent a little while there, talking about his "virtual reality" theory and the various bits of pop culture that had inspired it, a discussion that I ended up finding quite fascinating. While I still wasn't entirely fond of Kojima, I noticed that he was a lot less obnoxious when he wasn't talking about me. Maybe if he kept his thoughts and his feelings about me to himself, we might just be friends one day- if not anything more than that.

At 6 PM, we met up in the parking lot. I was honestly surprised that everyone had shown up, but glad they did. Rounding up sixteen people on an island this big without cell phones or other technology like that would be like herding cats.

"I'm glad you could all make it," Higurashi said. "Please share what you've found."

We each shared a little about what we've found. Most of us spoke about the inn, while a few others mentioned the empty buildings.
"To sum it up, there aren't any boats, communication devices or conclusive evidence of where on Earth we are," I said, "unless anyone wants to prove me wrong."

No one spoke up.

"So there you have it," I said. "Monokuma was clearly confident that he was in control of the island, even if he doesn't seem to have any of his people on it. If he was scared of us escaping, he'd probably have prepared seventeen cells, rather than just one."

Alternatively, Monokuma could have prepared nine cells, and had the roommates become cellmates.

"You raise a fair point, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "but at the same time, it is possible that Monokuma's power will go to his head, and he will end up becoming overconfident. When he becomes that way, he will end up making a critical mistake that we can use to our advantage... and maybe he already has."

"Maybe, Higurashi-kun," Karita said, "but I know that anyone who thinks they're putting one over on the person trying to con them is probably about to fall into a trap themselves. Monokuma took control of the ship by himself- well, maybe with the traitor's help- so it wouldn't be good to underestimate him."

I couldn't decide which was worse- Karita being the one to back me up, or being the only person who was less than optimistic about our chances.

"It's true that Monokuma had the traitor's help," Himemiya said, "but he clearly needed more than that. He would need an entire construction crew to build all the buildings on the island."

"You got that right," Asakura said. "It's not like anyone here has the money to pay for all this."

Tsukimura shot Asakura a dirty look, one that probably would have gotten her in trouble if she'd done it to one of her employers or their guests. While she gave me the impression of being a nice and polite young lady, I knew that pushing her too far wouldn't be a good idea.

As for Himemiya, despite sighing and giving a disapproving frown, she remained relatively calm.

"I suppose it's natural that you would suspect me, Asakura-san," Himemiya said, "but there are some things about your theory that do not add up. First, my father is the one who controls the Himemiya zaibatsu, and our family's wealth. I only have a few million yen in my personal savings account."

"All right, so maybe your dad's in charge," Asakura said, "and made you the traitor."

"In that case, I would have told Kanae about it," Himemiya said, "and there would be two people aware of the killing game, not just one. Monokuma said that one person was aware of the killing game."

"Perhaps," Kirishima said, "but maybe you left Tsukimura-kun in the dark in order to protect her from being named as an accomplice."

"That's not much of a favor," Tsukimura said. "If word got out that I was an accomplice, I'd probably get time in prison, but as long as I'm here, my life's in danger."

"I agree," Karita said. "In fact, if the Himemiyas are involved, they could just have Tsukimura-san act as the mastermind, since she'd follow their orders. If she gets caught, they can say that she was
acting alone and throw her, a mere servant, under the bus. Of course, the only reason to have Himemiya-san herself in the game would be to deflect suspicion, but since she probably isn't the heiress, they don't have much to lose if she dies."

Sasaki sighed and shook her head.

"Honestly, Karita-kun, there's no point in accusing Himemiya-san or Kanae-chan without any evidence," Sasaki said. "Do you honestly believe that they'd confess?"

"Confessions are not always given voluntarily," Mihama said. "It is possible that if we put enough pressure on a suspect, they will confess, but it is more than likely that any forced confession will be false."

I could definitely see Mihama's point. In terms of probability, there was only a one in seventeen chance of any given person being the traitor, which would probably be one in sixteen if I sought to interrogate a given person as the traitor (of course, it wouldn't be possible to actually torture Nagato-sensei). In terms of how people act, it's possible that some people would, if pushed far enough, confess to being the traitor, knowing that even if their torturer killed them, it would be preferable to further torment.

"Still, one thing does bother me," Kurogane said, "namely, the idea that a powerful organization is responsible for this killing game. Even if we somehow escape, we may have to deal with them, the masterminds behind the mastermind, sooner or later."

"That's certainly true, Kurogane-kun," Higurashi-kun said, "but people aren't so twisted that they'd enjoy watching high schoolers murdering each other. Surely, once we escape, we will find many allies to help us oppose those responsible. All they need is to become aware of what is happening."

We let the discussion drop for now, and continued discussing the island for a while, until everyone got hungry and went out to get something to eat. There was little point dwelling on what we'd do after we escaped for now, not when escaping was a pipe dream at best. Still, even if we did escape, we'd likely have to come to terms with why the world would allow this killing game to happen, an answer we most likely would find hard to accept.

After eating, I spent the next two hours walking around the island and getting a feel for the surroundings.

Eventually, I made my way to the western coast of the island, where I sat on a bench facing the ocean and watched the sun set. I tried to figure out where we were based on the time the sun was setting for this time of year, but to no avail. Even if I was an expert in that sort of thing, it'd probably require a lot of resources I didn't have, such as Internet access, not to mention that it'd be easier to just use a GPS to find my location.

While I was thinking about it, Monokuma paged me.

It is now time to return to the ship. Please be on board by 9 PM.

I returned to the ship, and made it back in roughly ten minutes., waiting at the central area with the elevators for the others to return. The island was small enough that you could return to the ship from the opposite side within an hour if you didn't dawdle, but I couldn't help but worry. What if someone fell ill and passed out? What if someone tripped and broke their leg? What if, after we got back, we found that one of us had been murdered?

Luckily, none of these came to pass. I was one of the first back, and I saw everyone else return one
by one. Once we were all on the ship, the gangplank retracted, but the ship remained in the harbor. We were on the island for the time being, so perhaps we'd get to explore it more tomorrow.

After returning to the ship, I went down to Nagato-sensei's cell. Apparently, she'd gone there by herself this time.

"Good evening, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said.

"Good evening," I said. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not really," Nagato said. "Mom and I were discussing her day walking around the ship."

"Wait, you mean they let her out?" I said.

Nagato-sensei nodded.

"Yes, Monokuma did," Nagato-sensei said. "Starting at 9 AM, I am allowed to leave my cell and have free rein of the ship except for student rooms and other areas that are off limits. However, I must be back in my cell by 8 PM on the dot, or else I will be punished."

"In other words, you can leave while no one else is on the ship," I said, "so no harm can come to you, and you can't do any harm to anyone else."

"Quite true," Nagato-sensei said, "of course, the rule about the spotless, myself included, being executed if a blackened graduates still applies."

"I know, Mom," Nagato said. "That's why I want everyone to work together to ensure that no murders ever occur."

As unrealistic as I found that hope, I couldn't fault Nagato for having it. All of us knew what was at stake, and that the only thing worse than dying a grisly death along with the rest of the spotless is your mother sharing your fate.

"In any case," Nagato-sensei said, "since you two have probably explored every inch of the ship Monokuma will allow you to access these past three days, I'm sure you haven't found anything there that I didn't. So why not tell me about the island?"

We gave Nagato-sensei a brief summary of what we saw on the island.

"This island seems harmless enough," Nagato-sensei said. "However, I'm sure Monokuma has some plan in store for you all."

"I believe so, too," I said. "All this time on the ship is likely to make us restless, and now that we realize that this island is the most land we'll ever see unless we graduate, we're likely to start killing each other.

"You aren't wrong, Azuki-san," Nagato said, "but I think people would have to be extremely desperate to try to graduate. Killing someone is not a decision that can be taken lightly- the girl I told you about earlier, who'd stabbed her classmate, wasn't trying to kill her, so the prosecution didn't seek an attempted murder charge. Even if someone would be willing to kill, I can't think of anyone who valued their life so little to risk it rashly."

When I thought about it that way, it made sense. In order to graduate and get out of this killing school trip, you'd have to put your life on the line first. That fact was a more compelling deterrent
to murder than all the platitudes about not wanting to kill that our class could come up with combined.

"Neither can I," I said, "although part of the reason is that I've only known everyone for a couple days. Of course, if we do have someone who's willing to throw their life away to graduate, I'm sure Monokuma will oblige them if they fuck up."

"I don't doubt that," Nagato-sensei said, "but any murder is a tragedy, even when they are solved. Like Chiyuri, I would rather not see any killings occur. All of you are my students, so I have no desire to see any of you come to harm- not even the one who betrayed our class."

I decided to leave it at that, and said goodbye to both Nagatos for now, promising to meet the younger Nagato in our cabin by the start of Night Time.

I quickly stopped by the lounge, hoping to see if I could find an atlas. Mihama was one step ahead of me.

"Good evening, Azuki-san," Mihama said. "Are you perhaps here to investigate where this ship is headed?"

"Took the words right out of my mouth," I said. "So, did you find anything?"

Mihama shook her head.

"Regrettably, no," Mihama said. "I searched for all the islands of this size that the ship could conceivably reach in just under three days, but to no avail. The only possibility I can think of is that this island is not on any map."

"Could be," I said. "How are you with geography?"

"Not good enough," Mihama said with a sigh. "I may be at the top of my class, but my tests have asked us questions such as where Japan's prefectures are, not the location of an uninhabited island in the middle of nowhere. I asked Kirishima-san earlier, and he had no more luck than I did."

I remembered seeing Kirishima at the gift shop earlier today. He'd probably made better use of his time there than I did, but even he couldn't solve this mystery.

"Figures," I said. "I guess they don't teach you everything you need to know in school."

"Unfortunately, no," Mihama said. "At my old school, I tutored a girl named Maho Matsunaga, who'd been held back twice. Matsunaga-san did not mind getting help from a 'kid' like me, but she made it clear that she had the edge in life experience. Not only was she older than me, but she grew up in a rough neighborhood and had to work to put herself through school, so she was not wrong."

I'd always thought people who said that an education wasn't everything were kind of anti-intellectual, but maybe they were on to something. If we were stranded on a desert island and forced to hunt and forage for our food(something I wouldn't put past Monokuma) the vast majority of us would range from "out of our depth" to "totally incompetent." Even with our needs provided for aboard the Ursa Major and on the first island, none of us had truly faced situations in which we'd had to fight for our lives.

"I guess not," I said. "I can tell you're smarter than me, Mihama, and probably smarter than any of us, but it's OK to rely on the big kids when you need to."
"I will keep your words in mind, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "so long as you are worthy of that trust."

I nodded, then said good night to Mihama. Trusting each other was a bit too much to ask in a situation like this, but a kid like Mihama definitely needed someone she could depend on.

I returned to my room, where Nagato was already starting to change into her nightgown.

"Welcome back, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "What were you up to?"

"I just had a quick talk with Mihama," I said. "We talked about our efforts to find out just where the hell we were, and how useless our schooling was."

Nagato nodded.

"I think Mihama-san was at the top of her class, even after skipping ahead a few grades," Nagato said, "but what about you?"

"Me?" I said. "Not to toot my own horn, but I do pretty well. My grades aren't the best in my class, but I do manage to keep them at a respectable level even after taking time off for acting."

"I'm sure you do," Nagato said, "or at least that you do better than I do. My grades are mediocre. They may be high enough to pass but are not good enough to earn me respect—merely some pity from those who are doing just as badly."

I was at a loss for words. Obviously, it wouldn't be appropriate to mock or make fun of Nagato, but at the same time, she didn't say this for pity.

"I can see why even a genius like Mihama-san would be out of her element here," Nagato-san said, "but the same applies to ordinary people, too. I don't know what to think of someone who'd be right at home here."

"Well, we do have the traitor," I said, "if Monokuma's right and they knew how things would go down. I think one of two things will happen now that we've reached land— they'll make their move or wait for one of us to make ours."

The Night Time announcement then sounded, and Nagato, after saying her prayers and "Good night, Azuki-san," climbed into bed. With a "Night, Nagato," I followed suit.

My conversation with Nagato had been humbling, in more ways than one I'd always been grateful for my talent, but hadn't anticipated a situation in which it wouldn't do me much good.

**Monokuma Theater**

*Some people have trouble deciding how their stories end. Me, I have trouble deciding how to begin mine.*

*I know I'd like the story to end with a crazy psycho killing everyone except for the lucky girl who ends up doing him in, but I don't know how to get all those schmucks into the creepy-looking campground.*

*I've always wanted to do a story about a drug lord shooting a bunch of guys in his mansion until he gets blown away, but when it comes to the first act, in which the drug lord makes it big, I'm*
drawing a blank.

I've got a lot of cool death scenes in mind, and all that's left is to think of characters to use them on.

Seriously, people, the payoff is the fun and the easy part. You're making it a lot harder than it needs to be.

Author's Notes

Thank you for the comments.

The next chapter may not come out for a while, as I'm still focusing on fine-tuning the details of the murder, the investigation and the class trial. I'm hoping to have the next chapter out by the end of July. As a preview, though, here's a sneak peek at the motive- kill the traitor without getting caught and you get to leave without anyone being executed.

In the mean time, though, you may see some Free Time Events, since I have a few mostly written up. So far, we have five down- Nagato, Higurashi, Karita, Tsukimura and Kumakura- and ten to go.
Day 5

Nagato and I woke up and started going about our morning routine- exchanging good mornings, getting dressed, listening to Monokuma's weather report (cloudy and a bit cooler today) and heading to the dining hall- since by now, we'd started to become accustomed to my new life on the Ursa Major. This didn't mean either of us was used to it- I wanted this trip to end as soon as possible, without graduating or ending up dead- but I was gradually coming to accept that unless the worst happened, I would be here for a while. As far as I could tell, Nagato felt the same way, as any sane person would.

Of course, this wouldn't be a killing game if the status quo remained the same all the time. Clearly, Monokuma realized that none of us had tried to graduate yet, and was getting impatient.

While we were getting dressed, Nagato took a look at our desk, where Monokuma had placed the second Hidden Monokuma next to the first.

"By the way, Azuki-san, I see you collected the second Hidden Monokuma already," Nagato said.

"Yeah," I said, "just because I happened to be the first person to get to the gift shop. Then again, like Monokuma said, it's not as though we'll get anything out of getting the other four... assuming we live long enough to do so."

I wondered if any of the others knew about the Hidden Monokumas- or if anyone did, whether any of them actually cared- but I doubted it.

"Maybe not," Nagato said, "but it might be nice if we complete the collection."

"Knock yourself out," I said. "Maybe you can help with the search. If you find some, I'll share the credit for completing the set- deal?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Nagato said, saluting well enough that she almost seemed like a Self-Defense Force officer.

While Nagato's formality was playful, I could still sense a bit of distance between us. We definitely got along better than Karita and Asakura, and probably agreed on more things than Higurashi and Kirishima, but we'd only recently met, unlike anyone besides the residents of Cabins F1 and F3. Perhaps some people could wholeheartedly call someone they'd met less than a week ago a friend, but Nagato wasn't one such person, and most likely wouldn't be, even under better circumstances.

We met up for breakfast, and Nagato and I sat down with the twins. Before long, Monokuma showed up again.

"Good morning, everyone!" Monokuma said. "It looks like everybody made it to breakfast once again, thanks to Higurashi-san."

"You're welcome," Higurashi said, a bit sheepishly. "But I guess you're not happy about it, are you?"

"No, sir!" Monokuma said. "Like I said yesterday morning, it's nice that everyone comes to the same place first thing in the morning. What's disappointing is that no one's killed anyone yet."
Monokuma was disarmingly polite for the overseer of this killing game, which only served to creep me out even more.

"I can see why it would be disappointing to you," Kirishima said, "but really, it should not be surprising. The prospect of graduation is an enticing incentive, but those who are interested in self-preservation may be deterred by the risk, while those who profess to be selfless may not wish to see their classmates die."

Kirishima's tone was dispassionate as always, but I could sense a bit of skepticism, if not disdain, in his remarks on the latter group.

"Well, let me sweeten the deal a little," Monokuma said. "You know how I said that someone in this class is a traitor? Well, if you kill that person, you get to graduate without needing to get through the class trial. Those who are only looking out for themselves won't have to worry about getting executed, while even those who say they care about others probably think the traitor deserves to die for putting you lot through this."

"Speak for yourself," Higurashi said. "The traitor should stand trial for their role in this, and be given whatever sentence the law determines to be just, not be slain by a student acting as a vigilante."

A few of the people who'd voted for Higurashi, including Nagato, nodded and murmured agreement, but we all knew that we couldn't take those words at face value. Few people would willingly admit to being motivated by self-interest, and no one would actively announce that they planned to commit murder.

"That's a decent sales pitch," Karita said, "but it doesn't take a con artist to know that there's a catch to it- you actually have to kill the traitor. What happens if someone besides the traitor dies?"

"Then the trial happens anyway," Monokuma said, "but look on the bright side. If you think someone's the traitor, then go ahead and kill them. If you're right, you get a ticket out of here. If not, then you can still graduate if you get away with it."

"And if you are wrong and you get caught, you will be executed," Mihama said. "The death penalty is, at least in theory, supposed to deter would-be criminals."

"I never said it was risk-free," Monokuma said. "After all, the threat of being executed should be enough to get would-be graduates to bring their A-game when plotting murders. In fact, there's one more stipulation- you can't let anyone catch you in the act, or the deal's off and you'll have to avoid being convicted in order to graduate."

Finally, Monokuma said something that was completely honest. It was bad enough that anyone could be killed at almost any time, but the worst part was that our survival hinged on finding out who was responsible. Since that person's survival depended on getting away with their crime, they wouldn't just lay down and die, so ferreting them out wouldn't be an easy or pleasant process.

"So sooner or later, all this will probably simply result in a murder and class trial sooner," I said.

"That's right!" Monokuma said. "Then again, you've got a shot at a free ticket out of here, so you might as well take advantage of that opportunity while you can."

A chill went down my spine. Odds were that the person who'd end up getting killed wouldn't be the traitor, which meant that they wouldn't be the only one who'd end up dead.

"One more thing," Asakura said, after glancing at Tsukimura. "Is it possible that the traitor has an
accomplice?"

Of course Asakura would ask that. Not only had he been suspicious of Himemiya yesterday, but if the traitor wasn't acting alone, that'd mean Asakura would be a less likely suspect. After all, there weren't exactly many people who could stand to be his accomplice or would take him on as theirs.

"It's certainly possible, Asakura-san," Monokuma said. "Only one person I'm aware of knew about the killing game in advance, but who knows? Maybe that person told someone else, or maybe they roped that person into helping them without them ever knowing about the killing game- if they did, they didn't tell me about it. That said, only the traitor counts as far as the motive goes."

"But only you know who it is, right?" Himemiya said. "If the traitor ended up dying, you could simply claim that they were just a normal student, and no one would be the wiser, right?"

"That wouldn't be fair of me, Himemiya-san," Monokuma said. "The traitor never told me their reasons for letting the killing game happen, but they are willing to put their life on the line to participate. I'm sure they'd be happy if their presence in the group drove one of the class to murder."

The group fell silent for a moment. While Monokuma made no bones about the fact that the motive would encourage us to commit murder, his statement just now also made it clear that even if we got out of this killing school trip, at least one of us would be dead.

"Anyway, I've said enough," Monokuma said. "Happy hunting, folks!"

Monokuma left. After a moment, Higurashi stood up and addressed the group.

"Everyone, I have a request," Higurashi said. "Please do not seek out the traitor. All Monokuma's motive serves to do is inspire conflict among us, and potentially lead to a murder."

"Yeah, I get why you'd be scared of it," Yamazaki said, "...if you're the traitor."

"Anyone is at risk from a motive like this, Yamazaki-san," Mihama said. "Should someone give in to temptation, they could decide that any one of us is the traitor, then act as judge, jury and executioner."

I'd considered asking Mihama about how many laws this killing game broke, but I suspected that if I did, she'd keep me there all day. In fact, we'd probably end up breaking at least a few laws if we ever got through this.

"There is one person who's safe from all that," Asakura said, "namely, our teacher."

Nagato firmly shook her head, and it wasn't hard to see why. Of course, while I agreed with her, I hoped she'd come up with something better than a knee-jerk argument.

"I don't think Mom's the traitor," Nagato said, "since Rule 10 says that we aren't allowed to free or harm her. After all, why would Monokuma encourage us to kill the traitor if that person couldn't kill or be killed by us?"

"That's a good point," I said. "Since the traitor played their part in getting the killing game started, Monokuma probably no longer cares whether they live or die. Maybe the traitor's a sociopathic thrill-seeker who doesn't care, either."

"But what if Nagato-sensei's the traitor?" Asakura said. "Then she's probably the safest among us, being locked in her cell and protected by Rule 10."
"At least until someone gets away with murder," Mihama said, "in which case, Nagato-sensei will be executed with the other spotless. Whether she's 'safe' depends on how much faith Monokuma has in our ability to find the blackened."

"But as Nagato-kun said, there is also Rule 10," Kirishima said. "If Monokuma executes anyone who tries to harm Nagato-sensei, then there is no benefit to killing her, even if she's the traitor."

Nagato shook her head, not particularly happy that the bit of evidence she'd brought up would be used to support an argument she didn't agree with. Neither was I, so I chose to speak up.

"Which would defeat the point of the motive," I said. "Monokuma must have anticipated that we'd be able to guess the traitor's identity, and if we knew for a fact, that Nagato-sensei was the traitor, then there'd be nothing we could do about it. Besides, while Asakura has a point about Nagato-sensei being safe, it's more likely that the traitor is among us, able to undermine our efforts. Since Nagato-sensei only sees us when we come to visit her, she can't do much to impact the killing game."

"Indeed, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "In fact, all this speculation as to the traitor's identity only serves to help Monokuma further the killing game. By suspecting and doubting each other, we make cooperation more difficult, and raise the likelihood of someone committing murder."

"Perhaps, Higurashi-kun," Kirishima said, "but the reality is that there is a traitor in our midst. While jumping to conclusions would be irresponsible, and rushing to murder a supposed traitor would be even more so, it would be to our benefit to find that person's identity. Ignorance is not bliss- in fact, it can be very dangerous in this killing game, so we must know which one of us wishes to see us kill each other."

"But what do we do with that knowledge?" Karita said. "We can't just turn the traitor over to the police. It's most likely that someone angry about being trapped in here will resort to killing whoever they believe to be the traitor, even without Monokuma's motive. Full disclosure- I'm aware that I might end up dead."

"Good to see you're honest about one thing," Asakura said.0

The rest of the group looked uncomfortable as Karita brought up the main problem. Obviously, if there was a traitor, we couldn't just ignore that person and let them do as they pleased, but if we did find out, then that would most likely lead to the traitor's death. Besides, there was a strong chance that our guess would end up being wrong. Knowing the traitor's identity was probably the lesser of two evils, but I couldn't say that I'd be happy once I found out.

"Enough," Higurashi said. "While I cannot force you to do anything, all I ask is that if you find out who the traitor is, you not do anything reckless. Whatever we decide to do should be a choice we make together."

We all outwardly expressed agreement, but I would easily bet money that more than a few of us crossed our fingers behind our backs as we did... since I was one of them. Maybe it was arrogant to think I alone could be trusted with the knowledge of the mastermind's identity- hell, even that I could find that out myself- but I knew I'd feel a lot safer once I figured out who was willing to watch us all die.

After breakfast, I saw Kirishima holding a quick meeting with Mihama in the lounge. It was still a few minutes before 8 AM, so we couldn't go to the island just yet.
"What are you two up to?" I said.

Kirishima and Mihama glanced at each other

"Should we tell her, Kirishima-san?" Mihama said, loudly enough for me to hear, but not so loudly that people could eavesdrop on her.

"I believe we can, Mihama-kun," Kirishima said, "since Azuki-kun seems to be of the same mind as us."

"I think I can guess," I said. "You're trying to find out who the traitor could be, aren't you? And you don't want Higurashi to find out that you're going behind his back?"

Kirishima and Mihama nodded twice, once for each question.

"Indeed," Kirishima said. "We are fully aware that this contradicts Higurashi-kun's wishes, but we are less concerned about him finding out than we are about the traitor. That said, please keep this secret."

I nodded. At this point, Mihama and Higurashi were just talking things out, so there wasn't any harm in that. If one or both of them ended up becoming a murder victim or a suspect, I'd probably renege on my promise and spill the beans, but for now, I'd keep it secret.

"Gotcha," I said. "Any suspects?"

Kirishima shook his head.

"Unfortunately, no," Kirishima said. "Nagato-sensei is still possible, but none of the others are suspicious enough to warrant serious consideration, much less a formal accusation. Focusing too much on one suspect may blind us to other possibilities."

"But by the same token, we are not ruling anyone out," Mihama said. "If one of the people we refused to consider as a possible suspect happened to be the traitor, we would be dooming ourselves to wander down the wrong track."

I paused and thought carefully for a moment.

"I get what you're saying," I said, "but I have a hard time accepting that some of us could be the traitor. Would the Nagatos or the Tachibanas really let a family member die? Hell, Himemiya and Tsukimura are practically sisters, so do you see them endangering the other?"

"Possibly," Kirishima said. "Some parents despise their children, some children hate their parents and some siblings loathe each other."

"You could be right, Kirishima-san," Mihama said, "but Monokuma acted surprised to see Nagato-sensei. If Nagato-san is the traitor, then perhaps she never wanted her mother to get involved in the killing game."

I paused for a moment to consider what Mihama had just proposed. As tempting as it was to believe that Monokuma's plan had gone off without a hitch, since he could seemingly do almost anything, we had to consider what didn't go as planned. Maybe Monokuma had made mistakes or suffered bad luck, had to improvise, or ended up abandoning his original plan. It was hard for us to determine whether any of these had happened, but we'd have to find out if we wanted to understand the scheme behind this killing game.
"True, but the teacher's part of the class, too, isn't she?" I said. "Wouldn't it be odd if we left on a so-called 'school trip' without a chaperone?"

"Good point," Mihama said, "Nagato-san being the traitor is one of seventeen possibilities- and an unlikely one, at that. This is just one explanation for Monokuma's remark, which would only work with that possibility."

"Seventeen, huh?" I said. "You're really serious about this if you're not ruling each other or yourselves out."

Kirishima nodded emotionlessly.

"In fact, I had an ulterior motive for this discussion," Kirishima said. "I hoped that if you or Mihama-kun were the traitor, either of you would let slip some evidence, such as being overly eager to pin the blame on a patsy. No such thing has happened, either because you are not the traitor, or because you are not careless enough to expose yourselves that easily."

Kirishima's voice was as emotionless as always. He wasn't relieved that his friends (not that he had any) were in the clear, nor was he disappointed that he wasn't making any progress on this investigation. While I wasn't surprised that we had hardly any clues at this point, I knew that someone would probably get murdered before we made any real progress.

"I, too, had hoped to narrow down the field of candidates," Mihama said, "albeit for different reasons. Not only did I want to have suspects to focus on, but I hoped to find out who I could trust."

"Well, we don't have too many clues so far," I said. "I guess we can keep our eyes and ears, as well as our minds, open."

Moments later, the clock struck 8 AM, and the announcements came on.

"It is now 8 AM," Monokuma said over the monitor. "Please proceed to the island within an hour."

The monitor shut off.

"It looks like it's time to go," I said. "Best of luck finding the mastermind, you two."

We split up to do everything we needed to get ready before leaving for the island to explore it more. While our days had little structure or routine, we had a surprising amount to do, so we couldn't spend our time thinking about a mystery that we didn't yet have any clues for.

We proceeded to the island for the day. After a bit of searching, I found Karita taking a walk around the neighborhood.

"Hey, Karita," I said. "What are you up to?"

"Just taking a little walk," Karita said. "It's not as though I've got anything better to do."

As hesitant as I was to believe anything Karita said, I didn't notice any evidence that he was up to anything suspicious, so I decided to let this slide for now. If there was any trouble, I decided to make a note of where he was at a few minutes past 9 AM. For now, I had more pressing questions.

"I'm a bit surprised that you're not in favor of finding the traitor," I said, "assuming, of course, it isn't you."

Of course, even if Karita was the traitor, he could encourage the investigation in hopes of framing
a fall guy. Maybe Higurashi could have brought it up, but someone as guileless as him probably never even considered the possibility.

"There's a good reason for that, Azuki-san," Karita said. "I don't have any faith in other people to not 'do anything reckless,' as Higurashi-kun put it."

"When you put it that way, it makes sense," I said. "After all, if people did the smart thing all the time, there wouldn't be any suckers for you to rip off."

Karita shrugged.

"It's true that con artists need gullible people to take advantage of," Karita said, "but they also need people with needs that the con artists can pretend to fulfill. You need to offer something they want, even if you plan on swindling them in the end."

"So that explains Monokuma's motive," I said.

"Yep," Karita said. "Asakura-kun and I might not like each other, but we wouldn't even consider killing each other in ordinary circumstances. If even we can say that, then I doubt that any murders will be caused by grudges between students."

I paused to think for a moment.

"I get that," I said, "but if you thought Asakura was the traitor, you wouldn't hesitate to kill him, would you?"

"Probably not," Karita said. "I guess you could say that even I'm not a murderer, but I doubt people would believe that I'm principled enough to stick to my beliefs, even if it costs me my life."

"It doesn't help that your talent doesn't speak well of your moral character," I said. "If you screw over people for your own personal gain, then what's stopping you from killing someone to graduate?"

"Not much," Karita said, "but maybe the fact that I don't have much confidence in my getting away with it, and that I know I'd die a gruesome death if I failed."

I didn't have a rebuttal to that. From a young age, we were taught that our actions have consequences, a lesson that was driven home by making those consequences apply to us. While it was necessary to punish kids to discourage bad behavior, you could cynically conclude that it didn't tell kids "don't misbehave" as much as "don't get caught."

"I've got some advice for you, Azuki-san," Karita said. "Instead of thinking about who has it in them to kill or not, think about who has a reason to kill."

"In other words, practically everyone," I said, "since we all want to get out of here."

"That's right," Karita said, "but some people want that more than others. So if you want to understand your classmates, two things are most important- what they want and how far they're willing to go to get it."

Karita then left, giving me a lot to think about. He wasn't exactly trustworthy, and gave me little reason to think otherwise, but when it came down to it, anyone could end up being the first murderer... or that person's victim. The only question was who would.
I had lunch with Himemiya at the restaurant. Even without her family or other distinguished guests around, her table manners were still impeccable.

"So how's the food?" I said. "It's probably not as good as what you get back home, but as someone whose mom often has to get takeout, I don't have particularly high standards."

"It's decent," Himemiya said. "It's hardly fair to compare it to what my family's chef serves, but it's probably a lot better than what people get in prison, particularly death row."

"True," I said. "Of course, Monokuma probably doesn't want us to think of the killing game as a death sentence, even if it might end with our execution. He's given us a chance to escape, and expects us to snap and take it."

Himemiya nodded as she chewed and swallowed her food, before wiping her lips with a napkin.

"Besides," I said, "if you ask me, he's awfully polite to his 'prisoners.' If we were on death row, he'd probably just call us 'Azuki' and 'Himemiya,' if not by our prisoner numbers."

"Some people practice good manners out of habit, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "Since my upbringing involved a rigorous education in manners, it's only natural that I'm formal with most people I don't know very well. Kanae turned out the same way, and if she'd met me as a classmate rather than a student, she'd probably call me 'Himemiya-san.'"

I nodded. Himemiya and Tsukimura's social classes had dictated the terms of their relationship, so it wasn't too surprising that Himemiya sometimes wondered how things would be if the circumstances of their birth were different.

"Speaking of which," I said, "you sounded a bit cynical when you first met Nagato, almost as if you believed that her politeness was fake."

"I wouldn't go that far," Himemiya said, "and I'm certainly not judging Nagato-san. However, I do believe that her pleasant demeanor is a façade of sorts, meant to appeal to others. She may not necessarily be a bad person, but as long as she puts up that front and hides her 'true' self, whatever that may be, I doubt we will ever truly be friends."

"Maybe not, Himemiya-san," I said, "but I believe wearing that façade is Nagato-san's choice, and our choices define us. The roles I play and the public persona I put on may be separate from my 'real' self, but I think of them all as parts of me."

"Good point, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "I suppose the polite act you put on just now is part of you?"

I chuckled.

"You could say that," I said. "I've gotten pretty good at acting polite, such as when talking with my teachers, my bosses and other people who outrank me in various ways. The fact that I did so just now, however...? That was purely my choice."

"Quite true," Himemiya said. "I suppose Monokuma and the traitor have made choices of their own. I can only imagine what led them to do so, though."

I thought about where we'd come from and why we'd turned out the way we did. Maybe there was some clue in the traitor's past, or maybe they'd been like everyone else until this killing game started.

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I found the twins in the gift shop in the afternoon, browsing the merchandise. After greeting them and making a little small talk, I decided to ask them something that was on my mind.

"I've got a question, you two," I said. "Is it possible that you keep secrets from each other?"

The two looked at each other and nodded.

"We do, Azuki-san," Taiga said. "My sister and I may be identical twins, and may have known each other all our lives, but that doesn't mean that we know what the other's thinking at all times... nor do we want to."

"Taiga's right," Tatsuki said. "It's only natural that even close friends would have secrets between them."

"Right," I said. "Would being the traitor be one such secret?"

The two sisters paused for a moment. My question before had been easy enough to answer, but this one, the one relevant to the killing game, was another story.

"You're trying to find out if one of us is the traitor, aren't you?" Tatsuki said.

"Yeah," I said, "since it's possible that the traitor told someone else."

"We know," Taiga said, "but think about it this way. Assuming my sister or I is the traitor, wouldn't Monokuma at least be able to guess that we told the other about the killing game?"

"Good point," I said, "but Monokuma said that the traitor didn't tell him about an accomplice, not that he couldn't figure it out on his own. Of course, I do have to wonder- does the traitor really need the accomplice's help when they've got Monokuma?"

Even though Monokuma often talked about the existence of traitor, I had to wonder whether that person had played any actual role in the killing game, since none of our talents were all that well-suited to it.

"I don't know," Tatsuki said. "Taiga and I do everything together, and we wouldn't have become a hit without her writing the songs, but if I was the traitor, then the only reason I'd tell Taiga about the killing game was so that she'd be able to stay out it."

Taiga nodded, but seemed a bit uncomfortable.

"That's right, sis," Taiga said, "but even if I was okay with the killing game, I wouldn't just let you walk in and risk your life. If Monokuma wanted you to make an appearance, I guess I'd just switch places with you."

I furrowed my brow. The idea of an evil mastermind being impersonated by her twin sister sounded like something out of a video game, but that was beside the point for now.

"Look, it's not that I don't believe what you're saying," I said, "but if we can hypothetically imagine either of you being the mastermind, we can imagine either of you not actually giving a shit about the other. Maybe one of you is acting alone, rather than partners-in-crime with your sister."

"That is possible, Azuki-san," Taiga said, "but at the same time, I can't bring myself to doubt my sister any more than Nagato-san could doubt her mother, or Himemiya-san and Tsukimura-san could doubt each other. Maybe, if one of them's the traitor, then the person closest to her is her accomplice, but for now, I think that it's only natural that each pair would trust each other."
I decided to let the subject drop for now, but I had to wonder why Monokuma would include people who knew and loved each other. If he wanted blood, then it would probably be easier to round up convicted murderers and grant a pardon to the one who graduated, or choose people who already hated each other. While there were so many people out there who seemed like "better" choices for a killing game, our class had been chosen for a reason, and we'd have to find out why.

As night fell, Monokuma once again sent out a message, and all of us returned to the ship. I was the first back, and I counted each of the students as they returned one by one, letting out a sigh of relief when my fifteenth classmate boarded. Not only had no one murdered them, but Monokuma would not punish them for breaking the rules... at least for tonight.

Once everyone was back on the ship, and Higurashi and Nagato had finished reporting in to our teacher, I went to meet with Nagato-sensei.

"I have a question, Nagato-sensei," I said. "If you knew who the traitor was, what would you suggest that we do with them?"

Nagato-sensei paused.

"Do you mean how to deal with them, or how to punish them?" Nagato-sensei said.

"Mainly the former," I said, "but I'm also curious about the latter."

"As long as we're in the killing game, I'd suggest that the traitor be kept somewhere they cannot harm the others," Nagato-sensei said, "possibly locked up in a cell like mine. If we manage to escape, I'd suggest turning the traitor over to the authorities, who'd know best how to handle such a person. It's not that I don't trust you; it's just that you're too deeply involved in this killing game to be impartial."

"Fair enough, Sensei," I said. "Of course, I don't suppose you're in favor of searching for the culprit either, are you?"

Nagato-sensei nodded.

"Indeed," Nagato-sensei said, "and I was glad that Chiyuri and Higurashi-san were of the same mind. The last thing I want is for any of my students to kill each other, no matter the reason."

"I agree," I said, "but we may have to one day deal with a student murdering another... and then being executed for the crime."

"I know," Nagato-sensei said, "and the prospect breaks my heart. Chiyuri may be my only daughter, but I consider all my students to be like my children. If sacrificing one will save the others, then so be it, but parents cannot bear to lose their children."

As professional as Nagato-sensei was, she also remained emotionally invested in her children, even in a situation like this. Perhaps even that sentiment was a lie, but her expression of it was heartfelt enough and I had little evidence, so I let it slide, and said good night to her.

I returned to our cabin and met up with Nagato.

"Welcome back, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "How was your day?"

"Decent enough, all things considered," I said. "In a situation like this, any day when no one dies is
Nagato smiled politely and nodded. After we changed into our night-time clothes, I asked Nagato something that had been on my mind since lunch.

"Anyway, Nagato, I'd like to know something" I said. "Are you all right with my calling you by your last name without honorifics?"

"Certainly," Nagato said. "I'm fine with whatever you want to call me."

I furrowed my brow, wondering if Nagato was nice, or just a bit of a pushover. A part of me felt kind of bad about her feeling as though she had to address me formally when I was casual with her, so I decided to see if she was willing to follow my example.

"Thanks," I said. "If I asked you to call me 'Azuki', leaving off the honorifics, would you do it?"

Nagato paused.

"If you really wanted me, to I could, Azuki...san," Nagato said, hastily correcting herself.

"Oh, I guess not," I said. "Sorry, just treat me like always."

"Thank you very much, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

Nagato blushed. At times, I forgot that it didn't just take a lot of courage to ask for permission to address someone less formally, but also to actually take that step yourself.

"No problem," I said. "I was just curious about why you're so polite with most people."

"There are a few reasons," Nagato said. "As you might have guessed, my mom raised me well, and expected me to practice good manners, even if other people don't show me the same courtesy."

"Got it," I said. "But why show good manners to the rude pricks who aren't even nice to you?"

"I've actually found that it can help smooth things over when dealing with difficult people," Nagato said. "If nothing else, rudeness only gives them more reason to give me a hard time."

Something told me that Nagato wasn't just talking about her callers, but whatever it was, she wasn't willing to tell me about it.

"I see," I said. "Well, you won't have to worry about sucking up to me, but it's also fine if you want to stay polite."

"Thank you very much," Nagato said.

After Monokuma gave his Night Time announcement, and Nagato said her prayers, we went to bed, and I lay in bed with a lot on my mind. While Nagato was probably a polite person by nature, as well as one who kept people at arms' length, I wanted her to feel comfortable enough around me that she could be herself. Perhaps we all showed different faces to different people- especially me, since I was an actress- but I hoped that whatever way Nagato chose to act around me would be out of choice, rather than obligation or necessity.

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Monokuma Theater

*It's really tough to subvert people's expectations, you know?*
Ordinarily, people have a good idea of what kind of outcome they can expect, and aren't too surprised when it happens.

But if you say you're going to do something people won't expect, then they'll expect the opposite of what they usually expect.

And if you go back and do what they expect, they expected it anyway.

But wait a minute- just what are you expecting, anyhow?

Oh well, I'll just do whatever.

Day 6

Nagato and I woke up once again, with her giving me a formal "Good morning, Azuki-san," and I giving her a casual "Morning, Nagato."

"I'm curious about something, Nagato," I said. "Does Monokuma talk to you in your sleep?"

"No," Nagato said. "Are you saying he does that to you?"

"Yeah," I said. "Every night since we got here, he shows up and puts on a Monokuma Theater. I thought it might be a one-time thing, but now that it's happening every night, I'm starting to wonder if I'm going crazy."

Nagato shook her head reassuringly.

"I don't think you are, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Monokuma is practically everywhere on this school trip, so it's not surprising that he's on your mind."

As if on cue, Monokuma showed up once again for the morning announcement- there would be cooler temperatures and a chance of showers in the afternoon.

"Case in point," I said.

"True," Nagato said. "But like I said just now, you seem to be holding up well, all things considered."

"Thanks, I guess," I said. "Don't get me wrong, I'm sure you meant it in a positive way- it's just that it's hard to tell who's going to snap until someone winds up dead."

We got dressed, then headed for breakfast. While our routine gave a sense of comfort, the past two days had shaken up the status quo, so I could only imagine what today would bring.

At breakfast, as Nagato and I sat down with Kojima and Kurogane, Monokuma showed up.

"Hello, class!" Monokuma said. "Are you enjoying your breakfast?"

"You again?" I said. "Don't tell me you're pissed off just because we haven't killed anyone yet."

"Oh, I'm not angry, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "It wasn't even about that. I just wanted to let you know of a special event I have planned for tonight- a night at the local inn! Be there at 6 PM, or be square... and dead!"
So we were finally getting around to the main event for this island, as well as the namesake for its theme. It seemed harmless enough, but there had to be a catch somewhere.

"But wouldn't this be against the rules?" Sasaki said. "I thought we had to stay the night in our cabins."

"Well, there's an exception to that," Monokuma said. "Check the rules- they've been revised."

**Rule 18: For special events, or if the entire class is unable to return to the ship, the curfew is waived. In such cases, students may sleep anywhere they wish if there is no designated sleeping area.**

"I understand," one of the sisters said, "but what about the designated sleeping area part? Since we're staying at the inn, that doesn't apply, does it?"

"You're right about that, Tachibana-san," Monokuma said. "We have rooms available for you there, and they'll be your designated sleeping areas for as long as you stay there."

"How long is that?" Yamazaki said.

"It depends," Monokuma said. "How long do you think it'll take for someone to commit murder?"

So this was the "catch." Obviously, Monokuma wouldn't- or perhaps couldn't- harm us if we didn't break any rules, but he could encourage us to kill one another If no one had taken him up on his offer, then maybe this would be the key factor in encouraging murder.

"Do we get to leave?" Kojima said.

"Yep," Monokuma said. "You'll have to stay in the inn from 6 PM until 8 AM, but other than that, you're free to explore the island all you like. Think of it as a bit like the Ursa Major for the time being, and don't worry- I'll make sure to feed you."

Nagato turned pale. While technically speaking, the inn had all the necessities that the Ursa Major did- food, shelter and a place to sleep in accordance with Monokuma's rules- one thing it didn't have was her mother.

"What about Mom?" Nagato said.

"Sorry, Nagato-san," Monokuma said, "but if you can't set foot on the ship, you won't get to see her. Go see her while you can, since you might not be back for a while... if ever."

Nagato meekly nodded, unwilling to argue with Monokuma any further, but it was obvious that she wasn't happy about this. I couldn't blame her, either, since while my mom could be gone for days at a time, I could at least be fairly certain that she'd make it home... even though one day, my dad had left home and never come back.

"If you don't have any questions, I'll be going soon," Monokuma said. "See you at the inn at 6- or else!"

Monokuma left. Since there was almost an hour left before we could head to the island, let alone almost half a day until the inn party began, we didn't feel all that much urgency, but still wanted to discuss it.

"An inn party?" Higurashi said. "This could be an opportunity for us to bond as a group."
"Or for someone to commit murder," Karita said. "If Monokuma's goals are to get us to kill each other, then having us grow closer definitely isn't what he has in mind."

"Exactly, Karita-kun," Higurashi said, "since the more we care for our classmates, the less likely we are to sacrifice them for our own survival. Perhaps having everyone be friends is too much to ask, but I would like to achieve a sense of togetherness here."

"That's all well and good," I said, "but I bet there's at least one asshole here who's evil enough to kill their own classmate, and I'm not just talking about the traitor."

I wasn't about to throw around the word "friends" for us, and not just because some of us hated each other's guts. Sure, some of us had known each other all their lives, but most of us were strangers, and there was no way of knowing who wouldn't be willing to kill.

"I wouldn't call those people 'evil,' Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "Perhaps the traitor allowed us to go into this killing game with malicious intent- assuming that there isn't some other reason- but most of us are simply desperate to survive and escape. I simply hope to give us a way to do that... together."

"Ah, yes, the Prisoner's Dilemma," Karita said. "If both you and your accomplice stay silent, you both get a relatively light sentence. Of course, that sort of mentality is easy to take advantage of if your accomplice is counting on you to do the same... or thinks you'll talk."

"I guess you've got experience with that, Karita," Asakura said. "Oh, wait- you don't have accomplices. It's just yourself and the people you can use for your personal gain."

While I agreed that Karita was suspicious, he hadn't lied or given us reason to distrust him... yet.

"Enough bickering," Higurashi said. "Karita-kun has a fair point, since our success will require all of us to cooperate and put our trust in each other."

We dropped the subject for now, but none of us forgot the difficulty of what Higurashi was asking of us- not even Higurashi himself.

We headed to the island for the day. This time, I noticed that some of the others were a bit slow in getting off the ship, probably because they wanted to make sure they had everything they needed. Since we were in for some rain, some of us needed our umbrellas.

I didn't see some of my classmates get off the ship- Yamazaki, Asakura, Mihama and a couple others- but I didn't have time to worry about them. Either they'd followed Monokuma's rules, possibly by getting off before I did, or they'd get punished. It was foolish to expect too much from my classmates at this point in the "game," but I hoped none of us were stupid enough to get killed in such a foolish manner.

As 9 AM rolled around, I set out to explore the island, hoping that any classmates would still be among the living.

While walking around the island, I found Kurogane at the coast, looking out at sea.

"Hey, Kurogane," I said. "Something on your mind?"

"I've been thinking about what Higurashi-kun said this morning," Kurogane said, "and while I do agree that we should stand beside him and work together as a class, it's not exactly easy."
"Yeah, no kidding," I said. "What tipped you off?"

"Well, if you think about it, then it's fairly obvious," Kurogane said. "How many of us actually have to work as a team to succeed at our talents?"

I paused to think for a moment.

"I do," I said, "since I've got to work with the other actors and production crew. Sasaki has to work with her assistants and her editor. Kojima was in charge of designing his video game. The twins work together, although Tatsuki's the only one on stage during a concert. I think Higurashi was on his student council, but it's just him whenever he gives a speech. Himemiya was on an archery team, but she's the only one firing her bow."

"Exactly," Kurogane said. "Most of us are used to working by ourselves, and in competition with their peers. It's difficult for us to combine our talents and put each to optimal use in a situation like this."

"Definitely," I said, "but I think the killing game isn't the only problem- we don't have a lot of people who are suited to the situation at hand. When I do an acting job, I work under famous directors, who have years of experience and a lot of successes under their belts, not to mention that they're signing my paychecks. Meanwhile, we've got Higurashi, whose only advantage over us is being good at public speaking and wanting to take on the job of leading us. Not a lot of people would want to work for him if he was hiring."

Kurogane nodded.

"You're probably right about that, Azuki-san," Kurogane said. "To be honest, I asked Kojima-kun if he had any interest in becoming our leader, since he was head of the group that developed his game, but he refused."

"Why'd he do that?" I said. "Does he think Higurashi would do a better job?"

"You could say that," Kurogane said. "He said that when he and his friends worked on their game together, he didn't think of himself as the 'boss' or anything. They trusted him enough to do what he said, and he trusted them enough to not have to crack down on them. He said he couldn't think of anyone he'd trust enough to do that."

"I guess not," I said.

"At any rate, I don't regret voting for Higurashi-kun," Kurogane said. "Even if it's difficult, we still need to work together, and someone has to lead us, even if that person isn't the best choice."

I said goodbye to Kurogane and continued on my walk, thinking about our conversation. I felt as though I better understood just how hard it was to be the leader of a group like this, and had mixed feelings about the realization. On the one hand, it certainly didn't give me any reason to expect that Higurashi would succeed, but on the other hand, I had to give him credit for trying. I certainly wouldn't hold back from criticizing him if he said or did something naïve, but I had no desire to needlessly or maliciously undermine his authority.

I ate lunch alone today. After lunch, I found Kirishima in the streets.

"I'd like to ask you something, Kirishima," I said. "I've noticed that you disagree about a lot of things with Higurashi- what do you suppose is the cause of it?"
"A difference in attitudes," Kirishima said. "Some would say that he is idealistic and I am pragmatic, but while that is true to some extent, that is overly simplistic."

"So what's the real story?" I said.

Kirishima paused.

"I would call it a question of knowledge," Kirishima said, "particularly how to obtain it and what to do with it. As a scientist, making new discoveries is my life's work, and I do not believe in remaining content with ignorance. There may be many questions that cannot be answered in our lifetimes, but that does not mean we should not try to seek the answer."

"I thought you'd say something like that," I said, "but what about Higurashi?"

"He fancies himself an authority figure," Kirishima said, "and seeks order, whether for the good of the people or to secure his own power, is fearful of anything that might disrupt that order. Since new knowledge cannot easily be forgotten, and leads to people questioning their assumptions, then it is only natural that leaders would be afraid of people learning new things."

"I suppose I get what you're saying," I said, "but how does the traitor's identity fit into all this?"

"There are a few possibilities," Kirishima said. "If we became aware of a possible suspect for the traitor, we would be forced to confront the reality that one of us is a willing participant in this killing game, and decide how to deal with that person. Higurashi-kun would have an enemy to unite against, but his platitudes about working together would no longer have the weight they once did."

"And what if we're wrong?" I said. "I definitely believe we need to know the traitor's identity, but we also have to make sure we have the right person."

"We certainly do, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said, "which is why Mihama-kun and I are thinking things over and trying to logically deduce the traitor's identity, rather than simply killing whoever we consider most suspicious."

"Good plan," I said. "Just don't rush into things, okay?"

Kirishima nodded tentatively, even though it was clear he didn't completely trust me. It wasn't too hard to believe, since any of our actions could be interpreted differently based on whether we were the traitor. Just as normal people might advise caution when searching for the traitor(or even argue that we give up on the search), lest tragedy ensue, the traitor would want to discourage the search to avoid being found. Likewise, anyone who urged that we root out the traitor could easily be the traitor, trying to pin the blame on someone else. Moreover, any of us- traitor or otherwise- could die in this killing game, and probably would. The only outcome that the traitor wouldn't possibly accept is us sitting on our asses and not killing each other, but luckily for them, there wasn't much chance of that.

As the afternoon rain began to fall, I took shelter in the inn. As I headed to the common area, I saw Sasaki and Tsukimura taking a look around.

"Hello, Akira-chan," Sasaki said.

"Hey, you two," I said. "Are you two here for a particular reason, or are just trying to get out of the rain?"
Both girls nodded.

"I wanted to inspect the inn, and see how clean it is," Tsukimura said, "and Sayuri-chan was nice enough to accompany me."

"Good plan," I said. "So, how does it look?"

"Quite nice," Tsukimura said. "Thanks to the fact that few people have been in here, and Monokuma's no littering rule, no one has made a mess."

So the inn was yet another building that was in pristine condition.

"Unfortunately, there's one place I'm not sure I can get into," Tsukimura said, "namely, the boys' bathroom."

"If you're worried about being found out, I'll go with you," I said. "Luckily enough, I don't think any of the guys are enough of a hardass that they'd mind."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Tsukimura said. "Let's head over."

We headed to the boys' bathroom, and, after looking to see whether anyone was in the halls, we peered inside to confirm that the coast was clear, then quickly and quietly slipped in. There were a couple toilet stalls (one of which was handicapped-accessible) and urinals and a pair of sinks with a mirror. It all seemed like a standard public bathroom, but it was surprisingly clean, and there wasn't even any graffiti on the walls. In one stall, however, there was a tool box- a metallic rectangular case that didn't seem to be locked- laying around.

"So, it looks like the boys' bathroom is in working order," Tsukimura said, "but why is there a tool box here?"

"Maybe it was left here before," I said. "After all, none of us set foot inside until now."

"Could be," Sasaki said. "I... had to use the ladies' room in the inn a few times over the past three days, but I didn't notice anything there. I suppose we'll just assume that the toolkit belongs there and call this restroom clean."

We nodded, then exited, leaving the tool kit where we'd found it. While there was a chance that someone could use one of the tools as a weapon, since the box was in an out of the way place that only half the student body could access, it was probably in the safest spot on the island.

"Thank you for your help, Azuki-san," Tsukimura said. "With this, my investigation is now complete."

"No problem," I said.

"I'm also glad I could come along, Akira-chan, Kanae-chan," Sasaki said. "I felt like a bit of a rebel going into the boys' bathroom."

I stifled a snicker.

"Yeah, that's really exciting," I said. "Was your old school really strict or something?"

Sasaki nodded.

"Yes, it was," Sasaki said, "The dress code was strictly enforced, as was the ban on jewelry, makeup or other accessories. Students had to go straight home after class, and it was difficult to get
permission for part time jobs- my manga was no exception. Students also weren't allowed to date
each other, and don't get me started on relationships between students and teachers. It definitely
wasn't like any of those schools you see in anime or manga."

When Sasaki put it that way, it was easy to understand. A lot of fictional organizations- schools,
workplaces and the like- were a lot more tolerant of eccentricity and fooling around than their real
life counterparts. Of course, none of the places we'd went to school or worked at before were
willing to kill us if we broke rules, unlike Monokuma.

"That sounds pretty rough," I said. "I think Himemiya mentioned that her and Tsukimura's school
was similar?"

"Yes, Himeno-sama did," Tsukimura said, "and that was also one of the first things that I discussed
with Sayuri-chan."

"Exactly, Kanae-chan," Sasaki said. "When I first met you, you seemed a bit repressed and overly
formal, so I'm glad that you could relax around me. That side of you is more lively, and even cute."

Tsukimura blushed.

"Th-thank you," Tsukimura said. "I hope that I can eventually show that side to Himeno-sama."

"I'm sure Himemiya-san would be happy to see it," Sasaki said.

I nodded, and we decided to get back to investigating the inn.

Sasaki, Tsukimura and I spent the rest of the afternoon checking out the inn, and got done around
the time the rain stopped, with our resident maid giving it a clean bill of health. Sasaki had decided
to leave shortly afterward, and after she left, Himemiya came in.

"Oh, hello, Kanae, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "What are you up to?"

"Good afternoon, Himeno…-sama," Tsukimura said, blushing as she corrected herself. "We wanted
to see whether the inn was ready for the party."

"Of course it is!" Monokuma said, popping up out of nowhere. "You think I'd let you spend the
night in a pigsty?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," I said. "After all, your goal is to get us all killed, right?"

"To get you to kill each other," Monokuma said. "It's no fun if you get sick and die because you
happened to starve to death, get sick or something like that. This inn's made just for you, so you
should expect a five-star treatment."

I found it difficult to believe that Monokuma had made this entire island "just for" us, but if that
was true, it would explain why everything seemed almost brand-new, and why there was no one
else around.

"Five-star may be a bit of an exaggeration," Himemiya said. "Father has been to far more luxurious
hotel rooms on his business travels."

"I don't want any complaints out of you, Himemiya-san," Monokuma said. "This should be good
enough for you girls, and if it isn't… you can kill someone. If you get away with it, you graduate,
but if you don't, you don't have to stay here any longer. Make with the killing, people."
Monokuma left.

"I'd like to know something," I said. "How does this compare to back home? I wouldn't know, since I live in a cheap apartment."

"Neither would I," Tsukimura said, "since I sleep in the servants' quarters with a few other young maids."

"It actually isn't that bad," Himemiya said. "Personally, all I need is a room that's large enough for me to sleep in and to fit my belongings. Maybe it's because we didn't bring much on the trip, but our cabin's the perfect size for me."

"Wow," I said. "I thought you'd take living in the lap of luxury for granted."

Himemiya shrugged.

"I understand why you think I might be naïve about something like that," Himemiya said. "When I was young, I once wondered if I could be a servant just like Kanae, so she wouldn't have to treat me special. Kanae talked me out of it, though, since she wanted me to enjoy what I had."

"True," Tsukimura said, "but I think Himeno-sama would be good at being a maid. She's what people call a 'neat freak,' keeping her room clean so that the other servants and I don't have to work as hard."

"It's just the responsible thing to do," Himemiya said, blushing slightly, "and while you do set the bar fairly high, I couldn't handle all the chores that you and your coworkers do for a living. After all, my family pays you to do the jobs they can't do themselves."

Tsukimura nodded.

"I'm glad I could help out," Tsukimura said, "not just with your family, but also putting my skills to the benefit of our group, even in a small way. I believe all of us can be of use to our class, no matter where our talents lie."

I admired the sentiment, even as I struggled to find a way I could use my acting talents for the benefit of others. While I had my doubts about whether we could cooperate, I also didn't intend to endanger the class by selfishly prioritizing my own interests, and hoped that there was some way I could help.

At 6 PM, the entire class met up in the lobby, which was the only room large enough for sixteen people to fit together. Some of us had taken some things with them, such as decks of cards or books, apparently to help pass the time while in the inn. Once we were inside, Monokuma jumped up onto the front desk and got our attention.

"I'm glad to see everyone's here," Monokuma said, "because it's time for your room assignments. The north girls' room will have Azuki-san, Nagato-san, Himemiya-san and Tsukimura-san. The south girls' room will have Sasaki-san, Mihama-san, and both Tachibana sisters. The north boys' room will have Kirishima-san, Higurashi-san, Kurogane-san and Kojima-san. The south boys' room will have Asakura-san, Karita-san, Yamazaki-san and Kumakura-san. Each room will have yukatas for the four boys or girls in it to wear- blue for the former, pink for the latter- with the wearers' names on them so you won't get confused."

So once again, Karita and Asakura were stuck together. On the one hand, if they hadn't killed each other after five nights of sharing a room together, they were unlikely to do so now that they had
two witnesses who could break up a fight or tell the others what happened. On the other hand, the fact that no one had killed each other thus far didn't mean that we'd do so now.

"That's useful information," Higurashi said. "Do we get room keys?"

"Nope!" Monokuma said. "None of the doors in this hotel are locked."

"You've got to be kidding," I said. "Anyone can get into our rooms?"

"Of course!" Monokuma said. "After all, it would be a hassle for the murderer if they couldn't get into their victim's room."

So this was what Monokuma was getting at. He was hoping to get us into a relatively.

"Tonight, we'll have a few events," Monokuma said. "Dinner will be at 6 PM, and at 6:30, the baths will open. The girls will be in from 6:30 to 7, and the guys will have a turn from 7 to 7:30. You don't have to bathe, but if you go in during the wrong time, you'll be punished."

I checked the handbook, but didn't see any new rules. Mihama was apparently a bit faster on the draw, as she spoke while I was busy looking at my handbook.

"I do not see this rule in the handbook, Monokuma," Mihama said. "Is it not official?"

"Think of it as a sort of 'house rule,' Mihama-san," Monokuma said, "a one-time only thing that's just for tonight. Of course, if you break that rule, I'll make certain that your misbehaving is also a one-time only thing, if you get my drift."

Mihama simply nodded, since her question had been answered.

"So there you have it, kids," Monokuma said. "Behave yourselves, and if you're gonna kill someone- the traitor or anyone else- just don't get caught!"

Monokuma hopped down, behind the front desk, and departed.

"Well, you heard him," Higurashi said. "We may as well enjoy our night in this inn, even if the circumstances could be better. For now, why don't you go to your rooms and get settled in? You can change into your yukatas after you're out of the bath."

We split up and headed to our rooms.

My group headed to our room, which was marked as "North Girls" on the sign outside the room. It was a traditional Japanese inn room with tatami mats on the floor, a futon in each corner, and a small table in the center of the room. There was a window in the back of the room, but it didn't seem to open. The ceiling of the room had planks supported by rafters.

On top of each futon, there was a pink yukata in a plastic bag that had the wearer's name and measurements on a label, and I picked up the one that said "Akira Azuki-sama." The yukata itself didn't have any markings on it that would distinguish it from the others, but it seemed to be my size.

"So Monokuma really did go to all the trouble of getting clothing for us," I said. "It's pretty amazing."

"Quite true," Nagato said. "I suppose you're speaking from experience, right?"
"Yeah," I said. "Not only do I have to buy school uniforms like everyone else, but I also had to get sized up for costumes. It's a good thing that I'm not really tall, like Kumakura, or short, like Mihama, so they don't have to get odd sizes."

"Mihama-san probably has the hardest time," Tsukimura said, "since she's still growing. On the other hand, if Monokuma knew in advance that an eleven year old girl was part of this cruise, then he could prepare clothing for her. It has been almost a week since the killing game started, after all."

I did calculations in my head. A week probably wasn't enough time to get a delivery out to the middle of nowhere, but maybe Monokuma had a supplier somewhere that could come through for him on short notice.

I checked my watch and saw that it was a few minutes before 6:30 PM.

"Looks like it's almost our bath time," I said. "Let's take our yukatas and go to the baths."

The girls nodded, then headed over, one by one, with me bringing up the rear.

On the way to the baths, I saw Kojima. I couldn't tell if he was just taking a stroll, or walking around in hopes of finding me.

"Hey, Azuki," Kojima said. "Where are you off to?"

"The baths, of course," I said, "along with the rest of the girls. You can get in once we're done at 7."

"Got it," Kojima said. "I did hear the times from Monokuma. Besides, I'm not interested in anyway."

"Good," I said. "In that case, since you understand, if I see you near the bath while we're in it, I'll know better than to chalk it up to a misunderstanding."

Kojima nodded.

"I'm well aware," Kojima said. "You know, Azuki, while I do think you're good looking, and I do like you that way, I know better than to peep on you."

"I should hope so," I said, "for your sake, that is."

"Oh, you can believe it," Kojima said. "After all, even if you don't get violent, acting like a pervert would only end up making you hate me, which is the last thing I want."

"You say that like I don't hate you already," I said. "But seriously, Kojima, while I do find you annoying, I do believe that you're a decent guy at heart. Don't let me down."

"I won't," Kojima said. "Well, see you later."

As Kojima left, I wasn't entirely convinced by his promise. While I was pretty honest when the situations allowed it, I knew that there were a lot of questions to which there was only one acceptable answer. Of course Kojima would say that he'd never dream of looking at the girl he had a crush on while she was naked, nor would he kill a classmate and sacrifice everyone else to stay alive, but that didn't mean he wouldn't do either. With that unsettling thought in mind, I continued to the baths, on my guard.
The eight girls convened in the changing room, and saw sixteen lockers, eight along each wall. After getting undressed, we stashed our uniforms there, along with our yukatas, and headed inside, each of us taking a towel.

The open air baths were a round hot spring surrounded by tall bamboo walls, with the rocks and water below us and the night sky, along with a Monodrone, above us. While it was easy enough to forget about the Monodrone, I couldn't help but feel a bit exposed.

"You seem a bit tense, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Are you perhaps worried that the guys might be peeping on us?"

"Kind of," I said. "Kojima did say that he was above that sort of thing, but you'll have to forgive me if I don't entirely believe him. If I find out that he looked at any of us, I'll beat him within an inch of his life."

While I wasn't anywhere near as strong as Kumakura, or anyone who did bodybuilding, sports or martial arts, I was fairly physically fit for a girl my age. Since Kojima seemed pretty skinny and didn't seem to exercise much, I could probably beat him in a fistfight- even if he was willing to hit me, a girl and the one he had a crush on. Judging from everyone else's faces, they believed me.

"Um, isn't that a little harsh?" Nagato said.

"I'd say it's just harsh enough," I said. "There's nothing harmless about small acts of perversion like this, and treating a tendency to engage in them as a harmless quirk only serves to legitimize them... and encourage worse acts. Besides, anyone who'd peep on a girl like Mihama and find it arousing is the scum of the earth."

"I appreciate the consideration, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "but... there is not much to see here."

Mihama's flat chest told me everything I needed to know.

"Just give it a few years, Miharu-chan," Sasaki said.

I shook my head. Not only was Himemiya probably the best-endowed of all of us, with Sasaki a close second, but in a situation like this, it was more likely that someone would die tonight than that all of us would make it a few years.

"Large breasts are overrated," Himemiya said, "and I say that as someone who's attracted to wom-er, would be considered an attractive woman by that metric. While there doesn't seem to be any truth to the myth that the Amazons cut off one of their breasts to better draw their bows, it's obviously harder to fit my breasts into the chestguard I wear when practicing my archery."

I noticed that in addition to her large breasts, Himemiya was surprisingly muscular, most likely because of her archery practice. Even if she didn't have her bow and arrows, she was probably the girl Kojima should fear the most if he tried to peep on us.

Speaking of Kojima, I eventually got a bit more relaxed as I made small talk with the other girls as we bathed and washed each other's backs. Feel free to imagine us in there if you want... while I imagine myself stomping on your private parts with a pair of combat boots.

While we were sitting there, I heard some music from inside the inn. I wasn't too much of a music aficionado, but it sounded like traditional Japanese music.

"Do you girls hear that?" I said.
"We do," Tatsuki said, "but I can't recognize it."

Taiga nodded, her birthmark clearly visible considering that she was "wearing" a towel, rather than a collared shirt.

"Neither do I," Taiga, said, "but frankly, it's rather amateurish. The performers aren't too bad, but the melody seems fairly random, not to mention louder than it should be."

I couldn't help but feel a bit worried. Judging from how far away we were from the sound, it didn't seem loud enough to drown out someone's cries for help, but perhaps we might end up missing something.

Before too long, we heard an announcement from the Monodrone above us.

"It is now 6:55," Monokuma's voice said. "Please be sure that you're out of the baths by 7:00, so the boys can get in."

For us, that was our cue to get out post-haste. While the boys probably weren't champing at the bit to get in the baths at 7 PM on the dot, it was likely that the Monodrone would use its Gatling guns on any girl still in the pool, so getting out was the safest route to take.

After getting out of the bath, the eight of us changed into our pink yukatas, and took our handbooks, cabin keys, clothes and other belongings with us. Once we emerged from the changing area, we saw Kirishima, Karita and Asakura, still dressed in their normal clothes. Since I didn't have much desire to talk with Kirishima or Karita unless it was about the killing game, and I didn't have any desire to talk to Asakura, I simply walked by them, along with the other girls.

What did surprise me, though, was that the bath wasn't exactly popular with the guys. While all eight of us girls had bathed together, less than half of the boys seemed willing to follow suit. I wasn't sure whether to chalk it up to personal tastes, or the fact that the guys going in weren't especially popular, but it did seem a bit strange.

Once we reached the north girls' room, we went our separate ways. The twins headed to the south room, Sasaki and Mihama headed to the common area, and the four of us from the north room went back there, at which point Tsukimura started gathering our clothes together.

"I'm going to do the laundry," Tsukimura said, "and when I'm done with the girls' clothes, I'll stop by the boys' rooms to see if they have anything they need cleaned."

"Got it," Himemiya said. "Don't work too hard."

"Understood, Himeno," Tsukimura said. "I'll be back after I'm done."

Tsukimura bowed and then excused herself. As she did, I saw that Himemiya was grinning ear from ear.

"So, Tsukimura finally dropped the '-sama' from your name," I said. "Aren't you going to say anything about it?"

"What should I say?" Himemiya said. "If she'd asked me for permission, I would have said yes, but she simply chose to do that spontaneously, so there's no point in calling attention to it."

I silently conceded Himemiya's point. After all, she knew Tsukimura better than anyone else here.
"Personally speaking, Himemiya-san, I think it's significant," Nagato said. "I've never been able to address my peers with anything more casual than 'san,' so I'm a bit jealous that Tsukimura-san had the confidence to call you by your first name without honorifics, even though she's your servant."

"She's also my best friend," Himemiya said, "and nothing makes me happier than the fact that she can finally consider herself a friend first, and a servant second."

I briefly wondered what things would be like if Tsukimura and Nagato had swapped places. "Kanae Nagato" probably would be mostly the same, showing her mother respect as a teacher while also being devoted to her as a dutiful daughter. On the other hand, "Chiyuri Tsukimura" would have gotten along with Himemiya, but the two probably would never have become friends. In the end, there wasn't much point in dwelling on it.

"Anyway," Himemiya said, "I'd like to go check on the others. Would either of you like to come with me?"

"Sure," I said. "What about you, Nagato?"

"I'll come with you, too," Nagato said, "if you're fine with it, that is."

Himemiya nodded, and led us out of the room. She and Nagato weren't exactly close friends—then again, hardly anyone here was—but the two could, at the very least, get along well enough to spend some time together.

The three of us stopped by the gym and saw Kumakura and Higurashi there. The former was bench-lifting a barbell that seemed too heavy for any human to possibly lift, and the latter was spotting him.

"You guys aren't in the bath?" I said.

"Maybe we'll go later," Kumamkura said. "For now, Higurashi-kun's helping me as my spotter."

"In more ways than one," Higurashi said. "Not only am I helping Kumakura-kun lift, but I'm also keeping an eye out for anyone who might stop by."

"Namely us," I said.

Higurashi shook his head after helping Kumakura complete his latest set.

"Not just you," Higurashi said. "Having a witness around makes it much less likely that anyone will end up killing you."

I agreed. The reason why no one had committed a murder this long wasn't necessarily because we were too good to do so—it was because the would-be killers were too cautious to blow their one chance at graduating.

As we were talking, I looked around the room, and saw the shot put balls.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Did someone take one of the shot puts in the last two days?"

Kumakura took a moment to put the barbell back on the rack, then walked over to investigate.

"It looks like it," Kumakura said. "It was probably earlier today, since it didn't look any different when I used the gym yesterday afternoon. I don't keep track of the shot puts too closely, but it does seem odd."
"It certainly does," Higurashi said. "Someone should probably look for it."

I looked at Nagato and Himemiya, who simply nodded.

"I think the three of us can handle it," I said. "You guys should probably stay here and just make sure no one else steals anything.

"Please do, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "Let me know if you find it."

We then set out to search the inn for the shot put, hoping that whatever the thief was planning, it wasn't too late to prevent it.

After exiting the gym, Himemiya and I returned to the inn, and stopped by the common room, where we saw Sasaki playing table tennis with Mihama. The two didn't notice us until Mihama failed to return Sasaki's serve.

"Oh, hello, girls," Sasaki said. "Would you like to play the winner- that is, me?"

Himemiya shook her head, and Nagato and I followed suit.

"I appreciate the offer, Sasaki-san," Himemiya said, "but I'll have to decline for now, since the three of us just passing through. We're looking for a shot put ball that went missing from the weight room."

"Sorry, Himemiya-san, but I haven't seen one," Sasaki said. "I did go to the weight room earlier today when I was looking the inn over along with Kanae-chan, but I didn't notice any missing. Then again, it was the first time I went there."

So the shot put had gone missing after our investigations... or maybe Sasaki just hadn't noticed it was gone.

"Are you certain?" Mihama said. "It would be difficult to keep close track of how many shot puts are in the box, so it would not seem odd if only one went missing."

"You're probably right," I said. "I hope I'm just imagining things."

We paused awkwardly for a moment. Evidently, the others shared my hope that I was wrong, as well as my fear of what would happen if I was right.

"Anyway, Mihama-san," Nagato said, "I didn't think you or Sasaki-san had a hobby like this."

"We do not," Mihama said, "but on the other hand, that is for the best. Since we are both amateurs at this, then neither of us is at too much of an advantage."

Mihama had a good point, even if she, with her smaller body and shorter arms, was clearly struggling to keep up with Sasaki. If Sasaki was the Ultimate Table Tennis Player, there wouldn't even be a contest.

"Ah, that makes sense," Nagato said. "Since I'm not any good at table tennis, I could join you, but we should probably be going."

"Go ahead, Chiyuri-chan," Sasaki said. "Once you're done, we'll be waiting for you."

We excused ourselves and resumed our investigation. Since nothing seemed out of place with the girls' rooms or the area around the bath, we decided to head to the only place that sprang to mind-
the boys' rooms.

After emerging from the common room, we started with the room to the north. Kurogane and Kojima were still in their room, but they didn't seem to notice us walking by. After passing by the room, Nagato, Himemiya and I stopped for a moment.

"Should we go ask those two if we saw it?" Nagato said.

"I don't know," I said. "I find it unlikely that any occupant of the room would hide something there without either of those two knowing about it. Besides, since Higurashi is with Kumakura, and Kirishima's in the baths, I doubt either one of them would be up to anything."

The bath wasn't the greatest place to commit murder. Not only were you and your target naked, preventing you from hiding weapons or concealing any injuries you might get in a scuffle, but since we bathed in groups, there would be witnesses around.

"So that leaves only the boys in the south room," Himemiya said. "I do recall seeing Asakura-san and Karita-san going into the baths, which only leaves Yamazaki-san. Perhaps we could ask him if he's in his room."

"Assuming he isn't in the little boys' room or something," I said. "But hey, since he's the only one who's alone right now, it's worth a shot."

The three of us entered the south room together. The good news was that we found the shot put ball. The bad news was that it was covered in blood. And the worst news?

We also found Tsukimura lying face-down on a futon in the back right corner, bleeding from a wound to the head.

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**Author's Notes**

Thank you for the favorites and follows.

Sorry for how long it took to get up to the murder. Part of the reason is that I wanted to gradually build up to it, introduce various character, and give some of the ones who die earlier on a bit more focus and development than in the previous fic. As in canon, the downtime between murders can play an important part, too.

As a fun fact about Sasaki, she went to the same school as Reiko Mitamura from Where Talent Goes to Die (a coed academy with dark sailor fukus as its uniform), and is her senpai.

Regarding the murder, I decided to make the revelation of the victim a surprise, since in some cases, you can tell who's going to turn up dead before you actually find them.

Next up is the investigation. I'm looking forward to seeing your guesses as to who you think the culprit might be.

As an omake, here's a what-if scenario of what would have happened if Sasaki and Tsukimura had a talent swap, as well as if Miharu was Nagato-sensei's daughter.

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*Sasaki’s POV*
By now, you've probably heard the story of how we found ourselves in the hotel, and eventually became trapped in a killing game. What you might not have heard, is that things are a bit different this time. My name is Kanae Sasaki, and I'm the Ultimate Manga Artist. My roommate, Miharu Nagato, is the Ultimate Legal Expert, as well as a child prodigy who got into high school at the age of ten and into Talent High School at the age of eleven. She was apparently quite pleased by my decision to address her as "Mihama-san," even when I pointed out that I did the same for everyone else.

We met Nagato-sensei, who happened to be Nagato-san's mother. Out of respect for her position as a teacher, Nagato-san called her mother "Nagato-sensei" without a hint of reluctance. Strangely enough, when asked about her relationship to her teacher, Nagato-san seemed to start to call Nagato-sensei "Mama" before switching to "Mother."

After meeting with Nagato-sensei, we headed to the restaurant, where we encountered two of our classmates- Himeno Himemiya, the Ultimate Archer, and Sayuri Tsukimura, the Ultimate Handmaiden. We exchanged introductions before sitting down together.

"So you're a maid, Tsukimura-san?" I said.

"That's right, Kanae-chan," Tsukimura-san said. "My family has worked for Himeno-chan's family for generations."

"Personally, I think of Sayuri as more of a friend than a servant," Himemiya-san said, "and I'm glad to say that so does she. She has to use '-sama' on me when my family is around, but when it's just the two of us, she's perfectly fine using '-chan' on me."

"Yep," Tsukimura-san said. "We're almost adults, though, so maybe I could start calling you 'Himeno-san' once we're twenty. Or maybe just 'Himeno'?"

"Do whatever you want," Himemiya said, "and the same goes for you two."

"Certainly, Himemiya-san," I said.

Himemiya-san seemed like a good person, so while the life of a servant wasn't one that I would be suited for, I could certainly do a lot worse when it came to employers. Perhaps in another lifetime, one in which I'd been born to the Tsukimura family, we might have ended up as close friends...
Chapter I, Part 5

Deadly Life

I stood there, frozen in shock. I'd seen people die in TV shows and movies, and even saw some
dead bodies in the news, but neither of those prepared me for seeing someone I knew dead, and
nothing could have prepared Himemiya for finding her best friend's dead body.

"KANAE!" Himemiya cried out.

A moment after Himemiya reacted, I heard a ping and checked my student handbook. The moment
I started it up, I saw that I had an email from Monokuma with the subject, "A Body Has Been
Discovered!" Inside the body was a picture of the map of the island, showing the location of
Tsukimura's body and that she was the one who'd been found. The only text was, "After a short
period of investigation, a class trial will be held." Off in the distance, we could hear the
Monodrone inside the bath making an announcement that read the text of the email out loud.

Before long, everyone else arrived. Mihama and Sasaki were among the first on the scene,
followed by Kurogane and Kojima seconds later. The twins came a little while afterward, as did
Kumakura and Higurashi. The last on the scene were Kirishima, Karita, Asakura and Yamazaki-
the former three were the only boys wearing yukatas. As everyone arrived, they either gasped or
stood in stunned silence.

Suddenly, Monokuma appeared before us, leaping onto the table in the center of the room.

"Good to see you're all here," Monokuma said. "Like I said in the email, the investigation period
has now started, and you've got a limited amount of time to find out who killed Tsukimura-san. If
she was the traitor, you wouldn't have to do this, but since she isn't, it's gonna be just like any other
murder."

"Of course she isn't," Himemiya muttered.

If the victim was anyone else, I'd find it odd that Himemiya believed Monokuma so easily, given
that the other day, she'd been skeptical about the idea that Monokuma would honestly admit that
we'd kill the traitor. Now that Tsukimura was the first to die, though, it made perfect sense that
she'd know that Tsukimura wasn't the traitor. She'd been a suspect, but not a very likely one, and it
was far more plausible that she'd be the accomplice or a fall guy for Himemiya than the actual
traitor.

"So what do we have to do?" Yamazaki said.

"Play detective," Monokuma said, "which means investigating the crime scene, questioning your
classmates and gathering evidence. When the time comes for the trial, you'll have to talk things out
and come to an agreement on the culprit. Speaking of evidence, here's a Monokuma File that
reveals when, where and how Tsukimura-san died- the only thing that's left is who killed her and
why. Check your handbooks for the goods."

We checked our handbooks

Monokuma File 1

The victim is Kanae Tsukimura, the Ultimate Handmaiden
The body was discovered inside the south boys' room of the inn.

The approximate time of death was 7:10 PM

The victim appears to have suffered blunt trauma and died almost instantly. There are two wounds on her head- one on the crown of her head and the other on the back of her head.

"Interesting," Karita said, "but can you prove that you're not making this up?"

"Not exactly, Karita-san," Monokuma said, "but let's think of it this way. It wouldn't be any fun to just tell you who the blackened is, but it also wouldn't be much fun if you failed to find the first blackened and all got executed. Think of it as a little way to level the playing field."

Nagato glanced at Tsukimura's body, then grimly nodded.

"I agree," Nagato said. "What I've seen so far and what we know corroborates what we've seen in the Monokuma File."

I had to agree. The location of the body was obvious enough, and we could probably guess the wounds just by looking at her. The only thing left was the time of death, but we could potentially figure that out on our own.

"One more thing," Monokuma said. "You'll have access to the ship during the investigation, so if you think you have business there, go ahead and look."

"But no one could have gotten over there around the time of the crime," one of the sisters said.

"That's true, Tachibana-san," Nagato said, "but on the other hand, maybe there's something there that's related to the crime, possibly something that the killer left behind while making preparations."

"You might be on to something," Monokuma said. "In any case, you've got a lot of ground to cover and not a lot of time, so get cracking. I'll text you and make an announcement when it's time for the trial, at which point you'll meet up at the red elevator on the ship. See you then!"

Monokuma then left. Once he was gone, Higurashi spoke up.

"May I have your attention, please?" Higurashi said. "Just now, one of us has murdered Tsukimura-san, most likely in an attempt to graduate. I would like to apologize to all of you for failing in my duty, especially to Tsukimura-san and Himemiya-san."

"There's no need to apologize, Higurashi-san," Himemiya said, wiping away a tear. "To be honest, I did not expect you to be able to prevent the murders in the first place. All of us are responsible for our own actions, and the blame lies with the one who killed Kanae."

"Yes, it does," Higurashi said, "and I would like to say something to her killer, who should know who they are. I can understand that you may wish to graduate, but please know that if you do, the rest of our lives are forfeit. If you confess, you will be punished, but the rest of us will be able to survive."

No one spoke up. I counted the fourteen students besides me- and the twelve suspects, if one ruled out Himemiya and Nagato- but even though the killer was almost certainly there, they obviously weren't willing to give up and die.

"So the killer won't lay down their life out loyalty to the rest of us?" Karita said. "I can't say I'm
"Me neither," I said, "but Higurashi's request just now helped one thing abundantly clear. The blackened knows what's at stake, just like the rest of us do, and won't go down without a fight. They're willing to sacrifice us all in order to escape, so it's only fair that we sacrifice them in order to stay alive."

Some of the nicer people, like Sasaki and Nagato, looked at me funny, but I think all of us knew what we'd have to do. Himemiya was no exception; even as tears streamed down her face and she choked back a sob, I could see resolve in her expression.

"So what should we do?" the other sister- I think it was Taiga- said.

"Obviously, we should make the most of the time allotted to us for investigation," Higurashi said, "although I am concerned about people tampering with the crime scene... if they haven't already."

I looked around and shook my head.

"So am I, Higurashi-san," Nagato said, "but after Himemiya-san, Azuki-san and I saw the body, we stood there, frozen, not able to do anything. That may change during the investigation, though."

"Then someone should guard the crime scene," Mihama said, "and I would like to volunteer."

"Just you, squirt?" Asakura said. "I doubt a shrimp like you could stop anyone from messing things up here."

As Asakura let off a derisive laugh, Mihama calmly shook her head. She clearly was more mature of the two... which wasn't saying much.

"No," Mihama said. "I would not be able to protect the crime scene alone, and there is a risk that I would contaminate it with no one around to supervise me. Rather, I need a volunteer to stand with me, and prove that I did not alter it."

"Then I will join you, Mihama-san," Kumakura said. "Higurashi-kun can vouch for my alibi, and I believe that I would be of little use when it comes to investigating."

"Good," Higurashi-kun said. "Split up and try to find out whatever you can about the crime. We will meet up back at the ship when Monokuma calls us."

The rest of the class, except for those assigned to guard the crime scene, fanned out around the inn, and I could only guess why. Some of them probably thought that they'd gotten a good enough look at the crime scene, combined with the information in the Monokuma File. Others probably were counting on their classmates to do the work of investigating the crime. Still others were looking for places outside the crime scene, which others might not think of. The blackened wanted to seem like a productive member of the class, so they'd pretend to help out. Himemiya probably couldn't bear to be in the room with her best friend's dead body and/or needed some time to compose herself. As for me, I decided that this was the best place to start.

Having already looked at the body, I decided to take a look at the shot put.

"So I'm almost positive that the shot put's involved in the murder," I said, "or at least that the culprit wants us to think that it is. Anyone disagree?"

"Not at all," Kumakura said. "It's certainly heavy enough to do the job, even if what I said before about it being tough to throw still applies."
I wondered if the culprit actually threw it. The room wasn't that large, so it was possible that the killer could have snuck up on Tsukimura from behind, or chased her down.

As I continued to investigate the room, I saw a blood splatter near the entrance of the room. It was amazing that we'd all avoided stepping on it.

"That's odd," I said. "Why's there blood all the way over there?"

"I can only assume that Tsukimura-san was struck near there," Mihama said, "but that would contradict the assumption that she died on the futon. At least one of those assumptions is wrong."

"I'm guessing the latter," Kumakura said. "It's more likely that the killer moved her body than it is that they faked a blood splatter over there. The only question is why."

I looked at the futon beneath Tsukimura's body. If Tsukimura's corpse wasn't originally in that position, then maybe there was something the killer didn't want us to find underneath it.

"Speaking of which, can we move Tsukimura's body?" I said. "I'd like to check whether there's anything under the futon."

"Certainly, Azuki-san," Mihama said. "If anyone asks, Kumakura-san and I will say that was why you asked us to move it.

Kumakura took a picture of the futon for our records, then knelt down and picked up Tsukimura's body, before gently setting her down beside the futon. Once she'd been moved, I looked under the futon, and saw a hand saw. There wasn't any blood on the blade, but the killer could have wiped it off. But why would the killer go through so much trouble to hide it?

"Bingo," I said. "Now the only question is why it's under the futon."

"I assume the culprit wanted to hide some evidence," Kumakura said, "but if you're asking about why it's under Tsukimura-san's body, then I can only guess. Either the saw was hidden there before the crime, or else Tsukimura-san's body was moved to cover it, if not both."

"Possibly the latter," Mihama said. "The killer must have assumed that we would be reluctant to alter the crime scene."

I looked up at the ceiling, which was a set of boards on a framework. One of those boards seemed out of place, seemingly a different color from the others.

"There's something weird," I said. "Why is that board directly above the bed different from the others?"

"Good catch," Kumakura said. "Was it like that when you found Tsukimura-san's body?"

"As far as I know, it was," I said.

"All right," Kumakura said. "Let me take a closer look."

Kumakura reached up and checked the board, as Mihama and I stood by, glad that we had a guy as tall as him at the crime scene. As he reached up for it, it tipped over, slid and fell down.

"Whoa!" Kumakura said, barely dodging the board as it fell to the floor.

I took another look at the board once it was on the ground. There was what looked like a string tied to it, long enough to reach the floor from the ceiling. More importantly, there was blood on the
"That's odd," I said. "Why is there blood on the board?"

"I'm guessing that it was used to hit Tsukimura-san," Kumakura said, "although oddly enough, it's not on the side that we can usually see."

"It's possible that the board was the weapon," I said, "but what about the shot put? That has blood on it, too."

"Good point," Mihama said. "There were two wounds on Tsukimura-san's head, so maybe the board inflicted one, and the shot put inflicted the other."

That sounded like the most likely theory, but I didn't get why the culprit felt the need to use two different weapons for the murder.

"I think I know why the board is out of place," Mihama said. "It is as though someone turned it over before putting it back."

"Yeah, but why'd they do that?" I said. "That only makes things more suspicious."

"Perhaps it was to hide the blood," Mihama said, "although I can't say for certain what the killer was thinking."

"Maybe they weren't thinking at all," Kumakura said. "Not everyone acts rationally in a situation like this."

I nodded, and pondered things. Maybe the killer had killed Tsukimura in the heat of the moment, or they'd come up with a plan of some sort, possibly a plan that hadn't gone at all as they'd intended.

I took another look at the board, and noticed the string once again.

"And what about the string?" I said. "Why's it tied to the board?"

"I don't know yet," Kumakura said. "It's possible that it was meant to be a death trap of some sort, but I can't figure out how it was supposed to work."

"Perhaps it did not," Mihama said, "and, as I said before, the killer tried to deceive us as to the cause of Tsukimura-san's death. Unfortunately, we may not be able to find the answer simply by standing guard here."

I nodded. It was unfortunate that while those who stood guard over the crime scene did us a valuable service, they also couldn't offer their help elsewhere, and were thus dependent on whatever information their classmates brought back. While it was true that at least one of us had betrayed the group, it was also true that we'd have to count on our classmates in the trial- after all, it didn't matter if I was right about the culprit if I couldn't convince everyone else that I was right.

Since I'd gathered all I could from the crime scene, I decided to look elsewhere, and find out if there were any other places relevant to the crime, or anyone who might know more about what happened or why. As I left, Kumakura's theory weighed heavily on my mind. I could guess why the killer had committed murder, but why did they choose this method, and why did they target Tsukimura? The answers to those questions weren't very obvious, but we'd most likely have to solve them if we wanted to find the killer's identity and make it through the trial.
I met up with Himemiya. Luckily for us, we were each other's alibi, so we could cross each other off our lists of suspects.

"Hey, Himemiya," I said. "How are you holding up?"

Himemiya shook her head.

"Not well," Himemiya said. "My mother was best friends with Kanae's mother before the latter died giving birth to Kanae. Mother said that you don't 'get over' losing someone important to you—simply learn to live with it. Perhaps the day may come when I become able to bear the pain, but only if I live long enough to see it."

I knew what Himemiya was talking about all too well. I'd gotten past the point at which I waited in vain for my dad to come home, but that didn't mean that I didn't sometimes hope that he'd knock on the door and apologize for playing a prank on us for all those years.

"I'd like to know something, even if it's not related to the investigation," I said. "Do you want revenge on Tsukimura's killer?"

"What I want is a secondary priority at best," Himemiya said. "I have to find who killed Kanae, or else, you and I, along with everyone else, will share her fate, while the scum who killed her escapes with their life."

"True," I said. "I would ask if this is what Tsukimura would want, but I think you know the answer."

Himemiya nodded.

"Kanae wouldn't want me— or rather, any of us— to die," Himemiya said. "She only disliked Asakura-san, but even she didn't think he deserved to die. That only leaves the question of how she'd feel about a murderer, but I guess we'll never know the answer."

"Sadly, we won't," I said, "but I know what I want. I don't want the killer to get away with this, either. After all, it's their fault we're in this situation to begin with."

"Indeed," Himemiya said. "We can't change that, though, so the only thing we can do right now is find that person."

We decided to get back to the investigation, since both of us knew what we had to do, but the conversation remained on my mind. Both of us knew perfectly well what would happen if we managed to find the blackened who'd killed Tsukimura… and a part of me wanted that to happen. A lot of people said vengeance wouldn't bring the dead back or soothe the pain of those who lost loved ones, but while it was possible that they were right, the only way we'd live long enough to find out was if we found the killer and ensured that they, not we, were executed.

I found Asakura walking in the hallway near the baths. He didn't seem like he was in any mood to share his findings, but that was just as well. I didn't have much confidence in his detective skills, so the most I could expect out of him was not getting in the way of the students who knew what they were doing.

"Oh, it's you," Asakura said. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to hear your alibi for tonight," I said, "just so we're sure you're not the murderer."
Asakura snorted derisively, but nodded. As much of an asshat as he was, even he knew it was in his
best interests to cooperate with the people he didn't like.

"All right," Asakura said. "I was in the baths with Kirishima and Karita, from 7 PM until the
murder. At around 7:17, Kirishima got out, and at 7:20, Yamazaki joined us."

"Just those guys?" I said.

Asakura nodded.

"Yeah," Asakura said. "You'll have to ask the others where they were, although Kirishima
mentioned that Kojima and Kurogane were staying in his room, while Higurashi went to the
weight room."

"Thanks," I said. "This could be useful information."

Asakura simply nodded, not even giving a "You're welcome," even though I was honestly grateful
that his sense of self-preservation was strong enough to get him to cooperate with us. As much as I
hated his guts, I had no desire to see him die, assuming that he wasn't the blackened responsible for
this whole mess.

"There's something else I'd like to know," I said. "Earlier, you said you thought that Himemiya was
the traitor. Do you think it's possible that Tsukimura is her accomplice?"

Asakura shrugged.

"Maybe," Asakura said, "but Monokuma's motive was for us to kill the traitor, not any accomplices
they might have. Sure, I was suspicious of Himemiya, but not Tsukimura."

"Why do you say that?" I said. "Hypothetically speaking, wasn't it possible that the Himemiya
family used her as a scapegoat?"

"They could have," Asakura said, "but I doubt she'd be the one entrusted with this task, since she
was constantly going 'Himeno-sama' this, 'Himeno-sama' that. I'm not especially sad that she's
dead, but I never thought she was the traitor, simply because she can't think for herself."

I was glad Himemiya wasn't around to hear this, or else we'd probably have two murders to
investigate, rather than one. As for me, I just gritted my teeth and listened.

"In any event, it's obvious that Tsukimura wasn't the traitor," Asakura said, "and I can't imagine
anyone here's dumb enough to think that she was."

"Me neither," I said, "but someone killed her. The only question was whether she was the intended
target."

"Obviously, the killer knew what they wanted to do," Asakura said, "but if they wanted out of here,
we're all dead anyway if they graduate. To them, it doesn't matter if Tsukimura dies a little before
us."

"It does if she isn't the traitor," I said, "since the blackened may have wanted to graduate without
having to go through a trial."

Asakura shrugged.

"Could be," Asakura said. "What matters, though, is that the traitor isn't the only one I need to
worry about here. The traitor might be willing to watch us kill each other, but Tsukimura's killer is willing to let us all die just to escape... assuming they're not one and the same."

Having gotten everything I needed out of Asakura, I excused myself. We could worry about the blackened or the traitor's motives once we caught them. If we failed, then the reason for our collective demise would be obvious- we'd lost sight of what truly mattered. I knew that our survival was most important, and it was important enough that I could cooperate with an asshole like Asakura.

I stopped by the boys' bathroom and saw Sasaki looking around there, starting where we'd found the tool box.

"Oh, Sasaki," I said. "I thought I'd find you here."

"I decided to look clues here," Sasaki said. "It's possible that someone hid these tools here and planned to use them for the murder somehow."

I nodded and made note of that information, even though we still didn't know how the box had gotten to the bathroom in the first place.

"Have you found anything?" I said.

"This," Sasaki said. "I'd thought it was a bit strange earlier today, so I decided to take a second look, and I noticed something- a saw is missing."

I looked inside the box and saw a variety of tools- a hammer, some nails, a wrench, and a few other possible murder weapons. So why was only the saw missing? And why hadn't it been used to slit Tsukimura's throat?

"That's odd," I said. "Just the saw?"

"Apparently," Sasaki said. "You can see a list of each tool in the box, and only the saw is unaccounted for."

I did a quick review of the tools in the box, and found everything there.

"You're right," I said, "and that's weird. Shouldn't the other tools be better weapons against Tsukimura?"

"They probably are," Sasaki said, "but only the shot put has blood on it. I can't help but feel that the culprit's trying to mislead us as to what the murder weapon is."

"Probably," I said. "I don't know enough yet, so I'll have to find out more."

A part of me considered telling Sasaki about the crime scene, and what Mihama and Kumakura had discovered while there, but I wasn't sure I could trust her- or anyone else. That being said, I knew that I couldn't get through the trial without other students' testimony or findings, and that while any one of us could have committed the crime, everyone else had a vested interest in finding the blackened.

I checked the laundry room and saw the twins there, looking at the laundry machines. Now that I thought about it, neither one let you see the contents of the laundry, so the list of the items being washed was the only way to find out what was inside.
"Hey, you two," I said. "Did you find anything?"

The twins nodded.

"We did," Tatsuki said. "Remember the time when Taiga had a nosebleed on the first day?"

"Yeah," I said. "The bloody clothing was given a special mark in the laundry list."

"Right," Taiga said. "Look at the laundry list."

Hardly anyone had used the laundry services since we'd gotten in, but I did see some examples for tonight. Someone, apparently Tsukimura, had dropped off a "Brown Kimono" for dry cleaning at 7:04 PM, along with clothing for the rest of the girls- an archery training outfit, two different sailor fukus, two matching blazer-style uniforms, a Catholic school uniform and my clothes. At 7:18 PM, there was also a "Blue Yukata" listed... in red.

"So we know someone dropped off a blue yukata, but we don't know who," I said. "Those things don't have name tags on them, do they?"

Tatsuki shook her head.

"Not at all," Tatsuki said. "You could probably guess them based on the size- Kumakura-kun's would be the largest, while Mihama-san's would be the smallest. Unfortunately, the laundry machine doesn't have information on the clothing's sizes, let alone their owners' names."

I sighed.

"So the killer's probably one of the guys, but we don't know which one," I said. "Just great."

Both twins nodded gravely. The fact that they had an alibi meant that they wouldn't be suspects, even if the killer happened to be female, but clearly, they were just as worried about finding the killer as the other spotless were.

"Well, a clue is a clue," Tatsuki said. "It may not mean much by itself, but maybe, if combined with some other piece of information, it'll point the way to the culprit."

"Got it," I said. "Well, I'm going to see if I can track down the boys."

I said goodbye to the sisters, and set out in search of the boys. Since I'd already spoken to Asakura (who represented the bathers) and Kumakura (who'd been with Higurashi), I decided to start with some of the people who hadn't been in the baths at the time of the murder.

I walked through the inn, searching for the boy with the bloody yukata. Since Higurashi and Kumakura had alibis for the time of the murder, I decided to look for Kurogane and Kojima. Fortunately enough, I was able to find them outside their room.

"Oh, Azuki-san," Kurogane said. "Do you need something?"

"Yeah," I said. "Where were you two at the time of the murder?"

"We were playing cards in our room," Kurogane said. "Kojima-kun isn't a fan of hot springs, so I decided to keep him company."

I almost chortled, tempted to assume that he didn't enjoy them as much as he did looking at bathers, but I thought better of it, since he'd denied any interest in seeing me naked. Besides, this
wasn't the time for it, so I moved on to my next question.

"Were you together the entire time?" I said.

"Pretty much," Kojima said. "I had to use the toilet at 6:40 PM, and was back in my room within five minutes."

I did the calculations in my head. The inn wasn't terribly large, but if you walked to the boys' room, took a piss and/or shit, flushed the toilet, washed your hands and returned to the room, you wouldn't have a lot of time for detours.

"In other words, while Tsukimura was still in the bath," I said. "Did you notice anything odd about the room?"

"Not really," Kojima said. "The three guys in it- Yamazaki, Karita and Asakura- just sat around in awkward silence. They didn't even change into their yukatas or anything."

"What about you guys?" I said. "Did you put yours on?"

"No, never," Kurogane said. "They're still in the plastic bags they came in, like mint-condition action figures. Here, have a look"

Kurogane handed me the yukata he'd gotten, as did Kojima, and I could tell that they were being honest about that. I could also see the name tags- "Hikaru Kurogane-sama" and "Shigeru Kojima-sama."

"Thanks," I said. "Someone dropped off a blue yukata in the laundry, and I need to find out who."

"Well, it isn't either of us," Kurogane said, "and it probably isn't any of the boys who went in the bath. I'm not sure who that leaves."

"Me neither," I said, not entirely honestly. "I guess I'll just have to do some sleuthing, so hold on to those yukatas."

Having investigated every part of the inn that seemed relevant to the case, I set out for the ship to see if I could find anything there. I didn't know how long I had left to investigate the crime, but I hoped to go into the trial with as much information as possible.

I headed straight for the Ursa Major and quickly walked up the gangplank, which was now down I knew that once I left the inn, I probably wouldn't have time to make it back, and hoped that I wouldn't be too late to get to the ship in time to investigate.

Once aboard the Ursa Major, I met up with Nagato, who was in the middle of the ship.

"Hey, Nagato," I said. "Did you find anything?"

"I may have," Nagato said. "Did you also hear about the saw under the futon?"

"Yeah," I said, "along with the toolkit in the boys' bathroom. What about it?"

"Apparently, a tool kit is missing from the warehouse," Nagato said. "I decided to head over to check it out, and it looks like someone took it from there."

"So it probably happened this morning," I said. "Any idea who took it?"
Nagato shook her head.

"Unfortunately, no," Nagato said. "I was one of the last off the ship, so I didn't see anyone leave with a toolkit. Higurashi-san left with me, though, so I know neither of us took it. I'm sorry, but I haven't been able to discover much else out- I'm not that good at investigating."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I don't think any one of us has all the answers, so we'll need to do this together."

Nagato nodded, but seemed uncomfortable, almost guilty.

"I do have a confession to make, though," Nagato said. "Part of the reason I came here was to stop by Mom's cell. After all, we might not make it through the trial, so if that ends up happening, I want to be able to see her one last time. I'm not sure I can solve the mystery, so..."

A part of me wasn't happy that Nagato would use her time so poorly. The odds were against us, but, at least in theory, we could tip the scales in our favor by investigating. Of course, in reality, I strongly doubted how many of my classmates could meaningfully contribute to the investigation. So I decided to head toward a middle ground in my response.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat our situation," I said, "since it's possible that we, the spotless, might end up getting executed tonight. But we're still alive, so we shouldn't give up just yet."

"I know," Nagato said. "Thank you, Azuki-san; I needed that."

"You're welcome," I said. "I'm not the best at cheering people up, but I can at least give them a verbal kick in the pants to get their heads back in the game."

"If you say so," Nagato said, "but personally, I think you have a bit of Higurashi-san in you. You both fight for what you believe to be right, and refuse to give up as long as you can fight that battle, which is something I admire about the two of you."

As I set out to look for more relevant people, I had to admit that I felt a bit surprised to hear such praise from Nagato. I'd had mixed feelings about Higurashi from the start, but I could tell that Nagato meant it as a compliment, and knew enough that it wouldn't come off an empty one. The only thing that mattered now was whether I could live up to the words of praise Nagato had for me.

I quickly stopped by the warehouse and confirmed that Nagato was telling the truth, but didn't stick around for too long, since I was probably short on time.

While searching the ship for people to talk with, I found Yamazaki standing outside his cabin, dressed in his casual clothes. He was tapping his foot anxiously.

"Still not here yet...?" Yamazaki said.

"What's that?" I said. "If you're looking for Kumakura, he's at the crime scene."

Yamazaki, startled from hearing my voice, quickly turned around and let off a sigh of relief after seeing me.

"Oh, nothing, Azuki," Yamazaki said. "I was just waiting for a delivery from Monokuma."

"Unless it's a signed confession by the killer, I think it can wait," I said. "The only thing I can think of that Monokuma would deliver is your laundry, but you already have your clothes, don't you?"
Yamazaki nervously chuckled at my "signed confession" quip, then nodded.

"Yeah," Yamazaki said. "Sorry, I guess it still hasn't fully dawned on me that I'm going to be executed if the trial doesn't go well."

When I thought about it, the stakes on game shows weren't that high. On Eureka, the show Yamazaki had appeared on, the losing contestants still had a modest cash prize, and roughly 15 minutes of fame among those who watched them. They'd never have the privilege of appearing on the show again, not when millions of Japanese would do practically anything for the chance, but at least they left the studio as a loser, rather than as a corpse.

"I get what you're saying," I said, "since it doesn't feel real that we might die tonight. But it will be real if we don't get our collective act together and find the culprit. You'd better investigate like your life depends on it, because it does."

"Gotcha," Yamazaki said. "So, apart from staying alive, is there something you want right now?"

"An idea of where you were at the time of the murder," I said, "as well as whether anyone can vouch for your whereabouts."

"In the baths," Yamazaki said, "along with Karita and Asakura. I came running when I heard the announcement, and was really shocked that it was in my room."

I had any number of questions I wanted to ask him, but lost my chance when the monitor came on. Both of us knew what message Monokuma had for us even before he spoke.

"Time's up!" Monokuma's voice said over the loudspeaker. "Please report to the ship, and gather in front of the red elevator."

I checked my handbook, which had just received a text message, and saw a message to the same effect.

"Well, you heard the bear," Yamazaki said. "I don't know if there's a deadline, but we'd better get moving. The last thing I want is to push my luck."

I nodded, then walked to the elevator. I'd done all I could for now, and the only thing left was to use everything I'd learned to expose the blackened and save all our lives.

We headed to the elevator, and waited for the rest of the class to show up. Nagato was the first to arrive.

"Hello, Azuki-san, Yamazaki-san," I said.

"Hey, Nagato," I said. "Are you ready for the class trial?"

Nagato sighed.

"As much as I'll ever be," Nagato said, "even if I'm still worried that I'll never see my mom again. Even so, I don't know what someone like me can do to solve a murder like this."

"Just give it your best shot," Yamazaki said. "As far as I'm concerned, your best is good enough."

"Someone's enthusiastic," I said. "But seriously, Nagato, I'm not the best person for this, either. We can't use 'we tried our hardest' as an excuse if we fail, but if we don't give this trial everything we've got, we won't make it through."
Nagato nodded. It was foolish to be overly optimistic about our chances, but there was still the possibility of success, so it was good that it made her feel better.

A couple minutes later, the first arrivals reached the ship. Apparently, Higurashi, who'd been one of the first ones back, had investigated the rest of the island, but to no avail. Apparently, so had Kojima and Kurogane, not long after I'd left them.

As I saw Kojima approach with his yukata in hand, an idea occurred to me.

"Hey, Azuki," Kojima said. "Any luck tracking down the guy who washed his yukata?"

"Not really," I said, "but I do have an idea. I'll need to borrow your yukata, to set a trap for the guy in question."

Kojima nodded enthusiastically, and handed me the yukata.

"I'm happy to help," Kojima said. "Just wash it before you bring it back... and an autograph might be nice."

"Deal," I said. "Feel free to remind me... if we get through this, that is."

As I accepted the yukata, I noticed that Kojima said the last part with surprising levity, despite knowing that one or both of us might not be around by the end of tonight. As for me, my main concern was whether my plan would work, not whether I could honor the promise I made to him.

Before long, the others gathered in front of the elevator. Once everyone had arrived, Monokuma appeared on the monitor above.

"Glad to see you're all here," Monokuma said. "Please board the elevator and ride down to the courtroom."

As the monitor shut off, the elevator doors opened, revealing it to be more like a cargo elevator than the elevator down to Nagato-sensei's cell. It could easily accommodate the fifteen of us, although it was a little cramped inside. Once the doors were open, the fifteen of us boarded the elevator, each finding a spot inside.

We rode down in silence. As unsettling as it was to have a traitor in our midst, now we also had a murderer, and it was unlikely that the two were one and the same. I couldn't fathom why the traitor would see the first victim as a threat- or anyone would, really- but a murder had happened, and now, we'd been thrust into our first class trial. It didn't matter why the blackened had killed Kanae-only who the person responsible was, and whether we would be able to find that answer.

Kanae Tsukimura was the Ulimate Handmaiden. I'd only known her for a few days, and knew that trusting anyone here implicitly was a bad idea, but Tsukimura wasn't such a bad bet. She was a kind and affable person who'd long been friends with Himemiya, so as tempting as graduation was, I couldn't think of anyone who'd specifically want her dead. But against all odds, she was dead, the first casualty of many in this killing game.

Losing Tsukimura was bad enough, but we were now in for the most difficult trial of our lives. We'd need to solve the mystery surrounding the murder and uncover the killer, or we'd share Tsukimura's fate. There would be no practice, no dress rehearsals, just a trial in which the blackened plays a cat and mouse game with the spotless... one in which the loser dies.

Author's Notes
Thank you for the comments and kudos.

I'm interested in hearing who you think is the culprit and why- obviously, Azuki couldn't have done it (since this case won't end up being a repeat of V3's first case), and Nagato and Himemiya are extremely unlikely, but that leaves twelve people. One thing I'll point out is that Azuki has some idea of who did it, but doesn't have enough evidence to accuse that person. In any case, I hope I didn't make the culprit too obvious.

This investigation period turned out shorter than some of the others, possibly because there were fewer segments in which the protagonist questions people, and because there was less evidence to go over.

One thing I forgot to ask earlier is about the traitor- do you think they have an accomplice(possibly more than one person), and if so, who?

Next up is the class trial. It'll probably go up in a week or two to give you time to formulate theories, but after that, Chapter II may take a bit longer to come out.
Chapter I, Part 6

Class Trial

The elevator eventually reached its final destination, and a door opened on the opposite side from our entrance. We then stepped off the elevator and into the courtroom, which was probably on the bottom-most level of the Ursa Major, with only the floor and walls between us and the ocean.

The courtroom was a large and mostly square room with a circle of podiums, or "seats" in the middle, each of which was designated to a specific student. Directly across from my seat was Monokuma, who was sitting in the judge's chair, with a large red button in front of him. Nagato stood to my left, and, going clockwise from here, there were Karita, Kirishima, Sasaki, Kumakura, Taiga, Tatsuki, Asakura, Higurashi, Himemiya, Mihama, Yamazaki, Kojima, Kurogane, and Tsukimura… or where Tsukimura would've been.

In Tsukimura's place was her student handbook portrait in a frame, with a pink X over her face, made out of a broom and a mop with their handles crossed. The portrait was standing on a pedestal that was tall enough to put the picture where Tsukimura would be standing if she were actually here. It all seemed like a grotesque parody of a memorial, just like how the class trial system was a parody of an actual trial. Instead of a procedure that at least tried to judge criminals' guilt and assign fair punishments based on the rule of law, this was a free-for-all in which we sacrificed the murderer among our number.

There was also a small camera that looked a bit different from the others, near Monokuma's seat, which had a large and ominous-looking red button in front of it. To Monokuma's right, and directly across from the elevator, there was a set of double doors in the back of the courtroom, while there was a large video screen on the wall across from Monokuma.

Once we were all in our positions, Mihama had to get up on a box to see over the podium, as well as reach the buttons. Each seat had a touch-screen with a four by four grid with the faces of all our classmates and Nagato-sensei off to the side. From what I could gather, we'd use this to vote for the culprit.

"Court is now in session!" Monokuma said. "The goal is simple. If you vote correctly, I'll punish the blackened who disturbed the peace, and everyone else will be free to go. If not, the blackened gets to graduate, while everyone else gets punished. Check your handbooks, and you'll see some new rules that relate to the class trials."

Along with the rest of our class, I opened up my student handbook and checked the rules for the new additions.

Rule 19: Class trials last for as long as Monokuma allows, and as long as two or more students believe that the discussion should continue.

On the plus side, this rule prevented the blackened from stonewalling us, but on the minus side, it also had its share of risks. The first was that the trial would end if we reached a consensus on the murderer- even if that conclusion was dead wrong. The second was that we'd probably never know how much time we had left until it ran out; at least when we had tests in school, we could check the clock, and teachers would give us at least one warning when we were low on time.

Rule 20: Threats or acts of violence are prohibited during class trials. Violators will be punished on the spot.
That was pretty self-explanatory. The only reason I could think of was a cornered blackened trying to force us to vote for someone else, but that didn't seem all that likely. In fact, any blackened desperate and/or stupid enough to try that would probably end up digging their own grave.

Rule 21: In the event of a tie, the blackened will graduate.

While it was hard to have much confidence in the class at this point, I really didn't think it would come down to that. It was most likely that one of two things would happen- either we'd all agree on the blackened, or no one would get the right answer.

Rule 22: If there are more than two murders, the spotless must solve each one to graduate. In order to graduate, the blackened must get away with all the murders they committed, and solve the ones that they did not.

"By the way, Monokuma, I'm curious about something," Nagato said. "What's the camera near your seat for?"

"Good question, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "It allows your mother to watch the proceedings. If the lot of you screw up and let the blackened get away, she should at least know why she'll get executed along with the spotless."

Typical Monokuma. By putting everyone here in the line of fire, including the one person who couldn't kill or be killed, he made the class trial a stressful affair for all concerned, doubly so for Nagato.

"Thank you for letting us know," Higurashi said, "but we don't intend to simply let that happen. Everyone, let us commence the investigation of Tsukimura-san's death, starting with how she was killed."

I nodded. While I had my suspicions about who was the culprit, I couldn't come out and point my finger at them right from the get-go. We'd have to agree on how the crime was committed, and then I could name a suspect.

"It's pretty obvious," Yamazaki said. "I checked the crime scene and saw a bloody shot put ball. Anyone would conclude that's the murder weapon, right?"

"That's a reasonable assumption," Sasaki said, "but how did the killer use it to kill Kanae-chan? Did they throw it? Strike her on the head with it?"

"Both of those are possible," Yamazaki said, "but personally, I'm thinking that the shot put fell on her head."

I found myself doubting Yamazaki's theory, but was intrigued by the fact that he thought of that first. He struck me as the kind of guy who wasn't good at much besides memorizing trivia, so it wasn't like him to think outside the box like that.

"That is certainly an unlikely conclusion to make," Kirishima said. "I am unsure what would cause you to deduce that was what happened based on the state of the crime scene."

"Yeah, no kidding," Asakura said. "There's no way in hell that Tsukimura died by accident!"

"I didn't say that it was an accident, Asakura," Yamazaki said. "I mean that it was a trap set by the killer. The killer set up a mechanism with a string tied to one of the boards in the ceiling, and made it so that when Tsukimura accidentally pulled on the cord, the shot put ball fell and brained her on the head."
"I noticed the string, too," Nagato said. "I checked the clothing store on my way back to the ship, and noticed some string missing from the clothing supplies in the back."

"Yeah, that's right," Yamazaki said. "Anyway, Kumakura, Mihama, doesn't the theory I just shared explain why the string was tied to the board?"

Kumakura hesitantly nodded, while Mihama looked thoroughly unconvinced.

"It does," Kumakura said, "but there's one thing wrong with it. The Monokuma file says that Tsukimura-san was hit on the head twice."

"Exactly," I said. "The shot put ball could only have hit her once if it was used in that manner, unless someone finished her off."

Yamazaki frowned, oddly unhappy about us poking holes in his theory. The only thing that I could think of that he'd have a problem with when it came to my theory was the fact that if the shot put falling from the ceiling didn't finish Tsukimura off, the killer would have had to have set foot in the south boys' room.

"I didn't say that the shot put was the only thing," Asakura said. "I saw blood on the board that was used. It must have fallen down, too, and hit Tsukimura on the head- I saw it on the ground."

"That was after Kumakura investigated the so-called trap in the ceiling," I said. "Before then, it had been put back in the ceiling, upside-down, something that was most likely done by the killer. Weren't you paying attention when we were all in the crime scene together?"

Judging from everyone else's expressions, I wasn't the only one to realize this- just the first person to point it out. I couldn't help but wonder if Yamazaki was forgetful or unobservant, as well as whether he actually hadn't noticed that, or was hoping that we wouldn't, either.

"Indeed, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "Nagato-san and I can confirm that the room was unchanged between when we discovered the body and when everyone else arrived. If the killer put the board back in the ceiling, it was immediately after killing Kanae."

"That probably wasn't the only thing they did to the crime scene, Himemiya-san," Kumakura said. "While investigating, Mihama-san, Azuki-san and I found something strange- a saw under the futon beneath Tsukimura-san's body. We believe the saw was used to construct the 'trap' in the ceiling."

"Interesting," Higurashi said. "What do you suppose it means?"

"There are two possibilities," Nagato said. "One is that the saw was hidden under the futon all along, before Tsukimura-san's body fell onto it. The second... is that Tsukimura-san's body was moved on top of it, likely to conceal evidence."

"I think it's the latter," I said. "There's a blood splatter near the door, which most likely indicates she was killed over there, rather than on Karita's futon."

"I also noticed that while I was in the room," Kurogane said. "What do you suppose the killer was trying to hide?"

"Perhaps that the trap never actually worked," Nagato said. "It's possible that Tsukimura-san was killed a couple meters away, after which her dead body was moved beneath the trap. I can gather that the blood on the board came from the murder."
I nodded in agreement. While Nagato hadn't done all that much investigation, she seemed surprisingly quick on the uptake - not that the standards were particularly high for a bunch of teenagers (and one pre-teen) with no experience in detective work. If nothing else, she was probably more competent than she gave herself credit for - which also wasn't saying all that much. As half-assed as these sentiments sounded, I hoped she'd realize them and take them to heart.

"You're right," I said. "That would account for the two head wounds. First, they struck her with the board to kill her, and then with the shot put, to falsify the cause of death."

"Good point," Kojima said, "but why bother with the trap if it didn't even work?"

"I can't speak for Azuki-san," Karita said, "but I'm guessing that the trap was their first plan, and that bashing Tsukimura-san on the head was what they had to fall back on. They must have been caught in the act, and killed Tsukimura-san to silence her."

"What makes you so sure Kanae-chan wasn't the intended target?" Sasaki said. "Apart from the fact that the trap wasn't in her room?"

"Or the fact that no one besides Azuki-san, Nagato-san and I knew that she was out cleaning?" Himemiya said. "Kanae's arrival must have been quite an unpleasant surprise for the killer."

"Because the 'trap' was above my futon," Karita said.

The others gasped.

"Are you certain, Karita-kun?" Higurashi said.

"Positive," Karita said. "The other three in my room- Asakura-kun, Kirishima-kun and Yamazaki-kun can vouch for the trap being above where I would have slept tonight. I'd be willing to bet money- if I had any on me, that is- that the killer was most suspicious of me and chose me as their target."

"You're right about that," Asakura said, "but for all we know, you might have set it up above your own futon to make yourself seem innocent."

"That is simply impossible, Asakura-kun," Kirishima said. "All four of us were together the entire time we were in our room, and I did not notice any alteration to the roof at this point."

"Then maybe they went in before that," Asakura said.

"That is unlikely," Kirishima said, "at least if they hoped to target Karita-kun. We only learned which of us would be sleeping in which futon immediately after we gathered at the inn. The blackened could only have acted while you, Karita-kun and I were in the baths."

I paused to think for a moment. Obviously, it was important to find out when the time was, and it would be advantageous for the blackened if we misunderstood any aspect of the crime, no matter how minor. There was a small window for the murder, so it would be pretty bad for the killer if we managed to find it out... so they were probably planning on fooling us into thinking it had taken place at another time.

"So in other words," Himemiya said, after biting her lip, "Kanae was killed because she volunteered to do our laundry and happened to wander into the wrong place at the wrong time."

"It seems so," Kirishima said. "Did she tell anyone else about this?"
"Azuki-san and I were the only ones besides Himemiya-san who knew about it," Nagato said.

"Taiga and I saw Tsukimura-san stop by our room," Tatsuki said, "but she didn't tell us in advance."

"Me neither," Sasaki said. "Miharu-chan and I went to play ping pong after the baths."

Mihama nodded to confirm Sasaki's alibi.

"So the culprit didn't know that Tsukimura would go to the room?" Kojima said. "Even if the deathtrap worked, why go to all that trouble if someone else might end up triggering it?"

"I think there's an obvious reason why the culprit would want to make it look like the victim had been killed by a deathtrap," I said. "For starters, the time of death only refers to when the victim actually died. If we wanted to know who did it, we'd need to know when the trap was set up, but the Monokuma File wouldn't tell us that, would it?"

"Nope!" Monokuma said. "It's meant to put you on the right track, not give you all the answers. I reserve the right to omit any and all information that would give too much away!"

I could believe that Monokuma wanted us to struggle before finding the killer, but I wondered why he'd help us at all. Maybe he was hoping that we'd find the blackened and allow the killing game to continue, rather than have the game end with one murder, a mass execution and a single survivor.

"I get what you're saying, Azuki," Yamazaki said, "but the culprit- hell, all of us- had no idea that we'd get a Monokuma File with information about Tsukimura's death until after the murder."

"Maybe not," Nagato said, "but what Azuki-san said still stands. In fact, I think the culprit hoped that even if we did figure out when the trap was made, it would be at a time that would draw suspicion away from them."

"When would that be?" Karita said. "As was said earlier, Asakura-kun, Yamazaki-kun and I were together in our room until the guys got in the bath."

"I'm aware of that," Nagato said, "and that's important information. At the time, the guys were supposed to go to the bath- even if only half of them actually did- while the girls had just left."

"Right," Yamazaki said, "so the killer's probably a girl, isn't she?"

I shook my head, catching on to what Nagato was getting at.

"No, that's wrong," I said, "and there's two reasons why. First, the culprit needed everyone outside of the room so they could work without being spotted. Second, if we realized that the trap was added while the boys were in the bath, the killer could more easily pin it on the girls. As such, it's more likely that the killer is male."

"What makes you say that?" Yamazaki said.

"The fact that I found a blue yukata listed among the laundry," I said. "The culprit must have worn it at the time of the murder, since the machine notes that it had blood on it."

"But that doesn't prove who did it, right?" Yamazaki said.

I shook my head yet again. While it was clear that the culprit would have been fucked if they'd gotten blood on their normal clothes, I had the proof I needed to determine who did it.
"Actually, it does," I said. "Four of the boys took baths, while the other four did not. The latter four were able to account for their yukatas, while three out of the former four are wearing theirs... except for the culprit. That person was the only one who left the baths in casual clothes."

I took a deep breath and looked around. I'd had my suspicions about who it was since the start of the trial, but now, I felt I could confidently say who it was without making an ass out of myself. While credibility seemed like a superficial concern, my goal wasn't just to find the culprit, but to convince everyone else to vote for that person, so I couldn't afford to make any mistakes or give people reason to doubt me. Now, however, I was confident enough to make my point, and so I pointed my finger at the blackened.

"By process of elimination, I know who the blackened is," I said. "It's you, Yamazaki."

Yamazaki did a double take upon hearing his name. Hardly anyone else seemed surprised, except Kumakura, who bit his lip. Maybe some of them had already realized Yamazaki could be the killer, but didn't have anything to prove it, so they hesitated to say it out loud lest they be suspected.

"Y-Yeah, right," Yamazaki said. "How does my not having a yukata prove anything? A-Answer in the form of a question!"

"Fine," I said confidently. "Why were you waiting outside your cabin during the investigation?"

"Th-That's..." Yamazaki said.

Yamazaki fidgeted and went silent, having realized when and why I'd started suspecting him.

"I'll tell you why," I said. "You were waiting for your laundry to come back, weren't you? You told me when we first got to the island that Monokuma would deliver laundry to our cabins, so that's why you were waiting there, to make sure you'd be the first to get the yukata."

"But what if Kumakura-kun had stopped by Cabin M1 instead of staying behind to guard the crime scene?" Higurashi said. "If Monokuma dropped off the laundry inside the cabin, Kumakura-kun would be the only one besides Yamazaki-kun who could access it."

"That would hardly be a rational course of action," Kirishima said, "considering that our top priority was to solve the murder, and the Ursa Major was unlikely to have any evidence on board. Nevertheless, there was a chance that Kumakura-kun would have chosen to return to the ship, and to the cabin."

I paused to think for a moment. Ordinarily, one would think that Yamazaki would do everything he could to prevent us from discovering the truth, as long as it wouldn't draw attention to himself, but that wasn't the case this time. Kumakura had chosen to stand guard on his own, without any nudging from Yamazaki. While Yamazaki's inaction couldn't be used as evidence against him, it did go to show that he hadn't foreseen the possibility Higurashi had proposed.

"If he had, then Yamazaki would be screwed," I said, "but Yamazaki must have known that wasn't a likely scenario. Not only did Kumakura volunteer to guard the crime scene, but at the time, Nagato was the only other one besides the two of us who was looking on the Ursa Major. In my case, I'd already looked over the entire inn, while Nagato wanted to see her mom."

Nagato nodded, but while she seemed to agree that Yamazaki was the culprit, she didn't seem fully convinced by what I'd said.

"I think Higurashi-san is on to something," Nagato said. "None of us knew at the time that we'd be able to access the Ursa Major during the investigation, so there was a chance of someone- any one
finding the yukata if it had been delivered to Yamazaki-san's cabin. He must have become quite desperate after learning that we could go back to the ship."

"You have a point, Nagato-san," Kumakura said, "but something doesn't add up. Yamazaki-kun stopped by the crime scene, so he must have known that I wasn't going to leave my post and return to the ship until the trial. Why do you think he stopped by?"

I could hear the desperation in Kumakura's voice. He was smart enough to realize that the facts pointed to Yamazaki, but even now, he felt something for Yamazaki. Maybe they weren't close friends, but having his roommate turn out to be the first to snap and kill someone struck close to home.

"Perhaps he wanted to confirm that you were at your post," I said, "or perhaps to get 'evidence' to further his trap theory. It was after I left, right?"

Both Kumakura and Mihama nodded.

"That is correct, Azuki-san," Mihama said. "I do not have the exact time, but it was no more than a few minutes later."

So in other words, Yamazaki spent the bare minimum amount of time "investigating," and spent the rest of our time waiting to see if his yukata would show up at his room. Not even the less intellectually gifted classmates were that lazy, and even though Nagato wanted to see her mom, she at least tried to look into a lead about a saw. Yamazaki's refusal to help out looked pretty damn suspicious, as did the fact that he was starting to sweat bullets.

"Seriously, Mihama?" Yamazaki said. "Are you just going to believe whatever Azuki says?"

"Normally, I'd second that, but she doesn't need to," Asakura said. "You got into the baths at about 7:20, just after the murder, and Karita can prove it. Even a liar like him can tell the truth at a time like this."

"You took the words out of my mouth, Asakura-kun," Karita said. "I'm glad to see you understand at least that much."

"Enough, you two," Higurashi said. "For now, let's just say that Yamazaki-kun did not have an alibi for the time of the murder."

Both of the adversaries promptly shut up, knowing that they'd have enough time for their hostility once the trial was over... assuming they were still alive at that point.

"Quite true," Nagato said. "In fact, it would explain why Yamazaki-san so vigorously argued in favor of the theory that Tsukiiura-san fell victim to a trap. If we figured out that the culprit hit her on the head, then Yamazaki-san would become the most likely suspect."

"What about Kirishima?" Kojima said. "He got out before I got in!"

"It was at 7:17 PM," Kirishima said, "after Tsukimura-kun was already dead. After changing into my yukata, I headed to the bathroom, and was there until the body discovery announcement."

"That's right," Karita and Asakura said together.

I was glad that Kirishima saved me the trouble of pointing out his alibi, and even more glad that for once, Monokuma's arrangements for the event had worked in our favor. Tonight, most of us had an alibi, so Yamazaki was shit out of luck when it came to finding someone to pin his crime on.
"Virtually everyone else is accounted for between the time the girls left the bath and when Tsukimura's body was found," I said. "Himemiya, Nagato and I were together the entire time. Kumakura and Higurashi were together in the weight room. The twins were together in their room, as were Kurogane and Kojima. Sasaki and Mihama were playing ping pong in the common room. As mentioned before, Karita and Asakura were in the baths, while Kirishima was with them for most of the time. That just leaves you, Yamazaki."

"I agree," Nagato said. "There weren't many places that you could be without someone seeing you... except for the crime scene."

Yamazaki bit his lip and stammered for a few moments. Sometimes I wondered why people said the stupid shit that they did, but then I remembered a classmate who was well-known for her legendarily moronic answers on tests. When people made fun of her for that, she simply said, "If I don't write anything, I'll get them wrong anyway, so I might as well write something, right?"

Yamazaki's chances of getting away with his crime were as slim as that girl's chances of passing her classes, but he wasn't any more willing to give up.

"Th-there's one thing left," Yamazaki said. "Where's my yukata?"

"Right here," I said, taking out Kojima's yukata. "I made a beeline over to the ship after I checked the laundry, to see if I could find what the culprit had worn."

"She's lying!" Yamazaki said. "When I got to the ship, Monokuma said my yukata wasn't finished drying ye..."

Yamazaki's mouth gaped open, as he realized what he'd just said, before he shut his mouth and clapped his hands over it. Up until now, running his mouth hadn't been too detrimental to his case, but what he'd just said had sealed his fate.

"Sorry, I lied," I said. "This is Kojima's yukata. But it looks like you just admitted that you just washed the yukata that had blood on it, so you're the only person who could have done it."

"Like hell I am!" Yamazaki said. "It's over when I say it's over!"

For a moment, I smirked, confident that this was a done deal. If Yamazaki didn't know what to do apart from futilely snapping at me, then it was clear that he was shit out of luck. If he was innocent, he could surely find some piece of evidence, however minor, to prove that he couldn't have done it, but he was guilty and he knew it.

Unfortunately, not everyone else did. I looked around the courtroom, and saw some people's faces were grimly resolute, while others were doubtful or even scared. Maybe success in here wasn't worth celebrating, but surely they realized that our victory was close at hand?

"So what's the problem?" I said. "Does anyone here still think Yamazaki didn't do it?"

"Not necessarily, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "It's simply that not all of us are ready to make a decision at this point. If we're right, Yamazaki-kun will die. If we're wrong, the rest of us will die instead. There's extremely high stakes and no second chances, so it's only natural people would hesitate."

"Monokuma's rules did say that the trial will continue as long as two or more people want it to," Mihama said. "Not only does it seem as though Yamazaki-san has not given up the fight, but at least one of us doubts his guilt enough to not be ready to vote."

I recalled Yamazaki's final TV appearance on Eureka. Since returning champions were given a
handicap that increased with every consecutive appearance, he had virtually no chance of victory in his last time on the show, but he never gave up trying to win... and nearly did. When interviewed about it, he said he wasn't trying to save face- he just thought that fighting to win was the natural thing to do.

"You're half right, Mihama-san," Monokuma said. "Class trials continue as long as two or more of you aren't sure... and I think there's time. If you keep dragging your feet, I'll start the Voting Time, whether you're ready or not!"

I shook my head. In a trial like this, with all our lives on the line, I didn't want to leave anything to chance. Perhaps our time was almost up, but there had to be something I could do.

"Perhaps you should say something, Azuki-san," Nagato said softly enough that only I could clearly hear her. "You've been right about the case so far, so if you tell them who the killer is and why, I'm sure they'll listen to you."

I nodded. I couldn't say for certain how well-founded Nagato's trust in me was, but it was reassuring to have someone like her on my side.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Nagato," I said. "I'll do just that."

I turned to the class and cleared my throat.

"Listen up, everyone," I said, "I'll give you a summary of what happened and why Yamazaki is the culprit. Let me know if you disagree with any part of it."

To understand how this murder took place, we should start with the preparations. Since the culprit, like the rest of us, only learned of the inn party this morning, they could only have obtained the necessary supplies today. Before leaving the ship, the culprit obtained a toolkit from the warehouse, specifically needing a saw. After leaving for the island, the culprit went to the inn and stopped by the weight room to obtain a shot put ball. While inside the inn, the culprit apparently stashed the tools in the boys' bathroom, not wanting to be seen with them.

The actual murder took place while the boys were taking their turn in the bath, starting at 7 PM. The culprit stayed out of the bath, since their plan was to set up the murder at a time when the culprit was more likely to be a girl, then changed into their yukata, presumably to make it seem as though they'd been in the bath. They then attempted to set a trap in the roof above Karita's futon, hoping he would trigger it and die when he went to bed. Their intended method was to hide a shot put ball inside the rafters, and to somehow drop it on his head while he was sleeping in his head. Based on our investigations, the trap couldn't have worked, but that didn't matter... because it was never activated.

While the culprit was busy setting up the trap, Tsukimura was out doing errands. She dropped off the girls' clothes in the washer a few minutes before the murder, then stopped by the south boys' room to pick up the boys' laundry, discovering the culprit in the process of setting up the crime. Panicking, they hit her over the head with one of the boards they'd removed from the ceiling. Tsukimura was most likely knocked unconscious or killed, leaving blood splatter on the floor of the inn and the culprit's clothes.

Since the culprit was now a murderer, they decided to make it seem as though the trap had gone off and killed Tsukimura. In order to make it seem as though the shot put ball had hit her, and possibly to finish her off, they dragged her over to the futon, hiding the saw underneath the futon and her body. They then hit her on the back of the head with the shot put ball, getting blood on it. By doing so, the culprit hoped to confuse us, by forcing us to try to figure out when the trap was set
Unfortunately, the culprit had blood on their yukata, so they dropped them off in the laundry, and switched back to casual clothes, before going to bathe with Karita, Kirishima and Asakura. Not long afterward, Himemiya, Nagato and I entered the south room and found Tsukimura's body. The Body Discovery Announcement then played, and the culprit arrived on scene, with everyone else. Unlike the others, they changed back into their casual clothes, not the yukata.

At this point, the culprit's real battle began, since now that they'd committed murder, they'd have to get away with it. They stopped by the crime scene to pretend to investigate, then returned to the ship, hoping that their yukata would be returned to them, and that they'd be the first to find it. In doing so, they provided a critical hint that would ultimately betray their identity, and helped us identify them as the culprit behind the murder.

Isn't that right, Hide Yamazaki?

Yamazaki gulped and nodded.

"You... got me." Yamazaki said. "I... I killed Tsukimura."

No one else said a word for a few moments. I don't think anyone was close enough to Yamazaki to deny that he could kill someone- not even Kumakura, his roommate- but we all knew what his confession meant. Himemiya gripped the railing of her seat and stared at Yamazaki, her face pale.

"It looks like Yamazaki-kun has confessed," Higurashi said, "so none of us have any doubt as to the culprit's identity."

I nodded with grim satisfaction. We'd proven the culprit's identity, and voting him would only be a formality at this point. After that... well, I was trying not to think too much about it, lest we get ahead of ourselves.

"Good for you," Monokuma said. "Is that your final answer?"

"It is," I said. "Of course, it isn't just up to me. Like you said, this thing's decided by majority vote- hell, even Yamazaki gets a say- so does anyone think Yamazaki isn't the culprit?"

No one spoke up. Now that we had proof that Yamazaki was the culprit, and even Yamazaki was no longer willing to fight back, it was obvious what we needed to do.

"So there you have it," I said. "I think we're ready, Monokuma."

"It looks like you've all made up your minds," Monokuma said, "so use the mechanisms on your seats to cast your vote. Now here's the million dollar question- will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one?"

All of us cast our votes by selecting Yamazaki's picture from the touch screen. After a few seconds, the screen in the courtroom showed what looked like a game of craps. There were three dice, and the eighteen faces between them had all of our faces- the sixteen students (including Tsukimura, whose face was crossed out), Nagato-sensei and Monokuma. The three dice were tossed into the air, but only one landed, and that one displayed Yamazaki's face. Shortly afterward, a "GUILTY" verdict was shown.

The courtroom was silent in the aftermath of the verdict, as we waited with nervous anticipation. While I had every reason to believe that Yamazaki was the culprit, I knew I wasn't infallible, so a
part of me doubted my conclusion... until Monokuma spoke.

"You got it right!" Monokuma said. "The blackened responsible for killing Kanae Tsukimura-san, and the one who spun 'Bankrupt' when trying to get away with it is... Hide Yamazaki-san!"

I let out a sigh of relief. The fourteen spotless, myself included, would live to see another day, while the bastard who killed Tsukimura would pay for his crime. Obviously, things would be better if no one had died tonight, but this was definitely the lesser of two evils.

Of course, Himemiya wasn't happy at all about this. Having pent up her emotions since the start of the investigation, she couldn't hold them in any longer, and tears began streaming down her cheeks.

"...Why, Yamazaki-san?" Himemiya said. "Why did you have to kill Kanae?"

"She... caught me in the act," Yamazaki said. "She was smart enough to know that I was setting a trap for Karita. I panicked, because I knew I'd never get another shot, so I whacked her on the head with the board. I was hoping she'd pass out and not remember who attacked her- I didn't want her to die."

Himemiya glared at him, clearly not buying it.

"But why would you act alone, Yamazaki-san?" Nagato said. "I know Higurashi-san, Mom and I didn't want anyone to kill the traitor, but if you'd worked with us-"

"Work with everyone?" Yamazaki said with a bitter laugh. "You know that 'everyone' includes the traitor, right? Like Asakura said, they know everything that we're doing as a group, so trying to outthink them is an exercise in futility."

"Maybe it's impossible for one person," Higurashi said, "but by working together we'd be able to overcome this killing game."

"How?!" Higurashi said.

Everyone fell silent for a moment. Most questions that were asked that flippantly or reflexively could be answered easily, or dismissed as not being worth our time. Our remaining classmates' silence indicated that they weren't going to do the former, and the expressions on their faces indicated that they couldn't do the latter. Those who supported Higurashi suddenly couldn't think of any good way to defend his ideals of cooperation, and even those who were skeptical of him, myself included, weren't happy that a murderer was voicing our doubts out loud.

"There's more than a few problems with what you're proposing," Higurashi said. "First, if the killing game's a casino, Monokuma isn't just another player- he's the house, and you know what they say about how the house always wins. Second, we can combine our strengths, but what do we get? Just a hodgepodge of talents that might be useful by themselves, but can't combine to make anything. It's like trying to make dinner with ingredients taken from every single section of the supermarket."

As much as I wanted to say something, anything, to tell Yamazaki off, I couldn't find the words. Sure, he was a selfish idiot, as well as guilty of murder, but he was saying what all of us knew about our situation since day one.

"And you know what?" Yamazaki said. "Out of all those talents that are ingredients, there's none more useless than mine. I can't do anything to help all of you, and I know that at the end of the day, I'd probably be the first one picked if we have to sacrifice someone, like it says in Rule #16. Trying to take out the traitor was the only way I could be useful to you... or at least that's what I told
myself."

"You... don't actually think so?" I said.

"No," Yamazaki said. "In the end, when I hit Tsukimura on the head, I realized that I was just trying to save my own skin. By then, it was too late, and I was too scared to just give up and die. I'd been screwed since you pointed the finger at me, but it was only after your summary of the case that I realized it was all over."

Yamazaki then turned to Himemiya.

"Himemiya, I know you'll never forgive me," Yamazaki said, "but if I could take back what I did, I would."

"So would I," Himemiya said, "but ask yourself this. Are you saying this because Kanae's dead... or because you're about to die?"

Yamazaki was left at a loss for words.

"I thought so," Himemiya said. "There's little more shallow or insincere than the act of apologizing, expecting words to serve as atonement for your actions. You killed my best friend, and there is nothing you could say or do that will convince me to forgive you."

"Of course Yamazaki can't earn your forgiveness, Himemiya-san," Monokuma said, "because it's time for his execution."

Gasps of shock went up from those of us who were still around. Himemiya paled, not at all happy with the punishment given to her best friend's killer, while Yamazaki's jaw dropped.

"E-Execution?" Yamazaki said. "C-Come on! You can't be serious!"

"Oh, you can bet your life that I am," Monokuma said, "not that it matters, since I'll be taking it, anyway! What did you think would happen when you got caught?"

"This isn't right!" Mihama said. "Yamazaki-san is not even eighteen! No civilized society would give him the death penalty!"

"Are you really sure about his age, Mihama-san?" Monokuma said. "But that doesn't matter, since we're playing by my rules, which means you're just as eligible for punishment as the big kids. When you play the game of graduation, you win or you die. There's no middle ground, no appeals and no mercy for the losers."

Mihama fell silent, as did the rest of us. Whether we felt sorry for Yamazaki or hated him, we felt a collective sense of helplessness. He was going to die, and nothing we could do would stop it. In fact, any of us might end up as the next.

"Now then, I've prepared a very special punishment for the Ultimate Trivia Champion," Monokuma said.

"This can't be happening!" Yamazaki said. "SOMEONE! PLEASE HELP ME!"

"Let's give it everything we've got! IT'S PUNISHMENT TIME!"

GAME OVER
Yamazaki-san has been found guilty

Time for the punishment!

After we saw the announcement, we glanced at Yamazaki, nervously awaiting what would happen next. He didn't seem to have any idea what was going on, either, until the doors at the back opened, and a clamp on a cable shot out, snagging him by the neck and dragging him into the doors. Suddenly, the video screen came on, and showed us his execution. Like a train wreck, none of us could turn away, even if we didn't want to look.

*The Ultimate Trivia Champion, Hide Yamazaki's Execution: Executed*

Death Line

Yamazaki found himself in a gaudy-looking studio for a game show. Monokuma offered him a multiple choice question with four answers, which would seem like an easy enough proposition, but for one thing. The four answers were each ways to kill him- stoning, strangulation, drawing and quartering, and incineration.

Apparently, Yamazaki wouldn't be the one answering, as Monokuma then asked the audience the question. By an overwhelming majority, they chose "stoning," and bombarded him with small pebbles- too small to kill him, but sharp enough to hurt like hell.

The barrage of pebbles stopped when Yamazaki was covered in cuts and bruises from head to toe, and then Monokuma decided to call a friend. Apparently, the friend chose "strangulation," since Monokuma then wrapped the cord for the phone around Yamazaki's neck and pulled on both ends.

Monokuma stopped strangling Yamazaki just before he passed out, and then chose an option to rule out half of the answers. The two answers left were the two remaining ones- drawing and quartering, and incineration. Yamazaki was then placed on a rack and pulled so much that his limbs were pulled out of their sockets, before being set on fire. As the flames consumed his body, he was torn apart, with each quarter on fire.

Back in the courtroom, the rest of us watched in horror. Himemiya doubled over and vomited. I was personally sick to my stomach, too, and I thought everyone else here was feeling the same. Yamazaki was a murderer, but all of us had sacrificed him to stay alive. I'd thought that choice was only fair, but now that I saw what I'd helped cause, I wondered if I was any different from Yamazaki.

"And that's that!" Monokuma said. "What did you think of our first execution, class?"

"Do you really need to ask?" I said. "Even after what Yamazaki did, killing him like that's going too far. Does anyone besides you seem happy about this outcome?"

I looked around, and no one was willing to argue with my assertion, even if Karita, Asakura and Kirishima didn't seem nearly as disturbed by what had happened.

"Not at all," Monokuma said. "It looks like you kids understand your situation... just not well enough. Yamazaki-san got closest, but he didn't quite get it in the end."

"What is there to understand?" Taiga said.

"The beauty and joy of despair," Monokuma said. "Your lives are full of suffering, and ultimately
have to end someday. These are harsh realities, and most people only manage to get by through not thinking about them. If, however, you learn to take pleasure in despair, then hardships become enjoyable and your demise will be your greatest moment of fulfillment. It's a shame Yamazaki-san never realized this, but it's not too late for those of you who are still alive."

For a moment, we remained silent, thinking about what Monokuma had said. Some of us had experienced difficulties in life and lost loved ones, but for the most part, our lives had been fairly comfortable until we'd found ourselves in here.

"What about the traitor?" Karita said. "If they believe what you're saying, then surely, they're prepared to die, aren't they?"

"Oh, they're prepared for that," Monokuma said. "After all, I did say they knew what was going to happen, so they could've backed out if they wanted. But they boarded this ship, just like the rest of you, and are a part of the killing game even now. Perhaps they've already learned to love despair-we'll know for certain in their final moments."

"Which can't come soon enough," Asakura said, "and I'd be glad to personally be the one to wipe them off the face of the earth."

The rest of us eyed Asakura with a mixture of emotions- apart from a handful of people who casually accepted what he was saying, from unease to outrage to horror. Considering that Tsukimura had died because Yamazaki had tried to eliminate the traitor, and Yamazaki had died because he'd failed to get away with it, it was obvious that no one wanted a repeat of tonight.

"Go right ahead!" Monokuma said. "Of course, if you live long enough in here, perhaps someday, you too will come to understand the pleasure of despair that you've never experienced in your sheltered life until now."

We didn't know what to say to that. It was true that this killing game was nothing like we'd experienced before, and Monokuma was counting on us to snap and kill each other. But judging from Monokuma's remarks just now, it seemed like even the killing was a means to an end.

"One more thing," Monokuma said. "I'm gonna deliver your clothes to your cabins, since we'll be leaving the island first thing tomorrow. See you later!"

Monokuma then vanished, leaving us together in the courtroom.

"This is horrible..." Sasaki said. "How many times will we have to go through this?"

"As many times as there are people who are desperate to graduate," Karita said, "or until one of them actually gets away with it."

"What he said," Asakura said. "Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for the asshole who killed Tsukimura and planned on letting the rest of us die. It was either us or him, and I'd choose him any day- hell, all of us did."

I felt my stomach churn once again, and not just because I realized that Asakura had a point. Monokuma had made his stakes abundantly clear, so all of us had chosen for him to die so that the rest of us would live. Since he'd hoped for the opposite outcome, I'd thought that we were justified in sacrificing him, and only now was coming to terms with how terrible that was.

"Yes, we made that decision," Mihama said, "but while we all knew what was at stake, none of us agreed to Monokuma's terms. We acknowledged that this outcome was the lesser of two evils, but we- at least most of us- still consider killing someone to stay alive to be an evil."
"Perhaps Monokuma is responsible for our predicament, Mihama-kun," Kirishima said, "but so, too, is Yamazaki-kun. Despite knowing what would happen, he sought to kill Karita-kun… and ended up killing Tsukimura-kun. Even after knowing he was mistaken, he still sought to get away with his crime, and sacrifice the rest of us for his sake. I have no pity for someone who would endanger the group, and neither should you."

"Neither do I, Kirishima-san," Himemiya said, "but I feel no joy in this outcome. His punishment won't bring Kanae back, nor is it anything close to 'justice'- he died just as senselessly as she did."

"How compassionate of you, Himemiya-san," Karita said facetiously, "but is that your conscience talking, or your stomach?"

Himemiya and I shot Karita glares, and most of us were at least a little disgusted upon hearing that. That said, I couldn't deny the thrust of his argument- we might not feel as bad about what happened if Yamazaki died a less gruesome death. Having one's neck broken by a rope or lying on a table and being injected with deadly chemicals were more merciful ways to die, but they killed you just the same.

"Enough, everyone!" Higurashi said. "What happened today is tragic, and I must admit that I share some of the blame for letting it come to this. But bickering amongst ourselves will not accomplish anything."

"Neither have you," Asakura said.

"You... aren't wrong," Higurashi said, "but now is far from an ideal time for a discussion. It is extremely late, and we have all have had a difficult day, Himemiya-san most of all. Let us go back to our rooms and get a fresh start tomorrow."

For once, all of us listened, and we collectively took a deep breath to calm ourselves down before heading to the elevator. The more idealistic members of our class appreciated Higurashi's appeal to reason, while even the more cynical members could not contest his assertion. Even Himemiya, who was one of Higurashi's detractors, gave him a "Thank you," along with a grateful bow.

For the moment, though, we were all of one mind. The fourteen remaining students got into the elevator together and rode it up to the main deck of the ship, desperate for some semblance of normality to return to this twisted school trip despite knowing that blood had been spilled, and this tragedy would most likely repeat itself.

Once the elevator reached its destination, we separated and headed to our cabins, mostly without a word or even a sound, save for exhausted yawns. I hadn't done all that much physical exercise, but this was the most exhausted I'd been in my entire life, even including days when I was doing filming for movies or TV.

As Nagato went to see her mother, I met up with Himemiya in the hall outside her cabin. While her tears had dried for the moment, she was nowhere near coming to terms with the loss of her best friend. Since this had been the longest night of our lives- not to mention Tsukimura and Yamazaki's last- it almost didn't seem real that mere hours had passed since the murder.

"So, Himemiya, I have a question for you," I said.

"Is it about Yamazaki-san, by any chance?" Himemiya said.

I nodded. It was tempting to ask if Himemiya was psychic, but it was an obvious enough guess that it wasn't worth commenting on.
"Yeah," I said. "I don't suppose you feel any better about the outcome of this class trial than I do?"

Himemiya shook her head.

"No," Himemiya said. "I must admit that while keeping the class alive, my own personal survival and bringing about the outcome Kanae would have wanted were my three greatest goals, a part of me also wanted Yamazaki-san to pay for what he'd done."

"Well, if he hadn't paid, the two of us and twelve other innocent people would have died," I said. "Like you said, Tsukimura wouldn't have wanted that, right?"

"I know," Himemiya said, "but I'm sure Kanae wouldn't be happy with this outcome, either. If she was here today, she'd be sad that two of our classmates are dead. I don't know if I can care for everyone else like she does, but I know what I feel- frustration and grief over this senseless tragedy."

I nodded.

"Me too," I said. "I don't know if any of us is as nice as Tsukimura seemed- hell, even Tsukimura- but if nothing else, that makes you more compassionate than Asakura, Kirishima and Karita. All of those three have valid points, sure, but I can't help but be a little disturbed at how little this affects them."

"Perhaps they're simply dispassionate," Himemiya said, "but I, too, am concerned. If they view the deaths of one of our own like this, then what's stopping them from killing?"

"I guess the fact that they'd also be executed if they fuck it up," I said. "But yeah, I am worried. How many murders are we going to have to deal with? And how many more good people like Tsukimura are gonna have to pay the price?"

"I don't want to know," Himemiya said, "and most of all, I don't want you to end up as a victim or a killer. Good night for now, Azuki-san; and please stay safe."

"You too, Himemiya," I said.

I couldn't help but think about Yamazaki's final moments. What I'd said about him still applied, since I wasn't about to forgive him for killing Tsukimura, but I couldn't forget the fear in his eyes, or pretend that I didn't understand why he felt that way. Odds were that I was going to die in the killing game, so if my time came, would I face my end more bravely than he had faced his? I couldn't say for certain, and I didn't seriously want to think about that question.

I returned to my cabin. True to his word, Monokuma had left my uniform on the bed, in a bag with a tag saying, "Akira Azuki-sama," and did the same for Nagato's clothes. He didn't seem to have washed them, so I'd probably have to put them in the laundry at some point.

"Welcome back, Azuki-san," Nagato said, still wearing her yukata.

"Thanks," I said. "This room isn't anything close to home, but I sure am glad to be back in it."

"Me too," Nagato said.

We took turns taking our showers and changing into our night time clothes.

"By the way, Nagato, you did pretty well at the trial," I said.
"You really think so?" Nagato said.

"I sure do," I said. "You were able to keep up with everyone and make contributions, such as pointing out that the so-called trap didn't actually work. At the very least, you were a lot better than you said you were."

"If you say so," Nagato said. "I couldn't have done anything on my own, though."

"No one could," I said. "Even if it seemed like I solved the case, it's because a lot of people gave their information. Hell, even Asakura had a useful clue about where the killer was. I still think Higurashi's a bit naïve, but we do have to work together."

Nagato paused to think for a moment.

"Fair enough, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Speaking of which, do you feel responsible for Yamazaki's death?"

"In a way, I do," I said. "Then again, while I feel bad for what happened to him, we didn't have any good choices- it was him or us."

"I see," Nagato said. "Personally, I couldn't bear the idea that my investigation would cause someone to be executed."

I didn't have anything to say to that. All of us bore some responsibility for Yamazaki's execution, from advancing the discussion to voting for him, so we'd started to realize what it was like to have blood on our hands. Because of that, I couldn't really judge Nagato for being unwilling to take responsibility for killing someone, not when I felt partly responsible for Yamazaki's death.

Before getting into bed, Nagato knelt at her bedside in prayer.

"Are you going to pray for Tsukimura's soul?" I said.

"I am," Nagato said, "but it's not just her. I'm also praying for Yamazaki-san, as well as Himemiya-san, who lost her best friend. I don't know if Kumakura-san was close to Yamazaki-san, but I'll pray for him, too."

"So you give the murderers the same consideration as the victims and those who are left behind," I said. "You're really forgiving."

"It's more that I know I'm in no position to judge others," Nagato said. "All of us are sinners, after all."

While Nagato's final remark wasn't too surprising, since it was obviously true, I wasn't expecting her to include herself. As humble as she was, most people probably thought they were better than their peers, regardless of whether this was true.

"Including you and your mom?" I said.

"Yes," Nagato said. "After all, I voted for Yamazaki-san and helped cause his death. Mom has also sinned herself- why do you think I don't have..."

Nagato shook her head before I could ask her more about it.

"I'm sorry, I'd rather not go into detail," Nagato said. "My point is that none of us are perfect, not even those dearest to us. We love and care for them in spite of their flaws"
"True," I said. "Still, Nagato, you seem like a decent person, so I'm glad you made it through this
time."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "I'm glad you made it through, too."

The two of us went to bed, although it took a long time for us to get to sleep- I saw Nagato tossing
and turning, and even got a glimpse of her eyes open at one point. Her faith was admirable, but her
psyche was too fragile for this killing game- then again, being too emotionally detached from the
death and suffering wasn't a good thing either. There were two kinds of people in here- decent
people who'd end up broken by the killing game, and psychos who probably wouldn't have a
problem with killing people. Despite Himemiya's arguments to the contrary, she was firmly in the
former group, but how many of us were in the latter? And how many in the former would end up
being changed for the worse by their time in here? And who was the traitor who'd been rotten since
day one? I only was able to rest when I was too tired to think of that question, but I knew that I,
along with everyone else who was left, would have to think about that when we woke up.

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End of Chapter I

Class Members Remaining: 15

Trivia Award: A memento of Yamazaki. He won it for a trivia competition at his elementary
school.

Author's Notes

Thank you for the comments.

I'd also like to congratulate DarkX the Dragon Knight, who commented for figuring out the culprit.

This trial turned out relatively short, at least compared to the others, probably because it's a relative
open-and-shut case.

While Yamazaki's motivation is similar to Sakuragi's- he feels helpless and desperate to get out- I
decided to make them different in various ways. Sakuragi goes for a relatively simple plan that's
foiled partly due to factors beyond his control, while Yamazaki goes for a complex one. I also
decided to show that his plan actually failed(and not just because he killed the wrong person) as a
bit of a twist.

Since Nagato-sensei counts as part of the class, I decided to include her on the dice that would roll
to determine the culprit- my latest choice for the casino game to determine the verdict after slots
(the first two games), roulette (V3) and poker (Where Talent Goes To Die). If I make another
Danganronpa fic, which won't be part of the Where Talent Goes series (or at least not the Talent
High School saga), I might do horse racing.

Here's a quick list of everyone on the dice, along with which face they correspond to.

One: Chiyuri, Yukari, Higurashi

Two: Yamazaki, Azuki, Sasaki

Three: Kumakura, Asakura, Tsukimura

Four: Taiga, Tatsuki, Himemiya
Five: Karita, Kojima, Kurogane

Six: Mihama, Kirishima, Monokuma

Chapter II may not be out for a while. As a bonus challenge while you're waiting, see if you can identify all the game show shoutouts in this chapter.
Day 7

Daily Life

As I woke up, I took a moment to look around, coming to terms with the fact that what happened yesterday was no more of a dream than the five days before it had been. We were still trapped on a cruise ship run by a psychotic robot bear, with the only apparent way out being killing someone, getting away with it and leaving everyone else to die. That said, we were still alive... which was more than could be said for Tsukimura and Yamazaki.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Morning, Nagato," I said. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm... managing," Nagato said. "I can't get finding Tsukimura-san's dead body or seeing Yamazaki-san's execution out of my mind, but I realize that I'm probably one of the lucky ones."

"Yeah," I said. "Most of us have never had to deal with not knowing whether any day might be our last. Getting knifed in an alley is always something that happens to 'other people'... until it happens to you or someone you know."

Nagato nodded.

"I know," Nagato said. "The girl I mentioned earlier who got stabbed had apparently been involved in a dispute of some sort with her attacker- nothing that would justify sending her to the hospital, of course. I didn't know how true the rumor was, but a lot of people assumed that they'd be safe as long as they didn't go looking for trouble. Not many people at my school liked me, but since I kept my head down, my schoolmates mostly left me alone. I even thought the same thing would happen here, but..."

Nagato's tone clearly indicated how deeply she regretted her naivete. Tsukimura had been one of our more popular schoolmates, but she'd still gotten killed, just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. With that in mind, it was anyone's guess who would die next... and we were no exception.

The weather showed that it would rain until just after breakfast and be cloudy for the rest of the day, which was weirdly appropriate. Not everyone cared for Tsukimura the way Himemiya (or to a lesser degree, Sasaki) did, to say nothing of Yamazaki, but I think most of us were feeling a bit down this morning, if weren't too callous or numb to feel anything at all.

Nagato and I proceeded to the dining hall and saw Himemiya there. Her eyes were red and there were bags under them, so she probably got even less sleep than the two of us had.

"Mind if we sit here?" I said. "Or would you rather be alone?"

"Go right ahead," Himemiya said.
Nagato and I pulled up our chairs, and could see that Himemiya hadn't slept at all that night.

"Before you ask, no, I'm not doing any better," Himemiya said. "My best and oldest friend is gone, and I'll have the rest of my life- which may not be very long, mind you- to try to come to terms with that."

"I thought you'd say that," I said. "While I can't given an overly optimistic answer, I'm sure that Tsukimura would want you to live for as long and as happily as you can."

"I believe so, too," Himemiya said, "not as a servant who puts her mistress' needs before her own, but as a friend who wants me to be happy."

I had to admit that I found Tsukimura's devotion to the Himemiya family incomprehensible at times. While I wasn't completely selfish, I couldn't imagine living my life, the only one I had, for the sake of another person. But when I saw Tsukimura and Himemiya together, it became much simpler. They cared for each other a lot, and I could only imagine how painful it was for Himemiya to lose her best friend.

"By the way, Himemiya-san," Nagato said. "I've been praying for you. I'm not sure if you're a Christian, or all that religious, but I hope it helps."

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Himemiya said. "My family practices Shintoism, but prayers help no matter which god they go to."

Soon afterward, the rest of the class filed into the dining hall, at which point I noticed the two empty seats. Once the dining hall was as full as it could be, Monokuma showed up.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "Are you having a pleasant day today?"

"It's a bit early to tell," I said, "but I doubt it'll be much worse than last night."

The others murmured agreement, but it was clear that they were low on energy.

"Well, I've got an announcement," Monokuma said. "Once we're done with breakfast, we'll be leaving the island and sailing to the next stop on our cruise. Any questions?"

"Yes," Himemiya said, raising her hand. "What will happen to Kanae's body?"

"Nothing, except slow decomposition," Monokuma said. "since it's staying at the inn. Don't worry- it's not going anywhere."

Himemiya sighed.

"In other words, she won't even get a funeral," Himemiya said, "and neither will Yamazaki-san."

"Of course not!" Monokuma said. "Well, in Yamazaki-san's case, there isn't a lot left to bury, so an open-casket funeral's off the table. The Ursa Major doesn't have any facilities to store dead bodies, so either you get home in one piece, or you don't get home at all."

Himemiya looked queasy. I wasn't sure what bothered her more- the idea of Tsukimura's body rotting on an island, or the fact that others, possibly Himemiya included, would likely share the same fate.

"This is barbaric," Kojima said. "Even mass graves aren't this dehumanizing."

"Well, someone's sentimental," Monokuma said. "Do you hold a funeral for every character who
Kojima had nothing to say to that, and neither did anyone else. I wasn't much of a gamer, but obviously, the answer was "no" - an answer we weren't in the mood to give Monokuma.

"Hey, that was an honest question," Monokuma said. "I don't play too many video games, but this situation seemed kind of similar, so I wanted to know. But in any case, it looks like your answer is no."

"I guess it is," I said, "but I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"It's got everything to do with your current situation," Monokuma said. "The killing game is a game, after all, and Tsukimura-san and Yamazaki-san lost."

None of us had anything to say to that. We were aware that our respective fields were competitive, and we'd had to outdo many others in order to become worthy of the Ultimate titles, but the stakes weren't this high. Every time I auditioned, the losers moved on to try out for other parts, instead of going home in body bags.

"One more thing," Monokuma said. "As a bonus for getting through the trial, I'll give you one digit for the keypad lock- 1."

"Which digit is that?" I said. "The first?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Monokuma said. "I'll tell you the actual order if you get all five. Later!"

Monokuma then vanished. As he did, Himemiya let off a long sigh and teared up.

"I'm sorry, Himemiya-san," Sasaki said. "Even if we get out of here, you won't be able to bring Kanae-chan's remains home, will you?"

Himemiya shook her head.

"Unfortunately not," Himemiya said, "which is a shame, since I, as well as my family, owe Kanae that much. Our family holds funerals for all those who die in our service, as well as our family members, and Kanae attended her father's funeral at the tender age of five. Kanae wasn't just my servant, but she was like family to me and my mother, so she deserves at least that much."

"Yeah," I said. "She shouldn't have had to lose her dad so young, but at least she was able to properly grieve for him."

Himemiya nodded, probably knowing that I was speaking from experience.

"And what about Yamazaki-san?" Nagato said. "Do you believe he's entitled to the same thing?"

"I believe so," Himemiya said. "I still can't forgive him, but he's paid for his crime, perhaps more harshly than he deserved. He probably has friends and family back home who will mourn his loss."

"Yes, he does," Kumakura said, "just like the rest of us."

"Exactly," Himemiya said. "Even now, I'm not self-centered enough to think I'm the only one having a problem, not when Nagato-san's trapped in here with her mother, or Tatsuki-san and Taiga-san are in this killing game together."

So that was part of the reason why Himemiya could feel compassion for Yamazaki, even after
what he'd done. She'd lost someone dear to her, but Yamazaki's relatives had, too. If nothing else, as long as she realized that other people felt the things she did, she probably wouldn't be callous enough to let us all die to graduate.

Moments later, Higurashi stood up.

"May I have your attention, please?" Higurashi said. "I would like to apologize for the murder that occurred on my watch last night."

"It's fine," I said. "I honestly never expected you'd be able to stop it, anyway. After all, you can't be disappointed if your expectations were never high to begin with, right?"

No one seemed to disagree with me.

"I agree with Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "Besides, Higurashi-san, what would you have done if you'd stumbled across the crime in progress? Do you think that Yamazaki-san would have been any more likely to spare you than he would have spared Kanae?"

"I suppose not," Higurashi said. "I was hoping to prevent things from coming to that."

"So did I," Himemiya said, "but the root of the problem was that Yamazaki-san was willing to kill to protect his own interests. In the end, he alone is responsible for his actions."

"I know," Higurashi said, "but I'm also responsible for mine. I can't promise that I'll prevent any further killings, but I won't sit around and do nothing."

I thought back to everything I'd said about Higurashi over the course of the past week- that he was naïve to expect us to be able to work together, and even more naïve to think we could do anything to overturn our situation- and frankly, all that still applied even now. We'd all need to work together to even have a shot at success, and all it took was one guy acting on his own to screw everything up, like Yamazaki had.

On the other hand, while Yamazaki's murder scheme laid bare the flaws in Higurashi's proposal, it wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement for "every man for himself." His plan to kill the mastermind had failed, resulting in the death of an innocent person, as well as Yamazaki's own death. Tsukimura and Yamazaki had lost their lives, and no one else had gained anything.

So while I wasn't keen on blindly trusting anyone, or buying into Higurashi's vision, I had no intention of playing to win Monokuma's game. Higurashi's plan wouldn't necessarily work, but at the very least, it was another option apart from waiting to die or seeking graduation.

After breakfast, the ship, true to Monokuma's word, began to pull out of the harbor, and I stood on the deck watching the island fade into the distance. While I was there, Kojima came up to me.

"Got a minute, Azuki?" Kojima said.

"That depends," I said. "What do you want this time?"

"Nothing too major," Kojima said, "just some stuff I felt like I couldn't say with Himemiya around."

"About the murder, right?" I said.

Kojima nodded, and I let off a sigh of relief.
"Bingo," Kojima said. "I could actually get what Yamazaki was saying, about not having a talent that's needed. It's kind of like if, in an MMORPG, he's one of the less skilled players who ends up being benched."

"He did say something like that," I said, "but it doesn't mean he had to kill someone and graduate just because he felt kind of useless."

"No, it doesn't," Kojima said, "but ask yourself this. Would you want to be kept around out of pity, not because you're needed?"

I was left at a loss for words. Every time I played a role in a show or a movie, I'd earned my part by outdoing who knows how many other young actresses for the role. Being able to appear onscreen was a privilege I was grateful for, in large part because I'd never doubted that I'd earned it.

But what if I'd gotten a part by virtue of being the director's granddaughter, rather than outdoing the other candidates? Even if I wasn't talented enough to play the part well, I was sure I was intelligent enough to realize I couldn't keep up with the others - a realization everyone else would arrive at, too. Unless I lacked any conscience or self-respect, it would surely be an unpleasant experience.

"No," I said. "I guess you're speaking from personal experience, right?"

"Yeah," Kojima said. "To use the RPG metaphor, I'm like a white mage or a priest. I play a crucial role in the group as a healer, but I lack the offensive or defensive abilities to do much on my own. I don't think I would have gotten my game published without the help of my friends. There's not a whole lot I can do by myself, either."

"Me neither," I said. "The most I could manage is doing a one-girl Shakespeare production in front of my webcam. I doubt many people would pay to that."

"I would," Kojima said.

I couldn't help but chuckle, knowing that I'd walked into that. Since I'd always known that some of my fans would probably sell their souls for a piece of merchandise with my signature on it, I forgot that Kojima was one of them.

"Of course, even if I do sympathize with Yamazaki feeling as though he's useless by himself, there's a good argument to be made for sticking together," Kojima said. "That's why I voted for Higurashi, after all."

"I thought so," I said. "But would you make that choice again?"

"Why not?" Kojima said. "Sure, a murder happened, but that doesn't change what he was saying, does it? After all, it's not like we have any real alternatives around here."

I sighed and shook my head.

"Not really," I said.

Kojima and I soon parted ways, and I realized that he didn't sound very sure of himself, and he probably wasn't alone. At the start of the killing game, Higurashi had gotten only nine out of fifteen of his classmates' votes, but now that two people had died (one who'd voted for him and one who hadn't) would he even get half the vote if he was up for re-election? While I knew that the answer as "not likely," I had to admit that kicking him out of office didn't sit well with me. At best, we'd be holding him to a standard he couldn't possibly meet, and at worst, we'd be merely using
him as a scapegoat.

I headed over to the bridge and saw Kirishima standing there, intently looking at the keypad. On further examination, the device had a keypad with twelve buttons- the numbers 0 through 9, and "Clear" and "Confirm" buttons. There were also five slots for the numbers, labeled with the letters A through E, from left to right. Upon further examination, the keypad was covered with dust, as if no one had used it in a long time.

"Hello, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said. "Were you perhaps curious about the keypad?"

"Yeah," I said, "ever since Monokuma gave us the digit at breakfast. I wonder if Monokuma's trying to get us to brute-force the password."

"Only a fool would try," Kirishima said. "While there are only the digits 0 through 9, and five digits in the combination, that leaves ten thousand possible combinations for the other four digits, assuming that the digit we were given is the first one. Since we cannot know that for certain, then the total number of possible combinations is roughly fifty thousand."

"And I guess the Gatling guns mean that if we get it wrong, we get pumped full of lead?" I said.

"Precisely," Kirishima said, "so I decided to see whether anyone had used the keypad. Since it is covered in dust, if someone were to use it, then they would probably remove the dust from the keys they used. For example, if the combination were 12345, then those keys would be free of dust, while 6, 7, 8, 9 and 0 would remain dusty."

"I doubt Monokuma had that weak of a password," I said.

"Perhaps he underestimates us," Kirishima said. "We will have to see once we learn the next digit, perhaps after the second murder."

I sighed. Perhaps I was jumping to conclusions, but I could see causality in the most recent major events. We'd gotten the first digit of the password just after we'd left the island, which had followed the spotless surviving the trial, which had followed Tsukimura's murder. The main reason we had for getting inside the bridge, and possibly seizing control of the Ursa Major, would be to end the killing game without any further deaths, but it seemed as though each digit would be bought with two of our classmates' lives.

"Look, Kirishima, I know that this definitely won't be the last murder," I said, "but aren't you a bit too calm about this? If one of the killers gets away with the crime or kills you, you'll die. In fact, that'll also happen if you fuck up and get caught for killing someone. So you should be more worried about that and less worried about when, how or whether you'll get the other four digits."

"I am fully aware of all this," Kirishima said, a slight hint of irritation in his voice. "In fact, staying calm and dispassionate is the only way to operate in a dangerous situation. Getting overly emotional is the most certain way of doing something you will regret."

I shook my head.

"Honestly, I do get that we need to keep our heads on straight," I said, "but I don't think there's any harm in being sad or upset that two of us are dead, especially if you're the girl who just lost her best friend. In fact, I'm worried about those who don't give a shit about the deaths, since they're the type who'd be willing to screw us over in order to graduate."

"While I understand how Himemiya-kun feels, I do not place much stock in sentimentality,"
Kirishima said, "nor do I believe that most of us would care much about those who they had just met. It is only a matter of time before someone decides that graduation is the only way for them to survive, and becomes willing to sacrifice the others to do so."

I sighed, painfully aware that I wasn't getting anywhere with this conversation, and I definitely wasn't enjoying it.

"Whatever," I said. "I just want to know that even if I don't like you, I don't hate you enough to not care if you died. I don't know if you believe the latter, but you can sure as hell believe the former."

"Duly noted, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said. "Feel free to speak with me if you have anything to share, or anything you would like to know."

I parted ways with Kirishima, adding him to my list of people I'd only talk with if I needed him, along with Kojima, Karita and Asakura. Of course, regardless of whether he believed me, I was telling the truth when I didn't want him dead. The world was large enough and our career paths were in separate fields, so it was entirely likely that we'd never see each other again if we both made it through high school, just like a lot of high schoolers who didn't care for each other (and, unfortunately, a lot of those who did).

I saw Kumakura running on the deck, and decided to check up on him. I waved to him as he approached, and he slowed to a walk before stopping.

"Hi, Kumakura," I said.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Kumakura said. "I suppose you're worried about me, aren't you?"

Judging from Kumakura's reaction, I wasn't the first one to speak with him.

"Yeah," I said. "You did lose your roommate, after all, so I wanted to see how you were taking it."

"I appreciate your concern," Kumakura said. "but we weren't especially close. Unlike Himemiya-san and Tsukimura-san, Yamazaki-kun and I had never met prior to coming here. Our talents don't even have much in common, so I can't fathom why we were paired together as roommates."

I noticed he didn't mention the Tachibana sisters, probably because it went without saying. Tsukimura and Himemiya might have grown up together, but the twins had been practically inseparable since birth.

In any case, while most of the roommate pairs seemed to get along reasonably well, the Asakura-Karita pair seemed like the kind of sick joke Monokuma would play; probably the only reason he didn't get Nagato was that only people of the same sex were paired together.

"Then again," Kumakura said, "it is hard to lose someone I'd come to know, if only for a little while. I'm still having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that when I go to my room at night and wake up in the morning, Yamazaki-kun won't be there. Of course, this is only a taste of what Himemiya-san's dealing with."

"Yeah," I said. "Personally speaking, though, I couldn't imagine being on this ship without Nagato. Having her around when I wake up makes my room feel a bit more like home."

"I'm glad to hear that," Kumakura said. "In fact, I think you two probably get along the best out of everyone here, besides those in Cabins F1 and F3."
In other words, the girls seemed to have the best relationship. While I was a tomboy by nature, I found the idea that girls couldn't form meaningful friendships with each other to be one of the most idiotic pieces of bullshit I've ever heard.

"Really?" I said. "What about the others?"

"Let's see..." Kumakura said. "Sasaki-san and Mihama-san seem to get along fairly well, even if Mihama-san is a bit distant from the rest of us, probably because we're older. Kojima-kun and Kurogane-kun are on reasonably good terms, even though the latter seems more interested in becoming friends than the former is. Kirishima-kun has always disagreed with Higurashi-kun when it comes to leadership, so things tend to be fairly awkward; according to Higurashi-kun, they don't really talk outside of meetings. And the less said about Asakura-kun and Karita-kun, the better. This is just my perspective, though, so take it with a grain of salt."

That went without saying. Then again, most of Kumakura's observations lined up with my own, since we didn't know those classmates that well. In fact, pretty much everyone knew that Karita and Asakura fought like cats and dogs, and only stayed out of it because if they killed each other (which wasn't all that likely to happen), it wouldn't affect us unless neither of them was alive to be executed for the latter's death, meaning we'd have to sacrifice someone else under Rule 16.

"Yep," I said. "Of course, I don't think anyone here hates each other enough to kill each other, even if they wouldn't get executed if they get caught."

Kumakura sighed.

"I know," Kumakura said, "but in the end, Yamazaki-kun still killed Tsukimura-san. He did say that he acted on impulse, so I'd like to believe that he didn't want to do it, but couldn't stop himself. I can't say for certain."

Kumakura dropped the subject. I couldn't tell whether he was tormented by the uncertainty of never knowing the definite answer, or whether he wanted to remain uncertain, to avoid confronting the reality that his roommate was willing to let him and everyone else die just to escape this place- if it was the latter, I could only imagine how he'd react to learning about the traitor's identity. As for me, I was determined to find the truth, no matter how painful it may be, and even if it meant learning that one of the people I liked was a murderer or the one behind this killing game.

I saw Mihama in the lounge, reading a legal textbook. Judging from the cover, it looked like it was simplified for a high schooler's reading level, although the fact that even a kid like Mihama could read it was pretty amazing.

"Hey, Mihama," I said. "Are you reading up about the last trial?"

"I am, Azuki-san," Mihama said, as she looked up and closed her book. "Of course, it does not take a legal professional to know that many of the rules- giving the death penalty for a murder committed as a minor, threatening to execute everyone else for a wrong verdict and not allowing any appeals- are hardly proper. Did you know that in Japan, years can pass between when a prisoner is sentenced to death and when they are actually hanged?"

I nodded. Since we were in our second year of high school, if Yamazaki had gotten the death penalty for the murder, then those of us who went on to college would have graduated by the time he was executed.

"Yeah," I said. "In the past, I wondered why they didn't just take criminals outside and hang them
on a gallows next to the courthouse on the day their sentence is handed down. Now, I think that perspective was kind of bloodthirsty and vengeful. No matter what they did, they should at least have a chance to overturn an unjust verdict... and maybe it isn't exactly just to kill someone for their crimes."

Mihama nodded solemnly.

"Yes, I, too, have been forced to think about some things," Mihama said. "If someone is executed for a crime they did not commit, what are the consequences for those who erroneously convicted them, and who chose to sentence them to death?"

I paused long enough to realize that Mihama was hoping for me to answer the question, then thought about it for a moment. Since I couldn't come up with a good answer, I sighed and shook my head.

"I don't know," I said. "In most cases, people wouldn't necessarily know for certain if they were wrong, would they?"

"I suppose not," Mihama said. "If nothing else, Monokuma's system forces us to take responsibility for our choices. They may be choices we should never have to make, but they are ours to make, nonetheless."

"Yeah," I said. "You know, going into the trial, I thought that Yamazaki deserved to die for killing Tsukimura, but after seeing the execution, I'm not so sure. It's all well and good to say that the scumbags who murder people end up getting a taste of their own medicine, but it's another thing to kill them like this."

Mihama sighed.

"I will concede that the execution was brutal," Mihama said, "but if anything, it is simply more honest about the brutality. When people are sentenced to death in our civilized society, they're executed out of the public eye, in an ostensibly more humane manner, but the reality is that the government is killing people in retribution for their crimes."

I recalled some pictures I'd seen of hangings. The prisoner's body wasn't bleeding at all, and the face was often covered with a hood or blindfold, but there were no two ways about it- that was a dead body hanging from that rope.

"Yeah," I said. "I can't imagine that it's easy to actually carry out the sentence."

"Not at all," Mihama said. "Whenever a condemned prisoner is hanged, a few people are given the task of pushing buttons that will open the trapdoor beneath the prisoner's feet, causing the prisoner to drop and the rope to break the prisoner's neck, but only one button actually works. None of those who take on the grim task will know whether they were the one who ended the prisoner's life."

"But all of them were probably prepared to do so," I said, "just like all fifteen of us voted for Yamazaki knowing what would happen to him."

"Indeed," Mihama said. "Perhaps some of us could have chosen to vote for someone else, hoping that the majority would vote to convict him, but that would be a cowardly abdication of responsibility. I am prepared to do what I must in the class trials, and accept responsibility for the consequences."

I nodded grimly. While I found the consequences of our decision to convict the blackened horrific enough that I wouldn't do it lightly, I didn't regret it. It was a tragic outcome, but it was also the
"Me too," I said. "You know, Mihama, for a kid, you've got a really mature perspective on issues like this."

"Anyone who is preparing to work in criminal law must be prepared to handle issues that affect people's lives and futures," Mihama said. "There may be nothing just about these class trials, but we should treat them with at least as much gravity as actual trials, since the stakes are that much higher."

I had to agree with Mihama. On the one hand, it wasn't exactly fair to force us to choose between sentencing the killer to death and being executed ourselves. On the other hand, the system did force us to think carefully and take responsibility for our choices. I didn't know whether we could be held legally responsible for Yamazaki's death, but none of us could forget that we'd let him die just so we could stay alive.

After dinner, while the sun was setting, I saw Karita on the deck. He was engaging Himemiya in a conversation, even though the latter clearly didn't want to be there. I stood a couple meters away, ready to step in if necessary.

"I have a question, Himemiya-san," Karita said. "Considering that Yamazaki-kun was trying to kill me, would you have preferred that I died instead of Tsukimura-san?"

"I'd have preferred that no one died, Karita-san," Himemiya said. "It should have been possible to talk Yamazaki-san out of his plan to kill you without anyone coming to harm."

"Good to hear that you claim to think of everyone's well-being," Karita said, "but you didn't answer my question. Would you rather have me alive... or Tsukimura-san?"

Himemiya-san sighed.

"If I were granted the final choice on who lives or who dies," Himemiya said, "a theoretical situation that in no way represents what actually happened, I would choose for Kanae to live and you to die. Is that the answer you were fishing for?"

"It's the one I expected from you," Karita said. "All of us have lives that we value more than others, and the designated con artist is generally fairly low on most people's lists."

I clenched my teeth. It was rude to eavesdrop, but at this point, stepping in seemed like the right thing to do.

"Enough, Karita," I said. "Does Himemiya look like she's in the mood for your questions?"

"Probably not," Karita said, "but how she feels at the moment doesn't seem as though it'd change her answers, so that's a non-issue. I got what I came for, though, so I'll let her go for now."

Karita walked off waving goodbye. As he did, Himemiya let off another sigh.

"You OK?" I said.

"I'm all right," Himemiya said. "Karita-san forced me to confront a harsh truth. While I do not believe anyone here deserves to die, I care more for Kanae, my best friend, than I do for an untrustworthy individual like Karita-san, who sees no problem with exploiting people for personal gain."
I nodded. Karita had made her seem like a bad person for choosing her best friend over him, but he wasn't wrong about how she'd choose. In fact, I felt the same way.

"I'm with you there," I said. "Then again, you're a hell of a lot more polite to him than I would be."

"It's part of how I was raised," Himemiya said. "Members of my family are taught to practice good manners at all times, even when that courtesy is not reciprocated, as a matter of principle and personal dignity. The last thing you want to do when dealing with a disagreeable person is to give that person proof that they're getting under your skin."

"Ah, that makes sense," I said. "Of course, that seems like it'd require a hell of a lot of discipline."

"It does," Himemiya said, "and Kanae was always better than I was at it, since she, as a servant, had even stricter rules imposed on her. I do sometimes have to wonder what things would be like if our positions were reversed."

I had to wonder which one of the two had gotten the short end of the stick. On the one hand, most people would obviously pick Tsukimura, since it was a hell of a lot better to be a rich girl than someone who cleaned up after her. On the other hand, while Tsukimura simply had to show Himemiya respect and do what she said, Himemiya had the more complex problem of not only not abusing her power over Tsukimura, but also treating her as a friend while recognizing that she couldn't always return the favor. If I had to make that choice when it came to my budding friendship with Nagato, I'd consider calling her "Chiyuri-sama" to be the lesser of two evils.

"I can't say," I said, "since they probably shaped you both into the people you are today. If it were up to me, I wouldn't change too much, though, since I like the person you turned out as."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Himemiya said.

"No problem" I said. "I've got to go, since I need to have a word with Karita. I'll talk to you later."

I quickly headed below decks, in the direction Karita had gone.

I managed to track down Karita just outside his cabin. The ship wasn't too large, so there weren't many places I needed to look in, but I was lucky enough to find him in the first place I checked.

"You need something, Azuki-san?" Karita said.

"You can bet your ass I do," I said. "What the fuck was that about just now?"

"Oh, I guess you're asking about my conversation with Himemiya-san," Karita said. "I'm just trying to get her to be honest with herself."

I took a deep breath to calm myself. I was still pissed about him putting Himemiya on the spot like that, but maybe he had his reasons. They probably weren't good reasons, but I had to hear them.

"Explain yourself," I said.

"All right," Karita said. "The idea that we all view people's lives the same is nothing more than a fantasy. Himemiya-san obviously cared for Tsukimura-san more than anyone else here, so she obviously wouldn't have been as bothered if I'd died. Even I know that much."

I sighed.

"Figures," I said. "So that explains why you didn't seem too bothered by the fact that Yamazaki
"Well, it doesn't help that his plan was poorly thought-out," Karita said, "so it would be unlikely that his trap would have succeeded in killing me. But let's be honest- anyone who wants to 'win' this 'game' is willing to not only kill someone but sacrifice the others, so no one is safe. Out of everyone here, I'm probably the one that people would have the least problem with killing, so I'm in the most danger."

"Yeah, I wonder why," I said. "But seriously, I do get your point. In fact, I recall you saying that you didn't want to make enemies, which is why it's strange that you said what you did to Himemiya."

"Yes, I said that," Karita said, "but as harsh as it was, I deemed it necessary to get Himemiya-san to acknowledge that truth. I doubt her opinion on me changed very much, if at all."

I shook my head.

"No, it didn't," I said, "Luckily for you, Himemiya's more tolerant of that sort of thing than I am, so she doesn't seem to hold it against you too much. As for me, I've said my piece."

"Good to hear," Karita said. "If you're done, I'll be retiring to my room, so I'll see you tomorrow, Azuki-san."

After finishing with Karita, I went to see Nagato-sensei in her cell.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said. "Are you here to talk about the trial, like Himemiya-san and Kumakura-san were?"

I shrugged, then sat down.

"Not exactly," I said. "I will say, though, that even though I can't forgive what Yamazaki did, seeing him die like that really got to me. Hell, even Himemiya said the same thing."

"Himemiya-san said as much to me," Nagato-sensei said, "although I won't say anything more out of respect for student-teacher confidentiality. I did try to offer a supportive ear to her as she grieved for her friend."

"Good," I said. "I'm glad to see that someone's looking out for us."  

"It's part of my duty as your teacher," Nagato-sensei said. "Not only is Chiyuri in my class, but I think of my other students as a bit like my children. Parents are many things- authority figures, guides and sources of support, among others- and the same can be said for teachers."

I nodded in agreement. Maybe her being Nagato's teacher wasn't too different from being her mother, although she did have to be mindful of how she treated her daughter at school.

"Speaking of which, I'm curious about something, if it isn't too personal," I said. "Don't you feel as though your daughter has to make a lot of effort to accommodate you when you're both teacher and
"She does," Nagato-sensei said, "but as I'm sure Chiyuri said, it goes both ways. Just like she has to treat me as an authority figure, I have to treat her as a student who's responsible for her own decisions and her own studies. Chiyuri is not the best student, but she does earnestly try to improve herself, and as such, I give her guidance rather than abuse my authority to smooth her path."

I then remembered what Nagato had said shortly after I'd first met our teacher- that she was glad that her mother treated her like a student, one of the few who'd earned their way into the school.

"Ah, right," I said. "I suppose I'm just speaking based on personal experience. My mom's my manager, but while she offers advice for my career, she never makes me do anything that I don't want to do."

"That's good for you, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said, "and I do something similar for Chiyuri. When Talent High School offered her an interview, and later, an invitation to the school, I left the decision to attend up to her, and she eagerly accepted."

"Pretty much anyone would," I said, "but I'm glad to see that Nagato's making her own choices, since she seemed a bit like a pushover at first glance."

"You aren't completely wrong," Nagato-sensei said, "since Chiyuri finds it difficult to impose on others. That said, she is still her own person, with her own needs and desires. As her mother and as her teacher, I hope to fulfill both of them... within reason, of course."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. "I guess that the two roles aren't so incompatible after all."

"True," Nagato-sensei said. "I'm not sure if Chiyuri ever told you, but she hopes to become a teacher someday, and I hope she does, too."

"That sounds pretty nice," I said, "but wouldn't you have to call each other Nagato-sensei?"

"Of course," Nagato-sensei said, "and that would make me happy. If that day comes, we'll be colleagues and equals, and my little girl will become a woman she can be proud of."

Nagato-sensei's eyes lit up fondly, even though she knew that it was most likely that her daughter would be dead by the end of the month. I knew that, too, but didn't want to take that hope away from her. After all, I, too, hoped Nagato would beat the odds, survive and escape with everyone else who was still alive.

Shortly before bedtime, I sat with Nagato in our room.

"Just wondering," I said, "but what do you suppose Higurashi's approval rating is?"

"About the same," Nagato said, "since we lost someone who voted for him and someone who didn't, and none of the survivors seem to have changed their minds. It thus went from ten out of sixteen to nine out of fourteen, excluding him."

"Excluding him?" I said. "Oh, wait, you're counting Nagato-sensei, right?"

Nagato nodded.

"I do," Nagato said. "Mom was glad that Higurashi-san stepped up to lead us, and still approves of him, even after what happened."
I nodded.

"I see," I said. "I suppose that his critics, myself included, never expected much of him, but what about his supporters?"

"It depends," Nagato said. "Some of us believe Higurashi-san is doing his best. Others believe that Yamazaki-san, as well as anyone else who commits murder, are responsible for their own actions. Still others have no desire to needlessly divide the group in a situation like this, or to damage morale by ousting our leadership. I, for one, don't think I could do nearly as good of a job."

"Well, I don't think Higurashi's setting the bar very high," I said, "so I think 'nearly' is a bit of an exaggeration."

"Maybe it is," Nagato said, "but even if Higurashi-san is unable to prevent the murders, he's still willing to do something about them, and is confident enough to stand in front of us and say 'This is what we need to do if we all want to stay alive.' I don't think I could manage that, and I don't know of anyone here who can do both."

I shrugged.

"Technically speaking, some of us simply don't want to," I said. "But yeah, there's a reason why Higurashi's our only choice."

Having come to the end of our discussion for now, we climbed into bed and went to sleep.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*Some people are happy to have things get back to normal, but let me tell you this- normal is debatable.*

*If you're a soldier who fights in a war in some hellhole, sleeps in tents and eats awful rations, you get used to it after a while.*

*And once you do, then going back to a society where citizens aren't allowed to carry guns, where you can sleep in a bed and eat home-cooked meals seems like a dream come true.*

*So if your life's a real mess, be happy! The few bright spots will seem like paradise in comparison to what you usually go through.*

---

**Day 8**

I woke up again after hearing Monokuma in my sleep. I wondered if he'd taken a break the night after the trial, since I didn't remember hearing him back then.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Morning," I said.

Unlike yesterday, the weather would be sunny all day today. As we got dressed, I decided to ask Nagato something that was on my mind.

"You don't have to answer if I don't want," I said, "but do you have any dreams?"

"I do," Nagato said. "Last night, I had a dream that my mom and I were living on a farm out in the
countryside. We lived in a one-story house on a few acres of land, and wore button-down shirts and overalls. Are you following me so far?"

"Yeah," I said, "but I didn't picture you and your mom as the type to wear that sort of thing."

Nagato giggled as she adjusted her tie.

"Mom wore maternity overalls while she was pregnant with me," Nagato said, "since she was on maternity leave and didn't have to dress up for work. As for me, I'm the type who likes wearing denim-jeans, overalls, you name it- when I'm not wearing my uniform or dressing up for church. I'm not up on the latest trends, so I generally go for casual clothes that aren't too trashy."

I had to admit that I was a bit surprised, since I'd always imagined Nagato would dress nicely when she wasn't wearing her uniform. Of course, since she, like the rest of us, was wearing the uniform because she didn't have much choice, maybe I was just making assumptions.

"Anyway," Nagato said, continuing her story, "Mom and I walked through the wheat fields, and eventually, we saw Talent High School standing there. I noticed four other people my age, dressed the same way I was- I think they were mostly girls, but there may have been at least one boy in the group. The six of us stepped through the front door, and that was when I woke up."

"That's one weird dream," I said, "especially since I recall that Talent High School's in the middle of a city."

Nagato nodded. Not only was her high school a few kilometers from there, but so was Sasaki's.

"I know it is," Nagato said, "since I've been there even before I was interviewed, meeting up with my mom after she got done with work. I'd always dreamed of going there someday, as a student, not a visitor."

I still had my fair share of unanswered questions about Talent High School, even if it was unlikely that either of the Nagatos could answer them. It was possible that one of them was the traitor behind this killing game, but not only did I not have any proof, but I hoped this wasn't the case. The younger Nagato was starting to become my friend, while the elder Nagato was a respectable teacher. Of course, the revelation of the traitor's identity would probably involve at least some heartache and outrage (unless it was that asshole Asakura, the one nobody liked), so even if we needed to find the answer to that question, I doubted we would enjoy hearing it.

At breakfast, Nagato and I sat with Asakura and Karita, with Nagato halfheartedly endorsing Higurashi's proposal to eat with different people. Apart from Karita offering a pleasant "Good morning, ladies," to which Nagato and I responded in kind, we ate our meal in silence.

Nagato finished first, and she and Higurashi went to meet with Nagato-sensei. After she did, Kirishima, accompanied by Himemiya, came up to us.

"Do you three have a minute?" Kirishima said.

"Sure," I said, "What do you want?"

"I am holding a meeting of everyone who did not vote for Higurashi-kun," Kirishima said, "to get them to share their opinions and discuss what, if anything, we should do next. Are you able to come?"

I shrugged and nodded, still not completely accustomed to having an entirely clear schedule.
"I guess I can," I said.

"I'm interested," Karita said.

"It's not like I have anything better to do," Asakura said sullenly.

"Excellent," Kirishima said. "If you are available, we can meet now, around the pool."

We took a moment to look around the dining hall, but saw that most of the others had left, and no one was listening. The five of us then headed out the door to the deck.

After stepping onto the deck, the five of us walked over to pools and sat down in chairs nearby. The sun was shining and the weather was fairly warm, so while Kirishima didn't seem like much of a fan of the outdoors, I was glad that he held the meeting outside, since the weather was so good. While a wide open spot like this seemed fairly conspicuous, it also meant that there weren't any places for eavesdroppers to hide nearby.

"Thank you for coming," Kirishima said. "My first question is as follows: have any of your opinions on Higurashi-kun changed?"

We looked around blankly for a moment. The most reasonable assumption would be that they changed from disapproving of his performance to approving, but maybe that wasn't what Kirishima was looking for.

"I can't say it has," Asakura said. "The guy was self-righteous and full of shit before Tsukimura and Yamazaki died, so it isn't too much of a surprise that he'd be that way afterward."

"Perhaps I should rephrase the question," Kirishima said. "Higurashi-kun's goals are twofold- in the short term, he hopes to prevent us from killing each other, and in the long term, he seeks to find a way out of the killing game. He has failed in the former, and has not made any meaningful progress on the latter."

"At least for me, the question's whether you can expect him to succeed," Karita said. "I can't say I did."

The others nodded in agreement.

"Now for our next question," Kirishima said. "While we seem to be in agreement that Higurashi-kun is unable to accomplish the goals that he set out to achieve, what should we do next?"

We paused for a moment. Ordinarily, an incompetent politician could be voted out of office, since there was no shortage of people willing to do his job, but what about Higurashi? Not only had no one opposed him, but was he truly incompetent by our standards?

"Do we need to do anything?" I said. "The current situation's far from ideal, but it could be a hell of a lot worse. At least Higurashi's trying to help, as opposed to causing more problems."

"Or at least he seems that way," Karita said. "Hypothetically speaking, he could be using his position to appear benevolent but ineffectual, thereby concealing his plans to murder someone and graduate... or his identity as the traitor."

"That certainly is possible, Karita-kun," Kirishima said, "but do you have a solution to propose?"

Karita looked as though he'd been caught off guard for a moment, but shrugged and shook his
"Not really," Karita said, "since, if anything, even having a leader would put us at risk of being manipulated. But if Higurashi-kun wants to lead us, and the majority are willing to listen to him, then I guess there's nothing the five of us can do about it."

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Asakura said, "but I actually agree. It's not as though I can do anything about how the others run things."

"Neither do I," Himemiya said. "If I believed I could do a better job than Higurashi-san, I would have volunteered to lead before Kanae died."

I simply nodded.

"So allow me to confirm my understanding of the situation," Kirishima said. "None of you necessarily approve of Higurashi's performance as leader, but no one wants to change anything. Is that correct?"

"Seems that way," I said. "It's not as though the five of us agree on much, anyway, so this meeting was a waste of time."

Kirishima shook his head.

"Not at all," Kirishima said. "We learned more about each other's perspective, and that so far, even Higurashi-kun's critics favor staying the course. As such, that is what we will do for now. I thank you all for your participation, and look forward to asking you again if the need arises in the future."

We got up and excused ourselves, scattering in various directions to prevent people from realizing that we'd met. We weren't exactly scared of what Higurashi or his supporters would do to us, but considering our circumstances, a bit of caution was always prudent.

Some time after the meeting, Himemiya walked up to me while I was below decks.

"Do you have a minute, Azuki-san?" Himemiya said.

"Yep," I said. "You want to talk about the meeting?"

Himemiya nodded.

"I'm curious about something," Himemiya said. "Do your disagreements with Higurashi-san result in any awkwardness between you and Nagato-san?"

"Not really," I said. "Nagato might be Higurashi's vice-president, but she's understanding about our disagreements."

"I thought so," Himemiya said. "Kanae was the same way, even though she disagreed with me. All she asked was that I try to work well with him, since he wanted what we did- for us to get out of here alive."

"That sounds like her," I said, "although I'm surprised that she was able to go against you at all."

"I'm glad she did," Himemiya said, "since Kanae is not a tool that serves the Himemiyas' will, but a person with her own feelings and desires. Higurashi-san felt the same way, since he once told me that because democracies rely on all people being considered equal and thinking for themselves, there's no room for slavery, serfdom or caste systems. His family is not wealthy enough to hire
servants, but he would most likely feel the same way about anyone in his family's employ."

I wondered how Tsukimura would have voted if she'd participated in a class trial and Himemiya was still alive. The most likely answer was along with everyone else, since Yamazaki's guilt had become obvious by the time I'd gotten him to confess... unless Tsukimura got cold feet at the prospect of sentencing someone to death. If Tsukimura herself was the killer, then things would get complicated.

"Anyway," I said, "I've done some thinking, and you can tell Kirishima to count me out of the next 'anti-Higurashi' meeting. Don't get me wrong; I'm not a total fan of his, but I don't have any desire to undermine what little authority he has."

"I understand," Himemiya said. "I will tell Kirishima-san this if he asks, but I will miss having you around, since you are perhaps the only one of the four- well, five- other voters that I like."

I thanked Himemiya and then parted ways with her. Considering that the two people who hated each other the most were part of the opposition group, it was clearly too dysfunctional to accomplish anything... even if they actually had the desire to change the status quo. Higurashi wasn't the best leader, but he seemed like a much better bet compared to his critics, so my money was on him.

I met up with Higurashi in the kitchen, while he was in the middle of some cleaning.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "Is there something I can do for you today?"

"I had a question," I said. "Have you heard that the people who didn't vote with you are meeting up?"

Higurashi shook his head.

"I have not," Higurashi said, "but I am not surprised, either. No ruler has ever been able to please all their subjects."

"Probably not," I said, "but surely you need some strategy to be able to get most people to vote for you?"

"I do," Higurashi said. "I hope to make policies that strive to do right by as many people as possible, rather than merely pandering to the majority."

I paused to think for a moment about one flaw of democracy- the majority could oppress the minority. In the killing game, sacrificing Yamazaki so the rest of us could live had been extremely unpleasant, but we knew what we had to do. In many other cases, though, the minorities could be denied their rights, sometimes without even any benefit to the majority, simply because most people didn't want to allow them to do that.

"And what if you have to make a difficult decision that would negatively affect some- or a lot of-people?" I said.

"Then I would think long and hard about it," Higurashi said, "and then choose whichever decision I believe to be right, rather than which would win me the most support."

"If you say so," I said. "Good luck actually getting elected."

"I know my odds are steep," Higurashi said, "but I also hope some voters recognize and seek
leaders with strong principles who are honest about their beliefs. Perhaps an honest candidate would inspire some who became cynical about elections."

I shrugged.

"I guess," I said. "If nothing else, you do seem like you believe what you're saying."

"I certainly do," Higurashi said, "and I also believe that those who did not vote for me are as worthy of my best efforts as those who did. This principle applies to the killing game, and that includes you, Kirishima-kun, Himemiya-san, Asakura-kun, Karita-kun… and Yamazaki-kun. I may have failed to stop the last murder, but I'll give my best efforts to save the ones who are left and honor those who died."

"Thanks, Higurashi," I said. "I can't say I'm expecting all that much, but give it your best shot."

I wondered if Higurashi considered death row inmates to be worthy of his benevolence, even though they'd been convicted of killing fellow citizens and were about to die themselves, but I guessed he'd say yes. Putting aside all questions of his competence, I could actually appreciate that he was honest, so maybe he was on to something when he said that alone would draw some people to his camp.

I found Sasaki sitting with the twins in the lounge, having a conversation. When I joined them, they said hello, then picked up where they'd left off.

"Speaking of your assistants, Sasaki-san, I'm curious about one thing," Tatsuki said. "Have you ever had to fire anyone?"

"A few times," Sasaki said. "One person kept missing work, even though we need all hands present in order to get the manga out on time; as callous as it was to fire her over the phone, I needed a replacement, and couldn't wait for her to actually show up. Another showed up drunk one time- I immediately called my editor and got permission to fire her."

"I see," Taiga said. "Did you ever have to let anyone go because they weren't good enough?"

"Yes," Sasaki said. "One girl who was a little older than me worked as an assistant. She was polite, dependable and reasonably hard-working, but she was a bit slower and less skilled than the other assistants. I did have a talk with her, but she didn't manage to improve. Finally, after a long discussion with my editor, I decided to let her go."

"You don't sound happy about it," I said.

"I'm not," Sasaki said. "The other two I mentioned clearly didn't want to work with me, but this girl was well-behaved, and even appreciated when I sat down to tell her what she was doing wrong. I even argued in favor of keeping her around when I spoke with my editor, but my editor told me I was just doing it out of pity. After that, I asked myself why I was keeping her around, and then decided to take my editor's advice."

Sasaki's tone was somber. She sounded like she didn't want to have to do this, but wasn't willing to pass the buck and blame her editor.

"I probably would have done the same," I said, "but do you think you made the right call?"

Sasaki shrugged.
"I don't know," Sasaki said, "but I have to be prepared to do this, which is part of the reason why I don't get too close to my assistants- I don't want my feelings to get in the way if I have to make a decision like that. If you were my assistant, you'd strictly be 'Azuki-san' to me. I guess I could use the twins' first names, but using '-san' rather than '-chan' would be non-negotiable. I wouldn't complain if you decided to call me by my first name, but I wouldn't return the favor."

I had to admit that I had a bit of trouble imagining Sasaki acting so serious and formally. Maybe things would be different if she'd started out as my boss or my teacher (or vice versa), just as maybe I'd have a different relationship with Nagato-sensei if she was my classmate.

"Is this about Yamazaki?" I said. "Specifically, how we had to cut him loose?"

"I suppose," Sasaki said, "but voting for Yamazaki-kun was easier than firing my assistant in some ways. First, I'd only known him for a week, whereas my assistant had been with me for a few months. Second, I had about a minute to make my selection once Voting Time began, so I couldn't afford to agonize over the decision- a day passed between when I met with my editor and when I actually fired my assistant. Third, it was a matter of survival- mine and everyone else's- so I knew what I had to do."

Sasaki spoke to what a lot of people had been dealing with when Voting Time came. We knew what we had to do, and the only question was whether we could push a button that would kill someone. Since we hadn't had any time to think about it, we only did what seemed natural, then spent the rest of our lives living with the consequences.

After a moment, Sasaki, realizing that the mood was getting uncomfortable, quickly changed the subject.

"In any case," Sasaki said, "we started talking about this because Tatsuki-chan, as a solo performer who plays her sister's songs, asked me about what it was like to work in a group."

"That's true," Tatsuki said. "I've heard of a couple cases in which a group of friends get together to form a band, only to break up for one reason or another, resulting in their friendship dying with the band. As fun as it would be to play alongside Taiga, I can't help but worry about that happening."

"Yeah," Taiga said. "I'd rather not force you to kick me out just because I can't keep up, sis."

Tatsuki shook her head.

"You're keeping up just fine, Taiga," Tatsuki said. "You're at least as good of a guitarist as I am, and there's no one I'd rather have writing my songs."

Taiga smiled appreciatively.

"Personally, I don't think I've ever had to think about this sort of thing," I said, "since while the entertainment industry has really high standards, I'm not responsible for enforcing them. Neither is my mom; all she does is make sure that I'm able to do my job as well as I need to. As she puts it, the entertainment industry is highly competitive, and not many people are willing to help you out, so it's only natural that she's one such person for me."

"That's good," Taiga said. "After all, I really think that people who are on the same 'team' should look out for each other."

As the subject changed to our various mentors, colleagues and allies, I wondered what this killing game would be like if all of us were willing contestants. Cooperation would be impossible, with the possible exception of the class trials (since we'd die if the spotless got away), but if we got through
those, then we'd be back to killing each other, just like Monokuma wanted. If he wanted a killing game, then convicted murderers would make the best players.

On the other hand, in such a scenario, virtually none of us would feel any sympathy for the other players, the scum of society, when they were murdered or executed. If Yamazaki had at least a few murders under his belt even before he killed Tsukimura, then I probably wouldn't even feel the small degree of pity I did for him; hell, if Tsukimura was a murderer herself, I'd probably suspect that she'd been trying to kill him at the time of her death. Monokuma's goal wasn't just to have a "game" in which the players killed each other, but he wanted the greatest possible impact by having the participants be talented teenagers who weren't killers by nature, but could be pushed to that point. He'd had more than enough fun, and I had no intention of furthering his twisted entertainment.

In the evening, I returned to my room. Not long afterward, Nagato opened up the door and came in.

"I'm back," Nagato said.

"Welcome back, Nagato," I said. "Where were you?"

"I was seeing my mother," Nagato said, "giving her an update on what was going on."

After hanging up her blazer in the closet, Nagato sat down on her bed, across for me.

"Anyway, I'm curious about something," I said. "Do you ever find it hard to live up to your mother's standards?"

"Not really," Nagato said. "My mom knows that I'm not the greatest student- I get good grades in math, but below-average ones in everything else- so while she hopes I'll improve, she doesn't push me too hard. She knows me well enough to know what my 'best' is."

"Ah, good," I said. "I'm glad she's so understanding."

"As a mother and a teacher, Mom believes in pushing me outside my comfort zone, not in forcing me to do something I can't," Nagato said. "That's why she was fine with my coming to Talent High School, even though... I might not be the most worthy of the title."

I once again thought about Asakura. The issue of him and Nagato having the same talent was far from our top priority, not to mention that I hadn't been in the mood to seek him out since the trial. Then again, I hoped to get to the bottom of it someday.

For now, Nagato changed the subject, and after Monokuma's Night Time announcement, we showered, changed our clothes and went to bed.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*If what you're reading proves relevant to your life, it's for the same reason this message reached you- a coincidence. Don't trust everything some piece of paper inside a fortune cookie tells you.*

*Lucky Numbers: 4, 8, 15, 16, 23, 42*

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*Day 9*
I woke up again, feeling a bit better rested than the last few nights.

"Morning, Nagato," I said.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Did you have that strange dream again?"

"Yeah," I said. "Have you ever had a fortune cookie?"

Nagato nodded, then started getting dressed.

"I have," Nagato said. "Sometimes, Mom gets Chinese takeout when she doesn't have time to cook. When I was young, I loved breaking open the fortune cookies to see what was inside, so Mom makes a point of giving them to me."

"Well, I got my own fortune," I said, "and it was some asinine bit of advice that was downright contradictory- not to believe advice like that. I guess that Monokuma doesn't want us to figure anything out, whereas if that came from my own subconscious, I'm not too sure of it myself."

Nagato shrugged.

"It's true that Monokuma is not a benevolent authority figure," Nagato said, "but I recall that, after the class trial, he told us that he wanted us to learn to enjoy despair. Maybe that's why he's making us go through all this suffering."

"Could be," I said, "but I don't get what these dreams mean. I'll tell you if I have an interesting one, or if I stop having them altogether."

I then put my clothes on and we headed to breakfast. Even though I still couldn't make sense of all this, at least Nagato didn't think I was crazy or making stuff up. She still had her secrets, but that degree of trust was the most I could ask for at the moment.

At breakfast, we sat with Kojima and Kurogane. I agreed, hoping that having other people around would convince Kojima to tone things down a little, and knowing anyone was preferable to Asakura and Karita.

"I'm curious about something," Kojima said. "Circumstances aside, isn't it great to be able to rub shoulders with some amazing young Ultimates?"

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, I can respect everything that you've achieved in your fields, which I couldn't hope to match you at, but I didn't really put you guys on a pedestal the way your fans do. If anything, the better I get to know you, the more you seem like ordinary people who happen to be really good at something, just like the actors I work with are."

Nagato shook her head. Since she was generally polite and good-natured, if a bit lacking in self-esteem, there were times when I underestimated her assertiveness.

"I actually agree, Kojima-san," Nagato said. "My talent isn't all that impressive, so I'm really glad to be in the same class as Azuki-san, since I'm a big fan of hers."

"Me too, Nagato," Kojima said, "but you shouldn't think of your talent as useless. I bet someone like you would be pretty good at debugging my games."

"I'm glad you think so," Nagato said, "but wasn't your team able to handle that without outside help?"
"We were," Kojima said, "but it's always nice to have fresh perspectives. Kurogane here was interested, too."

Kurogane nodded.

"Yeah," Kurogane said. "Of course, a part of me was interested in helping Kojima-kun out in some way, as well as playing whatever he'd make."

"True," Kojima said. "I don't take people out simply to be nice or because they're my friends. I only want people who can do the jobs, so if I ask you to come on board, you can be damn sure I think you can do the job."

I thought back to what the twins had talked about with Sasaki, and wondered if it was a coincidence that the same thing was on Kojima's mind. The two had a fair amount in common, as the heads of creative endeavors that required everyone involved to give their all.

"That's principled of you," I said.

"I'd say 'practical' is more accurate," Kojima said. "Any complicated machine like, say, a gaming console, needs all its parts in good condition, and that goes for the machines that make those machines. I take pride in what I make, and do my best to make a final product I and everyone else worked on it can be proud of. So would you if you had a chance to work on it."

"Good point," I said, "but I thought Realm of Three Kings didn't have voice acting."

"It doesn't," Kojima said, "for a few reasons. One, there was a lot of text, so we couldn't voice it all. Two, even if we could, we didn't have the budget to hire competent voice actors. Three, we couldn't exactly make do with what we had, since we didn't have any girls on our team. Maybe next time, we could hire you."

As Kojima not so subtly suggested he wanted to get me on, I could notice Kurogane looking off to the distance, seemingly feeling bored... or excluded. Nagato then changed the subject to ask about go, a subject that would be more Kurogane's speed. Since I didn't have much to say about it, I simply listened and ate, while feeling a bit bad for Kurogane.

Without anything better to do, I spent much of the morning just sitting on the deck, looking out at sea and trying to see if anything was on the horizon, but to no avail. There weren't any ships, fish or other signs of life out there- just clouds, the rising sun and the odd Monodrone. Considering how densely populated Japan was, it was surprising that roughly three quarters of the world's surface was water, a vast blue expanse that seemed empty from the perspective of a land-dwelling species.

The only signs of life were on this floating mass of metal, a marvel of engineering made to make up for the fact that we weren't designed to swim. Kumakura, joined with Higuurashi, went for a run on deck. Not long afterward, Himemiya did some target practice. Tatsuki practiced some of her songs, after checking with me and asking permission.

As I once again turned and looked out on the sea, with only the sound of Tatsuki's singing and guitar proving that there was someone else on deck, I couldn't help but feel lonely. While we were constantly being watched by the cameras and the Monodrones, since Monokuma was the only one who was viewing what was on the cameras, no one outside had any idea what was happening to us. If Monokuma executed all the spotless, then they'd never know why they'd never see us again, let alone why- the blackened who graduated would take that shameful knowledge to their grave.

A disturbing thought occurred to me- what if there was no one else out there? We'd started our
journey in an empty city by the sea, our first stop was a similarly empty resort town and we had no more reason to believe the next island- "Party City," if I recalled correctly- would be any different. At the moment, I was less worried about the fact that we'd probably never see our homes again and more worried about what had happened to my home. After all, my hometown, a moderately sized city in the Kagoshima area, wouldn't be much of a home if the buildings were intact but the people who lived and worked in them were all gone.

Before long, Tatsuki stopped playing, and the deck was once again silent save for the sound of the wind and the waves. Before long, Nagato joined me, carrying bentos.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "I thought you might like some company... and lunch."

"Thanks, Nagato," I said. "Have a seat."

Nagato pulled up a chair and sat next to me. She took a bite from each of the bentos to prove that they weren't poisoned, then handed mine to me.

"You know," Nagato said, "I haven't often had lunch with other people."

"I see," I said. "You always struck me as the kind of person who didn't have a lot of friends."

"Surprisingly enough, neither does Mom," Nagato said. "In a professional sense, she has good relationships with her colleagues, one of whom was planning to join Hope's Peak Academy as a teacher this year, but the few friends she still has are the ones that knew her all their lives."

I wasn't totally surprised to hear that. People tended to grow apart from their friends over time, especially after getting jobs and starting families.

"As for me," Nagato said, "not many people were willing to give me a chance."

"Why not?" I said. "Pretty much everyone here, apart from that asshole Asakura, at least tolerates you."

"Maybe they do," Nagato said, "but we've only just met, and no one here knows much about me."

I shrugged. Usually, the more you learned about someone, the deeper of a connection you felt to them, so I didn't have any idea what the root of Nagato's fear was just yet. A part of me was tempted to press her for it, but I knew that wouldn't do any good.

"I guess not," I said. "I don't know what secret of yours would be so terrible that they wouldn't want anything to do with you, but I'm not going to judge you for it. You can tell me when you're ready."

"I will," Nagato said. "Thank you, Azuki-san."

"Not a problem," I said. "In fact, I should thank you; you showing up helped get me out of a funk."

Nagato smiled, since she was clearly at her happiest when helping others. I could only hope that we'd escape, so that she'd find a place that was more conducive to cooperation, and people that she could readily trust.

After leaving the deck, I saw Himemiya sitting with the twins in the lounge.

"Hello, Azuki-san," one of the sisters said. "Just wondering, but do you have any siblings?"
"No," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Taiga and I were talking with Himemiya-san about our families," the other sister said. "How many sisters did you say you had, again?"

"Three," Himemiya said. "A brother who's five years older than me, a sister who's ten years older, and another brother who's fifteen years older."

"Holy shit," I said. "That's one hell of a large age gap."

"I know," Himemiya said. "Partly because of that, and partly because he was often busy when I was little, I'm not very close with my siblings. We get along reasonably well, but I think Kanae was more of a sister than they were."

"Yes, I heard," Tatsuki said, "but what you said also got me thinking. If Taiga and I were born to a family like yours, isn't there a chance that we'd end up fighting over our inheritance?"

"That would depend on a few factors," Himemiya said, "not the least of which are your personalities and bond as siblings, but the family is also important. Some families, such as the Togami family, encourage their children to compete with each other, but others, like mine, are different. My eldest brother was designated as the heir and groomed to inherit the family, and the rest of us are expected to accept that choice, while also living up to our own responsibilities, a bit like the emperor's younger children."

There were two schools of thought when it came to inheriting positions like a throne- either they were a great privilege that some people would kill to have (literally), or they were a terrible burden you were better off without. If you didn't get the position but still had responsibilities, you probably got the short end of the stick, apart from living a life of luxury.

"I'm glad to hear that," Taiga said. "Personally, if my family had a business and my sister was to inherit it, I'd do everything I could to support her- listening to her, working for the Tachibana company, you name it."

"That is if I could inherit it," Tatsuki said. "If I thought you were better for the job, I'd pass it off to you without a second thought."

"Well, I'm glad you two have things figured out for this hypothetical scenario," I said. "On Summer's End, inheritance disputes could get pretty nasty, especially when it comes to the throne. Two brothers went to war for the throne after their eldest brother died, and by all accounts, none of the three had ever gotten along."

"I know what you mean," Tatsuki said. "That's why I'm glad we aren't inheriting any titles from our parents- when they die, half their money will go to me and the other half will go to Taiga. I'd rather not get a yen from my parents if it ended up resulting in us fighting each other over it."

I nodded approvingly. While the part from Summer's End that I'd mentioned happened a lot, they probably only got that bad because everyone involved was greedy. If more siblings valued each other the way Tatsuki and Taiga did, then perhaps their relationships would be healthier.

Of course, I had to admit that I was worried. Knowing Monokuma, he'd have some sort of plan in place to take advantage of Tatsuki and Taiga's love for each other, and drive them to murder to protect their respective sister. I only hoped that when push came to shove, they'd still be able to do the right thing.
In the evening, I noticed Kojima talking with Sasaki in the lounge. She asked him a little about the promotional artwork for Three Kings, which the graphics designer did, and how he made it. He was pretty animated when talking about it, but from what I could tell, didn't seem half as creepy as he was toward me.

I slipped away before either Kojima or Sasaki could notice me. Maybe it was my imagination, but Kojima was marginally less obnoxious when I wasn't around, probably because he wasn't trying so hard to impress me. I couldn't help but wish that I was normal at times like this, so people would be able to relate to me as a normal person, rather than a celebrity they saw as an idol, rather than a person. After all, my parents had been ordinary people, and after being friends for a while, had gotten married and had me, enjoying years of happiness before... well, I didn't want to think too much about that part.

In any case, the problem wasn't with me, but with Kojima and everyone else who didn't care to make the effort to get to know me. Perhaps someday, Kojima would give up on his crush or see me as an ordinary person, and if that day came, he'd be a little easier to be around. It didn't seem all that likely, but stranger things had happened, so I couldn't help but hope for that.

By the time I returned to my room, it was already late. Nagato was in the shower, and I took my turn once she was done. By the time I was finished, she was just about done with her prayers, and after saying good night to each other, we climbed into bed.

I thought about the various students I met here. Apart from what I dubbed the "Asshole Trio"- Kirishima, Karita and Asakura- my obsessive admirer, Kojima and Yamazaki, the first killer, most of the students ranged from tolerable to likable, and a couple, like Himemiya and Nagato, were the sort who could become my friends. None of them deserved to end up in here, and while finding a way out of here was a pipe dream, it was what would be best for everyone concerned.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*They say a picture's worth a thousand words, and there's one I really would like to put up here, but it looks like I can't.*

*So in exchange, I'd like to give you a thousand-word summary of it, but I doubt you'd read all of it.*

*Whoops, out of time!*

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**Author's Notes**

Sorry for the delay with this chapter. I've had some side projects, as well as Side Stories. I'm two thirds of the way through Azuki's Free Time Events now- only the twins, Asakura, Kirishima and Mihama are left.

The next installment will be landfall on the second island, and will be significantly shorter. You'll see a fair amount of Himemiya, Nagato, Kurogane, Kojima and the twins this Chapter... and at least one of them may end up dying in the next Chapter or two.
Day 10

Nagato and I woke up again, and exchanged our "Good morning"s. I didn't have any dreams that were worth mentioning, so I just decided to start getting dressed, as did she.

The weather forecast showed sunny weather... and the fact that we'd be arriving at a new island.

"So, we've arrived," I said. "So just like last time, we spent three days at sea before arriving at the island, didn't we?"

"It seems that way," Nagato said, "give or take a few hours."

I nodded, but felt a bit uneasy. Usually, being right about something was a good feeling, but while being wrong could have severe consequences in a killing game like this, I didn't feel happy this time.

"Doesn't that seem a little weird?" I said. "We just happen to have three days of travel time between each island? Are all the islands the exact same distance from another?"

"Not necessarily," Nagato said. "For all we know, the ship could be going more quickly on certain stretches of the journey, or taking a less direct route."

"Maybe," I said. "Kirishima probably knows, since he's been keeping track of the ship's movements, but I don't know if even he can say for certain. Maybe the ship changes course while we're asleep."

"That could be the case," Nagato said. "In any case, we've only seen two islands so far, which isn't enough to establish a pattern."

As I put down that we'd arrived at the second island of Day 10 of our calendar, I realized that Monokuma was probably trying to deceive us all. We couldn't say for certain where we were, or how much time had passed since we'd come to Talent High School, and it was clear that Monokuma wanted it to stay that way. The goal was obvious- to remind us that we were helpless to oppose him- but what I didn't yet know was why Monokuma guarded his secrets so fiercely. He'd already taken away our ability to call for a rescue, so how threatening could this information be to him?

At breakfast, we sat with Himemiya, and Kumakura, noticing us sitting together, asked to join us. Elsewhere, Higurashi, along with Kirishima, took on the heroic duty of sitting with the boys of Cabin M4, Sasaki and Mihama sat with the twins, and that left the boys of Cabin M2 by themselves.

"So I guess that our next destination is 'Party City,'" Kumakura said. "Himemiya-san, Azuki-san, you two look like you've got some experience with parties, so do you have any idea what to expect?"

I looked at Himemiya, hoping she'd answer first.

"The parties I've attended with my family are generally fairly tame," Himemiya said. "Men are expected to wear suits and women generally wear kimonos or formal dresses, although my parents
have been to some black-tie events. My family serves alcohol to anyone who is of the drinking age, and while you are expected to have a drink, you never get enough to get drunk. In general, you have to eat, mingle with the other guests, and mind your manners. While Nagato-san, Kanae and I might be good at this sort of thing, it's unlikely that any of you would have much fun; I certainly don't."

So in other words, Himemiya's family parties wouldn't be much like what Monokuma had in mind. Hell, this wouldn't even be any good for approximating a school-sponsored party, since while Talent High School probably wouldn't throw any wild parties, they wouldn't hold anything as stiff or formal as the Himemiyas' parties.

"Yeah," I said. "I've been to a couple official release parties, as well as private celebrations. The former's probably a bit like Himemiya's family celebrations, but the latter's somewhat casual, and I doubt that either is what Monokuma has in mind. What do you think, Nagato?"

"I honestly don't know, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Talent High School doesn't hold many parties, and I've never had guests over for my birthday, so I don't really know what it's like. I don't think my answer could help very much."

A part of me wished I'd been able to meet Nagato when we were kids, so I could have had her over to my apartment for my birthday, and been able to come over to her place for her birthday. My parties weren't anything special- just enjoying some cake with my best friends- but like all happy occasions, they were better when shared.

"I think it does help," I said. "Whenever we ask these sorts of questions, what kind of answers we get matters less than that everyone makes an honest effort to answer them."

"You're right, Azuki-san," Kumakura said. "I'm sorry, Nagato-san; I should have asked you, too."

"It's all right, Kumakura-san," Nagato said. "I suppose we've learned that none of us know what to expect."

Around the time all fourteen of us were seated, Monokuma showed up.

"Good morning, class," Monokuma said. "Are you excited to make landfall onto the second island?"

"Not really," I said. "but what's the deal with this 'Party City' crap?"

"All in good time, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "but I will tell you this. The island's full of stores that you'll need for a wonderful party experience, in preparation for our costume party two nights from now. Food, costumes, music, you name it...Party City has everything you need that money can buy- not that you have or need any."

"Sounds fun," Karita said. "What's the catch?"

"There isn't one," Monokuma said. "It may seem like a way to get you all together and force you to kill each other, but the killing part's up to you. All school-sponsored events are strictly BYOMW- Bring Your Own Murder Weapon."

While Monokuma's "rule" seemed to be disadvantageous to the killer, it wasn't hard to find something that would do the trick. Yamazaki had managed to obtain the saw from the warehouse, the shot put from the weight room and the board from the ceiling above his head. Any would-be killer with half a brain and at least some creativity could probably find a serviceable murder weapon somewhere on the island.
"So you say," Kojima said, "but I'm sure you aren't willing to sit back and just wait for it to happen, are you? After all, the point of your 'game' is to force us to commit murder to graduate, isn't it?"

"That's the end result I want, Higurashi-san," Monokuma said, "but I'm not going to force you to do anything. Like they say, you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink, and I'm sure your teacher would agree with that sentiment. Ta-ta for now."

Monokuma left once again. After a few moments, Nagato broke the silence.

"You know..." Nagato said, "Mom does actually agree with that, just like any teacher worth their salt."

"Quite true, Nagato-san," Himemiya said, "but the saying cuts both ways. I appreciate your and Higurashi-san's efforts, but in the end, those who are so determined to survive that they would sacrifice everyone else will not listen to appeals to their conscience or reason."

"I dunno about that, Himemiya," Kojima said. "Sure, Yamazaki wanted to get out, but he was originally trying to kill Karita- the person he thought was the traitor. Who says that survival's the only reason people might kill someone?"

Higurashi shook his head, his expression stern and deeply disapproving.

"It is not, Kojima-kun," Higurashi said, "but make no mistake- nothing justifies murder."

All of us outwardly agreed with his assertion, or at least didn't contest it, even though a few of us were probably secretly crossing our fingers behind our backs. There was nothing wrong with Higurashi asking us not to kill each other, but it was unrealistic for him to expect everyone to do as he said given what was at stake. Of course, judging by his stern expression, he wasn't completely sure people would.

In all fairness, while Higurashi had so far failed to accomplish what he'd set out to do (which said more about the task than his abilities), he'd probably be an excellent class representative or student council president. He still had a bit of growing up to do before he'd be ready to take responsibility for people's lives, but he could potentially get there someday. It was a shame that this killing game had snuffed out too many promising young lives before they could realize their potential, and that his might end up being one of those lives that were cut short...

As the ship pulled toward the island, I joined Sasaki on deck, gazing out toward the island as it got closer. From a distance, I could see a small city that covered the island, with buildings that were several stories tall. It seemed like a modern Japanese city, but I couldn't think of any that were on islands that were this tiny.

"I'm curious, Sasaki," I said. "As a romance writer, what do you think of 'nice guys'?"

"That depends, Akira-chan," Sasaki said. "Do you mean nice guys or 'nice guys'?"

Sasaki did air quotes the second time she repeated the term, making it clear that the latter was not the genuine article.

"The latter," I said, "but feel free to mention the former if there's a distinction."

"Oh, there certainly is," Sasaki said. "The former's only nice to people they hope to impress, with every kind act being a calculated investment with an expected return. The latter is being nice for the sake of being nice, a bit like making anonymous charitable donations. In general, the most
honest acts of kindness are done without any expectation of a reward."

I agreed with the principle... but only to a point. A lot of celebrities, myself included, took part in charity fundraisers or other initiatives for the good of society for the sake of PR. I wasn't vain enough to think of it as purely altruistic, but I thought it was a sort of quid-pro-quo deal, and it was for the best if the work that I put in to earn the good press benefited others in the process.

"Ah, that makes sense," I said. "I can't fault the 'nice guys' for trying hard to win over a girl, but I'm not likely to fall for someone as insincere and fake as they are."

"Me neither," Sasaki said. "I do generally make my romantic couples nice people, but also add other traits that give their personalities substance and make them genuinely likable."

Sasaki then paused a moment.

"By the way, Akira-chan," Sasaki said, "is this about Kojima-kun?"

"Yeah," I said. "I don't know how much you've spoken with him, but he still hasn't given up on winning me over, even considering the circumstances."

"Ah," Sasaki said. "Well, he and I have been talking a fair amount lately- but not about you. Both of us are artists who strive to create masterpieces in our respective fields, with the help of our coworkers, so we have a lot of common ground."

"That makes sense," I said. "Of course, I see he hasn't joined the 'first names' club you have going."

"I asked him, but he turned me down," Sasaki said. "He said he didn't want to end up making the girl he was interested in jealous by calling some other girl by her first name, or vice versa."

I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Honestly, he makes too big of a deal of that," I said. "Would he think I was dating you if I called you 'Sayuri'?"

"Not really," Sayuri said. "Given that people are generally expected to form platonic friendships with those of the same gender, it's only natural to assume that two girls on a first-name basis are close friends, like Himemiya-san and Kanae-chan were."

"So there goes any hope I have of getting him to think that I've fallen for you instead," I said, "or at least that I'm only into girls."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sayuri said. "In the end, though, Akira-chan, who you decide to fall in love with is your choice."

I nodded, and said "Thanks, Sayuri," then decided to prepare to leave for the island. Kojima was far from my highest priority, even in the best of times, but since I'd be sharing a ship with him for the foreseeable future, I couldn't completely stop thinking about him. If I couldn't completely dissuade him, the least I could do is learn a little more about him and find the roots of his infatuation with me... so I could tear them out.

We made landfall around 8 AM, and got off the ship in a timely fashion. There wasn't much to do on the Ursa Major, so there weren't any good reasons to wait around and risk getting in trouble with Monokuma for not leaving in time.
The island was a relatively urban area, which resembled any modern Japanese city, and the ship was docked in a decent-sized harbor. There were a lot of tall buildings around, probably at least five or six stories tall, but there didn't seem to be any way into most of them. For a moment, I thought we were back at the port from which we'd departed, but the city seemed a bit smaller than I remembered, and there was a "Welcome to Party City" to greet us at the docks.

"So we're here again," Sayuri said. "Do you have any ideas what we should look for, Nobuhirou-kun?"

"Good question, Sasaki-san," Higurashi said, "and I can think of a few things. Obviously, we should find anything that could help us discover a way out, but does anything else come to mind?"

I looked around and saw the others thinking for a moment. While Higurashi could probably think of at least a few ideas by himself, he was clearly forcing us to put our heads together and come up with some, in order to get us all to participate in the discussion.

"Information of any sort would be valuable," Kirishima said, "particularly why we are here or on who Monokuma's allies may be."

"Very good, Kirishima-kun," Higurashi said. "Perhaps if we learn about that, we will get closer to putting a stop to the killing game."

Kirishima nodded, even if he didn't seem to buy into that idea as fully as Higurashi did.

"If this anything like the previous island, there will probably be a special event," Karita said. "We should try to find out where it will be held and if there's anything there that can be used against us."

"I agree," Kumakura said. "I also think we should keep an eye out for any possible hazards, even if it's unlikely that Monokuma would set things up so we'd die by accident."

"I also think that just knowing the layout of the island would help," Kojima said. "After all, if we need to get anywhere in a hurry, we should know the quickest and safest route there."

Higurashi nodded approvingly.

"All those sound like good ideas," Higurashi said. "Let me know if you think of anything else, but for now, split up and learn what you can about the island."

The meeting adjourned, and we split up, but I decided to follow Karita. After everyone else had left, he noticed me- or at least decided to acknowledge my presence- and at least decided to acknowledge my presence- and turned around.

"Do you need something, Azuki-san?" I said.

"I'm curious," I said. "Why would you want to openly ask about the venue for the party, considering what almost happened to you last time?"

"It's because of last time," Karita said. "Secrets are most useful when you're the only one that knows about them. By making it so that everyone knows about the venue, I hope to ensure that no one has the exclusive benefit of that knowledge."

"Ah, right," I said. "Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that you won't be able to keep a few secrets for yourself."

Karita smiled and shook his head.
"Bingo," Karita said. "As you've probably realized, Higurashi-kun is smart enough to realize that sharing information would help get everyone on the same page, but he's naïve to think everyone will cooperate."

"You're right," I said, "but it isn't in anyone's benefit if someone commits murder and fails to graduate, and it's even worse if the spotless fail to convict the blackened. I'm not saying his way is optimal, but prevention's always the best medicine."

"That may be so," Karita said, "but once you get sick, you need to take medicine that helps with your recovery. It would be best if we can prevent any other murders, but we should also have a plan for how to identify the blackened."

As someone who'd done what she had to during the previous class trial, I agreed, but at the same time, I wished it had never come to that. When I thought about it, Higurashi wanted what most of us wanted, even if he didn't necessarily have any more of a clue as to how to get it.

"We should," I said, "but I suppose that plan would depend on the murderer and how they commit their crime. I'm not looking forward to what the next killer has in mind, though."

"Me neither, Azuki-san," Karita said.

For someone who seemed like a liar, Karita came off as oddly sincere when expressing that sentiment. The only unanswered question was whether it was because he wanted to save his own skin, or because a part of him cared about the rest of us. At the very least, he hadn't broken faith with our group and committed murder to graduate, so while giving him the benefit of the doubt wasn't necessarily wise, I had to admit that he hadn't done anything to abuse our trust yet.

About a block from the harbor, there was a record store, which was as empty as any of the other buildings as we'd visited... or at least I'd hoped it was. Kojima was inside, listening to music with a pair of headphones connected to a music sampling console. As I walked in, he saw me approach and took off the headphones.

"Oh, hey, Azuki," Kojima said. "You looking for me?"

"No," I said bluntly. "I suppose even you have better things to do than stand around waiting for me to talk to you, don't you?"

Kojima let off a cross between a nervous chuckle and an actual laugh, enough to make me wonder if even he thought my remark was funny.

"I was actually checking out this store," Kojima said. "There's all sorts of great music here, so it's a shame that we can't buy any— not that there's anyone around to sell it to us."

"And no one to stop us from stealing it," I said.

"You said it," Kojima said. "This track is pretty cool, and is listed as the Manager's Choice, so have a listen."

Kojima handed me the headphones, and I saw that the track was set to "The Tragedy Overture." The current track, "Waltz of Monokuma's Gloomy Sunday," a slow and melancholy piece, was about twenty or so seconds from ending when I put it on, so the song was winding down. What I wasn't prepared for, was the next piece, "War of Hope and Despair," which featured what sounded like missiles being launched. In order to protect my hearing, I quickly pulled off the headphones.
"For fuck's sake, Kojima!" I said. "If you're trying to prank me by making me listen to something this loud, I'm not laughing."

"Sorry, Azuki," Kojima said sheepishly. "I didn't know it got to be that loud. It always seemed pretty soft, so I though it'd make a great soundtrack for a video game."

I then checked the list of tracks, and saw that "War of Hope and Despair" went on for five minutes.

"If you want to make your players go deaf," I said. "Volume aside, 'War of Hope and Despair' is too damn intense and oppressive for my tastes, even for a boss battle."

Kojima had a quick listen to it, at which point he ripped off his headphones just as quickly as I had.

"Yeah, you're right," Kojima said, "but I stand by what I said about the other tracks."

"If you say so," I said. "I hope that Monokuma doesn't end up playing this crap at whatever event he has planned. There's a hell of a lot of other music in here- by Ibuki Mioda, Sayaka Maizono and her idol group, and our very own Dragon Girl- so there's no reason to go with this one."

"Maybe not," Kojima said, "but if we had a say in which music gets played at the party, my vote would be for this soundtrack."

I paused to think for a moment. Most of my classmates would have picked the idol singer of the opposite gender (or same gender if they were homosexual) who was hot at the moment, simply because of how cute she seemed. Kojima was clearly a red-blooded heterosexual boy, so why didn't he lust after Maizono instead of me?

"You know, Kojima, I actually did want to talk to you about something," I said. "You should know by now that I'm not going to return your feelings, and there are six other girls- five if you don't count Mihama- out there to be won over, including a really rich girl, a popular manga artist and both halves of the J-rock sensation known as Dragon Girl. Even if Nagato's not anything 'special,' she's well above average in both looks and personality. So why go after me?"

Kojima paused.

"I honestly don't know," Kojima said. "Would you rather have me call in all the girls I admire for an interview, evaluate their personal qualities, invite the finalists back for a second round, and then 'hire' one to become my girlfriend?"

"I didn't say that," I said, "since I have a hard time imagining that you'd get a very large applicant pool. I was hoping you had some sort of criteria, though."

"Do you have to?" Kojima said. "There's plenty to like about you- your looks, your skill at acting and how straightforward you are- but there doesn't have to be a rational reason behind my initial attraction for you."

I sighed.

"I guess not," I said, "although I can think of plenty of reasons why I haven't had any sparks between us. I've got to see the rest of the island, so I'll see you around."

I quickly excused myself. While there was probably a bit more to Kojima than just another guy who lusted after pretty female celebrities, he was unlikely to ever show that side to me.
I found a costume store just north of the center of the island, and saw Nagato and Mihama browsing. There were racks of costumes on display, and a few changing rooms in the back, along with a door that was either an employee entrance or an emergency exit. Near the front of the store, there was a checkout counter that was abandoned, just like the one at the record store. In the back, there were some laundry machines.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Nagato and Mihama said, almost in unison.

"Hey, Nagato, Mihama," I said. "See anything you like there?"

Nagato shrugged.

"I'm not sure," Nagato said. "The selection is fairly broad, even if there's only one of each costume, but a lot of the costumes are fairly generic. Some of those include a princess costume with a pink dress and a plastic tiara, a farmer costume with a button-down shirt and overalls, and a ghost costume that's a white sheet with holes cut in it. I asked Monokuma if they have a Magical Girl Sakura costume, and he said no- he doesn't want to get sued."

I took another look around and saw some costumes that seemed a bit too familiar. One was a sleeveless sailor fuku style uniform with high boots that screamed "Magical Girl". Another costume was a red vest and blue shorts with a straw hat. Yet another costume was an orange ninja costume with a metal headband that had a spiral insignia. I could pretty much tell which anime they came from, even though they looked more like imitations.

"That's pretty funny," I said, "because I'm pretty sure that he'd be a target for wrongful death lawsuits from Yamazaki's family and the Himemiyas. Since the latter are super rich, I'm sure they could hire a really good lawyer to sue the pants off him."

Nagato chuckled, and Mihama cracked a smile for a moment.

"That would be a good plan, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "but Monokuma is quite confident that he is above the law- rather, he is the law in this killing game."

"Yeah," I said. "What's bothering me, though, is the fact that Monokuma clearly couldn't have done this alone, or even with the help of the 'traitor.' He not only got the seventeen of us here, but he somehow hijacked a cruise ship, emptied an entire city of people, fucked around with our memories, created all the Monodrones and somehow made an execution machine for Yamazaki. Even if he had all the money in the world, that would take a lot of manpower and technology to make reality."

"I agree," Nagato said. "Several of the things you mentioned- the robots, the memory manipulation and others- don't even seem possible."

Mihama nodded.

"This may seem like a minor quibble," Mihama said, "but did Monokuma really intend to bring all seventeen of us here? Like he said earlier, Nagato-sensei was not supposed to come. While it is possible that she is the traitor and was not meant to actually participate, she also could represent an unknown variable."

"I think so, too, Mihama-san," Nagato said. "Monokuma wanted us to resort to our baser instincts and kill each other, so having a mature adult authority figure around would discourage that. I'm not sure why he hasn't killed Mom, though."

"Perhaps because he has no cause to," Mihama said. "Rule 9 states that Monokuma cannot harm
students unless they have violated a rule. While Nagato-sensei may be our teacher, she is, for all intents and purposes, one of Monokuma's students on this trip."

Nagato got out her handbook to quickly check the rules, and I followed suit.

"Ah, right," Nagato said. "It sounds as though Monokuma can't break his own rules, even if it's to his advantage. Of course, Mom's not the ultimate authority figure, either- she has her bosses, after all."

"So I guess things would be similar if you were a teacher and your mom was the headmistress, right?" I said. "Or does Talent High School not let people hire relatives?"

"They do allow that," Nagato said, "and yes, things would be similar between my mom and I if she were the headmistress and I were a teacher or any other employee. Mom believes that rules aren't things that authority figures can ignore whenever it would be most convenient, and while it isn't necessarily a bad thing to hire family members or friends, you have to treat them fairly."

"Quite true, Nagato-san," Mihama said. "As someone else who is hardly like the others, I am glad your mother feels that way.

Mihama, who'd apparently arrived several minutes before Nagato, said goodbye to us and decided to move on, leaving Nagato and I to search the store. After a little while, Nagato searched inside a clay pot of "Honey" (paradoxically both the right and wrong spelling, depending on your perspective), and pulled out a Hidden Monokuma.

"I found another one, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Great," I said. "That's two for me, one for you."

Nagato giggled.

"Well, I wasn't going to let you get all of them," Nagato said. "Personally, I'm hoping to find at least half, assuming we make it that far."

I wondered if Nagato was a bit more competitive than I'd given her credit for, but then I approached it from a different perspective. Rather than competing with me, she wanted to do her part in our search for the Hidden Monokumas, rather than sit back and let me do all the work. This wasn't an especially important pursuit, but I felt like I could count on her, which was always reassuring.

After Monokuma arrived and took the Hidden Monokuma back to our cabin, I parted ways with Nagato. Shortly afterward, I felt my stomach rumbling, at which point Nagato pointed me to a restaurant. She'd already eaten, so I decided to head over by myself. The restaurant was on the ground floor of a building that was at least five stories tall, and there were a variety of signs out front. The hours were from 8 AM to 9 PM seven days a week, reservations were optional and catering was available.

I ended up having lunch with Himemiya, who'd arrived at the same time. The kitchen had a few pre-prepared dishes inside, so we each took one and sat down across from each other at a table. While the restaurant on the previous island had been fairly small, this restaurant seemed like it could seat at least a hundred people, so it seemed naturally empty with only one other person inside. If Monokuma was really responsible for setting up these islands, then he must have overestimated how much space sixteen people (not counting the one who was locked in her cell most of the time) would need.
Apart from being large, the restaurant also seemed quite fancy. I hadn't seen any rules posted, or even any prices, but judging by the surroundings, we'd be expected to wear suits, if not dresses.

"Wow, this is a pretty fancy place," I said. "It's almost like we're on a date."

Himemiya giggled.

"You should be careful about saying things like that, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "I might just take them seriously."

While Himemiya had a wry grin on her face, her tone was entirely serious.

"Yeah, but we're both girls, so it's fine," I said. "Unless you're a..."

"A lesbian?" Himemiya said. "Yes, in fact, I am."

I was a bit taken aback. I didn't have anything against homosexuality, but given the circumstances, Himemiya could easily have laughed it off and dismissed the whole thing as a joke. Instead, she'd bluntly confirmed what many people like her would see as their biggest secret, to someone she'd known for less than two weeks.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said. "I never thought you'd actually admit it."

"Ordinarilly, I wouldn't," Himemiya said, "since my family is quite traditional, and they expect me to marry a man from a respectable family. The last thing they'd want to hear is anything that would cause them to think I wouldn't do that, so Kanae is the only person I've ever told about this... until now, of course."

The idea that Himemiya couldn't even trust her own family about her sexuality was depressing. My mom told me to mind my behavior, and not do anything (or at least get caught doing it) that I didn't want to end up in the tabloids, but she was willing to talk with anything about me, and invoked "mother-daughter confidentiality" to make sure our conversations stayed between us. If I'd told her I was a lesbian, she would have warned me not to let my sexuality become public knowledge, but probably would have given a same-sex relationship her blessing as long as my girlfriend and I loved each other and knew what we were getting into.

"Well, you can trust me with that secret," I said, "along with any others you might have. I might not... swing that way, but I'm perfectly fine with hearing you out."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Himemiya said. "Or... Akira, if first names are fine with you."

"Sure thing, Himeno," I said. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"We certainly are, Akira," Himeno said. "There aren't all that many people I speak with this casually besides Kanae."  

I couldn't help but think about how different Himeno was on this regard from Sayuri, who hadn't even said anything when I'd called her by her first name. On the one hand, my perspective was probably a bit closer to Sayuri's, but on the other, the significance this gesture had to Himeno made me appreciate it more. Not only was it an exception to her usual formality, but it was the same gesture of friendship her best friend had showed her just before her death.

"Anyway, Himeno, I've got a question," I said. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but were you and Tsukimura... girlfriends?"
Himeno shook her head.

"No," Himeno said, "because while Kanae was my best friend, there were several issues that would have prevented us from having a healthy romantic relationship. First, she was heterosexual. Second, because she saw herself as my servant until just before she died, our relationship would have had a severe power imbalance. Third... a part of me realized that while I wanted her at my side, I thought of her as more of a sister than a lover. I wish that our parents could have recognized her as equal to me and their other trueborn children."

"That's fairly mature of you," I said, "at least more so than Kojima."

"Well, I've had years to come to terms with that," Himeno said. "Perhaps someday, months or years from now, Kojima-san may forget you."

I bitterly chuckled.

"That long, huh?" I said. "In case you haven't noticed, any of us could die today."

"I'm well aware, Akira," Himeno said, "but our predicament doesn't expedite people's emotional development. Just as I'm still grieving for Kanae, and am reminded of her loss every time I wake up without her, I doubt Kojima-san will get over you any time soon."

As I sighed and conceded Himeno's point, I realized how short a period of time ten days was, even if it felt like forever in this killing game. If our lives were a road, then ten days from now was like a few meters down the road; for the most part, we could clearly see our destination, unless the path suddenly turned. Here, however, we had no idea what would happen ten days from now, or even if we'd still be alive.

I found Higurashi at a news stand, which seemed to only have one newspaper on sale- no magazines, no tabloids, no books, no snacks or drinks. The existence of a newsstand like this was already quaint in the era of Internet journalism, which made me wonder how the stand stayed in business. Of course, I remembered that all these businesses were artificial sets made by Monokuma or whoever was responsible for the killing game, so while they weren't earning any money, they didn't have any employees they needed to pay.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "I have something for you; please take a look at it."

Higurashi handed me a copy of the newspaper, which was based in the same city as Talent High School. The headlines were pretty horrific, discussing riots, wars and other chaos and disorder. All that seemed par for the course when it came to the world, but the incidents described seemed far more widespread than usual, reaching into the places where people could go about their lives without worrying about that sort of thing.

"Yeesh, this is horrific," I said.

"That's not the worst of it," Higurashi said. "Take a look below the fold."

I turned the newspaper over, and, sure enough, there was an article- "Class 32 of Talent High School Goes Missing." It was far from the most important story, but it was local, not to mention it was the most relevant to us, who were in it. Apparently, word of the killing school trip, or at least our going missing, had gotten out.

"So there's a news article about our abduction," I said. "Has word gotten out that our school trip was a trap?"
"I don't know," Higurashi said. "First, the article never mentions a school trip."

I took another look at the article and skimmed through it. It said that we'd disappeared some time just before graduation, which was more than a little strange. According to our information, we'd left during Spring Break.

"You're right," I said, "although I guess we were lied to all along. What's the second problem?"

"The date," Higurashi said. "It's two years after we arrived after Talent High School."

I looked at the dateline, and saw that the date was in the middle of March. The year, however, was just as Higurashi had described.

"You're right," I said. "Is it possible that we've lost more of our memories than we thought?"

"Maybe," Higurashi said, "or Monokuma created this newspaper as a forgery of sorts."

"It's possible," I said, "but he'd only need two things to sell the idea that two years had passed since we got into Talent High School- the date and the story, but he went and created an entire newspaper. Props aren't always easy to make, but he really went the extra mile here."

"True," Higurashi said. "Even if these islands are just meant to be arenas in which we kill each other, there's a stunning amount of detail in the entire island, and this newspaper. There clearly must be a reason why Monokuma would go to so much trouble to make an entire newspaper... assuming it's not real, that is."

We took a look around to see if there were any other publications, but couldn't find any. It was possible that Monokuma just created that one newspaper in order to falsely give us the impression that the world had ended, or this was the only one he could find. By the end of our search, neither Higurashi nor I were entirely sure what to believe.

Once again, I wondered what Monokuma's real objective was. If he'd wanted us to die, he could have sunk the ship, thereby sending us to a watery grave. If he'd wanted us to kill each other, he could have locked us in a room with weapons, and told us that only the winner would be able to leave- in that case, the killing game would probably have been closer to ten minutes than ten days. He'd gotten death and killing, but there were easier and more sure ways to get that than sailing from island to island. Monokuma was a twisted bastard, but there was probably some ulterior motive for all this, maybe one we had yet to understand.

The last stop on our exploration of the island was a two-story house. It was on the north coast of the island, just north of the the rear of the costume store. I found Kurogane standing outside, peering in the windows.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Kurogane said.

"Hi, Kurogane," I said. "Find anything in there?"

Kurogane shook his head.

"Not yet," Kurogane said. "Monokuma said that the house would be locked for now, but told us that he'd open it up later."

I shrugged, then tried to peer through the windows. The curtains were drawn, so I couldn't see inside.
"This all seems kind of odd," I said. "Last time, there were only two types of places- those we could get into from the start, and those that were off limits."

"Think of it this way," Kurogane said. "Some video games only have a linear path from start to finish, but others let you explore. In the latter kind, you might not be able to reach the next continent until you obtain a ship, or you might not be able to go into the last dungeon until you've completed the rest of the game and are ready for it."

"So in other words, to keep you out of excessive danger?" I said. "This entire killing game is dangerous, and we're the threat."

"True," Kurogane said. "Of course, in talking with Kojima-kun, he proposed a theory that this 'killing game' was divided into chapters, and that after getting through all of them, we'll arrive at the 'climax' at the sixth and final island... whatever that is."

While I wanted to get out of the killing game as much as anyone, I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of what awaited us at the cruise's end, considering what Monokuma had for us so far. Of course, I knew that if I got that far, perhaps I'd be lucky to still be alive at that point.

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We met up in the late afternoon to share our findings. I was tempted to take a nap during the discussion of the various buildings on this island, since I'd been to all of them myself, but it was over in a few minutes.

"Now for our most important find- the newspaper," Higurashi said. "Has everyone received one?"

We all nodded, but as we looked around, we realized what the flaw in the assumption that two years had passed without us knowing it was- or rather who the flaw was.

"We did, Higurashi-san," Mihama said. "While the dates of the papers imply that at least two years have passed since we entered Talent High School, and the newspaper seems to confirm as much, I have to wonder- why have I not grown at all?"

"I was just thinking the same thought, Miharu-chan," Sasaki said. "Since you were ten at the start of high school and eleven when you entered Talent High School, you should have hit puberty by now."

"Unless she lied about her age," Asakura said. "Maybe she really is a really short high school girl who's pretending to be a little kid. Or maybe she's pretending to be one of us and is actually the traitor."

Mihama sighed, clearly almost as sick of dealing with Asakura's bullshit as I was.

"I realize it may be too much to ask you to take my word for it, Asakura-san," Mihama said, "since I cannot produce my birth certificate, school transcripts or other proof of my age. That said, please answer this question. Assuming that my goal was to entrap you all in this killing game, why would I go so far out of my way to get to high school early- even if I only pretended to be a child- if it would only serve to make me stand out among my schoolmates?"

"I think you're the only one who can answer that question," Asakura said.

Sasaki shook her head.

"I realize that we can't blindly trust anyone here," Sasaki said, "but at the same time, I don't think we have any concrete reason to suspect Miharu-chan. She has no obvious motive for wanting the
killing game, nor does she stand out in any way apart from being younger than us."

"Well said, Sasaki-san," Higurashi said. "I believe we are getting sidetracked, so we should get back to the main discussion."

"I agree," Nagato said. "I do have to wonder why Monokuma is having us go from island to island, but my best guess would be to prevent us from finding out the state of the world."

"But the port we started out in was fine, wasn't it?" Kojima said. "At the very least, it didn't look like everyone had gone crazy and started rioting and looting and whatnot."

"It was," I said, "but it's possible that it was merely a set, established to provide the illusion that we were in an actual city. Not only was no one there, but we walked less than a kilometer, so we didn't cover much ground."

"Good point, Azuki," Kojima said. "I'm certainly hoping that nothing happened to my family and friends. They live in Tokyo, so they'd probably be at ground zero."

Karita furrowed his brow.

"So in other words, everyone here believes that the rest of humanity is killing each other in some sort of apocalyptic crisis, all based on one article that we just 'happened' to find," Karita said. "Wouldn't Monokuma shuttling us around the ocean be a way of preventing us from realizing that that actually isn't true?"

"You have a point, Karita-san," Nagato said, "and that's what I meant when I said 'state of the world.'"

"You're not wrong about that," I said, "but I'd like to know something. If we all realized that the rest of the world was an even worse hellhole than this killing game, what reason would we have to get out of here? I think the chances of being killed by one of our classmates is lower than being killed by one of the rioters, terrorists or other psychos out there."

Higurashi nodded.

"Azuki-san raises a valid observation," Higurashi said. "I realize this may not mean much, but please do not seek to graduate. Not only would you be abandoning the others to a painful death, but if the newspaper is real, then you would likely only succeed in dooming yourself, as well."

We adjourned the meeting for now, but I couldn't help but notice that Higurashi was actually speaking in more pragmatic terms this time. This wasn't too at odds with his personality, since there was a lot of practical benefit in working together and not trying to screw others over for your gain (not that it was realistic to expect all of us to do so), but it was a sign that he was adapting to his circumstances and at least trying to lead us better. The odds were still against him, and the learning curve was steep, but maybe he wasn't completely hopeless.

We spent the next few hours exploring the island. Apart from the building I explored, there wasn't too much that was relevant. Kojima made note of how small RPG cities were compared to the real thing, since good game design required people to put all the facilities players needed fairly close to each other. From a gameplay perspective, it made sense, but it was still odd to see a city that took up less than a square kilometer in space, and had a population that was smaller than our class.

Back on the ship, I put Kojima's yukata in the laundry, having forgotten to do so earlier. While I was waiting, I leafed through the newspaper, hoping to see if I could find more information apart
from the date and the article about us.

The national and world stories were not only depressing and horrifying, but also hard to understand without context. They dropped all sorts of references to events over the past few days, weeks and months. One semi-recent story that was of interest was about the investigation into an explosion at Hope's Peak Academy that had apparently killed all of Class 77-B.

Since Class 77-B was our yearmates, and they were the senior class of Hope's Peak at the time, I became curious about the junior class. There should have been a Class 78 at Hope's Peak, as well as a Class 33 at Talent High School, but what had happened to them? Had they managed to escape to safety, ended up as victims of the tragedy, or been forced into killing games not unlike ours? Or did they even exist?

I looked through the rest of the paper, starting with the Arts section. Even in these bleak times, people were still performing music, shooting movies, writing literature and producing art of various kinds... the most popular of which seemed to express despair. Like the old question of the chicken and the egg, I couldn't tell whether the despairing atmosphere that had consumed the world had also infected these artists, they were contributing to that atmosphere... or both.

In any case, while I wasn't completely sold on the veracity of this newspaper, I had to admit if it was real, it was a remarkably comprehensive and scary look at the state of the world.

I stopped by Cabin M2, and handed Kojima's yukata to Kurogane. Shortly afterward, I ran into the twins on the way back to my cabin.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said.

"Hey, girls," I said. "I'd like to ask you a question of two- mainly Taiga. Do you ever stop to think about what sort of impact your music has on others?"

Taiga nodded.

"We do," Taiga said. "Our music is generally wholesome, not just to keep the moral guardians off our back or to appeal to the lowest common denominator, but to make something everyone can enjoy. After all, not only can you not take your kids to see a porno movie, but some adults wouldn't approve of those films, either."

"I see," I said. "Personally, while I think that violence and sex can be cheap ways to win people through shock value, they do actually have a place in movies. After all, it's hard to do a war movie unless you show disturbing violence, and in a romance... well, it's only natural that couples end up fucking, right?"

Both the twins nodded, knowing what I was talking about. Clearly, their parents had sex at least once- I was tempted to say twice, but for the fact that they were twins.

"But I digress," I said. "The newspaper Higurashi showed us apparently showed that the entertainment industry went to hell along with the rest of the world. Music, movies and other media weren't just showing the same kind of schlock that people crank out for a quick buck, but were actively trying to foment despair in Japan and the rest of the world."

"Really?" Tatsuki said. "In my experience, if you make your entertainment too preachy, people tend not to take it seriously. Even Taiga couldn't make a song about, say, how evil it is to eat meat, without ending up alienating much of our fanbase, even those that are vegetarians."
I shrugged.

"Well, I don't know how obvious the themes are," I said, "but maybe the songs don't so much preach about despair as show people the message. Or maybe humanity's that far gone that they don't even care that their entertainment's not even subtle about being propaganda."

"I don't know, either," Taiga said. "The only thing I'm certain about is that I hope that newspaper's a fake. If the world's this badly off, then the fact that we're being forced to kill each other is only a symptom of the problem."

Once again, I was brought back to the question of whether the newspaper was real, but I then thought of a third possibility- that it didn't matter. Monokuma wanted to plant the possibility in our minds, and force us to fear for the state of the outside world, as well as question what was or was not true.

I retired to my cabin, and saw that the third Hidden Monokuma had been added to the rest of our collection.

Before long, Nagato came back, having met with Nagato-sensei to talk with her about the island. We still had a while before bedtime, which was a good thing, since I had some questions for her.

"I've got a question, Nagato," I said, "and you don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

"All right, Azuki-san," Nagato said, "but I'll decide after I hear the question."

I nodded and cleared my throat.

"All right," I said. "I've been thinking, and I might know why you're a bit guarded around the rest of us."

"You do?" Nagato said, tensing up.

"I might," I said. "Is it possible you're a lesbian, or at least bisexual?"

Nagato let out what sounded like a sigh of relief, then shook her head.

"No," Nagato said. "Why do you think that?"

"Well, you did say that you went to a Catholic school," I said, "and considering that most of your teachers and schoolmates, and maybe even your mom, believe that homosexuality is a sin, you might have had to keep that hidden to fit in."

As Nagato shrugged, I wondered if I was jumping to conclusions, but the theory was worth asking about. If nothing else, she wasn't dismissing it out of hand.

"That's a plausible theory," Nagato said, "but that isn't it. I haven't met many boys that are boyfriend material, mainly due to going to all-girls schools, but I'm sure I'm a heterosexual. I... hope you're not disappointed."

I shook my head.

"I'm not," I said, "since I'm heterosexual, too. I'm guessing the same goes for your mom?"

"She is," Nagato said. "She's not 'in the market' for a boyfriend, so to speak, but my father was the man she most loved in the world, and she doesn't think anyone can ever replace him."
I noticed something was off about Nagato-sensei; despite having a daughter, she wasn't wearing a wedding ring, as well as the fact that Nagato didn't say that her father was ever married to Nagato-sensei.

"So your dad's no longer alive, is he?" I said.

"No," Nagato said sadly. "He died a long time ago, so I never knew him."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I also lost my dad when I was little, so I have some idea what it's like. Just like I lost my dad, Mom lost her husband, but we still have each other, which is part of the reason I want to survive and get back to her."

Nagato sounded like she was about to say something, but stopped short.

"I see," Nagato said. "Well, if your mother's anything like you describe, I hope you can see her again... and possibly introduce me to her."

As I went to bed, I thought about what Karita had confronted Himeno about, and realized what I should have said to him. He wasn't wrong that people tended care for their friends and family more than strangers, but that didn't mean that they couldn't care for the latter at all. People also had the capacity for empathy, which let them understand what others felt, especially when it was similar to what they, themselves were feeling. Himeno couldn't forgive Yamazaki for killing her best friend, but she could understand the fear, despair and pain he felt in his last moments, and that he didn't deserve that, so I couldn't see her killing anyone. Maybe if more people had that sort of empathy, the killing game would never have started.

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**Monokuma Theater**

It's pretty amazing how many different kinds of stories you can get from just one beginning.

Take, for example, a bunch of high schoolers going on a trip to an island.

If it's a romance, the main character and the love interest can get together and have some mushy romance while they're there.

If it's a murder mystery, someone will get killed, and the rest of the class is gonna have to work together to find the killer.

If it's a horror film, a lot of people are gonna get killed, until the protagonist and maybe the love interest are left.

At that point, the protagonist and the love interest will get together and live happily ever after, even though all their friends are dead.

Oops, I guess I overestimated my ability to think up these stories.

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**Author's Notes**

This chapter was meant to set up the island, establish a few things that might become relevant in the next murder, and provide some clues to the mystery behind the killing game.

I forgot to include Azuki returning Kojima's yukata, so I had her forget about it and get around to it now. As you can see, she'd rather not think about him too much, but his continued presence doesn't
Here's the answers Sasaki got after proposing calling people by their first names.

Azuki, Mihama and Nagato: Said yes; see the Prologue for details.

The Tachibana sisters: Said yes, partly because they were used to first names.

Tsukimura: Said yes, and later started calling Sasaki by her first name,

Himemiya: Said no, since they had only just met, but is open to changing her mind later.

Higurashi, Kurogane, Kumakura: Said either was fine.

Yamazaki: Said no.

Kojima: Said no, as mentioned above.

Asakura, Kirishima and Karita: Sasaki was so put off by them that she didn't even ask them.

The next installment may not be out for a while, since I'm still fine-tuning the details of the murder. As a preview of the next chapter, the motive next time will be a "graduation buddy" perk. Anyone who graduates will be able to choose one person to go with them, assuming that person hasn't been convicted of a murder. Of course, it's also worth noting my version of the rules for multiple murders- a blackened must get away with all the murders they committed, and successfully convict any other killers. With this in mind, who do you think will take the opportunity to graduate, and who will they want to take with them?

The omake focuses on Himemiya coming out of the closet.

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**Omake**

*Tsukimura's POV*

One day, after we got home from school and I finished my chores for the day, I had a chat with Himeno-sama. Some people disapproved of maids fraternizing with members of the Himemiya household, but the mistress always turned a blind eye to it.

I only vaguely remember what Himeno-sama and I were talking about- I think I was gushing about the boy band Tornado- but I will never forget what she said next.

"Kanae, I have something I'd like to tell you," Himeno-sama said, "but first, please promise me that you will never tell anyone. This is not an order to you as your mistress, but as a request to you as your friend."

I nodded.

"All right, Himeno," I said, not noticing I'd forgotten the ",-sama" until it was too late. "What do you want to say to me?"

"Thank you," Himeno-sama said. "I've been thinking lately, and I may know why I'm not interested in boys- I'm interested in girls instead."

Even back then, I knew why Himeno-sama was so intent on keeping it secret. Since her family was traditional, and would expect her to marry a respectable man once she grew up, just like how the
young master had married a fine lady, they obviously would disapprove. However, I didn't express it back then, possibly because I'd wondered if it was something more serious.

"Oh," I said. "I had no idea."

"For the longest time, neither did I," Himeno-sama said. "Since our family does not marry for love, I had not expected to feel anything for the man who would one day become my husband. It took me a long time to realize that I had no interest in men at all, and even longer to admit it to myself."

Considering how traditional the Himemiya family was, I didn't blame her. Considering her family's goals when it came to her marriage, and their old-fashioned views of same-sex relationships, they clearly had no intention of helping her come to this epiphany.

"I see, Himeno-sama," I said. "Are you perhaps saying that you are interested in me?"

Himeno-sama shook her head.

"No," Himeno-sama said. "If your sense of duty didn't compel you to say no to me, it would be almost impossible for you to do so because of our relationship as mistress and servant. But I believe that you're the one person I can trust with to keep my secret, since I need to tell someone about it."

I nodded. If the master learned of Himeno-sama's secret, I could potentially be held accountable for not saying anything about it, but if I betrayed Himeno-sama and told him, our friendship would be over. With that in mind, I didn't even have to think about what to do.

"I promise not to tell anyone," I said, "not as your maid, but as your friend."

Himeno-sama smiled and said "Thank you, Kanae." While she realized that our relationship could not be perfectly equal, as much as she (and I) wanted it to be, that didn't mean we couldn't show each other respect and trust, like all true friends did.
Chapter II, Part 3

Day 11

Nagato and I woke up yet again. As I did, I hoped that no matter what happened at the party, today would at least be a peaceful day. By now, we'd learned to keep our killing game-related expectations low, but even then, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't be betrayed.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Morning, Nagato," I said.

For a moment, I wondered why I didn't call Nagato by her first name. She was at least willing to tolerate my not using honorifics on her, so she'd probably agree to let me call her "Chiyuri" if I asked nicely. So if it was just a matter of asking her, why hadn't I?

"I'm curious, Nagato," I said. "Are you at all particular about what other people call you?"

"Not exactly," Nagato said, "since I don't think it's worth the trouble to make a fuss about it. If Tsukimura-san were my maid rather than Himemiya-san's, I don't think I'd have ever asked her to drop the '-sama,' although I wouldn't have minded if she'd done so."

There was my reminder of the reason why I hadn't asked. Nagato would probably have said yes if I'd asked her, even if she didn't actually want that. By comparison, Sayuri seemed willing to use first names on anyone she considered friends (which naturally ruled out the Asshole Trio and a couple others), while Himeno apparently considered me enough of a friend to bestow the rare honor on me. As for me, a part of me hoped Chiyuri would say yes, but only if she actually wanted to.

"Got it," I said. "Well, I was just curious, since your mom's strict about that sort of thing."

"Only when it comes to her students," Nagato said, "since part of it is ensuring that her students respect her, and another part is teaching them respect for others. When it comes to anyone else, she isn't quite as strict; she'd prefer to be addressed with respectful honorifics, but doesn't make a big deal about it. I'm the same, so calling me 'Nagato' is perfectly fine."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. "Well, if you ever want to 'renegotiate' what we call each other, I'm willing to talk it over with you."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "I'll keep that in mind."

We got dressed, and saw that the weather would be rainy for much of the day, so I made a mental note to take an umbrella.

At breakfast, I agreed to Nagato's suggestion to sit down with Kurogane and Kojima. Luckily for me, we didn't have the time to talk, since my gamble paid off. Just as I predicted, Monokuma showed up to interrupt our meal within a minute of everyone sitting down.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said.

"Good morning, Monokuma," Karita said. "How are you today?"
Most of us looked at Karita like he was insane for being polite to Monokuma like that. Even Monokuma seemed a bit surprised, since he was caught off guard for a moment, probably the reaction Karita was hoping for.

"Not so good," Monokuma said, "since I'm pretty disappointed in how things are going. Ever since the last trial, none of you have been all that eager to try to graduate. It's as though your motivation died with Yamazaki-san."

"What a surprise," I said sarcastically. "If you want people to kill each other, then maybe you shouldn't have such a gruesome punishment in store for them if they fail."

Higurashi gave me a disapproving look, probably worried I'd end up encouraging people to take Monokuma up on his offer, even though it was the opposite. While I still thought that Yamazaki's punishment was excessive, my support of the death penalty hadn't changed. As long as there were people who refrained from committing crimes out of fear of being executed, it had merit.

"Hey, that's part of the fun," Monokuma said. "If you manage to find the right answer, you not only get to stay alive, but you get to enjoy watching the murderer suffer a grisly death."

"There is nothing enjoyable about that," Mihama said. "While keeping executions private may lead to less transparency when it comes to the death penalty, executing prisoners should never be a spectacle."

"You're no fun," Monokuma said. "I guess I'll have to sweeten the pot with a one-time offer. If the next blackened manages to graduate, they get to take one spotless of their choice with them, saving them from being killed with the others! This offer only applies to the next murder, and can only be redeemed upon a successful murder and graduation."

So this was why the trip grouped us into pairs. Monokuma must have hoped we'd become friends with our roommates, so that we'd jump at the chance to take them with us.

"What if someone else graduates and chooses you?" I said. "Are you allowed to say no?"

"Not at all!" Monokuma said. "You should just be grateful that whoever graduated would pick you as their plus one. You could probably commit suicide if you want, but I don't think the graduate would be too happy."

"How terrible," I said sarcastically.

Even as I got that flippant remark out of my system, I didn't know what I'd do if I ended up in that scenario. On the one hand, I didn't value my own life so much that I was willing to sacrifice everyone else just to survive, so knowing that I'd survived simply because the asshole who'd gotten away with murder had chosen me would be almost unbearable. On the other hand, the prospect of dying here was terrifying, so I didn't want to throw my own life away just to spite the blackened. I guess I'd make sure the graduate got what they deserved, then live as well as possible, in an attempt to atone for all the sacrifices made for me.

Himeno glanced at Nagato with a concerned expression on her face, then raised her hand.

"When you say you can choose 'anyone' who's still alive, does that include Nagato-sensei?" Himeno said.

"Of course," Monokuma said, "assuming she's still alive as of the end of the trial. Like I said earlier, the teacher's part of the class, which means she'll share the spotless' fate. It's only fair for you to have the choice to save her from that."
Nagato looked anxious, and I wasn't sure whether it was because she was reminded that her mom's life was on the line, or something else was the matter.

"Then again, I'd like to point out that there are some limitations," Monokuma said. "Your plus one can't have gotten convicted for a murder themselves, or else they'll be executed for that. It only protects them from getting executed with the rest of the spotless, not for anything they did."

So in other words, two people couldn't team up for two murders, in hopes that if one of them got away with it, both of them would survive. That was actually something of a relief, since not only would two people working together have a better shot at success, but the death toll would be doubled if they failed.

"And what if two people get away with their murders?" Mihama said.

"Good question," Monokuma said. "If someone gets away with murder, obviously all the spotless get executed. If two people do that, then each of them is part of the spotless for the other's execution, and they get executed, too. As for all the other spotless, it's a shame that I can't kill them twice, isn't it?"

Monokuma let off a "Puhuhuhu!" laugh.

"And what about three murders?" I said.

"Well, that's where I draw the line," Monokuma said. "If anyone kills three or more people, I'll have to execute them on the spot, since the object of the killing game is getting away with murder, not killing everyone else."

I checked my handbook and saw that the rules had been updated once again. I quickly skimmed through the other rules and tried to think of anything else that needed clarification, but nothing came to mind.

"If you don't have any more questions, there's just one more thing," Monokuma said. "The special rule for the traitor doesn't apply this time. Anyone who wants to graduate will have to get through the class trial, even if they do manage to kill the traitor."

"You sound as though you do not expect us to find the traitor's identity," Kirishima said.

"That's not it, Kirishima-san," Monokuma said. "It's more that you already have your incentive to try to kill someone, so anything more would be overkill. Besides, the odds of you getting away with murder is probably a lot more than the one in fifteen chance of killing the traitor, so you don't need that."

Technically, the odds should have been one in fourteen, since everyone seeking to graduate probably knew they weren't the traitor... unless somehow, the traitor didn't know their own identity. Of course, I knew that Monokuma would never answer any questions about this, so I kept it to myself for now.

"If that's all, then I'm off," Monokuma said. "Remember- if you've got anyone you want to graduate with, then now's the time to take a shot at graduation! See you later!"

Monokuma left, at which point Higurashi let out a long sigh.

"So when Monokuma releases a new motive, the first thing you ask is how it works and who qualifies for it?" Higurashi said.
"We may as well," Kirishima said. "It is almost inevitable that a murder may occur, so we should understand the motive as well as possible if we want to know who will participate."

"I agree, Kirishima-san," Himeno said, "but the opposite is also true. If, hypothetically speaking, it is impossible for someone to get what they want through this motive, then once they realize that, they will not attempt to graduate."

Higurashi shook his head.

"I understand that," Higurashi said, "but believing that a murder is inevitable is merely defeatism. If you subscribe to the idea that we will be culled two by two, with alternating murders and executions, it is easier to fall prey to despair and seek to be the only survivor. After all, if you believe everyone here is doomed to die, then why not make sure that you are the only one to survive?"

Higurashi's question, delivered with a sardonic tone, left us at a loss for words for a moment.

"Fair enough," I said. "I think that if there was a guaranteed way to get all of us out of here, most of us would take it. Of course, since we can't count on that, that's why people like Yamazaki only look out for themselves. We're decent enough not to kill each other for shits and giggles, but not good enough that we'd never consider screwing others over to save ourselves."

"You have a point, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "While, as always, the prospect of graduation is tempting, and this time, those with people they care about may want to protect them at the expense of the others, please simply give the lives of the others equal weight to your own."

Higurashi's simple yet audacious request ended the conversation. While I wasn't enough of an idealist to believe that everyone here truly shared his beliefs, I wasn't enough of a cynic to dismiss the possibility that some people actually cared for others' lives. As for me, I wasn't a saint, but I didn't want anyone else here to die, so I couldn't help but hope for Higurashi's success, despite knowing the odds against him. With that in mind, I decided to do the one thing that I thought I could do to make a murder less likely.

After breakfast, I followed Kojima below-decks and pulled him aside into the storage room.

"Oh, Azuki," Kojima said. "Got something to talk with me about?"

"Yeah, and I think you probably have some idea," I said, "but just to be sure I'm clear, I'll spell it out for you. The last thing I want is for you to kill someone so that I can graduate. If you commit murder, I won't hesitate to expose you at the class trial and sentence you to whatever Monokuma has in mind for you."

"I thought you'd say that," Kojima said, "but why assume I'd go that far?"

"How about the fact that you're obviously infatuated with me?" I said. "If you cling to the faint hope that I'll return your feelings, then it isn't too much of a stretch to say that you'll take the long shot and try to graduate... and take me along if you succeed."

Kojima sighed.

"You're right, I would pick you as my plus one," Kojima said, "but think about it for a moment. If I killed someone- let's say Nagato- and let everyone else die just to save you, you'd probably hate me, right?"
"You're acting as though I don't hate you already," I said.

Kojima nervously chuckled.

"But seriously, yes, I would hate you if you did such a thing," I said. "I may find you more than a little annoying, and certainly don't feel the way about you that you'd like me to, but I at least would like to believe that you're a decent guy at heart."

"Faint praise," Kojima said.

"Yeah, I guess," I said, "but think of it this way. I may not know you well enough to say that you are a decent person, but I don't have any proof to say that you aren't one... yet. Don't go proving me wrong."

"Will do," Kojima said. "Here's hoping you come around."

After Kojima left, I saw Himeno come out from the hallway. He'd probably seen her as he'd left, but I couldn't tell.

"Oh, Himeno," I said. "Were you listening in?"

"Not exactly," Himeno said, "but I did want to speak with you, and I couldn't help but overhear Kojima-san. I hope you don't actually believe you managed to discouraged him from wanting to kill anyone."

"Probably not," I said, "since if he's enough of a selfish asshole to be willing to let everyone die so he can graduate, what I said won't do a damn thing. But if there's a chance that I can prevent a murder, I'll have to take it. I'm sure you'd do the same if it would have kept Tsukimura alive."

Himeno nodded.

"I certainly would," Himeno said. "No one wins when it comes to a failed graduation attempt, so as always, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

We paused for a moment, and I recalled what Himeno had asked.

"By the way, Himeno," I said, "you don't seriously think Nagato would try to graduate, would you?"

"I'll admit it's unlikely," Himeno said, "if for no other reason than if she graduated, her mother would die. But what if that isn't the case? This is Nagato-san's only chance to save her mother, and she can't afford to wait. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's realized this."

"I know," I said, "and I'm sure that if Nagato tries anything, everyone will know she has a motive."

Of course, depending on the circumstances, it might be impossible for Nagato to commit the murder, even if she had every reason to do so. If, for example, Himeno ended up being stabbed to death at the house, then it wouldn't matter how badly Nagato wanted to save her mom if I could confirm that Nagato had never left the music store all day.

"True," Himeno said. "I suppose it's unfair of me to say this, since the person I'd most want to take with me is dead."

"I think it's a natural conclusion to make," I said, "but I'd like to know something. Would Tsukimura really want you to kill anyone for her sake, or be willing to do the same for yours?"
Himeno firmly shook her head.

"No," Himeno said. "I could see Kanae laying down her life for me- as a friend, not a servant- but she'd never kill someone else. If I killed someone to graduate, I doubt she would ever fully forgive me. That's what she said when the two of us discussed the killing game on the first day."

"I suppose that makes sense," I said.

"True," Himeno said. "Of course, she also said that even if I did something that terrible, a part of her would still choose to remember me fondly. For what it's worth, a part of me is glad that she never crossed that line."

"Me too," I said.

"In fact, I think having someone here who believes in you is a good thing," Himeno said, "since as long as that person is there, you're less inclined to let them down. I believe you're a good person, too, Akira, so I hope you'll never prove me wrong."

I thanked Himeno and agreed. For a moment, I hoped that the potential "plus ones" would potentially discourage graduation. I'd given Kojima my warning, and Himeno wouldn't commit murder for Tsukimura (or vice versa), so I hoped that if one of the Tachibana sisters or Nagato hoped to graduate with their sister or mother, respectively, then the realization that their loved ones would disapprove would stay their hands.

After the ship made landfall, we got off and quickly made our way inside to get out of the rain. I found Nagato waiting in the record store.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Hey," I said. "Did you talk to your mom about this?"

"I did," Nagato said. "As you might have guessed, Mom doesn't want anyone to commit murder, least of all for her sake. She asked me to tell everyone that, and Higurashi-san also agreed to pass the word along."

"Well, you can tell Nagato-sensei that I got the message," I said. "Higurashi, too, while you're at it."

Nagato nodded, but looked oddly pensive.

"Anyway, is something on your mind?" I said.

"There is," Nagato said, "specifically, Himemiya-san specifically asking about Mom. Does she suspect me?"

"She isn't ruling anyone out," I said. "The only reason she asked about your mom, as opposed to one of our classmates, is that there's some doubt as to whether Nagato-sensei would count. We already know that the twins could choose each other, or Kojima could choose me, so we don't need to ask about that."

Nagato didn't contest my point, but didn't seem to feel better after hearing it, either.

"I don't blame her," Nagato said, "but at the same time, it's difficult knowing that people don't trust you. After all, if others are constantly wary of betrayal, there's not much you can do to convince
them to lower their guard, can you?"

"Not at all," I said. "Higurashi might not be the most effective leader, but I'm a bit impressed he managed to get this many people to trust him."

"So am I," Nagato said. "Trust, friendship and love aren't things that you get by asking for them... well, at least not from people who aren't willing to give them to you. I don't know how to prove to Himemiya-san or the others that I'd never commit murder just to save my mom."

I nodded, and paused to think for a moment. As desperate as Kojima seemed, maybe his dogged attempts to get me to notice and fall in love with him were based in the understandable belief that he'd need to put himself forward in order to win me over. As for Nagato, I wondered if her apparent lack of any close friends, both here and in the past, was due to her unwillingness to assert herself.

"Just keep on doing your thing, and prove yourself a good team player," I said. "After that, most reasonable people will see that you can be trusted and come around. I'm sure Himeno's one of them."

Nagato seemed a bit surprised after hearing me use Himeno's first name.

"I understand, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "I may not have had much success with this in the past, but I know better than to act in an untrustworthy manner in circumstances like these."

We stayed in the store for a little while longer, watching the rain fall outside, and as we did, I pondered the motive. Nagato had every reason to want to kill someone- if not for herself, for the sake of her mother- but I couldn't see her doing so.

After the rain let up, I headed back to the news stand to look around. The newspaper that was on sale was the same issue that had reported our going missing, and the news stand itself looked almost the same as yesterday. Since there were only fourteen of us milling about the island, there were naturally fewer people to make messes, just like there were fewer to clean them up.

I then thought about the origins of the newspaper, and realized that the state of the news stand could support either theory. If the newspaper was fake, then Monokuma didn't have the capacity to create the next issue, or didn't care enough to put in the effort. If it was real, then the production and/or distribution of the newspaper had come to a screeching halt as a result of the chaos.

While I was looking around, I saw Kojima off in the distance. Almost on a whim, I hid myself inside the news stand, under the counter, before he left. As soon as the coast was clear, I emerged, and saw Kurogane.

"Oh, hello, Azuki-san," Kurogane said. "Hiding from someone?"

"Bingo," I said. "I'm pretty sure you can guess who."

Kurogane nervously chuckled.

"Oh, you must mean Kojima-kun," Kurogane said. "I understand that he's... a bit overbearing when it comes to you, but he isn't that bad of a guy."

I sighed. For some reason, Kurogane seemed eager to white-knight Kojima, a guy he'd just met. It probably wasn't anything important, and might not be any of my business, but I felt the urge to get to the bottom of it.
"This again?" I said. "I doubt you'd be so eager to defend Kojima if you were the object of his affections."

"Who knows?" Kurogane said. "I might actually like it. Kojima's a good-looking guy who's passionate about making video games, so maybe we'd click."

I paused for a moment, realizing that Kojima had more or less admitted to the same thing that Himeno had confided in me the previous day.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you...?"

"Gay?" Kurogane said. "Yes, I am."

I let off a nervous chuckle. I'd seen plenty of love triangles when watching and making movies, but I never thought I'd end up in one, much less in the middle of a killing game.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said. "Kojima keeps on pursuing me, while there's a guy who's eager to return his feelings in the same cabin as him."

"That sums it up nicely," Kurogane said, "but what exactly are you implying? That Kojima-kun's obligated to return my feelings?"

I was left at a loss for words for a moment. I'd hated the idea that if Kojima persisted with his "nice guy" schtick for long enough, so why did I think that Kurogane deserved to have Kojima pay attention to him, just because Kojima was a nice guy?

"Not really," I said. "I just wish he would, so that I wouldn't have to deal with him anymore. I also feel a bit bad for you, since you're not half as obnoxious as Kojima. Besides, I can't think of any reason Kojima wouldn't be interested for you apart from his sexuality and his crush on me."

Kurogane shook his head, rejecting my pity.

"I understand how you feel," Kurogane said, "but to be honest, I've come to terms with the fact that even if you weren't around, Kojima is purely heterosexual. That's part of the reason why I'm not jealous of you- that and the fact that you have something you don't want."

"You said it," I said. "I guess you have experience with that sort of thing?"

"Yeah," Kurogane said. "I know enough to consider myself lucky if the guy I likes says, 'Sorry I'm not gay, but can we still be friends?' like Kojima-kun more or less did."

I almost asked why Kurogane didn't share this detail earlier, but thought better of it.

"So that's part of the reason why you like Kojima so much," I said. "I'll actually give him some credit on that front, but he's not the only one out there who wouldn't judge you for being gay, and neither am I. Of course, the bad news is all of the people I can think of who fit the bill here are girls."

"That's fine, Azuki-san," Kurogane said, "and thank you. I'm not looking for a boyfriend so soon, since I have more pressing concerns, but I'm always glad to make a friend."

I nodded. Since we'd finished talking about this topic, and Kojima was long gone, I was just about ready to say goodbye, but I had one more thing to ask Kurogane.

"One more thing," I said. "You wouldn't make Kojima your 'plus one,' would you?"
Kurogane shook his head.

"Never," Kurogane said. "No matter what I might feel for him, or even if he actually came to feel the same way about me that I did for him, no one person's life is worth enough to sacrifice everyone else's."

"Got it," I said. "Well, thanks for your answer."

Convinced that Kurogane was being honest, I set off, carefully checking my surroundings but no longer worried about Kojima following me. I'd learned a lot about Kurogane and Kojima just now, but my mind went back to Kojima.

Maybe there was a vicious cycle of sorts at work here between me and Kojima. By rejecting Kojima, I caused him to redouble his efforts to win me over, which only served to make him even more repellent to me. On the other hand, I'd never been interested in Kojima, and I doubted that him dialing back on his efforts would change that.

Still, I had to wonder if I was wrong- well, partly wrong- about Kojima. There were sides of him that I hadn't seen as often, sides that were, ironically enough, more appealing than the one he'd shown the person he wanted to win over. I doubted anything I'd learn about him would cause me to fall in love with him, but I was willing to admit that I didn't know everything about him, and accept the possibility that my opinion could change for the better.

I found Karita by himself in the costume store. He was picking out and examining costumes, then putting them back in order to prevent anyone (well, anyone besides Monokuma and whoever else watched the surveillance camera footage) from realizing that he'd touched them.

"Hey, Karita," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah, hello, Azuki-san," Karita said. "I'm just checking out the costumes, and seeing which ones Monokuma might hand out."

"He's not letting us choose what to wear?" I said.

Karita shook his head.

"That's not it," Karita said. "Sure, he's giving us our costumes, but he isn't making us wear them. We can easily choose to wear something else, as long as we show up in a costume of some sort or another."

"Heh, figures," I said. "I should have known that he'd leave a loophole that couldn't be used against him... or that you'd be the one to find it."

Karita chuckled, but the smile on his face didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I've got something to ask you, Azuki-san," Karita said. "You're afraid I'll try something tomorrow, aren't you?"

"I am," I said, "but you aren't the only one I'm worried about. Now that there's a motive that allows more than two people to graduate, the blackened can have an accomplice. A lot of people who wouldn't be willing to sacrifice the one person they care about are possible killers now."

I decided not to mention the possibility that the blackened might not be affected by the motive, but would use it to throw suspicion onto someone who would be tempted by it. Either Karita already
knew that, a likely possibility considering for someone as devious as him, or

"That's right," Karita said, "but do you think the blackened can really trust the accomplice, or vice versa?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Let's say that with Person A's help, Person B becomes the blackened," Karita said. "B commits the murder, while A helps dispose of evidence, serves as Person A's alibi, and misleads the rest of the class at the trial. Sounds like a good strategy, right?"

I thought about the answer for a moment, and started to realize what Karita was getting at.

"Yeah, it is," I said, "assuming they can trust each other. Since B's the only one who'll get executed if the plan fails, all it takes is A screwing up or blabbing for B to get killed. Maybe A could trick B into killing someone A didn't like and then let B get executed while keeping their hands clean."

Of course, even if that did happen, then if the rest of us realized what A had done (possibly if B sold A out before being executed), we'd never trust A again.

"You're right about one thing, Azuki-san," Karita said. "A can be a liability to the plan, and if it fails, B will be the only one who'll die. But what if B succeeds?"

"Then B gets to graduate and pick a plus one," I said, "which will probably be A... assuming B is being honest."

Karita grinned, noticing that I'd figured out the biggest risk for A.

"Bingo," Karita said. "It's possible that B actually wants to make Person C their plus one, but C is unwilling and/or unable to help out as an accomplice. A, however, is willing to take the chance and become an accomplice, perhaps unaware that B is using them until it is too late."

One thing struck me as odd about the scenario. Since B's morals would have to be pretty fucked up if they were willing to kill someone and let everyone else die just to save person C- their lover, their friend or s family member- why the hell would A trust them implicitly? Of course, rather than quibble about that scenario, I decided that question was most important of all.

"So in other words, the blackened has to trust the accomplice to do their part, while the accomplice has to trust the blackened to choose them," I said. "That isn't exactly a reasonable proposition in the killing game."

"Not at all," Karita said. "You're completely right to be worried, Azuki-san, but remember this-things are at least hard for the blackened as they are for the spotless. That's why Yamazaki-kun failed, after all."

"True," I said. "Of course, even if the odds are against the blackened, not everyone's good at calculating them, which is why Yamazaki bet his life and lost."

Karita simply nodded, and for a moment, I wished I was as good at game theory as I was at acting. While the skills required to be a good actress- a good memory, a talent for speaking well and the ability to understand people's personalities, among others- were useful for the killing game, understanding what was going through the minds of my fellow participants was critical, which was why the difficult to read Karita bothered me so much. If nothing else, though, I could count on him to not be stupid enough to go through with a half baked murder plan... but if he did go through with it, he might just get away with it.
I found Kirishima and Mihama in the restaurant. After getting some food, I asked to join them.

"So I guess you two are having another meeting about the traitor's identity?" I said. "Even though killing them won't make a difference this time?"

"The answer to both questions is yes, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said, "but you are mistaken if you think not knowing the traitor's identity makes no difference this time. They may not be the target of this motive, but they are responsible for our predicament. Out of everyone here, they are still the most likely to be killed."

"Fair enough," I said, "but at this point, whoever's actually the traitor matters less than who everyone thinks is the traitor. Because Yamazaki was sure Karita was the traitor, he tried to kill him."

Mihama nodded.

"That is true, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "but do you think that everyone else's guesses are necessarily different from what Kirishima-san and I may come up with by thinking it over?"

"Probably," I said. "Asakura once said he was suspicious of Himeno, just because her family's rich. We don't have a lot to go off right now, so it's probably safe for the traitor to lie low and wait for someone else to commit murder."

"That certainly is possible," Kirishima said, "but I would like to ask you this. Why would the traitor allow a murder to happen, since they are at risk of being killed or being executed with the rest of the spotless?"

"Good question," I said. "Maybe they're thrill-seekers who don't fear death, or maybe they're overconfident enough that they don't think they'll die."

"Perhaps," Kirishima said. "I cannot fathom why a rational individual would mastermind such an event, in which we kill each other wastefully. That said, some people are driven by irrational urges that are easy to predict. Some people would kill their enemies even at the cost of their own lives, or give their lives so that someone precious to them could live on. All that remains is to understand the desire, and thankfully for us, Monokuma has given us a clue."

We talked for a little while, trying to brainstorm who would likely take advantage of the motive, but while a few people seemed like obvious suspects, anyone was possible. After all, there was still the possibility of getting out of here, a prospect that grew more tempting as the game went on and more people died.

After I was done eating, I headed to the house where the party would be held. As I approached, I saw Kojima quickly walk outside, past me. He didn't give any indication he'd seen me, which, while a bit of a relief, was highly unusual for him. I considered asking him about this, but doubted I'd get a straight answer, so I decided to let him be for now.

Just inside the house, there was a vestibule where guests could take off their shoes. A metal detector that resembled the kind you pass through at airport security was installed, with sensors on each side of the wall.

"What's this thing?" I said.

"Our very own metal detector!" Monokuma said, popping out from the other side of the metal
detector. "If you pass through it with anything with a significant amount of metal- which means that keys, belt buckles, braces and the like don't count- it goes off, like so!"

Monokuma then leaped toward me. As he passed through, the metal detector lit up red, and a harsh siren played for a couple seconds.

"That's great," I said, "but what's the point of it? At an airport checkpoint, the metal detector's just a tool so that the security guards can search you and stop you from getting on a plane if you've got anything dangerous."

"That's not important for now," Monokuma said. "Just remember- the detector never forgets whoever got caught sneaking metal in, and you'll hear about that if there's a trial. Later!"

Monokuma then left. Once he was gone, I checked my pockets to make damn sure I didn't have any loose change in there. The only things I had on me were the clothes on my back, my (plastic) keycard to my room, and my student handbook, so I hesitantly stuck the latter through, only to get no response. Letting out a sigh of relief, I passed through the detector, which didn't go off.

Once inside, there were two hallways that went around the outer edge of the building. The eastern hallway had a bathroom and storage closet, while the west side had the kitchen and a living room. There wasn't too much of note in any of those places, although I noticed that the kitchen didn't have any silverware. Since there weren't any knives, that was a good thing; anyone who wanted to sneak in a weapon had to either go through the metal detector or think outside the box.

At the back of the house, there was a dining room with a rectangular table that only seemed to seat six to eight people at most. Even though I'd only been to half of the house, there wasn't a room that would fit all fourteen of us.

I headed upstairs and saw that the second floor was significantly smaller. Apart from the small walkway at the top of the stairs, there were only two rooms. The first was a bedroom with a king-sized bed, a nightstand and a closet, as well as a window that looked out over the front of the building. The second was a study that had a bookshelf, a desk and a suit of armor holding a sword, with a window that looked over the back.

So this was our venue for the party. We wouldn't be able to congregate in one room, but in any given room, there would probably be at least a few people around, and several more able to hear someone call for help. There weren't any weapons around, with the possible exception of the sword held by the suit of armor's gauntleted hands, and the metal detector would pick up on anyone bringing one in from outside. My first impression was that Monokuma hadn't thought things through too well, but I knew better. He- or better said, whoever would become the next blackened- would find a way to get the killing started again, and we'd just have to be smarter than that.

In the evening, as the sun was setting, I saw Kumakura taking a walk around the island and decided to join him. He seemed grateful for the company, since Nagato and Higurashi were apparently discussing the party over dinner at the restaurant.

"I'm curious about something," I said. "Are you at all close to anyone in this class?"

Kumakura shrugged and shook his head.

"Not particularly," Kumakura said. "I get along pretty well with most of the others- with a few exceptions- but I'm a bit hesitant to call anyone here friends just yet. Even if Yamazaki-kun hadn't betrayed us, I don't have all that much in common with him or the others, and I've only known you
for less than two weeks."

"Fair enough," I said. "What about your old school?"

"I had some friends back there," Kumakura said. "I don't think I can quantify how close we were, but we got along well, and I miss them."

I nodded, since I knew the feeling. I'd said goodbye to friends in the past, even if I didn't have to worry about them being murdered, or perishing in the chaos that was covered in the newspaper.

"But you still decided to accept Talent High School's offer and come here?" I said. "Even knowing that you'd have to say goodbye to your friends?"

"Yeah," Kumakura said. "It's probably selfish, but I felt I owed it to myself to make the most of this opportunity. My friends agreed, and urged me to take it."

"I would, too, if I were in their position," I said, "assuming, of course, that I didn't know how this would turn out. If you let an offer like that slip through your fingers, you're screwing yourself over to no benefit for your friends, right?"

"You're right," Kumakura said. "As important as friendship is, I also think that there are some things that are more important, such as staying true to your principles and doing what you believe to be right. That's why, even if you want to save the person most important to you by graduating, it's better to stay here and find a way for everyone to survive."

I nodded in agreement. As idealistic as Higurashi was, he was also the type who remained true to himself even in a situation like this, and didn't compromise or bend easily. Perhaps he didn't always- or often- get what he wanted, but he was unlikely to lose sight of his goals, and he was probably the last person I thought would kill anyone.

After a couple laps around the island, the time came to return to the ship. I got back a little after most of the others, and saw Nagato emerge from the elevator.

"Good evening, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Are you here to see Mom, too?"

"Yeah," I said, "because I've got some questions for her."

"Go right ahead," Nagato said. "Higurashi-san and I finished our report, and Mom and I got to spend some time as a family."

I nodded and thanked Nagato.

"By the way, I did actually manage to talk to Himemiya-san about her suspecting me," Nagato said. "She didn't apologize, but she did invite me to prove her wrong. I guess that's as close as I'll ever get to her trusting me, at least as long as this motive is active."

"Well, talk is cheap," I said, "which is part of the reason why Himeno doesn't have much faith in Higurashi. Of course she's not going to just take your word for it."

"I didn't think so," Nagato said.

I paused, trying to think of something I could say that would make Nagato feel better while still being honest. I realized that words wouldn't be enough... and in fact, that was the key idea.

"Of course, it goes both ways," I said. "She's not the sort of person who thinks saying 'sorry' will
fix everything, nor does she think that just saying she trusts you means much. I'm guessing that if you prove that you can be trusted, she'll show you her appreciation."

"I'll do just that, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Thank you very much."

Nagato bowed deeply in gratitude before heading back to our cabin. While actions did speak louder than words, there was something sincere and heartfelt about Nagato's actions. Perhaps Himeno would soon realize that Nagato never intended to kill anyone for any reason... assuming Himeno wasn't the next victim, that is.

I decided to see Nagato-sensei. After exchanging greetings and pleasantries, I sat down outside her cell.

"So, the party's tomorrow," I said. "What are your thoughts, Sensei?"

Nagato-sensei carefully thought over her answer.

"I'm hoping no one ends up killing each other," Nagato-sensei said. "I think I'm speaking for most of us."

"You are," I said, "with the obvious exception of the blackened and those who are rather pessimistic about the whole thing."

Nagato-sensei sighed. She'd probably heard about the incident in which a student stabbed another at her daughter's school, as well as who knows how many other incidents of student violence in her time, but she'd never been prepared for anything like this.

"To think that there was a time when my greatest party-related worries were kids getting drunk or racking up noise complaints," Nagato-sensei said. "Even then, I didn't think about it too much because Chiyuri never got invited to other people's parties."

"Neither did my mom," I said, "because I was too busy with acting to go to many parties outside of official celebrations. For those, Mom came, partly to chaperone me and partly because she was also invited. Even if she wasn't, she trusted me enough not to get into trouble."

"The mothers I know feel the same way about their children," Nagato-sensei said. "Of course, those children were younger than Chiyuri, for the most part. The eldest of them is only in her second year of middle school this year... or perhaps the first year of high school."

"So you've read the newspaper that we found," I said.

Nagato-sensei nodded.

"Yes, Higurashi-san shared a copy with me," Nagato-sensei said. "As someone who watched her daughter grow up, I find it hard to believe that I forgot about the last two years of Chiyuri's life... or at the very least, I don't want to believe it."

"Me too," I said. "Of course, something's fishy about us suddenly finding ourselves in this hotel and on the ship, so we're going to have to find out the truth sooner or later."

After speaking with Nagato-sensei, I realized something was up here when it came to the two years. A lot of things didn't add up, but rather than think of it as a wrong equation, maybe it was more like a puzzle with some missing pieces. The only question was what those missing pieces showed us.
Monokuma Theater

Sometimes, what you're looking for and what you find are two very different things.

I went fishing in a lake once and I didn't get a single bite- but I did catch myself a pair of boots.

The guy on the other end of the lake, however, caught some real beauties that would make any fisherman jealous.

I went over to congratulate him, but you know what he said to me?

"I don't care about the fish! I came here for a good pair of boots!"

Day 12

Nagato and I got dressed, as the weather predicted a somewhat overcast day. We then started getting dressed, and after I was finished, I noticed Nagato retying her tie, apparently not satisfied with the first knot she'd tied.

"I'm curious about something," I said. "Why is it that you keep on wearing your uniform according to your old school's regulations?"

"You mean unlike you?" Nagato said, unusually cheekily, finishing with her tie and putting on her blazer.

"Good one," I said with a chuckle. "It's not as though there's anyone around to make me, is there?"

Nagato smiled and shook her head.

"In all seriousness, though," Nagato said, "there are a few reasons. The first is because I believe that a uniform, the symbol of your membership in a school or whatever other organization it represents, should be worn respectfully."
I nodded, but realized that while Nagato wasn't the type to tell lies, it didn't feel as though it was her talking.

"Fair enough," I said. "What's the other reason- or perhaps, the real reason?"

"Both reasons are real," Nagato said, "but I supposed you could call the other one a more personal reason. That reason is because I wanted to be seen as a respectable student, and had no desire to make people judge me as a delinquent or other sort of problem child based on appearance alone."

While I didn't have nearly enough information to take the measure of Nagato's character, I could already sense a recurring problem. For some reason, Nagato was ostracized, and she hoped to become worthy of others' respect so they would accept and like her.

"I have no idea why they'd think that," I said, "but I'm pretty sure they're full of shit, since you haven't given me any reason to dislike or distrust you."

Nagato giggled.

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Nagato said, "but I do wonder what you'd think if I told you that I...

"If you said what?" I said.

Nagato stopped and shook her head.

"Forget it," Nagato said, "since it's my mom's problem, too, not just mine. Besides, we've got the party to deal with right now, so Higurashi-san's on edge."

"Got it," I said. "If we make it through, I'll consider asking you again."

Nagato hesitantly nodded, but we realized that anything could happen. One of us could end up being murdered tonight, and while I had no intention of killing anyone, I had to admit that Nagato might be pushed over the edge and try to save her mom. Alternatively, one of the other people with someone they cared about- Kojima, Kurogane, one of the twins, or someone we didn't know about- could end up aiming to graduate to protect their most precious person, or someone else could use the motive to shift blame onto their fall guy of choice. There were too many possibilities, too many ways this could go wrong, and too many innocent lives in the balance for me to not worry about the party, so I decided to put my unanswered questions aside.

We sat down for breakfast with Mihama and Sayuri.

"So we finally get our costumes today," I said. "Are you looking forward to getting another outfit?"

"Maybe," Nagato said, "depending on what Monokuma has in mind for a costume. I personally don't mind having to wear a uniform; like I told you, I'm not too up on the latest trends, so having to wear one thing makes it a lot simpler."

I nodded, remembering what Nagato had said. My mom would probably sympathize with her, since Mom wore a dark pantsuit most of the time, and wore plain clothing when she was dressed casually. Mom always believed that you should dress to fit in, since if you were underdressed, overdressed, or wore something gaudy or tacky, people would notice your outfit first, rather than pay attention to you as a person. I personally found the principle sound, even if as an actress, my outfits had to turn heads.

"I actually think school uniforms can be convenient for a manga artist," Sayuri said. "It makes it
easy to draw throngs of background characters, since everyone's dressed identically. Of course, there are times when I wish you could make adjustments to your uniform—wearing a cardigan rather than a blazer, a neck ribbon in lieu of a necktie, pants instead of a skirt, or vice versa."

Mihama nodded.

"I have mixed feelings," Mihama said. "While I agree with some of the principles behind requiring students to wear uniforms, it can often be a bit much to expect families to purchase a garment that their children will only wear at school. My family is often short on money, so I could often hear my mother sigh every time she wrote a check to the uniform supplier."

"I know what you mean, Mihama-san," Nagato said. "All of us were our old high schools for only one year."

"Most of us, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri said. "My school was an academy, so I've worn this uniform since middle school, only getting a new one when I outgrew it."

Mihama gave Sayuri an understanding look, then returned to what she was talking about earlier.

"Then again," Mihama said, "as much as Mother disliked having to pay for my uniforms, I saw her face light up when I tried on my old high school uniform. Whenever friends of the family or relatives praised me after seeing me in the uniform, Mother dismissed the compliments, but inside, she was happy. Knowing that, I swore to do this uniform and my mother proud. This was a promise that I renewed when I got into Talent High School, and one that I do not intend to break, even in this killing game."

It was a heartwarming memory, but also a reminder that not all of our loved ones were necessarily stuck inside this killing game. I had to wonder— if Mihama killed someone and let everyone else die to save the person she cared about, possibly Sasaki, could she face her mother? I hoped, for all our sakes, she'd never have to find out.

My train of thought was interrupted when Monokuma announced his presence.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "Are you excited for the party tonight?"

"Not exactly," I said, "but I guess you're here to give us an announcement of some sort, so out with it."

"Patience, Azuki-san," Monokuma said, "but yes, I do have something to share with you. Your costumes are waiting at the costume store, and will be marked with your names. Feel free to use the changing rooms to change, and store your uniforms in the lockers near the changing rooms. I'd like you to wear costumes of some sort, even if they aren't the ones I provided."

"What about the party?" Higurashi said. "Are we supposed to stay in the house all evening?"

"You aren't required to do so," Monokuma said, "but, as your chaperone, I will not be held responsible if any harm comes to you while you are outside. The only person who'll get punished is the blackened... if the rest of you manage to find them."

"In other words, nothing's changed," Karita said.

"Not at all," Monokuma said. "Killing's the name of the game here, and I'm looking forward to seeing what you can manage."

A chill went down my spine. Not only did we have to worry about would-be killers, but we also
had to worry about anyone who'd do something reckless or careless enough to endanger their own life or those of others. Anyone could make those mistakes, including would-be killers.

"Like I said earlier, the party will last from 9 PM to midnight," Monokuma said, "and will feature food and a haunting soundtrack in 'The Tragedy Overture'- the rest is up to you. You have the rest of the day to yourselves, so have fun! I'll be going, but here's your keys! Enjoy!"

Monokuma handed each of us a key to the lockers before leaving. I said a silent prayer to whoever was listening that the costume inside my locker wouldn't be too revealing, and the others apparently agreed; we spent the rest of breakfast speculating what we'd get.

It seemed a bit frivolous that we were worried about stupid crap like this- and it was- but in the end, we were only teenagers (or a tween, in Mihama's case). Even if the newspaper was right and we had aged two years since arriving at Talent High School, we didn't have any memory of those years, and none of the life experience that helped us go from children to adults.

Of course, I knew that growing up wouldn't make us immune to the pressures of the killing game- in fact, some awful teenagers became even worse adults. That said, none of us were ready for this, and simply kicking back and acting like kids was probably one of the few methods we had of not snapping under the stress of it all.

Not long after leaving the ship, I headed to the costume store to get changed into my costume, picking it up from the locker marked with my name. The locker was locked, and only opened with my key, but the clear door made it possible to see what was kept inside the locker.

I got a prince's outfit, which looked a bit like a 19th century European military uniform, and reminded me of the costume I'd worn in my first school play. Being a military uniform-like outfit, it had several plastic medals on the lapel, and a plastic sword, a replica of a blade that was probably more for ceremonial purposes than for cutting people up. The blade was light and easy to swing, but I doubted that even someone as strong as Kumakura would be able to inflict worse than a bruise on people. There was a tag on my trousers, which I quickly removed.

On my way out, I saw the twins emerge from the changing room. Both of them were wearing matching blue denim overalls, brown work boots and white gloves, as well as a hat and a shirt- Tatsuki's were red with an M on the hat, and Taiga's were green with an L on the hat. I could see Taiga's birthmark.

"Nice costumes, you two," I said. "Did Monokuma give them to you because you were twins, or because all the roommates get a matching set?"

"I'm guessing the former, Tatsuki said. "They gave Higurashi-kun a red sentai outfit, while Kirishima-kun got what looked like an orange hazard suit with a λ on it. Karita-kun is an astronaut, while Asakura-kun is a pirate."

"Yeah," Taiga said. "Then again, some costumes match- Sasaki-san got a white burial kimono, while Kojima-kun got a white sheet with holes in it, so they're both ghosts. I'm guessing Nagato-san's a princess, right?"

"Sorry, Taiga-san," Nagato said, "but the answer is no."

I saw Nagato emerge from the changing room, dressed in a black and white nun habit.

"Oh, I stand corrected, then," Taiga said. "I don't know how Monokuma chose these costumes, but I guess they aren't half bad."
I agreed. Tatsuki had several different stage outfits, including her "signature" dragon qipao, but having a matching set of costumes with her sister suited her. Of course, as I looked closely at her, as her attention was drawn to Nagato, I noticed something was off.

"By the way, Tatsuki," I said. "I see you forgot the tag on the seat of your overalls."

"Oh, good catch, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said as she ripped the tag off. "And thank you."

Taiga quickly checked the seat of her overalls, before apparently remembering that she'd already gotten her tag off, and the two then excused themselves.

Shortly after they were gone, I saw Sayuri emerge from the changing rooms with a disheveled white kimono.

"Excuse me, Akira-chan, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri said, "but do either of you know how to tie a kimono?"

Nagato and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

"I'm sorry, but no, Sasaki-san," Nagato said. "I've never worn one in my life."

"I wore one a couple times," I said, "but my mom helped me with them. Why not wear something else that's easier to put on and move in?"

"I can help," Himeno said. "I know how to tie a kimono. Turn around, please."

Sasaki turned around, and within minutes, Himeno helped her get dressed.

"Thank you, Himemiya-san," Sayuri said.

"You're welcome," Himeno said. "One of Kanae's duties was helping me get dressed, but since I wore kimonos often and didn't want her to be forced to look after me all the time, I decided to learn how to tie my own kimono. I guess it paid off."

Himeno had a wistful look in her eyes.

"In any case, Sasaki-san, I have a favor to ask of you," Himeno said, showing her costume, a set of plastic plate mail armor that was fitted for a woman and had a skirt. "I need someone's help to get into this armor, since it isn't designed for people to put on by themselves."

"Then I'll help, Himemiya-san," Sayuri said. "Consider this repaying your favor."

Sayuri accompanied Himeno to the changing room, while I decided to head to the back of the building. There was a washer and a dryer there, and according to the instructions, they were the same as the one on the ship and the one at the inn. That meant that Monokuma would deliver the laundry back to my cabin, but also that any clothes with blood on it would be listed.

I then walked out the back of the building and onto the street, not far from the house. The door didn't seem to be locked, so there wasn't anything stopping people from using it, and the house was maybe a minute or two's walk from the back of the store (half that if you ran). As I did, I saw Kojima once again slip past me, apparently trying not to be seen. Something was amiss, but as much as I wanted to ask Kojima, I doubted he'd tell me.

I had lunch with Kumakura, who was wearing an orange martial arts uniform. Apparently, he'd gotten a bear mascot costume, but traded it in for something more practical.
"By the way, Azuki-san, I'd like to ask you something on Kurogane-kun's behalf," Kumakura said. "Have you seen Kojima-kun much today?"

I paused a moment to recall the past few hours, then shook my head.

"Not really," I said, "which is strange, since he's usually all too willing to talk to me. Are you asking because he's got a crush on me?"

"Well, I am asking everyone," Kumakura said, "but you did come to mind for those reasons. I do find this strange, though."

I shrugged.

"Me too," I said. "We may not know everyone all that well, but I do think that we all have certain patterns in our behavior, so by now, we can tell if someone deviates from those."

As an actress, I had to be well-versed in my characters in order to play the parts consistently, which meant I noticed whenever the writers fucked up and had my character do something that wasn't like her.

"True," Kumakura said. "I hope that he's just feeling stressed right now, but I suppose only he knows the answer."

We continued eating in silence, wondering what was going on. Of course, while something was clearly wrong with Kojima, the two of us also had eleven other people to worry about. Because of that, Kojima was one person, and we couldn't solely fixate on him, even if he was usually one of the easier ones to figure out.

Several hours passed, and not a lot happened. I eventually ran into Kojima outside the music store, at which point he said hi and went on his way. Kumakura mentioned that a few other people had seen him at the music store, so it wasn't as though he was trying to become invisible or anything.

The party began at 9 PM, but I decided to show up a couple minutes early, and saw that others had done the same.

Higurashi and Nagato had set up shop in the vestibule of the house. As each of the students passed through the metal detector, which didn't react to their locker keys, Higurashi, who'd taken off his costume's helmet, wrote on a pad of paper. Judging from the paper, Kojima, who'd arrived at 8:42, was the first to arrive apart from Higurashi and Nagato, who'd both gotten there at 8:30 sharp. As for me, they wrote "8:54" next to "Akira Azuki."

"What are you guys doing?" I said as I passed through.

"Recording whoever comes or leaves and when," Higurashi said. "That way, if there's any incident, we'll know who wasn't at the party."

"That's good," I said, "but are you sure this is the only exit?"

"It is," Nagato said. "Higurashi-san and I checked, but none of the windows on the first floor open. As for the second floor, while it is possible to open a window and get outside, it would be fairly difficult for anyone to get down without injuring themselves."

I paused for a moment.
"So it's 'difficult' but not impossible, huh?" I said.

"Unfortunately, yes," Higurashi said. "That being said, Nagato-san and I cannot be everywhere at once, and it would be most advantageous to have a two-person security team at the only point of ingress."

"I guess you're right," I said. "Well, I'll be sure to keep an eye out for anything unusual."

I was once again reminded of the greatest flaw with Higurashi's strategy for preventing the killings—the idea that any one person could solve all our problems. If we wanted to prevent any further killings, we'd need to police ourselves and make good decisions, so I decided to do my part.

As the clock struck 9 and the party officially began, I decided to mingle with the guests, who were scattered around the house. Unfortunately, Kojima was the first one I encountered. Even though his ghost costume—a white sheet with holes cut in it—covered his face, I could still clearly make out his voice, and could see his trousers and sleeves poke out from the sheet.

"Hey, Azuki," Kojima said.

"Hey," I said. "Uh... nice music, right?"

Kojima nodded enthusiastically.

"It is," Kojima said. "This is the first track of The Tragedy Overture, Hope's Peak Academy's school song."

I listened for a moment. It was the standard sort of song that sang about how great the school was, but it was fairly catchy.

"Wow, it's actually not so bad," I said. "Maybe I should have listened to this earlier."

"Well, I did say that the rest of the track was good," Kojima said, surprisingly less smugly than I'd expected.

With the small talk out of the way, I finally decided to ask him the question on my- and probably everyone else's- mind.

"By the way, what's up with you?" I said. "You've been acting odd today, particularly keeping to yourself all this time. It's not that I mind you putting some distance from me- it's just that I'm worried about why you're doing so."

Kojima looked a bit uncomfortable, and I wondered if he even wanted to answer the question, but after a moment, he did.

"Well, I'm not sure how to put this," Kojima said, "but do you have a family outside of this ship?"

"Yeah," I said. "Before coming to this school, I lived with my mom."

Luckily for me, Kojima didn't ask for any further details.

"Got it," Kojima said. "Now, are you worried about what might've happened to your mom?"

"I am," I said. "It's about the newspaper, right?"

"Bingo," Kojima said. "In my case, it's not just my family I'm worried about, but also my friends,
the ones who worked on my game together. Now, I don't know if the article's real, but..."

"But?" I said.

"That's the problem," Kojima said. "If I knew they were safe and sound, I'd be able to rest easy for now. If I knew they were dead, I'd be heartbroken, but I guess I could come to terms with it. Because I don't know, I can't stop thinking about them. If we get out of here, I might be able to find out what happened, but will I be ready for it?"

I paused and thought for a moment, hoping to come up with an actually meaningful answer, but to no avail.

"I think you're the only one who knows," I said, "and I hope you never have to find out how you'll deal with the bad news."

"Me neither," Kojima said. "Thanks, Azuki; I actually feel a bit better talking with you about this."

"You're welcome," I said, "but why'd you tell me that?"

Kojima gave me a funny look, as if to say, "You're really asking me that question?" but then decided to answer it.

"Well, I did also tell Kurogane," Kojima said, "but there's a few reasons I told you. It's because I know you'll give it to me straight, because you're in the same boat as me- no pun intended- and because even if you're a bit harsh, you really do care about others. The latter's probably the most important, because I know that you'll understand."

I said "Thanks," with sincerity that surprised even myself. Perhaps, for all his overly forward behavior, Kojima really did trust me. Maybe that wasn't enough for me to return his feelings, but the least I could do was be worthy of that trust.

I went to the dining room and found Himeno and Sayuri sitting around. There were a few snacks on the table, all wrapped in plastic to deter poisoners, so I decided to help myself. They also had a few cans of juice in a cooler (apparently, Monokuma was fine with making students kill each other but not with serving them alcohol), and I could see the other girls partaking in them.

"Hey," I said. "What are you two up to?"

"Not much," Himeno said. "I am currently teaching Sasaki-san how to sit in seiza."

"Sounds fun," I said sarcastically.

Sayuri giggled.

"Well, it's not as though I can walk very easily with this kimono on," Sayuri said, "and with that armor, neither can you."

"True," Himeno said. "We might as well make the most of the situation."

I nodded and sat down.

"In all seriousness," Sayuri said, "this started when I complained about how difficult it was to move in the kimono, and Himemiya-san told me about how she regularly had to wear one. She then offered to give me lessons on how to conduct myself like she does, and I graciously accepted."
"I see, but why?" I said. "Not for shits and giggles, I assume?"

"No," Sayuri said with a smile. "It was because I wanted to learn how to do things on Himemiya-san's terms and understand her a little better. I believe all relationships- whether friends, family or lovers- involve a bit of compromise and sacrifice, so by playing along with her, I hope to get to know her better."

Himeno smiled.

"I appreciate your making the effort," Himeno said, "since friendship involves the willingness to make compromises. As much as I wanted Kanae to treat me as an equal, a desire Kanae shared, I had to acknowledge that her position made it difficult, and make compromises accordingly."

"That's good, Himeno," I said, "but what about me?"

"In your case, Akira, I respect your audacity," Himeno said. "You're not afraid of offending others, but at the same time, treat all your classmates as equals. You'd never be suited to Kanae's position or mine, but because you're someone I wouldn't meet in my family's 'respectable' social circle, I get a lot out of talking with you."

I nodded and said "Thanks."

"You two are on a first-name basis now?" Sayuri said.

"We are," Himeno said. "Speaking of making compromises, while I would prefer being called 'Himemiya-san,' I won't complain if you use my first name."

Sayuri shook her head.

"The reason why I ask permission to use first names is to find out what people would like to be called," Sayuri said, 'so if you'd rather be called 'Himemiya-san,' then I'll do that. Let me know if you change your mind and want to be called by your first name."

"Thank you very much, Sasaki-san," Himeno said. "I'll keep that in mind."

I then excused myself and let those two to their own devices. There was a burgeoning bond of friendship between them- or perhaps even love- but however it developed was up to them. All I could do was stand by and wish them the best.

I wandered by the staircase, where I saw Kurogane leaning against the wall near the foot of the stairs. He was wearing a dark ninja costume with the hood down, but while it wasn't as gaudy as what some ninjas wore, he clearly wasn't making any real effort to stay concealed, since he stood out fairly well on the white wallpaper.

"Hey, Kurogane," I said. "Keeping watch on the stairs?"

"You could say that," Kurogane said. "It's a pretty central location, so if something happens, I can yell and people will come running, or vice versa... well, assuming whoever's in trouble yells loudly enough that people can hear them over the music."

A loud explosion rang out, proving my point.

"What the fuck was that?" I said.

"Calm down, Azuki-san," Kurogane said. "It's just part of the song. 'The Practical Exam' features
an explosion near the end, one that really surprised Kojima-kun the first time he heard it."

Normally, I wouldn't believe an excuse like this, but I decided to take Kurogane's word for it for now. Maybe once this was over, I'd swing by the record store and listen to the soundtrack.

"But anyway," Kurogane said, "there are speakers all over the house, except for the bathroom and study. We'll probably hear the music no matter where we are in the house, but it's better than going outside and ending up on our own."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess this is the safest place for you. As for me, I'm going to check on the others, so sit tight and yell for help if you need it."

"Will do," Kurogane said, at which point I set off.

I took a walk around the first floor, and saw Kirishima and Kumakura sitting in the living room. Kirishima seemed to be busy recording observations in his notebook, so he only waved to me.

"Hello, Azuki-san," Kumakura said. "Have you been upstairs yet?"

"Not really," I said. "I went there when I checked this house out yesterday, and there isn't much to see there."

"Got it," Kumakura said. "Well, Asakura's been in the upstairs bedroom for a little while now, and I'm pretty sure the twins are upstairs, too."

I chuckled. I wondered why I hadn't seen Asakura so far, and was glad I could chalk it up to him being out of the way, rather than something much worse.

"Thanks for the warning," I said. "Now I know to steer clear of up there."

"Hey, the twins are actually pretty nice," Kumakura said with a smile, "but when it comes to Asakura, you know what they say if you can't say anything nice."

I laughed out loud, but then felt an all too familiar squeezing sensation in my crotch.

"I've got to go," I said. "Nature calls."

"Got it," Kumakura said. "You know where the bathroom is?"

"I do," I said. "See you later."

I quickly walked off as the sound of a woman singing filled the halls. Her song, "Please Give Me Wings," was a staple of graduation ceremonies, but graduation was the last thing I wanted to think of right now.

At around 9:18, I headed to the bathroom and did my thing. As I was washing my hands, I heard a knock on the door.

"I'll be out in a minute!" I said.

"Gotcha," the person outside said, and I recognized the voice as Karita's.

After drying my hands with the electric dryer, I opened the door carefully, so as to avoid being stabbed, and saw Karita in an astronaut's space suit.
"Go on in, Karita," I said. "And... good luck doing your business in that thing."

"Thanks," Karita said. "I guess I can forget about becoming an astronaut."

Leaving aside how Karita would only make the cut by forging documents, I was pretty sure space suits had something in place to help astronauts with that sort of thing. After all, the sight of piss and shit floating around in zero gravity would be one hell of an unpleasant image, and even worse in reality.

After a moment, I pondered why Karita had chosen this bulky and uncomfortable costume, but then I realized it was his alibi. If it was difficult to move in, people would realize that he couldn't leave the scene of a crime very quickly. If it was equally difficult to take off by himself, it wouldn't be easy to ditch the costume if he got blood on it. Because of those factors, we wouldn't be likely to consider him a suspect for murder, or much of a threat. As far as avoiding being suspected went, it was surprisingly brilliant, and I hoped he'd never actually commit a murder.

Immediately after getting out of the bathroom, "War of Hope And Despair" began playing. I recognized it immediately, if only because it was "the track that's really fucking loud."

Mihama, who was in the hallway dressed in a dark skirt suit (presumably as a lawyer), tried to say something.

"What's that?" I said. "The music's too loud; I can't hear you."

"THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY!" Mihama yelled at the top of her lungs.

Evidently embarrassed, Mihama said something that sounded like an apology, then bowed deeply. Since she wouldn't hear me, I tried to give her a reassuring smile.

We stood there together for a few minutes, unable to say anything to each other. Finally, just before 9:30, the song ended.

"Finally," I said. "You OK, Mihama?"

"I am," Mihama said, "but I am worried about the others. Kurogane-san will not be likely to hear anyone else above this din, and the opposite is likely true."

A knot formed in my stomach as I realized why Monokuma had chosen "The Tragedy Overture" as the music for tonight- the noise would drown out any murder attempt that had taken place during it. But who, apart from myself, Kojima and Kurogane knew about this part in advance? Perhaps that answer would be important.

"You're right," I said. "Let's go check on Kurogane."

Mihama and I wandered over to Kurogane, who was still by the stairs.

"Oh, hello, you two," Kurogane said. "Did you enjoy 'War of Hope and Despair'?"

"Like hell I did," I said. "I just hope I didn't suffer any hearing loss."

Mihama nodded vigorously.

"It's true that it's kind of intense," Kurogane said, "but Kojima-kun was a big fan of it. He often went to the record store to listen to it, and wished he could have a CD player so he could play it."
One would think that Kojima would want an MP3 player, but he'd need access to the Internet to download the file, and I could imagine a million different ways the internet could be used better.

"I'll admit that some people do like it," I said, "but I'm pretty sure that Taiga or any other expert on music would know that it's a piece of crap that's too loud for its own good."

Suddenly, Taiga rushed down the stairs, pale as a sheet.

"Speak of the devil," I said. "I've got something I want to ask-"

"Come upstairs, quickly!" Taiga said. "Something terrible has happened!"

Along with Kurogane and Mihama, I ran up the stairs, while Taiga ran off to get Higurashi, but none of us were prepared for what we saw inside the study.

Kojima lay on the floor, with a knife buried in his chest and his ghost costume soaked with blood.

Author's Notes

The motive is one of my favorites from my fanfics. There are a lot of possible scenarios I could go for with it, so it's a shame I'm only stuck with one. I'm interested in hearing how it could possibly play out, as well as your theories on who the actual culprit is.

The next installment is the investigation, and I have some good and bad news. The good news is that I hope to finish this Chapter by the end of the month. The bad news is that I'll be taking November off for a NaNoWriMo fanfic project.

Edited to clarify one thing relating to the body discovery

The omake displays a foot race between the costumed students.

Omake

Thank you for the favorites and follows.

The sixteen of us gathered around the Talent High School outdoor track for a race, but this was no ordinary gym class. Instead of wearing our gym uniforms, we were dressed in our costumes- Tsukimura wore a French maid outfit, while Yamazaki wore a tuxedo with a domino mask. The weather outside was average for autumn- not cool enough that we'd need a sweater or scarf, but not hot enough to boil those with bulkier costumes.

Our goal was to run two laps around the track, each of which was about 400 meters long. It wasn't all that strenuous, so none of us would have a problem completing it... just with doing so in a timely manner if the costumes weren't suited to running.

Nagato-sensei, wearing a sweatsuit, held up a starting gun. After reciting a countdown, she fired it, officially kicking off the race.

I got off to a running start, focusing only on my own run and not on the others, although I did have to be careful not to run into anyone. Kumakura was leading the pack, while Higurashi was just behind him, and the twins were just ahead of me. The places were by no means fixed, as I occasionally saw some people change positions as they rounded a corner, and anyone who tripped would probably fall behind the others.
We ran around the track, past the starting line, and past some of the slower contestants. Sayuri was walking as quickly as her kimono would allow, while Mihama was struggling to run as fast as her eleven-year-old body would allow. Karita had discarded his helmet before the run began, but the bulky space suit wasn't doing him any favors.

Eventually, the race ended, and I ended up in fifth place. The winner was Higurashi, who'd pulled ahead of Kumakura in the last stretch, both of whom were followed by the twins. Seconds later, Asakura, Kurogane, Yamazaki, Kirishima, Tsukimura and Kojima crossed the line.

"Congratulations, Higurashi," I said.

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "I may not be the fastest student, but by giving it my all, I was able to win. The fact that I had a good costume helped, too."

As we started walking off the track, I turned and saw the stragglers. Mihama was somewhat ahead of the pack, but crossed the finish line almost half a minute after Tsukimura, gasping for breath. A little while later, Himeno crossed the finish line in her armor, closely followed by Karita in his space suit. Nagato, holding up the skirt of her habit, walked across them shortly afterward. Trailing behind them was Sayuri, who was walking slowly in her kimono.

"The race is now over," Nagato-sensei said. "Thank you for your participation, everyone; you may head to the locker rooms to get changed. Don't worry about finishing the race, Sasaki-san."

"Yes, ma'am," Sayuri said sheepishly, before walking over to the locker rooms barely faster than a snail's pace.
Deadly Life

As I saw Kojima's dead body, I felt the same familiar mix of terror and horror, caught between wanting to throw up and wet myself. Another person had died, and yet another person had chosen to commit murder in order to graduate. Kojima wasn't my favorite person, but I didn't want this to happen again. After all, he wouldn't be the only one who'd die tonight.

The others weren't holding up much better. Taiga's face was white, even though she'd probably been the first to find the body, and a tear rolled down Kurogane's cheek as he stammered unintelligibly. For him, the most recent victim was his roommate, his friend and perhaps his first love, so it would probably take him a while to come to terms with the loss- if he lived that long.

The others rushed up the stairs, or at least as far as they could get without running into someone. Kurogane, Mihama, Taiga and I were at the front of the pack, while near the back were Tatsuki, Himeno, Sayuri and Karita, the latter of whom hastily zipped up his fly. I couldn't get a good look at all of them, but some of the later arrivals probably had heard that there was a murder, or were expecting it, so while their expressions were horrified, their initial shock had faded.

Once everyone was situated on the stairs or between the bedroom and study, Monokuma jumped into the study.

"Looks like everyone's here," Monokuma said, "or technically speaking, in Kojima-san's case. Now, the fun part begins- investigate the murder, and find out whodunnit."

"I guess we have different ideas of fun," I said, "but let's just agree to disagree here. Give us the Monokuma File, already."

"As you wish, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "Check your handbooks for it."

We opened up our handbooks and checked the new Monokuma File.

Monokuma File 2

The victim is Shigeru Kojima, the Ultimate Game Designer.

The body was found in the study on the second floor of the house.

There are two stab wounds to the heart- one from the front and one from behind. Death is believed to have been instantaneous.

The second Monokuma File seemed a bit less complete than the first, since there was only one piece of information that wasn't completely obvious (maybe two, depending on how you counted). I wasn't the only one who noticed, though.

"I cannot help but notice that the Monokuma File lacks the approximate time of death," Kirishima said. "I assume there was a reason for omitting this information."

"Of course there is," Monokuma said, "since I leave out any information that would make things too easy. Do you think that after you lot solved the last murder, that I'm just going to tell you who did it?"
"No, I did not," Kirishima said. "Fairness may be anathema to you, but I suppose this does give both sides a chance to prevail."

In other words, there was a chance that by the end of the night, everyone besides the blackened and the one person they cared about would be dead. If Kirishima really wasn't bothered by this, there were two possibilities—either he was confident in our chances of solving the crime, or he was the blackened and thought he could get away with it. Each theory was equally valid, if not equally likely.

"By the way, I have an announcement to make," Monokuma said. "Only the one who killed Kojima-san is eligible to choose a plus one if they graduate, so the rest of you missed your chance. As they say, you snooze, you lose."

After a moment, I realized that the motive had two ways to force people to action. Not only did it play on our desire to save those we loved, but it also forced us to do so before someone beat us to the punch. As things stood, there was no telling whether those who'd been targeted by the motive had resisted that temptation, or had simply hesitated.

"Of course, there won't be a next time if you don't catch the killer," Monokuma said. "So get to work finding that person, or buttering them up so they'll pick you! Any questions?"

"I'd like to know something," Nagato said. "When are you going to share the times the metal detector went off?"

So Nagato had thought to ask about those, too. While she had been manning the vestibule the entire evening, she was probably looking for the records of prior to then.

"In good time, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "I'll share the results with you, but only during the trial, so keep yourself occupied investigating until then. Later!"

Monokuma then left. Higurashi, who was at the top of the stairs, called for everyone's attention.

"So, it's happened again," Higurashi said. "Truthfully, I had hoped that since everyone would be in a house with only one access point, one that was equipped with a metal detector, Nagato-san and I could stand guard and prevent anyone from bringing in any weapons or committing murder, at least for the evening. Once again, I was naïve..."

"Well, everyone else knew about the measures you put in place," Karita said, "including whoever decided to commit murder. On the other hand, if the killer figured something out that could be useful to them, then obviously, they'd keep mum about it and use it to their advantage."

"That's unfortunately true," Higurashi said, "which is the main obstacle to asking for cooperation in a situation like this. So, too, I suppose, is the fact that the killer could have an accomplice, who would also benefit from the killer's graduating."

Usually, the threat of graduation would force us to band together, since if the killer graduated, everyone else would die, but this time, the accomplice would have no reason to cooperate with us, either. Then again, I was sure that the beneficiary of the motive probably knew who they were, whereas everyone else knew that they'd die if they didn't solve the case.

"In any case, what should have been done is irrelevant for now," Higurashi said, "since we must now focus on solving the crime, which means having a few people guard the crime scene and the others investigate. Mihama-san, Kumakura-kun, will you please guard the body again this time?"

Kumakura nodded, while Mihama did so hesitantly.
"I am willing to do so, Higurashi-san," Mihama said, "but since there is the possibility of an accomplice, two people may not be enough this time. Hypothetically speaking, Kumakura-san and I could be in cahoots."

While Mihama was honest enough to acknowledge this possibility, it didn't seem all that likely. Not only were the two not especially close, but Mihama had been with me at the time of the crime, while Kumakura was probably still with Kirishima. Maybe one of them was using the other to help a third party graduate, but neither seemed stupid or amoral enough to be the patsy or the manipulator in that case.

"Then I will help," Higurashi said. "Everyone else, please get to work investigating the crime."

"What about the checkpoint, Higurashi-san?" Nagato said.

"It's served its purpose, Nagato-san," Higurashi said, "or at least as well as it could have. I had hoped it would prevent a murder, but now, we will have to find the truth ourselves."

Nagato nodded, and began to investigate the crime scene. I still believed that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," especially since the lives lost in the killing game would never come back. That said, while preventing killings was much more desirable than solving them, it was also a hell of a lot more difficult.

We then set out, with some of us staying around the crime scene to look it over, while others heading off elsewhere. The first thing I noticed about the crime scene was that the window was open, and there wasn't anything in place that would prevent someone from jumping or falling out. The roof of the dining room just below, so a fall wouldn't necessarily be fatal, but at the very least, anyone who jumped from there to the ground would be limping... unless they had some help.

The suit of armor's sword lay at its feet. It was a European longsword that, while heavy, could probably be wielded by anyone here besides Mihama. The blade of the sword seemed sharp, and I noticed that while the rest of the sword had dust on it, the tip of the blade seemed to have been wiped clean.

I took a closer look at the body. A knife was plunged into Kojima's chest, through his costume, and I could see a bloodstain around where the knife had gone in. At that point, I remembered the Monokuma File's report about the two wounds, and realized I was only getting half the story.

"Would it be all right if we turned Kojima's body on its side?" I said. "I'd like to take a look at the back to see the stab wound."

"All right," Higurashi said. "Kumakura-kun, could you please give me a hand?"

Kumakura and Higurashi knelt down and gently turned Kojima's body to the right, as I'd asked, giving me a close look at his back. Oddly enough, while there was some blood on the back of his costume, there didn't seem to be any cuts in the fabric. Of course, when I lifted up the sheet, I saw a large stab wound in his back- one larger than the one he'd gotten from the front.

"That's weird," I said. "The Monokuma File did say that he got stabbed twice, right?"

"It does," Mihama said, "and there do appear to be two stab wounds in Kojima-san's body. But why is there only one hole in his costume?"

"Maybe he wasn't wearing his costume at the time of the crime," I said, "although I can't imagine why."
The only reason that occurred to me was that if he was plotting to murder someone with a knife, he'd take off the ghost costume before stabbing someone. He'd get blood all over his clothes, but he could then drape the costume over himself so that no one could see it (at least until someone demanded that he take off the costume). Of course, that would mean that he'd been attempting murder at the time of his death, which would open up a whole another can of worms.

In any case, what Kojima was doing was beside the point for now. For some reason, he'd come upstairs, where his killer had presumably been waiting for him, and had gotten stabbed to death. The big question was who could have been able to kill him.

"By the way, I'd like to hear your alibis for the crime," I said.

"I was with Kirishima-kun in the living room," Kumakura said. "We stayed there from when you stopped by until Taiga-san came by to report the murder."

"And I was with Nagato-san in the vestibule the entire evening," Higurashi said. "Like Kumakura-kun, it was until Taiga-san told us about the body."

Nagato nodded to confirm Higurashi's account. While it was possible that any two people could have been in cahoots and committed the murder while serving as each other's alibis, it was almost completely impossible for them to get from the entrance to the crime scene and back without someone (particularly Kurogane) seeing them.

"And I was with you, Azuki-san," Mihama said. "All of us are accounted for."

I agreed, but noticed that there was a point when Higurashi and Nagato hadn't been watching the door, which could become important later.

"By the way, how did the culprit leave the crime scene?" I said. "Higurashi, you mentioned that it'd be difficult, but not impossible to climb down outside, so do you have any ideas?"

"It's possible they climbed down with a rope or a ladder," Higurashi said. "Unfortunately, I don't see anything near the crime scene.

I checked the desk, but couldn't find anything. That said, I did distinctly notice that the drawer was open, and there was a key on the desk. I tested the key on the drawer, and found that I was able to lock and unlock it.

"So the drawer up here locks," I said. "It's kind of weird that it was left open, rather than being used to conceal evidence."

"Maybe it's the opposite," Nagato said. "Maybe the killer hid what they'd need for the murder inside, and planned to carry out the killing here. That said, how would the killer manage to lure the victim here?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I doubt anyone would have come to a private one-on-one meeting just because someone asked them to, especially considering it might be a trap."

While I'd made a policy of ignoring all the love letters that found their way into my locker back at my old school, I had to admit that I'd never seriously considered the possibility that the senders wanted to lure me into a deserted area and murder me. That would be one of many things that would likely change if I ever made it out.

We looked around the crime scene for a while longer. I peered outside and saw that the ground outside the window- a rocky area near the cliff- didn't seem to have any footprints, so there wasn't
any evidence that anyone had set foot outside. With that, I decided to call it quits.

"I think that's all I can get from the crime scene for now," I said, "but I'd like to find out who entered or left."

"According to my records, no one did between the start of the party and when Kojima-kun's body was discovered," Higurashi said. "Nagato-san can confirm this."

Higurashi took out the sheet and showed it to me. Apart from him and Nagato, Kojima had been the first to arrive, while Kumakura had been the last. Everyone was inside by 9 PM, so there wasn't anything that struck me as out of place.

"Thanks," I said. "Well, I guess I'll head out and start looking for more information, since there's probably other clues to be found out there."

The others nodded and said goodbye for now, while Nagato went downstairs. We had a lot of ground to cover and not much time, so I decided to go to the person who seemed like the most obvious suspect.

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I found Asakura in the upstairs bedroom. Since it had a lock and a peephole, it was a good place for him to hide away from everyone else, but the presence of someone without an alibi upstairs would probably make things more complicated... or perhaps very simple.

"Hey, Asakura," I said. "I'd like to ask you some questions about where you were at the time of the crime."

"Right here," Asakura said, "since this room could be locked from the inside. You probably think I did it, don't you?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "You were close to the crime scene, but it doesn't make sense for you to stick around the crime scene considering that the twins were also upstairs. Besides, if you'd stabbed Kojima, you'd have blood on you."

As Asakura chuckled, I looked him over. His pirate outfit consisted of a black vest, a white shirt, tan breeches, and a black hat with a skull and crossbones on it, none of which had a drop of blood on it. Either he wasn't guilty, or he hadn't been wearing his costume at the time of the murder.

"So you're smart enough to consider me suspicious, but also smart enough to realize what doesn't add up," Asakura said. "You're not as dumb as I thought."

"Thanks, I guess," I said, as I chose to ignore his condescending praise, "but did you see the killer?"

"Not really," Asakura said. "I saw Kojima through the peephole in the door, but I couldn't hear what happened over that blasted piece of crap. That's why I didn't hear about the murder until Taiga brought you, Kurogane and Mihama upstairs."

"She didn't tell you?" I said.

"No, I don't think anyone knew I was up here," Asakura said, "which is good, because if the killer had known, they'd probably have killed me, too."

While Asakura's point was more or less on the mark, I couldn't help but nitpick a few of the details.

"Well, Kumakura knew you went upstairs, but that's beside the point for now," I said. "He has an
alibi, so I don't think he's the killer... or at least, there are people that warrant inspecting more than him."

"Got it," Asakura said, "but does that include me?"

"It's hard to say," I said. "You're still a possible suspect, since there's a lot I don't know about the murder, but I'm not about to jump to conclusions and point fingers at you."

"Good, Azuki," Asakura said. "If nothing else, I can count on you to have your head on straight."

While Asakura wasn't one for thinking of others or giving thanks, I had to admit that I was glad that his sense of self-preservation was strong enough that he was willing to cooperate with us at a time like this. I probably wouldn't feel too bad if he died, but I didn't hate him enough to die with the rest of the spotless just to take him down, and hoped the feeling was mutual.

I saw Himeno and Sayuri in the dining room. The latter was helping the former take off her armor, laying each piece on the table. Himeno was wearing her archery training outfit underneath it, so she could change into her normal clothes without needing privacy.

"This is rather inconvenient," Himeno said. "I can hardly believe the knights of old wore this to battle."

"They sure did," I said. "Of course, the cast for Summer's End thanked their lucky stars that it was an anime rather than a live action adaptation, or else they'd have to wear something like it."

It didn't help that anyone who wanted to wear full plate had to pay through the nose for it, which was why only the nobility and royalty could afford full plate.

"Anyway, I'd like to ask you two some questions," I said. "Were you here this whole time?"

"We were," Himeno said. "By staying together, we reduced the likelihood of anything happening to us, and ensured we could account for each other's whereabouts."

"Makes sense," I said. "Did anyone else stop by?"

"Karita-kun passed by, on the way to the bathroom," Sayuri said. "He was in the bathroom the entire time the music got really loud. Miharu-chan also stopped by for a while earlier."

There were a few possibilities as to why Karita spent so long in the bathroom. He might have been taking shelter from the noise, looking for somewhere to hide out and stay out of trouble, or had to take a really long piss.

"There may have been one other person," Himeno said. "Around the time of the murder, we saw someone land on the ground outside, having descended via rope. They then tugged on the rope, which fell, then quickly ran off around the building, carrying the rope with them. Seeing them flee, Sasaki-san and I tried to run and intercept them, but couldn't move quickly enough. A few minutes later, Taiga-san came to get us."

"That's important information," I said. "Could you see them well enough to identify them?"

"No," Sayuri said. "They were draped with a sheet that was covered with blood, one that looked like Kojima-kun's ghost costume. They were about as tall as I am and seemed to be wearing pants of some kind- I couldn't make out the color very well in the dark."
I could rule out a few people based on this. Kumakura was too tall, while Mihama and Nagato were too short, and all three had alibis. If Sayuri was right about what she saw (which wasn't guaranteed considering how dark it was outside), it was probably a girl, or one of the shorter guys. Then again, I was the only girl who wore pants as part of her normal outfit, which muddied things a bit.

"You sure about the costume?" I said. "We saw it on Kojima's body upstairs, after all."

"We are," Himeno said. "Even in the dark, I could see a large bloodstain on the back as the costumed person ran away. I don't yet know why the costume is in two different places at the same time, but this is probably important."

"It sure is," I said. "Thanks for the information; I'll go look for some more clues."

I then left, realizing that while I'd found another piece of the puzzle, I didn't yet know where it fit.

I headed into the vestibule and saw Karita and Nagato, examining the metal detector. Karita slowly walked through the metal detector, which remained silent as he passed through.

"Hey, Azuki-san," Karita said. "Do you need something?"

"I'd like to ask where you were during the crime, Karita," I said.

"In the bathroom," Karita said. "I'm sure you remember that I went in just after you left, and given this costume, it took a little while longer to, uh, do my thing. I didn't finish until after the music quieted down."

So in other words, this confirmed what Sayuri had told me. Since the killer probably would end up lying about something, it was important for me to determine what I could prove to be true, and what could be disproven.

"Interesting," I said. "Is it hard to get in and out of your costume?"

"It sure is," Karita said, "which means I couldn't have changed out of it to commit the murder, then back into it to hide the bloodstains on my clothing."

So in other words, Karita wasn't a terribly likely suspect, nor was he a very useful witness. Then again, when you have a dozen suspects for a murder, you won't get anywhere until you rule some of them out.

Gazing at the metal detector, I was struck by a burst of inspiration.

"Hey, Nagato, I forgot to ask something earlier," I said. "Did the metal detector go off when you and Higurashi were working security for the party?"

"No, it did not, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "While some costumes may have metal parts, they don't set off the detector, so everyone was able to come in without the detector going off. Higurashi-san and I tested the metal detector a few times to confirm this."

"So the knife must have gotten in before the party," I said, "which is why you asked Monokuma about the detector."

Nagato nodded.

"Yes, that's true," Nagato said, "but I do have to wonder why Monokuma would offer to show us the information so readily, even if he's planning to wait until the trial to do so."
"Maybe because he doesn't think it'll solve the case," I said. "Of course, he does know that we were able to solve the last murder, so he must have some idea of what we can do."

"I'm sure he does," Nagato said. "Then again, I wonder why the outcomes of these trials matters to him, since we suffer either way."

We decided to drop the subject, since we had more pressing matters at hand, but I couldn't help but think about it anyway. All this time, we'd assumed that Monokuma did this for shits and giggles, but what if there was some purpose behind it? And if there was, would Monokuma simply discard us once he'd fulfilled it or if the killing game didn't get him what he wanted?

I walked outside the house and into the cold night air. There wasn't enough time to cover the entire island, but I decided to see how much I could uncover in the time I had left.

In order to satisfy my curiosity, I ran toward the city, and found that it only took about a minute to get from the house to the back of the costume store. After catching my breath, I ran over to the music store, and found that it took another couple minutes. While it would have been possible to go from the house to the costume store and back between the murder and the body discovery, the killer probably wouldn't have been able to make it back from the music store in time for the body discovery. In fact, Mihama or one of the less practically dressed partygoers probably wouldn't even have made it back from the costume store.

I noticed the twins inside the music store, and saw that they were once again dressed in their uniforms. Hoping to talk with them, I stepped inside.

"Oh, hey, you two," I said. "I see you changed back into their uniforms."

"Taiga and I thought we should do that while we had the chance," Tatsuki said. "After all, if we end up dying, we might as well look nice."

"You said it, sis," Taiga said. "A dress or a kimono would be great, but my school uniform can do in a pinch."

That was a weird reason at a time like this, and almost sounded as though Tatsuki was planning on dying tonight. Then again, it was hard to tell if our getting through the first trial had been a fluke, so I wasn't completely confident in my chances of making it.

"I wouldn't worry about it," I said. "If your execution's anything like Yamazaki's, by the time it's done, there probably won't even be a scrap left of your clothes- or of you."

Tatsuki winced, but simply nodded. In Summer's End, Princess Ophelia had worn a fancy black dress to her beheading, but if she'd been burned at the stake, she would have met her end wearing a peasant's clothes, lest they end up turning a perfectly good dress to ashes.

"Anyway, what are you two doing here?" I said.

"We're looking into the music," Tatsuki said. "and trying to see if it's at all relevant to the crime."

I saw a copy of the CD. The cover showed a woman with short dark hair and freckles in a formal black dress like the kind female orchestra members wear to performances. I hadn't cared to listen to the soundtrack before the party, but I decided to familiarize myself with it now that it had become relevant to the investigation.

*Hope's Peak Academy School Song (3:15)*
Aria of the Reserve Course Cash Cows (3:45)

Twilight Syndrome Rhapsody (4:10)

The Practical Exam (3:20)

Creating Hope (3:30)

Please Give Me Wings, ft. Mukuro Ikusaba (3:40)

Waltz of Monokuma's Gloomy Sunday (4:20)

War of Hope and Despair (5:00)

Requiem For The Old World (5:00)

I quickly shuffled through each of the tracks. The School Song wasn't all that loud, as I'd recalled from my final conversation with Kojima. Aria of the Reserve Course Cash Cows was a seemingly upbeat song that had seriously depressing lyrics. "Twilight Syndrome Rhapsody" was an eerie song, but relatively quiet.

"Looks like the first three tracks aren't that loud," I said. "If a fight or something like that had started during that time, we'd have heard it."

"I agree," Tatsuki said. "The fourth track, 'The Practical Exam', has a really loud explosion near the end, but it only lasts a moment."

I nodded, remembering that track from when I'd talked to Kurogane. "Waltz of Monokuma's Gloomy Sunday" was somewhat fast-paced, but only moderately loud; not loud enough that you couldn't hold a conversation or hear a struggle over it. If the murder had occurred during that track, then Asakura probably would have heard it (and obviously would have if he was the culprit).

"The only really loud one is "War of Hope and Despair," I said. "I almost went deaf listening to that one in the store with Kojima."

"It's actually not that bad," Taiga said, "so maybe the problem was you had the volume cranked up. Then again, my sister and I are only hearing it for the first time."

I chalked it up to different tastes, before quickly looking at the final track, Requiem for the Old World, which had played around the time we'd found Kojima's body. If the killer wanted to make use of the noise, then they'd only have those five minutes to do it.

"Anyway, Taiga, I'm curious about something," I said. "How'd you find the body?"

"I went upstairs without my sister," Taiga said. "When I did, I saw Kojima-kun's body, and ran downstairs to get the rest of you. After that... you know the rest."

Tatsuki nodded, tacitly making it clear that I wouldn't get any additional details out of her.

"All right," I said. "I think that's enough for now. I'll let you know if I have any other questions."

I then left the twins behind and headed for the costume store, hoping to investigate some things before I ran out of time.

Outside the costume store, I found Kurogane, who'd also changed back into his uniform.
"Oh, Azuki-san," Kurogane said.

"Hello, Kurogane," I said. "How're you holding up?"

"I'll... manage," Kurogane said, wiping away a tear. "There's no time for grief or self-pity now, since all our lives are on the line."

I decided to take him at his word. He wasn't "okay" by any stretch of the imagination, at least not any more than Himeno had been last time, but he knew what he needed to do. As callous as it sounded, now wasn't the time for grief or condolences, but finding the truth and saving our own asses.

"Anyway, enough about me," Kurogane said. "What are you here for, Azuki-san?"

"Information," I said. "Specifically, I'd like to hear more about where you were at the time of the crime."

"At the bottom of the stairs," Kurogane said, "watching everyone come and go. Kojima-kun went upstairs just before War of Hope and Despair- the really loud track- started. Once he was up, no one came back downstairs until Taiga-san came down to report the murder."

This piece of information would make Taiga the prime suspect, but I doubted that she'd report the crime so easily if she expected doing so would implicate her.

"I see," I said. "Who was upstairs at the time of the crime?"

Kurogane paused for a moment.

"I could be mistaken," Kurogane said, "but I'm fairly sure that apart from Kojima-kun there was Asakura-kun and both the twins."

"I see," I said. "Is it possible that someone could have gone up or down the stairs without you noticing them?"

"It's possible," Kurogane said, "since I wasn't watching the stairs the entire time. However, I think I could have heard anyone climbing the stairs; I heard Mihama-san climbing down the stairs several minutes before Kojima-kun came up, but only caught a glimpse of her. Of course, I was watching the stairs the entire time 'War of Hope and Despair' was playing."

So in other words, his testimony wasn't completely ironclad. That said, it did narrow down the suspects significantly... assuming that they used the stairs. From what I understood, the killer couldn't have returned upstairs with the rope, but maybe they'd used it to get into the study.

"Got it," I said. "Just one more thing- how many people do you think listened to the Tragedy Overture in the store?"

"I don't honestly know," Kurogane said, "but I think Kojima-kun was definitely the most passionate about it. He knew it like the back of his hand, and could tell when each track began and ended."

"Thanks," I said. "Just hang in there, and we'll catch whoever did killed him... I'd bet my life on it."

"I appreciate that," Kurogane said. "Well, I'm off for now, but I'll see you at the trial."

I nodded, then headed inside the costume store, knowing that I probably didn't have much time left,
and would see Kurogane in a matter of minutes.

As I entered the store, I mentally kicked myself for not saving time and going through the back door earlier. Of course, I didn't have the time to dwell on that, so I put that thought out of my mind and got my head back in the game.

Several of my fellow partygoers had stashed their costumes in their lockers, with varying degrees of haste. Kurogane's ninja costume was a black pile of cloth. The twins had apparently put their costumes in "upside-down"- first their hats, then their gloves, then their shirts, then their overalls(Tatsuki's apparently had a tag on it) and finally, their boots. Sayuri's kimono was neatly folded, most likely courtesy of Himeno. Asakura's pirate outfit was sloppily stuffed into his locker, with all items of clothing scrunched into a cloth cube. Karita did a valiant job of fitting his space suit into his locker, but had to leave the helmet next to the lockers.

I headed into the laundry room in the back, and looked over the list of clothes. Several other people had their uniforms washed this time, so there wasn't anything too out of the ordinary- except for a roe, a button-down shirt and overalls, the latter of which had blood on it. It was most likely that the killer had switched out of their costume, and the only question was who that person was. Since the rope was included on the list, and had started at the same time, the culprit must have thrown it in the laundry in order to get rid of evidence without breaking the no littering rule.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to think that over, as one of the monitors in the laundry room came on.

"Time's up!" Monokuma said. "Please report back to the ship for the class trial."

As the voice sounded, I saw Nagato enter the room.

"Oh, hey, Nagato," I said. "What brings you here?"

"I was curious about whether the killer had washed any bloody clothing," Nagato said, "and wanted to check it out."

"They did," I said, pointing at the display for the laundry machines. "The only question is who those overalls belong to."

"Well, since the twins stashed their costumes in the lockers, the overalls probably don't belong to either of them," Nagato said, "unless..."

"Unless?" I said.

Nagato shook her head.

"Never mind," Nagato said. "I don't have any proof for it, so I'd rather not jump to conclusions."

"All right," I said. "We'd better get gong."

Nagato nodded, and we headed out the front door and toward the ship in a brisk walk. By now, we knew the way back to the ship, so while we weren't sure how long we had to report to the courtroom, we weren't too worried that we wouldn't make it in time.

"By the way," I said, "did you see your mom any time tonight?"

"No, I haven't been back to the ship since we left this morning," Nagato said. "To be honest, I wish..."
I could, but if everyone's giving their all in the investigation, then the least I can do is to pitch in as well. If the worst happens, I can simply face the dedicated camera and say 'I love you, Mom,' before I meet my fate."

"Ah," I said. "You don't mind not being able to hear the same thing from your mom?"

Nagato shook her head.

"I'd like to, but there's no doubt in my mind that she loves me," Nagato said. "It's a shame that there isn't a speaker to allow her to say that, but I'm sure that knowing that will be enough for me in the end."

While some of us were feeling heartache after not seeing our loved ones for over two weeks and being thousands of kilometers away from home, we knew that we were in our families' and friends' hearts. As corny as it sounded, it was one of the few things that kept us going in a time like this.

The thirteen of us made our way back to the ship, and assembled outside the elevator. As we boarded the elevator, I took a look around, and saw that Higurashi, Kumakura, Nagato, Sayuri, Mihama and I were still wearing our costumes. Meanwhile, Asakura, Himeno, Karita, Kirishima, Kurogane and the twins had changed out of their costumes. While the killer might have worn the farmer costume while carrying out the crime, had they changed back into their costume or their ordinary clothes? Or was that theory mistaken? The answers to both questions had yet to be determined, they would probably determine the outcome of the trial.

Of course, even if we found the killer's identity, we knew how the trial would end. There were no "good" outcomes in the class trials- only one in which we'd survive by sacrificing the murderer, and another in which we died so that the murderer would graduate(and this time, take someone with them). Of course, since none of us wanted to die, and most of us had no reason to believe that we'd be chosen as the killer's plus one, we only had one option- find the blackened or die trying.

Shigeru Kojima was the Ultimate Game Designer. He seemed pretty damn obnoxious, although I'd heard other people say that he wasn't that bad... probably because he didn't have a crush on them. That said, while I hoped we'd never see each other again if we got out of here, I never wanted him to die. We didn't always get along, but our differences weren't worth committing murder over... and yet, someone had killed him.

We knew that we had nothing to gain and everything to lose here. Succeeding wouldn't end the killing game, uncover the traitor's identity or other secrets, or bring back our lost friends; we'd simply live another day, until the next murder. Despite that, losing meant death, so it was a battle we had no choice but to fight, for as long as the war known as the killing game raged on...

Author's Notes

Thank you for the reviews.

As you can probably guess, the Tragedy Overture is a reference to the events of Side: Despair. Apart from the school song, the tracks refer to Hajime's early days in the Reserve course, the Twilight Syndrome murders, the bombing of the practical exam, the creation of Izuru Kamukura, the massacre of the student council, the brainwashing of the students into despair or suicide, the Tragedy itself and the aftermath.

Next up is the trial. I'm planning on updating it on the evening of October 30, or early October 31,
as a Halloween celebration; it was quite fortuitous that the "costume party" chapter will end on Halloween. If you're interested in sharing your theories, please do so by then.
We returned to the courtroom. Yamazaki's X was composed of two crossed film reels. Kojima's X was done in a blocky and pixelated style.

We went to our respective seats, although I noticed the twins hesitate a bit before switching seats with each other, each apparently having mistaken the other's seat for her own.

"Court is now in session," Monokuma said. "Once again, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to find the blackened who committed murder. If you do, then I will punish the blackened, and the spotless will live. If you don't, then I'll punish everyone besides the blackened... and this time, whoever they see fit to choose as their plus one. As always, should you or any of your classmates be caught or killed, I'll disavow all knowledge of your actions."

I let off a bitter laugh at the "should you choose to accept it" part, since that choice had been made for us when someone had killed Kojima. Now, we had a simpler one- succeed or die.

"So let's begin with a summary of what we all know," Higurashi said. "At some point during the party, Kojima-kun went upstairs to the study and was stabbed to death while inside. While he apparently died instantly, we don't know when he was stabbed, since the Monokuma File doesn't include that information."

"I can think of someone besides the killer who knows," I said. "Kurogane, you saw Kojima go upstairs shortly before he was killed, didn't you?"

"That's right," Kurogane said. "As I told you, I saw him go upstairs at around 9:23 PM, just before War of Hope and Despair began. It seems most likely that he was killed during that song."

"War of Hope and Despair?" Sayuri said, and a couple others looked equally confused.

"By that, he means the obnoxiously loud piece of crap that was blaring through the house," I said, "except for the study, which was the one place without a speaker. It was the second to last song on the Tragedy Overture soundtrack."

Sayuri let out an "Oh," as she immediately realized what I was talking about. She and the others who'd been confused probably hadn't listened to the Tragedy Overture at the store before the murder, or just didn't know the names of each track very well.

"It was so loud that we wouldn't have been able to hear any sounds of a struggle," Nagato said, "and since it lasted about five minutes, Kojima-san could easily have been killed in the middle of it."

"The only question is who did it," Kurogane said. "I didn't see anyone come downstairs or go upstairs between Kojima-kun's death and Taiga-san finding his body."

"Are you sure the stairway's the only way up?" Asakura said. "What if someone climbed up from outside?"

"They'd have to get outside first," Higurashi said, "and if they had, Nagato-san and I would have seen them. We kept track of everyone who entered and left, and no one left the house after the party began."
"True," Himeno said. "The rope would have had to have been lowered all along, and since the study was above the dining hall, Sasaki-san and I would have been able to see the rope if it had been in place."

In other words, that ruled out the theory that the rope had been used for the killer to climb into the study. Considering the progress we'd made in this short amount of time, I felt optimistic, or at least as optimistic as the situation allowed me to be.

"So the killer was upstairs at the time of the crime," Kumakura said, "which narrows it down to Asakura-kun and the twins, unless I'm missing something."

"I don't think you are, but something doesn't add up," Kurogane said. "How would they have gotten downstairs without my seeing them?"

I glanced at Sayuri, since while I'd heard her testimony, it would probably be best if she gave it herself. She nodded, then complied.

"Himemiya-san and I witnessed someone descend via a rope from just outside the dining hall window," Sayuri said, "which was just below the study. They were wearing what looked like a ghost costume, which was soaked in blood. Apart from that, they seemed to be about my height-165 cm- and were wearing pants."

"So that rules out most of the girls," Taiga said, "since most of us wear skirts, and Himemiya-san wears a hakama. The only ones left are Azuki-san and some of the shorter guys- Karita-kun and possibly Kirishima-kun."

In other words, that wasn't exactly a helpful clue, since none of the three people Taiga mentioned were likely suspects. I knew I didn't do it, Kirishima had an alibi, and it was unlikely that Karita could have hauled ass from the bathroom to the crime scene while wearing that astronaut costume. Of course, speaking of costumes, there was a more pressing concern, though.

"Well, whoever it was, I think I noticed something," I said. "They were probably wearing a replica of Kojima's costume."

"Because I checked the laundry machines in the costume store after the trial," Taiga said, "and the costume was listed as a white sheet, not a ghost costume. The rope also happened to be included on the list, probably because they needed a place to dispose of that piece of evidence."

So far, I was making a lot of assumptions, but I didn't think they were all that out there. Besides, someone had to say something to advance the discussion, and what I was saying was helping us make progress.

"Hmm..." Mihama said. "You raise an important piece of evidence, Azuki-san, but I have a question. Who do you suppose prepared the fake costume?"

"Probably the killer," I said. "They must have done so in order to impersonate Kojima after killing him."

"That is possible," Himeno said, "since the killer was not easily visible in the darkness outside the house. That said, it is highly unlikely that the killer could have known that Kojima-san would come upstairs during War of Hope and Despair, let alone to that specific room."

"Unless the killer called Kojima-kun there," Taiga said. "In fact, I know of one person who had the
ability to do so—namely you, Azuki-san."

I felt a chill down my spine. Since I had an alibi for the time of the crime, it probably wouldn't be that hard to clear my name, but it was still kind of disturbing to end up in the hot seat. It was possible that Taiga honestly believed I was the culprit, but if she didn't... then that would have to wait until after I'd disproven her accusation.

"Why do you say that?" I said.

"As we all know, Kojima-kun had a crush on you," Taiga said, "and as such, he'd probably have done anything you'd asked him to, such as agreeing to a romantic rendezvous in the study, which was away from most of the partygoers. You could have killed him, then escaped through the window. When you landed on the ground, you thereby created two witnesses—Himemiya-san and Sasaki-san—who saw 'Kojima-kun' fleeing, then rejoined the rest of us downstairs."

Maybe I was mistaken, but Sayuri and Himeno didn't seem all that convinced that the ghost was Kojima.

"Or alternatively, someone may have tricked Kojima-kun into answering their summons, while pretending to be Azuki-san," Karita said. "Since none of us are familiar with Azuki-san's handwriting or style of writing, it wouldn't be hard to pretend to be her, thereby framing her for the crime. It's just a theory, since no one found a note anywhere, but it's a bit too soon to assume that only Azuki-san could have managed this feat."

"Perhaps," Taiga said, "but on the other hand, Azuki-san could have personally asked Kojima-kun to come upstairs. As long as no one overheard them, it wouldn't leave any physical evidence behind, which would have been an optimal way for her to avoid suspicion."

I wracked my brain for a moment, trying to find some way of disproving Taiga's claims. While I'd met with Kojima shortly before his death, there was no way of proving that I hadn't arranged for him to meet. Perhaps I had to think outside the box and prove that I couldn't have made it to the meeting.

"That's not true," I said. "I never went upstairs until you told me about the murder."

"Really?" Taiga said, more surprised than disbelieving.

"Really," I said. "Go on, ask Kurogane if you don't believe me."

I glanced at Kurogane. He nodded, then turned to Taiga.

"Azuki-san's telling the truth," Kurogane said. "I didn't see her go upstairs at all until after the murder. Again, there isn't any way to reach the second floor apart from the stairs."

"And Higurashi-san and I didn't see her at all since after the murder," Nagato said. "As we've established earlier, the rope could only have been used for going down, not coming up. Even if she'd used it to leave the crime scene, then she couldn't have met up with Kurogane-san again without passing through the vestibule."

I smiled and nodded. While I had needed the others' help to clear the (admittedly unfounded) accusations against me), I had to get things back on track. Of course, Taiga wasn't entirely convinced just yet.

"But... But..." Taiga said.
"I think you should give it a rest, Taiga," Tatsuki said. "At this point, I don't think any of the evidence points to Azuki-san."

Taiga silently and reluctantly complied.

"Going back to the discussion just now," I said. "Himeno, Sayuri, you two saw the rope for the first time while War of Hope and Despair was playing, right?"

"We did," Himeno said. "The rope descended along with the costumed individual. As such, whoever arrived with the rope had to have brought it in advance."

I wracked my brain for a moment trying to figure out who could have smuggled it in, but to no avail. The metal detector wouldn't have picked it up, and I could think of at least a few costumes that had enough room to smuggle the rope inside.

"Yeah, and there's also one other thing that had to have been brought in advance," I said. "Namely, the knife. I noticed that the kitchen didn't have any knives so the only way someone could have gotten it inside is by taking it in."

"That's true, Azuki-san," Nagato said, "but the metal detector didn't go off while the guests were arriving, so unless the culprit had a way to circumvent the system, it must have been brought in before the party."

"Well, that's where Monokuma comes in," I said. "Monokuma, time to make good on your promise and show us what the metal detector found."

"Your wish is my command, Azuki-san!" Monokuma said. "Let's take a look at the camera's pictures!"

Monokuma then started up the screen and showed some images. The first was him leaping through the metal detector to demonstrate it to me, and I could see myself there. The next few images showed Higurashi and Nagato testing it out with various items, from a kitchen knife to a wrench. The last one was someone in a ghost costume, with their hands concealed inside it. For a moment, I wondered if the ghost costume was the imitation, but then I saw the tag on it, and realized it was the real deal. In fact, the parts of the uniform that stuck out seemed rather familiar...

"That's... Kojima-kun!" Kurogane said.

The others nodded. A part of me worried that they'd assume it was Asakura, or worse, me, under that costume, but it seemed they'd gotten the right answer... for all the good it did us.

"Indeed!" Monokuma said. "I hope you didn't think that those pictures would show you Kojima-san's killer."

I sighed. It was probably naïve of me to expect that it would show the culprit, but it did clear some things up- namely, the actions of a certain someone during the trial. If we wanted to understand what had happened tonight, we'd have to piece together their actions, not just their killer's, and with this, we'd gotten a step closer to completing that half of the puzzle.

"No, but we did learn something important," I said. "Namely, that Kojima was plotting to kill someone during the party."

The others looked alarmed, especially Kurogane.

"Y-You've got to be mistaken," Kurogane said. "Kojima-kun..."
"...would never do something like that?, you say?" Karita said mockingly, not even bothering to wait for an answer before continuing. "He could, and you know it. Everyone has at least one reason to want to graduate, while those affected by the motive have at least two. Kojima-kun might have hesitated before, but once he got a chance to get himself and Azuki-san out of here, he leapt at the opportunity."

"That may be true," Kurogane said, "but at the same time, I can't accept it. Please, Azuki-san, explain yourself."

I sighed, knowing that this wouldn't be an easy or a pleasant task. Kurogane didn't fully approve of Kojima's dogged pursuit of me, but even for me, that sort of behavior was easier to tolerate than the knowledge that he'd been plotting a murder that would have screwed everyone else over. If I was a bit shaken by that, even though I didn't like it, then I could only imagine how hard it would be for Kurogane to come to terms with this.

Of course, talking about why Kojima tried to commit murder and whether it was right or wrong would have to wait until later. For now, I had to focus on the facts.

"I actually saw Kojima-kun leaving the house just before I entered it for the first time," I said. "He probably was scouting it out in advance and must have known about the metal detector somehow. He might have eavesdropped on my conversation with Monokuma, asked Monokuma himself or figured it out by intuition- we'll never know."

"It's probably the second," Nagato said. "Monokuma told me about the detector when I asked about it, so Kojima-san could have done the same."

So I wasn't the only one who'd asked about it. Perhaps asking who'd requested information from Monokuma might shed light on who killed Kojima, but for now, I had more important things to discuss.

"Back when he was avoiding us, he'd probably been setting up his murder attempt," I said, "creating a replica of the ghost costume, then planting that, the knife and the rope in the desk drawer upstairs. He could have gotten whatever he needed from the storage on the ship this morning, and used said drawer as a hiding spot. Unfortunately for him, the metal detector picked him up while he was smuggling the knife into the house."

Now that I thought about it, Kojima might have been able to go into the house, lower a rope to the outside, leave the house, retrieve the knife, climb back up said rope and deposit it in the hiding place, but he'd apparently chosen not to. Maybe he didn't think things through, or maybe he was confident that the metal detector going off wouldn't be a problem if it wasn't manned.

"Ah, yes, that would explain the key," Higurashi said. "But isn't it possible that the metal detector would pick it up if he tried to smuggle it out?"

"He wouldn't have to take the key anywhere," I said. "All he'd have to do is hide it in a place where he'd know to look, then pick it up. In fact, it could probably have been in the study upstairs, since that was most likely the planned crime scene. After all, if no one had any reason to believe that he was hiding something there, they wouldn't look for the key to open the drawer. He also chose the study because its window would serve as his escape route."

"So if Kojima-kun had succeeded, Himemiya-san would have seen him come down that way," Sayuri said. "But where would he need to go in such a hurry that he'd risk being spotted by someone at one of the windows?"
"The costume store," I said. "He could have made it over in a couple minutes, stashed the bloody costume replica in the laundry machine, and then climbed back up the rope into the window. As for what he planned to do next... I'm not sure."

As irrelevant as it seemed to point out what a dead would-be murderer was trying to do, I hoped it would help shed light on the true killer's plan. If they hadn't planned things out in advance, maybe they'd taken advantage of Kojima's plan. The others, however, didn't seem fully convinced just yet.

"But what's the purpose of the replica costume?" Kurogane said.

"Probably to protect him against blood splatter," I said. "If it had gotten all over the actual costume or his uniform, then he'd have been screwed if we saw him with blood on either of them, or if he'd washed a bloody piece of clothing."

All the pieces seemed to fit together well, but while we'd mostly figured out what Kojima had been up to, Kirishima didn't seem convinced.

"I can see a few flaws in the plan," Kirishima said. "If Nagato-kun and Higurashi-kun had seen him re-enter the party without leaving through the front door he would have seemed quite suspicious. Perhaps he could have climbed up the rope, but then Himemiya-kun and Sasaki-kun would have spotted him."

"Quite true," Himeno said. "In fact, while Sasaki-san and I did not see the face of the person who had fled, we would have recognized it as Kojima-san had he not been the victim."

"Not to mention the rope," Nagato said. "No matter how he chose to return to the party, one way or another, he'd have to get back to the study to retrieve and untie it before anyone else saw it- and Himemiya-san and Sasaki-san already had seen it. Besides, I doubt he could have untied the rope from the ground... unless someone was inside the study, helping him."

So in other words, Kojima had a no-win scenario on his hands. If he'd stayed upstairs with blood on his costume, he'd have been caught red-handed... almost literally. If he'd gone downstairs, Kurogane would have seen him. If he'd descended via the rope, then Himeno and Sayuri would have spotted him, as would Nagato and Higurashi if he'd been stupid enough to come in through the front door. If he'd stayed in hiding, then people would have noticed that he'd left the party.

"Well, his plan was full of holes," I said, "but that's actually beside the point. I'm sure we'd be discussing the flaws in his plan if he'd killed his target and made it to the trial, but his victim somehow managed to take him out instead."

"Yes, that is true," Mihama said, "but how do you suppose the person in question managed it? The sword is the only other bladed weapon, and the wound from the front is too small to have been inflicted by the sword."

"Exactly, Mihama," I said. "Ordinarily, you'd assume that his target stabbed him in self-defense, but even if Kojima made all those mistakes, he's not stupid enough to take his eyes off someone he's trying to kill. Instead, he was probably stabbed from behind the first time, and from the front the second time. The attacker must have used the sword from the suit of armor for the first attack, and the knife for the second."

"I've noticed that, too," Higurashi said, "but why bother with two different weapons, or even with stabbing the victim a second time?"

I shrugged. I had to admit that I hadn't really thought about that. At times like these, it was nice
having the other spotless around to ask questions and put our heads together, since I wasn't smart enough to solve the case myself.

"I honestly don't know," I said. "It's possible that they didn't want to find out that the sword was used, or for people to assume that the knife was the only murder weapon involved."

"I can think of a few possibilities for why Kojima-san was stabbed twice," Nagato said. "A) He turned around and faced his attacker before being stabbed again, B) He fell on his back and the killer stabbed him as a coup de grace, or C) He was stabbed from the front at the same time. However, all of them are only possible if... there were at least two other people in the room."

As Nagato's face paled and her voice quavered as she came to the realization, I nodded. I'd had my suspicions about them from the beginning, but this seemed to be the final piece that connected everything together. I could now confidently say which two people had been in the room with Kojima, and which one had killed him.

"That's right, and I know who those 'two people' are," I said. "Namely, the twins, and more specifically... Tatsuki."

Taiga's face turned white, while Tatsuki was relatively stoic. Maybe Tatsuki didn't mind dying in a painful manner as long as her sister was able to live on, or at least was holding on to some hope that she'd get off. If it was the former, then that further proved my theory that she'd committed murder to save her sister. If it was the latter, then I'd just have to prove her guilt to everyone here.

"What!?" Taiga said. "Why would you suspect my sister?"

"Because of where you two were at the time of the crime," I said. "Kumakura said he believed you were upstairs, and I agree with him, but Kurogane never saw Tatsuki come down."

Kurogane nodded and said, "That's right."

"That would explain the costumed individual Sasaki-san and I saw," Himeno said. "If Tatsuki-san stabbed Kojima-san, she would likely have blood on the bib of her overalls, as well as her shirt, but the fake costume would hide that. In the dark, it would be difficult to tell the difference between the blue denim of her overalls and Kojima-san's dark trousers. Is that right so far, Akira?"

"It is, Himeno," I said, glad the others were catching on. "Meanwhile, Tatsuki must have taken the real costume, which Kojima had removed while committing his crime, and put it on his corpse before stabbing it, making it look as though he'd been murdered with the knife."

"But what was Taiga-chan doing all this time?" Sayuri said. "If she was at the scene of the crime, having witnessed Tatsuki-chan kill Kojima-kun, then that means she..."

Nagato solemnly nodded. Sayuri had probably figured it out already, as had anyone who was paying attention, but this uncomfortable truth needed to be openly acknowledged.

"...is most likely Tatsuki-san's accomplice," Nagato said. "She couldn't bear to see her sister be executed, so she kept quiet about her crime, and worked to cover it up. If the two sisters weren't in this together, Taiga-san would have told us what she'd seen, and Tatsuki-san would have killed the witness."

I could hear pity in Nagato's voice. She couldn't condone what Taiga had done, especially not when it endangered Nagato-sensei's life, but I think she understood that the bond between the Tachibana sisters wasn't all that different from the one between her and her mother.
"That's right," I said. "Taiga must have known that the body would be discovered sooner or later, even if Asakura couldn't hear Kurogane being killed, so she sent her sister on ahead while reporting the body to serve as a diversion. Because of that, Tatsuki joined the others and pretended that she was coming up from downstairs. Because Nagato and Higurashi left the vestibule to check out the crime scene, Tatsuki was able to slip into the house unnoticed."

"A reasonable observation," Kirishima said, "but there is one problem. Would it not be possible that Taiga-kun is the real killer, and Tatsuki-kun is pretending to be the culprit? After all, if we wrongly convict one sister, then the other sister can graduate and save her."

While I expected either of the sisters to back Kirishima up, Taiga seemed remarkably concerned. Some would have seen that as a sign that Taiga was the actual culprit, but I knew better.

"That's possible," I said, "but the twin who stabbed him would have blood all over her clothing, especially her overalls. If she'd been spotted in that state, then it would've all been over."

"That may be true," Kirishima said, "but I recall that both sisters had clean overalls on when we convened after the body was discovered, and both have since changed back into their uniforms. How would you explain this?"

I was about to answer, but then Nagato said what was on my mind, one step ahead of me.

"Taiga-san must have avoided getting blood on her," Nagato said. "Tatsuki-san most likely, got blood on her overalls after stabbing Kojima-san... or at least the pair she was wearing. She switched her overalls with an identical pair from the farmer costume in the store, then put the entire costume in the wash to make it seem as though the killer had temporarily switched into the farmer costume. As for what I'd said earlier about the two stabbings... perhaps Tatsuki-san stabbed Kojima-san from behind the first time, then cleaned off the sword and stabbed his body with the knife, making that seem like the murder weapon."

That would explain why the tip of the sword had been free of dust- it had been wiped off along with the blood, most likely by the fake ghost costume or on Tatsuki's overalls. The pieces were falling into place, but our suspect hadn't given up just yet.

"An interesting theory, Nagato-san," Tatsuki said, speaking for the first time since she'd been accused, "but what proof do you have that I switched my costume's overalls with another pair?"

I'd been impressed by how much Nagato had caught on to the class trial business since we started, but unfortunately, she was at a loss for words right now. Luckily for her- for all of us- I had the answer.

"The tag," I said. "When we were getting changed into our costumes, I noticed that you forgot the tag on the seat of your overalls, and pointed it out to you, enabling you to rip it off. When you changed back into your uniform, I noticed the tag on the overalls you left in your locker."

"Really?" Tatsuki said.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm guessing you and Taiga changed back into your uniforms to throw us off your tail and prevent us from uncovering that slip-up. Maybe a little blood got on your shirt, but since it's red, it would've been harder to notice a bloodstain than on Taiga's green shirt. In any case, I see why you changed back into your uniform- to prevent us from seeing the tag or spotting any bloodstains on your shirt."

Tatsuki sighed, and faintly smiled.
"So you don't have anything else to say?" I said. "I suppose I can consider that a confession."

"Yes, but what about Taiga-san?" Mihama said. "As Nagato-san said, she is an accomplice. If Tatsuki-san is the killer, as she almost certainly is, would Taiga-san be equally culpable?"

"No, she wouldn't be," Monokuma said. "The goal's to find out who killed Kojima-san, not who helped that person. If you're so sure about Tatsuki-san being guilty, just vote for her and stop wasting everyone's time. It's up to you how you deal with whoever helped the killer."

"It's as Monokuma said," Higurashi said. "If Taiga-san really did cooperate with Tatsuki-san in an attempt to graduate together, then she also betrayed us. We will need to decide what to do with her, but that will have to wait until after the trial. For now, however, we must convict the killer."

Higurashi looked even less happy than he did in the previous trial. This time, three of us- the killer, her accomplice and even the victim- had sought graduation, rather than merely one. One had gotten himself killed, one was about to die, and the other would most likely escape any punishment, even though she'd end up in prison if she were convicted in the real world.

As always, though, civilized society's standards of justice and decency didn't apply here. All that mattered was our survival, and as much as I hated to sacrifice yet another person to stay alive, I knew that if we couldn't do that, then twelve innocent people, myself included, would die. At this point, everyone else had realized this, and the only thing left was to make the twins confess- as the two remaining holdouts, they'd forced the trial into a deadlock under Monokuma's rules.

"It looks like the twins haven't given up just yet," Nagato said. "Azuki-san, please summarize the case, just like you did last time, and prove that you've solved the mystery."

I grimly nodded, and then complied with Nagato's request.

_During the costume party, one of the guests set a murder plot into motion. That person isn't the killer, but rather, the victim, Kojima._

_While preparing for the crime, Kojima created a facsimile of his ghost costume using a white sheet, likely intending to change into it during the murder so that his costume and clothes would not be splattered with blood. He also planted a knife in the storage closet in advance, hoping to take it out and use it for the murder. Finally, he stashed a rope in the study, intending to use it to climb down after the murder was complete. While making his preparations, the metal detector went off, but he ignored it, since no one was manning it at the time._

_As the party began, Higurashi and Nagato stood guard in the entrance, and saw each of us pass through into the house. Kojima also passed through the metal detector, since everything he needed was inside the house... including the speaker system. Kojima was quite familiar with "The Tragedy Overture," the soundtrack that would be playing at the party, and so intended to take advantage of the loudest part of the soundtrack, "War of Hope and Despair," to commit his murder. He proceeded upstairs, past Kurogane, to the study, where he found his target, Taiga, and intended to kill her. His murder had been planned out well in advance, but he hadn't counted on an additional person being there. The killer grabbed the sword from the suit of armor and stabbed Kojima in the back, killing him._

_Unfortunately, the killer's overalls were covered in blood, and they had to cover up their crime somehow. With Taiga's help, they cleaned off the sword and returned it to the statue. They then put Kojima's actual ghost costume back on him and stabbed him again, thereby making it seem as though he had been killed by the knife. Afterward, they put on the fake ghost costume, and used the rope to climb down and circle around the building. Himeno and Sayuri noticed the person, but_
were unable to catch or identify them.

The killer then made a beeline for the costume store, entering the rear entrance. They swapped their overalls with those that belonged to a farmer's costume, and then stashed the farmer's costume, as well as the fake ghost costume, in the washer, planning on making it seem as though the killer had been wearing that costume. But they made a fatal mistake - they didn't remove the tag from their replacement pair of overalls. They might have had some blood on their shirt, which was red, but they couldn't replace it, so they wore it for now.

The culprit then rushed back to the house, in time for the others to discover the body, but there was a problem. They came up from downstairs, when they had previously been spotted upstairs. Afterward, they, along with Taiga, changed out of their costumes and back into their uniforms, stashing them in the lockers in the clothing store. There was one person who was present at the scene of the crime, who ended up being downstairs when she should have been upstairs, and is the culprit behind the murder.

Does that sum it up, Tatsuki Tachibana?

"No, you're wrong..." Taiga said. "I...I-

"It's over, Taiga," Tatsuki said, cutting off her sister. "Azuki-san is right- about how I killed Kojima-kun, and how wrong it is to sacrifice everyone else just so the two of us can live. On the bright side, though, you'll survive."

"No...no!" Taiga said. "Everyone! It was me! I killed Kojima-kun!"

"Please pay no attention to Taiga," Tatsuki said. "Her desire to protect me, her twin sister, is understandable, but that does not make what she is saying true. It may be difficult for you to forgive her for becoming my accomplice, but I ask that you find it in your heart to do so - this is my last request, and the only thing I can do for her."

"STOP LYING, SIS!" Taiga said.

"This... could present a problem," Karita said. "Like Kirishima-kun mentioned earlier, if Tatsuki-san - by which I mean the one who confessed - is taking the heat for Taiga-san, then isn't it possible that if we vote for Tatsuki-san, we'll all be executed?"

Kirishima silently concurred, his expression grave.

"That's possible," Nagato said, "but why is Taiga-san panicking? If she's the true murderer, then we're playing right into her hands, and it would be best to encourage us to vote without any further fuss now that Tatsuki-san has confessed. If Tatsuki-san is the blackened, then it's only natural that she would be upset about her sister's impending death."

"Indeed, Nagato-kun," Kirishima said. "While I agree that the sisters may have tried to mislead us, the facts you and Azuki-kun mentioned clearly point the finger of blame at Tatsuki-kun."

Neither of the sisters said anything, since there was no rebuttal. While they could potentially have swapped their shirts and hats, I'd seen Taiga's birthmark when she came downstairs, and knew that she was the accomplice while her sister was the killer.

"Well, Karita-san may have his doubts," Monokuma said, "but the rest of you seem convinced who did it, so I think it's voting time! Will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one?"

We then cast our votes, and all thirteen of us voted for Tatsuki. The craps display rolled the dice,
and Tatsuki's side came up, along with the "GUILTY" message. It was the same animation as last time, but would our result be the same?

After a few tense moments, Monokuma finally spoke.

"You got it right!" Monokuma said. "The blackened responsible for killing Shigeru Kojima-san is none other than... Tatsuki Tachibana-san!"

So we were right, and once again, we had to sacrifice someone to live. That was an outcome none of us wanted, but what everyone had chosen... except Taiga. For a moment, I wondered why she had voted for her sister, even considering the writing was on the wall for her, but apparently, she hadn't.

"What do you mean it was unanimous?" Taiga said. "I voted for myself!"

I had no idea how Taiga could have accidentally voted for her sister instead of herself, since Tatsuki's button was labeled with the kanji for "Tatsuki Tachibana," but I understood what she had been trying to do. Even knowing that her sister was doomed, she simply wanted no part in her demise, and since refusing to vote was out of the question, protested in the only way she knew how.

Tatsuki glanced over at her sister, but seemed to be the only other person who'd heard her. Instead, Kurogane turned to Taiga, tears streaming down his face.

"Is it true, Tatsuki-san?" Kurogane said. "Did Kojima-kun really try to kill your sister? And could you only save her by killing him?"

Tatsuki nodded.

"It's as Azuki-san told you just before the vote," Tatsuki said. "I simply wanted to protect Taiga, and ended up killing Kojima-kun in the process. That's all there is to it."

"Are you sure?" Karita said.

"I am," Tatsuki said. "I did what was necessary to save my sister's life. Now, I'll pay the price for my crime so the rest of you won't have to. Please don't blame Taiga- this is something I chose for myself."

While Tatsuki seemed calm, I could see a bead of sweat trickle down her forehead, and noticed her glancing in her sister's direction. Perhaps she'd resigned herself to her fate, but that didn't mean she wasn't scared shitless.

"Anyway, I've said my part," Tatsuki said. "Let's get this over with, Monokuma."

"Somebody's eager!" Monokuma said. "Well, somebody besides me, that is."

"NO! DON'T DO THIS!" Taiga said. "Monokuma! I'm the real culprit! I'm the one you need to execute!"

"I'm sorry, Taiga," Tatsuki said. "Monokuma, please pay no attention to her."

If Monokuma had heard either of the sisters, he didn't give any indication of it.

"Now then, I've prepared a very special punishment for the Ultimate Guitarist," Monokuma said.
"Take care of yourself, sis," Tatsuki said, "and never forget- I'll always love you."

"Let's give it everything we've got! IT'S PUNISHMENT TIME!"

"TAIGA, NO!" Taiga said.

GAME OVER

Tachibana-san has been found guilty

Commencing the punishment!

The clamp shot out once again and snagged Tatsuki around the neck. Taiga reached out with her right hand, but Tatsuki simply waved goodbye before the cable retracted, pulling her into the execution chamber.

_Tatsuki Tachibana, the Ultimate Guitarist's Execution: Executed_

_Guitar Heroine_

Tatsuki stood on stage, surrounded by a crowd full of Monokumas. She held a guitar in her hand, or what seemed like a guitar-shaped video game controller. Instead of strings, there were five buttons to press.

In front of her, a screen showed a series of notes for her to play, one that would be all but impossible for most video gamers. Despite that, Tatsuki managed to play flawlessly, with the system registering an increasing full combo, and a thermometer-shaped gauge slowly filling. By the time the song ended, the mercury had reached the top of the thermometer.

Her performance complete, Tatsuki turned to the audience, which raised their lighters... or rather, improvised flamethrowers. They then turned them on Tatsuki, unleashing jets of flames that burned her alive, reducing her to a charred skeleton, her uniform to a pile of ashes and her controller to a lump of melted plastic.

Once again, we were speechless in the aftermath of another horrific execution. Burning alive was an awful way to go, so I was immeasurably glad that our culture didn't expect Mom to immolate herself on Dad's funeral pyre just because she outlived him. Tatsuki didn't deserve a punishment like that, either, since while she was a killer, she'd done it to save her sister.

Taiga had collapsed to her knees, staring at the screen in disbelief. Even if she'd tried to help her sister get away with murder, she didn't deserve to have to watch that sister die. Both sisters simply wanted to protect the other, so I could easily imagine their positions being reversed. Perhaps Taiga would have died, while Tatsuki would have lived.

"No...Taiga...why?" Taiga... or perhaps the person I thought was Taiga said as I was pondering that thought.

My mind then flashed back to the moments before the execution. In her final moments, "Tatsuki" had called her younger sister "sis," like Taiga always had, while "Taiga" had addressed her older sister by her own name. Even before that, "Taiga," having realized that her sister was about to be convicted and executed, had frantically claimed to be the culprit. Was it an attempt to protect her sister, the truth, or perhaps both?
In an instant, I realized what was going on.

"Tatsuki?!" I said.

Tatsuki nodded, then untied her ribbon and unbuttoned her collar to show me her neck- which didn't have the birthmark on it. While there technically wasn't any need to use first names to distinguish between the twins anymore now that one of them was dead, the fact that the surviving twin answered to Tatsuki, rather than Taiga, confirmed my suspicions.

"What is going on here?" Monokuma said. "I was certain that I'd executed Tatsuki-san!"

"There's something you might not know," Tatsuki said. "Just before the trial... Taiga and I switched places. We changed back into our uniforms to disguise the fact that we were assuming the other's role. You probably saw us do so, even if you lost track of which of us was which some time later."

"But why?" Higurashi said. "Why would you let your sister be executed for your crime?"

"LET?!" Tatsuki said. "You think that I'd let that happen? Like hell I would!"

We fell silent a moment, startled by Tatsuki's outburst and the realization that at least one of our assumptions had probably been wrong all along.

"Tatsuki-san's telling the truth, Higurashi-san," Nagato said. "Just before the verdict, and immediately afterward, Tatsuki-san loudly insisted that she was the culprit. Since we thought she was trying to take the heat for her sister, we didn't believe her."

"That was my original plan," Tatsuki said, "not that I had one in the first place."

"I didn't think so," I said. "From the beginning, all of the planning had been done by Kojima, the victim. After killing Kojima to save Taiga, you pretty much just had to improvise according to his plan, didn't you?"

Tatsuki sighed, then nodded.

"You're right about that, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said. "Ever since the killing game started, Taiga and I had no desire to kill anyone, since graduation would involve one of us sacrificing the other. We decided that even if we died together, it would be preferable to living on at the cost of everyone else's lives."

"I can believe that," Himeno said. "Kanae and I felt the same way."

"Well, this motive is a horse of a different color," Karita said. "If one of you made the other her plus one, it would be possible for you two to escape together, wouldn't it?"

"I know," Tatsuki said. "To be honest, the prospect tempted me, but Taiga refused to let everyone else die so that she could live, since she didn't think she was worth that sacrifice. Not only did the thought of killing someone and letting twelve others die to save myself and my sister make me sick, but so did the thought of betraying my sister."

In that regard, Tatsuki wasn't too different from Himeno and Chiyuri. Whether it was her sister, her best friend and her mother, all of them valued their precious people, but not so much that they'd shit all over the faith those people had in them just to save them.

"But then everything changed when Kojima tried to kill you, didn't it?" I said.
"Yes," Tatsuki said. "When "War of Hope and Despair" began playing, Kojima-kun entered the study, pulled out a knife and tried to kill Taiga without saying a word to either of us; I'm not sure he even saw me. Without a moment to lose, I took the sword from the statue's hands, and stabbed him from behind, killing him almost instantly. I honestly didn't want him to die, but there wasn't any time to hesitate. I had to choose between his life and Taiga's, and I chose Taiga."

That wasn't a hard choice to make. My feelings about Kojima notwithstanding, I'd probably have done the same thing if I had a twin sister. Besides, it was possible that Kojima was planning on killing both sisters while setting it up to look like a mutual kill. If he had, then Tatsuki had also saved her own life.

"In other words, sacrificing everyone else," Kirishima said.

"That wasn't what I was planning at first. "I was planning on confessing, but Taiga refused to let me, since she didn't want me to die. She then suggested that if I got away with the murder, the two of us could escape this place... together."

"And everyone else would be dead," Himeno said. "Didn't you just say that Taiga-san wouldn't want that?"

"I... I knew that," Tachibana said, "but I also realized what she was feeling- the fear of losing her sister, that same fear that had driven me to kill Kojima-kun. Too late, I realized that while I'd saved her life, if I ended up being executed, Taiga would live with her grief for the rest of her life... which might not be very long in this killing game."

Himeno had no rebuttal to that, knowing that even if Tsukimura had sacrificed her life to save her, rather than being senselessly murdered by mistake, Himeno might have died tonight, her life extended by less than a week. Besides, as noble as it was to give your life to a higher cause, or to save others, it inevitably caused pain to everyone you left behind, which was probably one reason why Himeno had no intention of asking Tsukimura to die for her.

"The rest is as Azuki-san said," Tatsuki said. "Taiga lowered the rope for me, letting me run to the costume store and swap my overalls with the ones from the farmer costume, then she spread the word about the body once she was sure I could make it back. During the investigation, we changed back into our uniforms so that she could take my place. I thought we could get away with it, so I didn't ask any questions until it was too late."

"How devious of Taiga-san," Karita said. "If her plan succeeded and Tatsuki-san graduated, then Tatsuki-san would surely choose her. If her plan failed, then she would live while her sister paid the price."

I remembered what Karita and I had discussed the other day, about how both the killer and accomplice had their own risks in a plan like this, but couldn't fully agree with him. On the one hand, Karita had explained how Taiga would have completely neutralized the risks of being an accomplice. On the other hand, Nagato didn't seem convinced.

"I don't agree with your analysis, Karita-san," Nagato said.

"Why not, Nagato-san?" Karita said. "Do you really put so much stock in the sisters' love for each other?"

"I do," Nagato said, "but that's not all. Ever since Azuki-san cornered the sisters, 'Taiga-san'- by which I mean Tatsuki-san- was the one who protested and argued against our theories, while 'Tatsuki-san'- that is, Taiga-san- mostly stayed quiet, accepting this outcome. I think Taiga-san was
planning to let herself be executed in her sister's place."

"That's right," Tachibana said. "Of course, Taiga must have known I wouldn't sacrifice her just to
stay alive, which is why she suggested graduating together. I accepted the deal knowing that if
Monokuma was lying about his motive, at least Taiga would live. If she- or rather, I- was found
out, I could speak up and expose myself."

"So to you, it did not matter whether the rest of us lived or died," Kirishima said.

"No," Tatsuki said solemnly. "Even though I knew it was wrong, I fought to the end because I
didn't want my sister to die in my stead... and look at how it ended up. Monokuma, you know the
I'm real killer now, so kill me next! We were born together and committed this crime together, so
it's only fair we should die together!"

"Too bad for you... Taiga-san!" Monokuma said. "You see, I already executed Tatsuki-san, and as
the rules say, only the blackened gets executed for each murder. If you want to die so badly, I'm
sure one of these fine folk will be willing to oblige you, but not me. Even if you weren't your
sister's accomplice in her murder plot, the others have all sorts of reasons to want to kill you.
Maybe it'll be your turn next time."

"I'm sure they do," I said, "but while this probably won't be the last murder, don't you regret
blowing your juiciest motive this early in the game?"

"You underestimate my imagination, Azuki-san," Monokuma said, "not to mention how badly your
classmates want to get out of here. Even if the carrot I'm offering isn't quite as tasty as this one,
some of you will definitely kill to get it. If that doesn't work, there's always the stick."

I shuddered, unwilling to imagine what Monokuma had in mind for the latter. It was hard enough
to ignore the temptation of graduation, so who knew how far Monokuma would go if he tried to
force us to kill each other?

"But that's enough for now," Monokuma said. "Congratulations on making it through the trial.
Anyone who left their clothes or costumes in the lockers will have them dropped off at their cabins.
Until next time!"

Monokuma vanished, leaving the twelve of us in the courtroom.

"So..." Asakura said, "anyone want to talk about how unlike last time, the killer's still alive?"

"There is little need to state the obvious, Asakura-kun," Kirishima said, "but what, exactly, do you
plan to do about it? If you kill Tachibana-kun, few will mourn her, but even fewer will mourn you
when you follow her into the grave. Monokuma has no intention of punishing her for Kojima-kun's
murder, but the same does not go for any subsequent murders."

"Yeah, I know that, genius," Asakura said, "and I'm not about to let myself die just to give
Tachibana what she deserves. But who's to say that she won't come after me next?"

"Why would she do that?" Nagato said. "Her sister, the person she killed Kojima-san tried to
protect, is now dead."

"As is the one person she cares about other than herself," Karita said. "The fact that Taiga-san
would have died if Tatsuki-san had graduated was the only thing staying the latter's hand, and now
that she's dead, there's nothing holding Tatsuki-san back."

As Tatsuki didn't even try to make a rebuttal, I gritted my teeth and shook my head.
"Look, you're not wrong about Tachibana," I said, "but where do you three get off claiming the moral high ground here? None of you really cared about Kojima, so I doubt you'd give a shit about his death if it didn't mean that you'd be forced into the class trial. Hell, I bet the only thought going through your heads when Taiga got executed was 'At least it's not me'."

"Oh, really?" Asakura said. "I bet you think you're better than us, don't you?"

"Try 'more honest,'" I said. "I don't care enough about any of you that I'd kill for you, or that I'd hesitate to execute you if you ended up being the blackened. That being said, I'm also not heartless enough to let you all die. After all, I don't want to die, either."

Everyone, even the Asshole Trio, simply stood there silently. Since I had the floor, I decided to press on.

"I voted for Tatsuki because the thought of her dying bothered me less than everyone else-including myself and except for Taiga- being killed," I said. "But you know what? That doesn't mean I wanted Tatsuki- or Taiga, of course- to die. Hell, the same goes for Kojima."

"Quite noble of you, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said facetiously. "If only Kojima-kun had lived long enough to hear you express such feelings for him."

"His death's the reason we got into this mess in the first place," I said, "or better said, the fact that he tried to kill Taiga. Hell, Taiga isn't necessarily blameless, either, since she convinced Tatsuki to try to get away with it, albeit in order to save her."

Tatsuki winced. What I'd said was a harsh truth, but it had to be said, since if not for her, the class trial wouldn't have turned out this way.

"Sh-She did," Tatsuki said, "but I was the one who believed her, and didn't realize that she had another plan in mind."

"I know," I said. "Of course, if she'd kept her mouth shut, she'd probably still be alive, and you'd be dead. Even if she could have survived, I doubt she could easily live with that."

Tatsuki silently concurred. The sisters weren't carbon copies of each other, but they were similar enough that they each wanted similar things. The trial might have played out the same way if Tatsuki had been the one who Kojima had tried to kill, while Taiga was the one who killed him.

"Anyway, while Tatsuki does bear some of the responsibility, you can't pin all the blame for this clusterfuck on her," I said. "In the end, she just wanted to protect her sister, for better or worse, and if not for the killing game's rules, it wouldn't have had the consequences that it did. So I say that if Monokuma won't kill her, we shouldn't, either."

"Big words," Asakura said. "Maybe you'd feel differently if someone you cared about had been killed."

This time, I was at a loss for words, since I couldn't say anything without going back on my admission that I didn't care for the others all that much.

"I can't speak for Akira," Himeno said, "but I know what it means to lose your best friend, to see the murderer suffer a grisly demise, and to be left with a hole in your heart that can't be filled by inflicting suffering on others. If anything, Asakura-san, what you said just now did little but prove your own ignorance of what it means to have someone you care about."

Asakura went silent, chastened. As much of a jackass as he was, even he couldn't come up with a
rebuttal. Even if he didn't have the tact to think twice before saying something insensitive, he was at least smart enough that he knew that he'd only end up making an ass of himself.

"Enough," Higurashi said. "While it is true that Tachibana-san betrayed the group, as Azuki-san just said, we have no desire to adhere to the eye for an eye mentality of Monokuma's killing game. As such, I do not want any harm to come to Tachibana-san. For now, though, we should retire to our cabins for tonight, and discuss this problem more tomorrow."

We nodded, and, by unspoken agreement, headed for the elevator to return to the upper decks of the ships, with Tatsuki slowly following us. Of course, we knew that as always, Higurashi's words had no power of their own, not when one of the people who could harm Tatsuki was Tatsuki herself.

As we got off the elevator, most of us headed back to their cabins, and Nagato and Higurashi went to report to Nagato-sensei, but Himeno and I stayed behind to talk to Tatsuki.

"Thank you very much, Azuki-san, Himemiya-san," Tatsuki said.

"You're welcome," I said. "I'm not really the best at offering condolences for this sort of thing, so all I can say is that I've been there, too. I didn't lose a sister, but..."

"Fair enough, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said, "but I do appreciate your thinking about me."

Tatsuki bowed deeply in gratitude.

"I'll be honest, Tachibana-san," Himeno said. "I'm still angry with you over what happened, but I don't think killing you will solve anything. Just stay alive and do your best for the group, and perhaps someday I'll forgive you."

"That's kind of you," Tatsuki said. "Most people wouldn't forgive me for endangering the group like I did."

"Well, I have been thinking," Himeno said. "Maybe it's because Kojima-san isn't nearly as important to me as Kanae is, but I find it harder to judge you the same way I judged Yamazaki-san."

"Me too," I said. "For all intents and purposes, Tachibana, you're still one of us in every way that matters. You're still trapped on this ship, or on whichever islands it may dock at. If someone kills you, there will be a trial, and if someone graduates, you'll be executed if you haven't been killed already. Like Himeno said, just play nice from here on out; even if not everyone will forgive you, I'm sure the others will at least put up with and work with you."

As Tatsuki nodded solemnly, I suspected that one of those least likely to forgive Tatsuki was Tatsuki herself. Even as she politely listened, her eyes were those of someone crushed by despair, guilt and grief. We'd done what we could for now, but if she wasn't in the right frame of mind to listen to us, it wouldn't do any good.

"I will," Tatsuki said, before bowing and walking off. "I'll... see you two tomorrow."

Tatsuki walked off and into the cabin that she used to share with Taiga. Once she was gone, I turned to Himeno.

"Thanks for the help back there, Himeno," I said.
"It was nothing, Akira," Himeno said. "I couldn't have made my point without your speech. As I said earlier, I find myself sympathizing with Tachibana-san to a certain extent."

"Me too," I said. "If nothing else, I think that considering the circumstances behind her crime, she deserves a second chance. All that's left is for her to prove herself worthy of it."

Perhaps calling Tatsuki a "hero" for killing Kojima to protect her sister would be going a bit far, but even in a civilized society like ours, people probably wouldn't think of her as a cold-blooded murderer. If she ended up on trial, in a normal Japanese court that didn't follow Monokuma's rules, she'd probably be shown leniency for her age and her circumstances. At worst, I doubt many people besides Kojima's family or friends would want to see her hang for killing him. She'd probably serve time for killing him, then emerge a free woman, grateful for her second chance. For better or worse, she'd gotten that chance in this killing game, and it was up to her how to use it.

Himeno started to leave, but then turned around.

"One more thing," Himeno said. "Please tell Nagato-san that I was wrong to suspect her. I don't know whether her conscience or her fear stayed her hand, but I understand that she gave up the only opportunity to save her mother."

"I will," I said, "but you don't seem completely convinced that she won't kill anyone."

Himeno sighed.

"Don't misunderstand," Himeno said. "I actually believe Nagato-san is a decent enough person to not want to kill anyone. Unfortunately, the same probably went for Tatsuki-san, but the threat to her sister's life pushed her over the edge. Who knows what it will take for the rest of us?"

"True," I said. "I honestly hope we'll never have to find out."

We then said good night to each other, and Himeno walked back to her cabin.

As I stood there by myself, Kurogane walked up to me, his eyes red. Even if he'd known Kojima for less than two weeks, he wasn't going to get over him immediately, especially not when he'd been focused on solving the mystery until maybe ten to fifteen minutes ago. The fact that the process in question involved finding out what Kojima had been up to in his final moments didn't help.

"I'd like to apologize, Azuki-san," Kurogane said. "I didn't think Kojima-kun could do such a thing... and I'm still having trouble accepting that he did, even now. I wish I'd talked to him and convinced him not to try to graduate."

Kurogane bowed deeply.

"If you want to apologize to someone, Tatsuki's your best bet," I said, "as is Taiga, if she were alive to hear it. Then again, I don't know how pissed you are at Tatsuki for killing Kurogane."

"I...I can't blame her," Kurogane said. "She wasn't given much of a choice, so I don't think it's fair to say she's the only one at fault here."

Kurogane's voice quavered. Maybe he was struggling with the idea of forgiving the girl who killed the guy he liked, or acknowledging that said guy had been a would-be murderer, but he knew what he wanted to do. He was clearly resolved to bury the hatchet, no matter how he might feel about it, which was admirable in some ways.
"Anyway, I'd like to know something," Kurogane said. "Do you hate Kojima-kun?"

"I sure as hell don't like him," I said, "and I never will after what he tried to do tonight. To think he'd want to get into my pants so badly, he'd be willing to kill Taiga and let the rest of us die."

Even as my voice dripped with anger and bitterness, only part of it was directed at him. In a way, I felt responsible for this, simply by virtue of existing, and not doing more to extinguish the torch he'd carried for me. I'd noticed something was up about his actions today, but didn't act until it was too late.

"I'm not so sure about that," Kurogane said. "Yes, he probably would have chosen you as his plus one so that you'd survive, even if you'd hate him for it, but I don't think you were his main motivation."

"Then who was?" I said. "I can't think of anyone else here who'd count."

"If I had to guess, I'd say it was his friends and family," Kurogane said. "After hearing about the state of the world, he became anxious, and wanted to check up on them. Taking you along was just a bonus."

If Kurogane was right, then Monokuma's newspaper, whether real or not, had served its purpose, after all, by planting seeds of doubt in all of us. Kojima's had blossomed, and there was no telling who would be next.

"So even Kojima has people he cares about," I said. "I get why he feels he has to get back to them at any cost, but that doesn't necessarily make him a good person."

"Maybe it doesn't," Kurogane said, "but I'm hesitant to consider him a completely bad person, either. We may not be able to forgive his actions, and a part of me feels the same way, but there are people out there who love and care for him. You can take this with a grain of salt, because I'm biased, but this is how I feel."

"Yeah, I get it," I said. "Of course, I suppose that at this point, all we can do is make a guess about why Kojima did what he did."

Kurogane sighed and teared up.

"I know," Kurogane said. "I wish I could have seen Kojima-kun one last time, so I could hear him tell me why he'd tried to kill Taiga-san, and whether I meant anything to him at all."

"Even if the answers aren't the ones you'd want to hear?" I said.

"Yes," Kurogane said, "since I know better than to fall back on wishful thinking. Then again, I do know that not all questions have easy answers, and some questions don't have any at all."

I said good night to Kurogane. It was easy enough to say that Kojima's actions were wrong, even inexcusable, but could I conclusively judge him to be a bad person when I'd known him for only twelve days? His decision to commit murder to graduate, thereby screwing everyone besides himself (and probably me) was probably the worst thing he'd done, but it probably wasn't a line he'd even consider crossing in better circumstances, just like with Tatsuki.

Maybe Kojima was a bad person who embraced his baser impulses once he was outside of civilization. Maybe he was an otherwise good one who'd been pushed too far. Or maybe he didn't fit into either category. Solving the murders was a manageable task, if not an easy one, but finding out who was right or wrong, or whether we could judge our actions inside the killing game
according to the morals of a civilized society was another issue entirely. Until I could answer that question, the only option I had was to do what I had to in order to keep the spotless alive.

By the time I got back to our cabin, Nagato was too sleepy to do much besides change into her nightgown, say her prayers and climb into bed. Since I wasn't much better off, I followed suit after passing along Himeno's message. There were some things I wanted to ask her about, but now wasn't a good time for either of us.

I couldn't help but think about my dad at a time like this. He was a loving husband and father who had many friends. He was good at his job, and while it wasn't one of those highly respected occupations like a doctor, a police officer or an emergency rescue worker, his coworkers counted on him to do his duty, and he delivered. I'd loved and respected Dad, but he'd also made a critical mistake at the end of his life... and someone else had paid the price. Because of that, I couldn't quite look at him the same way I once did, or decide whether he was "good".

All of us were fairly certain that Monokuma and the traitor were bad, but who was "good"? Was it the boy who'd been willing to do what it took to see his family and friends again? The girl who'd killed that boy to protect her sister? Her sister, who'd been willing to give her own life (and according to Karita, possibly everyone else's) to save her? The rest of us, who'd sacrificed the blackened on two separate occasions to protect the majority of us, who hadn't committed murder yet?

Of course, while I was no longer so sure about whether we were good or bad people, I knew there were right and wrong choices. Monokuma forced us into this killing game, but that didn't mean we had to play it. If the worst happened and someone ended up murdered, then we would have to identify the blackened to ensure the majority's survival, no matter what cost we'd have to pay.

End of Chapter II

Class Members Remaining: 13

Sheet Music: A memento of Taiga. It was the first song she wrote for her sister to perform as "Dragon Girl."

Author's Notes

Thank you for your reviews and theories. I'd like to congratulate J Carp, who reviewed on FanFiction, for correctly identifying Tatsuki as the culprit, as well as Dark X The Dragon Knight, who commented on AO3, for figuring out several details about the crime (the overalls, the two wounds, the sisters' actions in the music store, etc), and narrowing the suspects down to the twins.

I decided to upload this chapter a bit early, since I was satisfied with how it turned out, and didn't want to wait until the 30th if I was ready. That being said, I'll be taking next month off.

If you're confused about Tatsuki voting for herself, she pressed the button for Tatsuki, intending for it to be for herself, but ended up voting for Taiga-as-Tatsuki instead.

Kojima's meant to serve as a foil of sorts to Kaori from the previous fic. He's overly forward in his pursuit of Azuki, while Kaori initially doesn't realize that she's in love with Sae, and takes several days to confess to her once she does realize that. Kojima is the first to commit murder after learning the state of the outside world, while Kaori tries to find other solutions, even as her own family is
threatened in Chapter V of the previous fic. Essentially, Kojima's a "nice guy," as Sasaki puts it, while Kaori is a genuinely nice girl.

As I mentioned before, I'll be going on hiatus for the month of November. I plan to update at least once more before the end of the year, though.

While I'm on hiatus, here are a few questions to ponder, and come up with theories for.

Who will be murdered? Who will end up being executed? Who will survive?

Who's the traitor, and what's their motive? Are they still alive? (Tsukimura is the only person who cannot be the traitor, as Monokuma pointed out)

Does the traitor have an accomplice? If so, what's that person's motive?

What's Chiyuri's secret? (This one will be answered first, in the first part of Chapter III)

Monokuma mentions that if the blackened is dead at the end of the trial (like with Sakura for the first game), the survivors will have to choose another person to execute. Will that rule ever come into play, and if so, how?
Chapter III: The Despairing (Baker's) Dozen

Day 13

Nagato and I woke up once again, realizing that we were only here because we'd convicted the blackened, and someone had paid the price for Kojima's murder. As painfully aware as we were that this fleeting peace was the most we could expect, we were grateful for what we had.

"Morning, Nagato," I said.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Did you have... that dream again last night?"

I shook my head.

"No, I didn't," I said. "I guess this confirms that the Monokuma Theater takes a break after every class trial, unless this time and the last were just coincidences. I'd rather not test it with a third trial if I can help it, though."

Even as I said that, I knew that this trial had proven that the killings would be a regular occurrence. If we weren't desperate enough to graduate already, Monokuma would end up giving us additional reasons to want to do so.

We got dressed, since Monokuma, true to his word, had dropped off our uniforms. It was a good thing for us, since while some of us had semi-practical costumes and others had costumes that could be worn over their uniforms (therefore meaning that they didn't have to change out of their clothes), it'd probably suck if Sayuri was stuck with nothing but her kimono.

The weather forecast showed scattered clouds today. Since we were leaving this island behind, I wouldn't mind too much if it rained, but it was nice to be able to walk around the deck without getting poured on. After all, it would likely be our only way to exercise and enjoy the great outdoors until the next island.

Since I had my plate full with other things- the aftermath of the trial, what we'd do with Tatsuki and even what digit would be revealed next- I didn't think to ask Nagato about what she was planning to tell me earlier, and she was probably too distracted to remember, either. For now, I decided to let it go, hoping that we'd have time to talk later.

At breakfast, Nagato, Himeno and I sat with Tatsuki, who picked at her food. She clearly didn't have much of an appetite, but since it had been about half a day since she'd last eaten, she had to fill her stomach somehow. As a result, the contents of her plate were gradually transported to her mouth at a rate that increased as she realized she didn't want to eat a cold breakfast.

"How are you holding up?" I said.

"Not well, to say the least," Tatsuki said. "My sister is dead, and it's my fault. I'll have to spend the rest of my life dealing with that."

I nodded. There were three possible outcomes for the twins in this trial- the twins graduating together, Tatsuki being executed, or Taiga being executed in Tatsuki's stead. Obviously, the third
option was the worst possible one for someone who was willing to die for her sister, but while I
could sympathize with her, I had to admit that she'd deliberately sought the first option.

"You're not completely wrong," I said. "I do know this trial didn't go how you'd hoped, but
sometimes, when you fuck up, it can result in people dying- you, those you care about, or even
complete strangers. In cases like those, your intentions don't change the results of your actions."

"I know," Tatsuki said. "This would never have happened if I hadn't chosen to graduate."

"Yeah," I said, "but I do know that it's not an easy choice to just give up on life in a situation like
that. It may be a while before everyone trusts you again, but unless you commit another murder
and become the blackened again, I'm not gonna throw you under the bus."

Tatsuki nodded. If nothing else, the only person whose life she cared about enough to kill someone
else for was now gone.

Some time after breakfast started, Monokuma arrived in the dining hall.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "I'd like to congratulate the majority of you, save
Kojima-san and Tatsuki-san, for making it through the trial."

Tatsuki gave a despairing expression, wishing that had been what had happened. Her desire was
partly born of crushing guilt, and partly because she hadn't died before. Maybe I didn't know what
it was like to live with the former, but life was fleeting enough that nothing good came of wishing
for it to end sooner.

"So I suppose we'll be leaving the island once again?" Higurashi said.

"You bet," Monokuma said. "The ship will depart by the time you finish breakfast."

"What about the passcode?" Kirishima said. "Did we not earn a second digit by completing the
trial?"

"You did," Monokuma said. "The next digit of the passcode, albeit not necessarily the second digit,
is also a 1."

Kirishima wrote down that digit, as well as the caveats Monokuma had provided. Since I'd brought
a pen and the notebook I'd used to record my findings so far to breakfast, I followed suit.

"By the way, I'd like to add a new rule," Monokuma said. "Deaths from starvation, dehydration,
ilness, heat stroke, hypothermia, drowning and other natural causes that can't be mistaken for a
murder will not result in a class trial."

I then realized that several people, myself included, had taken strolls on the deck despite the fact
that there was a body of water deep enough to drown us in the middle of the deck, and that the
biggest body of water on Earth surrounded the ship.

"So it won't end up as a trial if someone jumps or falls off the deck," I said, "but what if someone
gets pushed off?"

"That won't count, either," Monokuma said. "If the body's never discovered, then I can't hold an
investigation, which means no class trial. Of course, the pool's another story."

"What about accidents or suicides?" Nagato said.
"Depends on who caused them," Monokuma said. "If, say, you jump off a tall building, or accidentally fall off, then you're responsible for your own death, and at the trial, the others will have to pick someone to execute. If you get pushed off, then the person who did it's the blackened. In the end, if it looks like a murder, then we get a class trial out of it."

While it was arguably somewhat fortunate that not all deaths would lead to a class trial, which endangered most if not all of the students and ended with at least one person dying, all deaths were tragic. Even if I'd managed to solve two murder mysteries thus far, I couldn't do jack shit when it came to preventing the murders.

"Of course, that doesn't mean you can afford to do a sloppy job with the murders," Monokuma said. "Just ask Yamazaki-san, Kojima-san and Tatsuki-san. If you fail, you get to join them, but if you succeed, you get out of here. Until next time!"

Monokuma then left.

"May I have your attention, please?" Higurashi said. "I regret that another murder occurred last night, in spite of our efforts to stop it. That said, we have somewhat more pressing concerns for now- namely, Tachibana-san."

"Indeed," Kirishima said. "What do you intend to do with her?"

"Nothing," Higurashi said. "It is true that she is responsible for Kojima-kun's death, but killing her will not solve anything."

"So, you've made up your mind, huh?" Asakura said. "You're not even going to hold a vote?"

Although Asakura's tone was sarcastic, I could tell that he wanted at least some say in it. Of course, knowing him, he probably wouldn't be satisfied unless he was the sole authority, since I couldn't see him being happy with being one vote out of twelve.

"Nagato-san and I discussed it with our teacher," Higurashi said. "While democracies are run by the will of the masses, and trials should involve juries of our peers, the responsibility of deciding the punishment should be given to a qualified and unbiased judge."

Higurashi probably wouldn't like to live in the world of Summer's End. Criminal cases were often decided by trials of combat, and those that weren't had rules that stacked the deck in favor of the prosecution. Even relatively minor crimes, such as theft, could be punishable by execution. Your social class determined your chances and your fate. Himeno would get the red-carpet treatment by being beheaded, while the rest of us would most likely hang.

"Going back to Tachibana-san," Nagato said, "Mom, Higurashi-san and I discussed locking her in her cabin, but there were two problems with that. First, we do not have any feasible way of converting a cabin into a holding cell, since even if we take away her key, the door can be opened from the inside. Second, at this point, Tachibana-san is not much more likely to kill someone- well, another person- than any of the rest of us. Therefore, there is nothing we can do about her at this point."

While no one seemed to protest this decision, all of us understand the situation we were in. Yamazaki killing Tsukimura had been bad enough, but Tatsuki killing Kojima had proved that the murders and class trials would be regular occurrences. Even if the would-be blackened knew that trying to graduate would likely accomplish nothing but costing them and at least one other person their lives, they were probably desperate enough to try, anyway, since we had no feasible alternatives.
Still, I couldn't help but share Higurashi's naïve belief that we could get through this without anyone else dying if we could only work together, because while I didn't think it would happen, I sure as hell wanted it to. In fact, I had the even more naïve hope that someday, we'd all wake up and this would all be nothing more than a long nightmare. Of course, even if we had a chance to make that best-case scenario a reality, it wouldn't happen simply by wanting it; we'd have to make it happen.

I went to the door to the bridge again and found Kirishima examining the keypad. I wasn't sure what he was expecting to find that we hadn't discovered already on our preliminary investigation of the ship, but he was looking at it intently, almost fixated on it enough to not notice me.

"So the second digit is identical to the first," Kirishima said. "Interesting."

"Yeah, I was a bit surprised, too," I said. "You think the password might be 11111?"

"You are welcome to try it," Kirishima said, "assuming you are willing to stake your life on a theory that has one tenth of a percent chance of being correct."

I did the math in my head. If all three of the other numbers were ones, then it wouldn't matter which ones were the "ones" Monokuma had given us... no pun intended. On the other hand, the odds of death were still astronomically high, and as much as I wanted to get into the bridge, I had no desire to throw my life away on such a slim chance of success.

"Thanks, but I'll pass," I said. "It'd be one thing if my sacrifice was guaranteed to open the door, although there isn't any guarantee it'd be worth the price, but it's another thing if failing just gets me turned into Swiss cheese."

"A wise decision," Kirishima said. "As celebrated as martyrdom is, it is only meaningful if it actually accomplishes something. It seems Taiga-kun never fully understood this."

My temper flared, but I bit my lip and composed myself just enough to avoid flying off the handle. Kirishima wasn't the sort who gave a rat's ass about others, but he was smart enough not to shoot off his mouth, so there had to be a point of some sort hidden in his remark just now.

"What the hell do you mean?" I said.

"Let us assume that her goal was to die in Tatsuki-kun's place to ensure her older sister's survival," Kirishima said. "Ordinarily, the assumption would be that by sacrificing one person to save another, the other would be extricated from danger, but this could only happen by dooming the one person to certain death. For example, if the Ursa Major were sinking and Taiga-kun gave her sister the last spot on the lifeboats- assuming the ship had them- she would perish in the ocean, while Tatsuki-kun would escape to relative safety."

I imagined the scenario Kirishima had brought up, and immediately saw the problem with it. While the lifeboats were meant to save the lives of the passengers by keeping them out of the freezing water, they were only a temporary measure until some other ship could come by and save us. Since we hadn't seen any ships since we set out, then those who made it to the lifeboats wouldn't last much longer than those who went down with the ship.

"But Tatsuki's still in danger," I said. "Like she said in the trial, even if she'd confessed to killing Kojima, Taiga would still be in the killing game. As a result, all Taiga accomplished was ensuring that she died while Tatsuki lived."

"Precisely," Kirishima said. "Now, not only is Tatsuki-kun still a player in the killing game, but she
has little desire for her own self-preservation. Kojima-kun's killer had to die for the rest of us to live, but Taiga-kun's sacrifice left Tatsuki-kun alive, but emotionally broken. If Taiga-kun could not foresee this, or if she foresaw it and carried out her plan in spite of that, she is nothing but a fool."

I sighed. There wasn't a modicum of sympathy or tact in Kirishima's words, but I could see where he was coming from. Of course, there was a chance that Taiga really did want to graduate, and had only changed her mind when I'd proven Tatsuki's guilt, but I didn't have any conclusive evidence for that.

"I guess you have a point," I said, "but do you really think that Taiga would just do nothing and let her sister die if she had some way to save her? Tatsuki sure as hell wouldn't."

"No, of course not," Kirishima said. "Those ruled by emotions and sentiment are thought to be unpredictable, but that could not be farther from the truth. They will simply act in accordance to what their hearts desire, and once you know what that desire is, you know what they will do."

"Yeah, but what about you?" I said. "What do you want?"

"To survive, of course," Kirishima said, "and to one day continue my research. At this point, I believe that seeking to graduate would only get myself killed, as long as you are around to solve the case, so I will refrain from taking such a foolish risk."

A part of me was relieved, since if nothing else, my efforts had deterred some would-be graduates, so maybe everyone's deaths so far hadn't been in vain. That being said, I'd come to realize that Kirishima was a sociopath who seemed to only refrain from wrongdoing to stay out of prison. Maybe our country's law enforcement was enough to keep him in line, but he was on my list of people I hoped I'd never see again once I got out of here.

On the deck, I found Higurashi, staring off into the distance. By now, the second island had faded from view, leaving us surrounded by empty ocean on all sides.

"Ah, hello, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "I was hoping to talk to you."

"About what?" I said.

"The speech you gave after the trial," Higurashi said. "While I am grateful that you were able to speak out in favor of Tachibana-san, it does frustrate me a little that you were the one to do so."

"I see," I said. "Are you jealous that someone outdid the Ultimate Public Speaker in his area of expertise?"

"A little," Higurashi said, "but the main problem is that this incident also underscores my own inadequacies as a leader. If I can't win over the people who aren't inclined to agree with me, then there's little I can do to keep everyone safe."

I shook my head.

"Like I said earlier, the problem's with your sales pitch," I said. "Idealism's all well and good, and I agree it would be best if we found a way out without killing each other, but you also need to acknowledge the reality of the situation. I'm guessing that the reason my little speech went over better was that I fully acknowledged my own shortcomings and didn't make any promises, much less those I couldn't keep."
"You have a point," Higurashi said. "I think you succeeded because you're honest and straightforward."

"Maybe, but it's not as though I'm any better than you," I said. "I might have shut up Asakura and the others, but I think I only managed that because Himeno backed me up. I don't know how many votes I would've gotten, even if you weren't running against me."

I did the math in my head. While none of my friends- Himeno, Sayuri and Chiyuri- had taken a liking to me until some time after the vote, I would probably have gotten at least a few votes from people who were willing to support any leader who was making a good-faith effort to help us.

"I honestly don't know, either," Higurashi said, "but would you say your 'star power' as an actress is a factor?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "Sure, I do have a small talent for speaking to others, but the me you see right now isn't the version of me that you see at press conferences and other public appearances. If people adore me, it's because they like my performances and my movies, not because they think I'm cut out in leading my class in a killing game. Let's face it- neither Monokuma nor the traitor consider any of us threats."

Higurashi let off a long sigh.

"I'm not surprised," Higurashi said, "but I had once thought that was a good thing. When the candidate I supported ran for student council president, her opponents thought she had no chance of winning. They were wrong, of course, but her victory was a hard-fought one. Monokuma's estimation of my inability to stop the killing game by serving as leader is accurate, but at this point, it is all I can do."

I left Higurashi for now, realizing that the same went for me. Perhaps one of the points of the killing game was that the talents that we'd spent our lives honing amounted to nothing in a situation like this. They were our passions, things we were good at and were ways for us to make a living, but survival in the killing game didn't involve putting food on the table- it meant winning the games of cat and mouse between the blackened and the spotless. The only question was how long we could keep up the winning streak.

I found Mihama walking the halls of the ship.

I have a question for you," I said, "since you've struck me as one of the more rational members of this class. What do you think we should do about Tachibana?"

"You are not asking Kirishima-san?" Mihama asked.

"Of course not," I said. "I said 'rational,' not 'assholish,' didn't I?"

Mihama paused to think for a moment. She probably agreed with me, but was too polite to admit it outright.

"I know what you mean about Kirishima-san," Mihama said, "but while some of his beliefs may be... unkind, I appreciate his dispassionate and logical mindset."

"Even if he's a total dick who doesn't care about anyone else?" I said.

"He may not be compassionate," Mihama said, "but perhaps his harsh words befit a harsh situation like this. Tatsuki-san did choose to seek graduation."
I couldn't argue with that. As much as I disliked Kirishima, Karita and Asakura, none of them had ever killed anyone or endangered our lives. That being said, if they had killed someone and somehow made it through the class trial without being executed or graduating, I doubt they would have felt nearly as much remorse as Tatsuki had.

"I'll admit that's true," I said, "but what would you have done with her?"

"If I were a judge, I would have sentenced her to time in juvenile hall," Mihama said, "although considering that the murder was accidental in protecting her sister, she would not be imprisoned for very long. I personally believe she could be rehabilitated, and while her music career might never fully recover, she could perhaps use her talents for the good of society."

"Sounds fair," I said. "You do acknowledge that she deserves some punishment, but at the same time, you're not out for blood. You'll make a good judge when you get through law school."

Mihama nodded in agreement, a smile on her face.

"Back to Kirishima-san," Mihama said, "while I do appreciate his ability to provide a rational perspective, I also believe that compassion and regard for the feelings of others are also necessary to make wise decisions."

"Me too," I said. "I'll do what I can to prevent anyone else from being killed, or, failing that, prevent those killers from graduating."

"As will I, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "but I am glad to have someone like you around. You're honest, intelligent and compassionate, so if the rest of us were like you, perhaps we would not have lost anyone."

I thanked Mihama, and left her feeling a bit weird. While I appreciated being thought of as reliable, it still felt a bit weird for someone like me to be the best person in that regard, rather than, say, a young detective. Perhaps I had a hidden talent for this sort of thing, or I was the proverbial one-eyed woman in the land of the blind. Whatever the case was, I only hoped I would be able to face the challenges that lay ahead.

I saw Sayuri in the laundry room, reading a book she'd borrowed from the lounge. Instead of her usual sailor fuku, she was wearing a button-down shirt and overalls.

"Hey, Sayuri," I said. "What's with the look?"

"Tatsuki-chan offered to lend me a pair of her overalls while I washed my uniforms," Sayuri said, "since after Monokuma returned the costumes, she ended up with three extra pairs. After I tried them on, I liked them, so she let me keep them and threw in one of her sister's shirts."

I'd heard that giving away possessions was a red flag for suicidal tendencies. That said, I honestly hoped I was overthinking this, since Sayuri didn't place much sentimental value on the costume she'd gotten a few nights ago. In fact, it probably only served as a reminder of what had happened last night.

"So I take it you got your kimono back, right?" I said.

"I did," Sayuri said. "It's difficult to put on and uncomfortable to wear, but while Himemiya-san agrees with me on those points, she told me I look beautiful in it. I've been practicing tying the sash so I can do it by myself."
"Got it," I said. "And what about your look as a farmer?"

Sayuri giggled.

"Well, it's a bit different," Sayuri said. "She said her family wouldn't stand for her dressing that way... which is why she'd be interested in wearing overalls at least once in her life, so I told her to speak to Tatsuki-chan about it. Chiyuri-chan was interested, too, but the overalls were a bit too big for her."

I simply nodded, noticing that the overalls were a bit on the loose side. Since Nagato and Mihama were two of the only really short members of our class, and Kumakura was the only really tall one, maybe Monokuma had sized most of his costumes so they'd fit the taller-than-average crowd, and hoped they wouldn't be too loose for everyone else.

"By the way, I've noticed that Himemiya-san has changed," Sayuri said. "She was unwilling to forgive Yamazaki-kun, but she's relatively understanding toward Tatsuki-chan. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad for that; it's just that I'm a bit surprised."

"Well, it helps that Tatsuki didn't kill Himeno's best friend," I said, "but you do have a point, since I feel similarly myself. I think all of us were faced with the fact that executing the murderer doesn't make anything better; it just adds one more classmate to the death toll. The fact that Monokuma didn't care that Taiga got executed by mistake proves that."

"I agree," Sayuri said, "and the fact that Tatsuki-chan is still alive also posed another question-how do we deal with someone who's killed before? We only let Yamazaki-kun die because the alternative was the rest of us being executed, but now, we do have a choice. I hope I'm not alone when I say that we shouldn't have to play by Monokuma's rules, and we should give her a second chance."

I shook my head.

"You're not alone, either," I said. "It doesn't take a legal genius like Mihama to know that there's nothing just about the killing game."

"Definitely," Sayuri said. "Miharu-chan has been teaching me a little of what she knows, while I've been teaching her how to draw. Neither of us will ever catch up to the other's level, but we can share a little about ourselves and become closer to each other, in more ways than one."

I smiled approvingly, then sat down to talk with Sayuri for a while. I don't think any of us had a foolproof- or even very reliable- solution to stop the killing, but Sayuri seemed to be on to something. Perhaps by realizing we had more in common than we thought, we'd develop some level of trust and mutual respect that would help us see our classmates as peers and even friends, rather than potential enemies. There were some people I didn't like and never would, but I'd work to strengthen my bonds with the ones I did like.

I met up with Karita in the halls, and stopped him, hoping to ask him a question or two.

"Got a minute, Karita?" I said.

"Sure, Azuki-san," Karita said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm curious about something," I said. "Would you say that at this point, Tatsuki has a bigger target painted on her back than you do?"
"I honestly don't know," Karita said. "Monokuma could bring back the incentive for killing the traitor next time, in which case I'd be in danger, since more people think I'm the traitor than she is."

One could make an argument for Tatsuki being the traitor, if you assumed that she'd willingly let Monokuma execute her sister in her stead. That being said, there were a lot of ways Tatsuki could have ended up dead- if Kojima had attacked her rather than Taiga, if Taiga hadn't proposed switching places and/or graduating together, or if Monokuma had decided to rectify his mistake and execute Tatsuki, too. In fact, we wouldn't have learned that Tatsuki had survived if not for her outbursts near the end of the trial.

"Good point," I said. "I guess the motive will decide who ends up committing murder, and to a lesser extent, who might be targeted."

"Yes, it will," Karita said. "In fact, I find it unlikely that any of us will kill anyone for any reason until we get the next motive. After all, why risk your life just to graduate when Monokuma made it clear he can sweeten the deal?"

"Good question," I said, "but he also hinted at the possibility of using threats or other methods to coerce us into killing."

"Then that's equal reason to wait," Karita said. "This cruise is hardly pleasant, but all our needs are provided for. As long as someone doesn't kill you- which probably won't happen as long as they don't get that extra push- then you'll be able to live in relative comfort, if not safety."

I had to admit that I was grateful for the necessities. The only remotely good thing that had come from Kojima and Taiga's deaths was a few more days of relative peace on this cruise. I didn't have much faith that we'd be able to make good use of that time, but at the very least, I could appreciate it.

"You know, Karita," I said, "you've got a knack for understanding people's motives."

"It's part of the job," Karita said. "Con artists, like salespeople, need to know what their customers want, and the only difference is they don't need to actually deliver it. Knowing who wants what and how far they'll go to get it is crucial to the killing game."

"I thought so," I said. "None of our skills are all that well-suited to the killing game, but they at least have some relevance."

"They sure do," Karita said. "Part of any successful person is being able to step outside your comfort zone and use your skills in new ways, while also learning new ones. For example, I'm not an archery prodigy like Himemiya-san, but I know how to fire a bow if the need arises. I don't know when that skill will come in handy, but it's nice to have."

I realized Karita was talking from experience, assuming that he'd used his expertise as a con artist to pretend to practice various professions. Perhaps he'd be a good actor one day, or at least, he could pretend to be one. Someone with that sort of talent could be a valuable asset in the killing game... or a threat.

Some time after dinner, I took a stroll on the deck, and happened upon a lovely sight... Asakura berating Nagato. I couldn't tell what sort of expression was on her face, since I approached from behind, but she was probably close to tears.

"Take that back," Nagato said. "Higurashi-san is not the traitor!"
"Then who is?" Asakura said. "In fact, I'd say that you're pretty damn suspicious yourself. You got in here with a title you didn't earn, and now you're willing to let us die just because we're better than you."

"Interesting," I said, my voice dripping contempt. "Weren't you previously saying that Karita was the traitor? Or Himemiya? Make up your damn mind already."

As I walked up, I turned to Nagato and whispered, "Get back to our cabin; I'll meet you later."

"Save your clever remarks for when you actually have a suspect," Asakura said. "At least I'm actually trying to find out the traitor's identity."

As Asakura turned to me, he was apparently too distracted to notice Nagato run back into the dining hall... or at least he didn't seem to care.

"Yeah, like Yamazaki was," I said. "Who's going to pay the price if you get it wrong?"

"Enough!" Higurashi said, walking in. "Our situation is delicate enough that we cannot afford bickering."

"He started it," I said, an assertion that was as childish as it was true.

"Yes, Nagato-san informed me about her dispute with Asakura-san," Higurashi said. "I understand that you're upset about what Asakura-kun said, but please control yourself."

I took a deep breath.

"Fine," I said. "You can forget about my apologizing to this asshat, since it'll be a waste of breath, but I'll try to show more restraint in the future."

Higurashi didn't seem completely happy, but he recognized that this was as conciliatory as I'd get, so he reluctantly accepted my answer before turning to Asakura.

"The same goes for you, Asakura-kun," Higurashi said. "Perhaps it may be too much to ask you to like your classmates, but please show them some respect."

"Talk is cheap," Asakura said. "It didn't do anything to stop Yamazaki, Kojima or Tatsuki, so it sure as hell won't stop the next murder."

Asakura stormed off.

"By the way, Nagato-san said she returned to her cabin," Higurashi said. "You should probably check up on her."

"I was planning to do that," I said, "but aren't you guys close?"

"Our relationship is mainly professional," Higurashi said, "and most of our conversations are about helping lead the class. Because of that, I don't know what Asakura-kun could have said that upset Nagato-san so badly; all I know about their grudge is Asakura-kun being upset that Nagato-san was granted the same title."

I was kind of surprised that Higurashi didn't know Nagato all that well despite having spent so much time with her. Maybe he did know about her conflict with Asakura, but that was probably because the root of it was so obvious.

"Well, that's pretty much it," I said, "apart from him accusing you of being the traitor. I don't know
much more about Nagato than you do, but I do think of her as a friend, so leave her to me."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I nodded, then went below decks to find Nagato.

I returned to my room, and sure enough, Nagato was there. By now, she'd composed herself a little, but her eyes were red from crying.

"Are you all right, Nagato?" I said.

"Yes," Nagato said. "Thank you for standing up for me back there."

We took our showers, and Nagato seemed to calm down after a while. Finally, after I was done with my shower and changed into my pajamas, she asked me to sit down next to her on her bed, with a calm and even resolute expression.

"I have a confession to make, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "What Asakura-san said about me is... true in some ways."

"What, that you only got into this school because of your mom?" I said. "I always thought he was talking out of his ass, so what the hell is he right about?"

"The part about my getting into school because of a parent's influence," Nagato said. "The only part he got wrong is which parent."

I paused to think for a moment. I'd often heard about Nagato's mother, and occasionally spoken to Nagato-sensei herself, but neither of them had mentioned the former's father and the latter's husband/boyfriend/whatever that man who knocked her up was. The only thing I knew for certain was that he wasn't

"So in other words, your dad helped you get in," I said. "But he's..."

"Dead?" Nagato said. "Yes, he is. His name is Shou Mitamura. In addition to being a teacher at Talent High School he was also the youngest son of the chairman of the board."

I was speechless. I had no idea whether Asakura knew about this, or how he could have found out, but if Nagato was the granddaughter of the head of the school's board, then she'd definitely qualify for preferential treatment.

"Back before I was born, Mom was in a relationship with my father and, well, had sex with him," Nagato said. "Normally, she'd be against that sort of thing, but their relationship was serious enough that my father was almost ready to pop the question. The condom broke, so you know the rest."

"In other words, you were the result," I said.

"Exactly," Nagato said. "Because of Mom's religious beliefs, and the fact that she'd always wanted a child- if not this soon- she refused to have an abortion, or even give me up for adoption. Of course, because of the stigma against unwed mothers, she hoped that my father would marry her so they could raise me together."

"But that didn't happen, did it?" I said.

"Sadly, it didn't," Nagato said. "My father was willing to take responsibility and raise me, since he
considered this unplanned pregnancy to be at least as much his responsibility as it was Mom's. Unfortunately, my father was hit by a car and killed around the same time Mom was confirmed to be pregnant with me."

"So the son of the chairman gets a woman pregnant out of wedlock," I said. "Sounds like Talent High School's got a scandal on their hands."

"They would have," Nagato said, "but my paternal grandfather made a deal with Mom. Talent High School would hire Mom as a teacher, and promised to keep a place in their class for me once I became old enough. In exchange, Mom wouldn't tell anyone who my father was."

So in other words, Nagato-sensei had probably broken that promise by telling her daughter. Then again, Nagato deserved to know who her father was and had kept the secret thus far. Not only was Talent High School probably in ruins, if they weren't behind the killing game itself, but there was no longer any benefit to Nagato in keeping that promise.

"So their secret's safe with you and your mom," I said.

"Mostly," Nagato said, "but even if not many people realized I was the illegitimate granddaughter of Talent High School's chairman, they did realize that I had been born out of wedlock. Rumors spread, and eventually, everyone at my school knew about me and judged me accordingly."

As the daughter of a single mother, I knew that people tended to notice when you don't have a dad- my friends only saw my mom at home when they came over, and had never heard me mention my dad. There had been certain rumors about my dad's demise, but those had faded after we'd moved away while I was still in elementary school.

"I might know that my title's nothing more than a gift to me, as a dead man's love child, but I still need it," Nagato said. "First, I want to be able to establish myself so that I can be independent from my mom, who's worked hard to raise and provide for me. Second, I want to be known as something other than an illegitimate child. Perhaps Asakura-san feels threatened by my 'sharing' his talent, but I cannot give up the only thing that makes me 'special' in a good way."

"Well, it's not like it's all that unique," I said, "so Asakura 'picked' the wrong talent to get all possessive of."

Nagato took a long sigh and seemed a little hurt. Even considering what I'd just heard, I should've known that insulting Asakura's talent would also mean insulting Nagato's.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that," I said. "What I'm trying to say is that to me, it doesn't matter whether you're a bastard or the Ultimate Tech Support. You're my friend, and while I wish you weren't caught up in this mess, I'm happy to have you as my cabin mate."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "I'm glad you feel the same way I do."

Nagato felt a bit worn out after a long day, so after she said her prayers, we went to bed, although I lay awake for almost half an hour, thinking about what we'd learned. On the one hand, this sort of secret wasn't something that Nagato would tell just anyone, so the fact that she'd confided in me said a lot about how close we'd become. On the other hand, realizing this didn't change what I knew about Nagato; it only showed it in a new light. She'd always been a bit reserved and had poor self-esteem, and only now did I understand why- the only question was how to solve this problem.
They say the most exciting part of a story is close to the end, but if you're at all familiar with fiction, you can guess how the story will turn out.

Then again, it's not like the start of a story is much better, since the first part's stuff that you heard about in advance.

So I say the middle's the most interesting part, since practically anything can happen. The story's set up, and there are a few standard endings, so now you get to see how the story gets there.

Enjoy the middle of this story. It doesn't get any better than this.

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**Day 14**

The next morning, Nagato and I woke up, as usual.

"Good morning, Azuki-san," Nagato said.

"Morning, Nagato," I said. "Before you ask, I had the dream again last night."

Nagato nodded, before she started getting dressed. After she finished she turned to me, oddly self-conscious.

"Now that I think about it, I'm actually surprised I told you so much last night," Nagato said.
"There aren't many people outside my family who know about my father."

"Not many?" I said. "Are you saying that other people know?"

"Some do," Nagato said. "As I said before, back in elementary school, some kids teased me and spread rumors about my family situation. They must have known I had a single mother, but they probably didn't know the entire story, since the prevailing theory was that Mom was-or at least used to be-a *prostitute*. In third grade, I lost my temper one day and got into a fight with one of the bullies."

I was tempted to say "Way to go, Nagato!" but thought better of it, since Nagato's tone was clearly ashamed.

"As you can imagine, I got in trouble," Nagato said. "My mom was called into the principal's office, apologizing to the principal, my teacher, the bully and said bully's parents. I ended up transferring out of the school, but my reputation as an illegitimate child followed me to my new one, so I tried to overcome it. I hoped that if I acted nice and helpful to people, they'd come to like or even accept me. It's a mask I've worn for so long that I've almost forgotten that it isn't my face."

I shook my head.

"I think I've always known better," I said. "I still remember how, just after we met Asakura and I badmouthed him, you *laughed at him*. The 'good girl' in you felt you had to stay polite to him even if he didn't return the favor, but you actually thought he was a prick too, didn't you?"

"I do," Nagato said. "Asakura should be grateful that the school let two people with the same title in, instead of holding a grudge against the other person with his title. If he has to blame someone for that, he should blame the administration, not me."

"Damn right," I said.

A puzzled expression crossed Nagato's face.
"You're smiling, Azuki-san," Nagato said. "Did something good happen?"

"Oh, it's nothing much," I said. "I couldn't help but notice that you 'forgot' the honorific after Asakura's name."

"O-Oh," Nagato said, blushing. "I've honestly never liked him, but have tried to be polite to him, partly because my mom wants me to, and partly because I've been told to treat others how I'd want to be treated."

That certainly explained why Nagato was so painstakingly polite; she wanted to be treated that way. Of course, while that would convince like-minded individuals to show her the same courtesy, she wasn't likely to make many close friends.

"I see," I said. "So you'd prefer to be addressed with honorifics."

"Truthfully, yes," Nagato said, "since I would like to be treated with the same respect I show to others. That being said, I do have a different, and more audacious request for you. Can we use first names... Akira-san?"

"We certainly can, Chiyuri," I said. "I was waiting for you to ask."

Chiyuri smiled the most warmly that she had these past two weeks.

"Thank you, Akira-san," Chiyuri said. "Let's head to breakfast."

Chiyuri set off, a spring in her step, and I followed her to the dining hall.

We ate breakfast together with Sayuri and Mihama, the former of whom had changed back into her uniform, since the last time I'd spoken with her.

"I see you two are using first names now," Sayuri said.

"We just started this morning," I said, "at Chiyuri's request."

"Ah," Sayuri said. "In any case, Chiyuri-chan, feel free to call me 'Sayuri' if you'd like."

"I'll... think about it, Sasaki-san." Chiyuri said. "I'm not quite ready yet, though."

Sayuri nodded.

"Fair enough," Sayuri said. "Both Himemiya-san and Miharu-chan have yet to take me up on my offer, after all. Please think about it- it's not as though I'm going to retract it if you wait too long."

When I thought about it, people tended to take friendship at their own paces. Sayuri and Tsukimura had hit it off almost immediately, while Sayuri and Himeno took a little longer to become close, at least compared to Himeno becoming friends with me.

Of course, whether slow or fast, friendship in a circumstance like this seemed almost unbelievable. By now, roughly a fourth of us were dead, and a fifth of us had either killed or tried to kill someone, so death and betrayal were constants in this "game." It was a lot easier to stay sane if you didn't give a shit about your fellow "players."

That being said, I knew that while it was easier in theory, in practice, it wasn't exactly feasible. No matter how recently I'd met my fellow classmates, or how much I disliked them, I couldn't bear to watch them die. If I ended up caring for my classmates, I might as well cherish my time with the
ones I actually liked, and do whatever I could to keep them all safe.

After breakfast, Mihama decided to talk with me, so we headed out on the deck.

"You know, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "I might not know Nagato-san as well as you do, but I think I might understand how she feels, and why she is a bit hesitant to accept Sasaki-san's offer of friendship."

"What do you think?" I said.

"Our circumstances may be... a bit different," Mihama said, "but I think one thing Nagato-san and I have in common is that we feel somewhat out of place among our contemporaries. Nagato-san is Nagato-sensei's daughter, while I am far younger than most."

"But being able to get to high school at an age in which most people would still be in elementary school is amazing, isn't it?" I said.

"Perhaps it is," Mihama said, "but I am expected to continue to prove I belong with my older yarrimates. Similarly, Nagato-san is probably under pressure to prove that she is just as deserving of this chance as the rest of us are, and that Nagato-sensei is not playing favorites. Because of that, I think it is difficult for us to get close to our peers."

"Well, Chiyuri made a pretty big leap last night," I said. "She told me some pretty important details about herself, things she wouldn't tell to just anyone."

"That is true," Mihama said, "since I said 'difficult,' not 'impossible.' As for me, while I appreciate Sasaki-san's friendship, I also feel obligated to show her respect as my elder, which is why I said our circumstances are different."

"But I suppose I am meandering," Mihama said. "My point is that it may take Nagato-san time to open up to everyone else the same way she has opened up to you. Because of that, you should appreciate that she has chosen to confide in you."

"I do," I said. "Of course, I do hope that she'll open up to everyone else here- well, everyone else who isn't a total asshole."

"So do I," Mihama said. "I would be open to talking to her, but if she does not wish to do so, I will respect her decision."

"Good to hear that," I said. "If nothing else, you've got a lot more respect for her than some people I know."

I said goodbye to Mihama for now. Perhaps some of us, like her and Chiyuri, were overly conscious about how others viewed them and were polite to the point of awkwardness, but if we had more people like them in here, then maybe Tsukimura, Yamazaki, Kojima and Taiga would be alive.

That afternoon, I found Asakura alone. While I'd sworn off talking to him unless I needed something, especially after my encounter with him last night, I'd decided now was one of those times.

"Hey, Asakura," I said. "I've got a question about Chiyu- er, about Nagato."
"Go ahead," Asakura said tersely. It was hard to tell whether he was unfriendly as usual, whether he wasn't happy that I was now on a first-name basis with Chiyuri, or whether he was just in a bad mood.

"Let's assume that you're right, and that she's the 'fake' Ultimate Tech Support," I said. "What proof do you have for that?"

Asakura looked caught off guard.

"Let me put it this way," Asakura said. "You stood before a panel of Talent High School board members and demonstrated your talents, proving that out of all the talented actresses and actors, you were the one most worthy of the Ultimate title, didn't you?"

"I did," I said, "but not just them. There was also a director and an actor present to give their 'expert' opinions on whether I deserved it."

Asakura furrowed his brow upon hearing about the other people who evaluated me.

"But in any case, you were tested," Asakura said, "to determine whether you lived up to your reputation. The same went for me, and I doubt that Talent High School would give it to someone else in the same year. Maybe there are times when multiple people get tested for one title, and a couple people who have the same title, but I've never seen two people have it in one year."

"Right," I said. "And you think you're the 'real' Ultimate Tech Support, right?"

"I do," Asakura said. "Who's more likely to have gotten the title merely as a favor- me, or the daughter of a teacher?"

While I was probably glaring at him at the moment, I tried to keep a poker face. He hadn't cottoned on to Chiyuri's parentage just yet, but I didn't even want him to think she had anything to hide.

"Is that so?" I said. "You're still basing your opinion on that?"

"Well, do you know something I don't?" Asakura said. "If you do, tell me."

I shook my head.

"Forget it," I said. "I just wanted to see if there was any basis for your beliefs. I guess I'll take your remarks as a 'no' answer."

I left Asakura for now. He was the last person I wanted to learn about Chiyuri's status as an illegitimate child, since if he learned that, she'd never hear the end of it. Luckily, even he didn't seem to know the truth, despite having every reason to want to believe it, so I decided to make sure it stayed that way.

I ran into Karita by chance in the halls, and after exchanging hellos, decided to ask him something about Tatsuki that I hadn't thought about much since she'd survived the class trial.

"I'm curious, Karita," I said. "At what point in the last trial did you start suspecting Tatsuki?"

Karita shrugged.

"Before I answer that, Azuki-san, I'd like to know one thing," Karita said. "Wouldn't it be possible for me to falsely claim I knew it was her all along just so I'd look smart?"
"You might," I said, "but it seems more like you to downplay your intelligence. I'm interested in hearing your answer, and I'll judge whether you're telling the truth after you give it."

After a long pause, during which time he was thinking things over, Karita decided to humor me.

"Well, I guess the first red flag for me was her being upstairs at the time of the crime," Karita said. "So was Asakura-kun, but not only had he locked himself in the room, he didn't come in from downstairs after the murder. I noticed the tag on her overalls, but decided not to tip my hand too early. Does that sound about right to you?"

"It does," I said, "or at least it's as believable an answer as I can expect of you. But why not say something earlier?"

"Simply put, because I don't want to present myself as a threat to the next killer," Karita said. "If they know that someone- you most likely- is going to be good at solving the crimes, they'll kill that person to prevent them from uncovering what they've done."

"Maybe they will," I said, "but in my experience, anyone smart enough to solve the cases is probably not dumb enough to get themselves killed."

Karita made a "Tsk-tsk-tsk" sound and wagged his right index finger.

"You're not wrong about that, Azuki-san," Karita said, "but overconfidence can cloud one's judgment, turning geniuses into fools and causing fools to think they're geniuses. For me, survival isn't just about getting through each trial, but making smart choices that help me in the long term. You'd do well to do the same."

"Thanks for the advice," I said, "but doesn't giving away information not benefit you?"

"Not directly," Karita said, "but being cooperative and helpful at times like this can help allay suspicions of me and gain me allies, even if friends are a bit much to ask for."

Even though it was hard to tell whether Karita was telling the truth or lying, I did glean something useful from this- I was the only person I could count on to solve any murders that might occur. Chiyuri had proven trustworthy so far, and in the second trial, she'd demonstrated a knack for murder investigations, but I wasn't comfortable giving her the task of solving the crimes for a few reasons, not the least of which was that it wouldn't be fair to stick her with all the responsibility. Perhaps I wasn't completely alone when it came to crime solving, since I relied on the testimony of others- including the killers- but it would be my job as long as I was alive to do it.

As the day ended, I returned to my cabin and saw Chiyuri waiting there. After chatting for a little while, I remembered my conversation with Asakura.

"By the way, Chiyuri, I talked with Asakura earlier," I said. "He doesn't seem to 'know' anything about you. He still thinks you got in because of your mom, rather than your dad."

"That's a relief," Chiyuri said. "It's a shame that Asakura isn't changing his mind, though."

"Maybe not," I said, "but he seems oddly insecure about his belief that he's the 'real' Ultimate Tech Support, since his reasoning is pretty flimsy. Or maybe he's hiding something."

"That's possible, Akira-san," Chiyuri said, "but what do you suppose that is?"

I paused to think for a moment, and recalled Asakura asking me about being judged as an actress.
High school age actresses weren't all that common, but there were a significant number out there, some of whom probably would have deserved the title. At that point, I had an idea as to why they chose two Ultimate Tech Supports, even though the pool was wide enough that they could wait for someone truly extraordinary.

"This is just a thought," I said, "but if they promised you the Ultimate Tech Support title, and Asakura happened to be the next best contender, couldn't they just turn him away and say he wasn't good enough, since there's probably a lot of people out there who are better than he is?"

"Maybe they could," Chiyuri said, "but if he actually was Ultimate material, they'd want to study his talent, and would invite him even if there was another title holder."

"What if he didn't?" I said. "Like I suggested earlier, maybe Asakura got in through connections- I mean, he also got in that way- and they couldn't refuse him any more than they could refuse you."

"That's possible," Chiyuri said, "but why do you believe that so strongly? Even I don't know much about how the children of Talent High School administrators benefit in the selection process."

"I don't have any hard proof," I said, "but think about it this way. First, I see you as a lot more honest and trustworthy than Asakura- not that it's saying much, of course. Second, do you really see Asakura willingly taking on a job in which he has to help people with their jobs, including assholes like him?"

Chiyuri giggled.

"Not at all," Chiyuri said. "I can't imagine what the administration was thinking when they chose him, though."

"Neither can I," I said.

When I thought about it, the murder mysteries were vastly simpler than the longer-standing problems, like who betrayed us, how we got here or what the deal was with the school. In the class trials, all we had to do was find out who had killed the victims, and while that involved unraveling the events their deaths, it was fine if we missed a few details as long as we got the right person. Here, if we were missing a few details, then it was likely that some part our current theory didn't hold up, and the entire thing was no longer valid. Because of that, there were times when learning something made me feel as though I was farther away from the truth than I'd been before.

We decided to get ready for bed, but as Chiyuri got up to use the shower, she turned to me.

"One more thing, Akira-san," Chiyuri said. "Thank you very much for believing in me."

Chiyuri bowed deeply, and only rose when I sheepishly let off a "No problem." While she had seemed a bit distant until a day ago, her politeness had always been genuine, rather than a sign of said distance. The only thing that had changed these past few days was that she'd learned to trust me, something I was extremely happy to see happen.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*I've got a sweet offer for you lot- the chance to guess the traitor's identity.*

*If you get it right, I'll give you a copy of this fanfic, signed by the author.*

*If you get it wrong, your computer will permanently break down.*
Day 15

We woke up once again.

"Morning, Chiyuri," I said.

"Good morning, Akira-san," Chiyuri said, as formally as ever. By now, I'd gotten used to her morning greeting, so the only adjustment was hearing her use my first name, rather than my last name.

The weather was mostly cloudy today, but had a chance for some rain later that night. I wasn't too familiar with the weather around this part of the Pacific (wherever the hell we were), but I jotted the data down in my notebook, hoping to find a pattern of some sort.

"I see you're continuing to record your observations," Chiyuri said.

"Yeah," I said, "since I'm hoping to find out some more about where we are and what's going on. It's not as though I know what good it'll do, but I might as well try."

"I know," Chiyuri said. "I hope that we can gradually start to see patterns emerge, and that those patterns will lead us to answers."

"Me too," I said. "If I was the betting sort, I'd be willing to bet that we'll reach the next island tomorrow."

Chiyuri giggled softly.

"I'd say, 'you're on, Akira-san,' but for one thing," Chiyuri said. "Namely, that's what I'm betting, too. Let's just see whether we're right."

I nodded, then headed to breakfast with Chiyuri, not yet sure whether our prediction coming true would be a good or bad thing.

We ended up sitting with Karita and Asakura at breakfast. Chiyuri greeted them with a polite "Good morning, Karita-san, Asakura-san," to which Karita responded in kind, and we ate together.

By now, I'd come to realize that while Chiyuri's politeness was a façade, her willingness to tolerate Asakura was fairly admirable. I wasn't idealistic enough to believe that all the different races, ethnic groups, religions, political parties and other factions of humanity could simply accept and respect one another's differences, but I hoped that we could simply come to realize that violence wouldn't solve our problems. Given our track record- hell, even that of sixteen Japanese high school students- that wasn't too likely, but it was the most we could hope for.

Higurashi stood up to address us all. As he did, he produced a backpack from under the table and pointed at it.

"I have something I'd like to talk about right now," Higurashi said. "Based on previous trends, I suspect that we will arrive at the island tomorrow."

"Yeah, and?" Asakura said.
"Ordinarily, this would not require any amount of preparation," Higurashi said, "but Monokuma's plans mentioned a camping expedition, which may involve spending one or more nights on the island. I'm no expert on camping or outdoor survival, but I can think of several things we will need: tents and sleeping bags, food and water, something to start a fire, backpacks, suitable attire for the outdoors and light sources. The storage room may not have all those items, but please stop by to pick out what you can."

Once again, I was reminded of how many personal conveniences we were missing out on, and not just because we'd be camping on the next island. If I ever got the desire to go camping, I'd research the topic on the internet, go shopping at a local outdoors or sporting goods store, plan according to the schedule and the weather, and bring some friends along. In this case, we only had the vaguest idea of where we'd be going or what we'd be doing, so asking us to prepare for that was pretty much asking the impossible.

After breakfast, before Chiyuri went to meet with Nagato-sensei, I pulled her aside for a minute.

"Do you need something, Akira-san?" Chiyuri said.

"It'll be quick," I said. "I just noticed that you're still using '-san' on Asakura."

"Oh," Chiyuri said. "I guess it's because I don't have the courage to dispense with the politeness around him yet. I can only imagine how much more unpleasant he'd be if I responded in kind."

"Well, it's not as though he's at all nice to you now," I said, "so I can't tell how much good your efforts are doing."

Chiyuri shrugged.

"Well, think of it this way," Chiyuri said. "I trust you enough to be myself around you. I consider you enough of a friend to use your first name, and I respect you enough to use the honorific."

"Gotcha," I said, "and what do you think about me?"

"You're different," Chiyuri said. "With the exception of Mom and other authority figures, you treat everyone like an equal, and always say what's on your mind. If you don't like them, you let them know, but if you do like them, you treat them well. Because of that, I'm fully confident that you see me as a friend."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, "because you're right about that."

Chiyuri smiled.

"Anyway, I'll be going now," Chiyuri said, "since I have to meet with Mom. Can I leave getting the supplies to you?"

"You can," I said. "I'll see what I can do."

We then went downstairs and walked in the same direction until I turned to go to the storage room, while Chiyuri continued toward the elevator to Nagato-sensei's cell.

I checked the storage room for camping gear, and found Sayuri and Mihama there.

"Are you perhaps here for supplies, Azuki-san?" Mihama said.
"Yeah," I said. "I'm guessing you two struck out, didn't you?"

Mihama sadly nodded.

"We have had... mixed success," Mihama said. "Here is our list of supplies."

Mihama handed me a sheet of notebook paper with a list. She'd put a check next to what she did find, and crossed out what she couldn't find.

*Camping Supplies, Working List*

- Water bottles (check)
- Non-perishable food (crossed out)
- Backpack (check)
- Tents and sleeping bags (crossed out)
- Matches or other tools for starting fires (crossed out)
- Compass (question mark)
- Map (question mark)
- Casual clothes (crossed out)
- Flashlight (check mark)

*Raincoat/Umbrella (both were crossed out; it looked like Umbrella was added after Raincoat)*

I handed the list back to Mihama.

"So the ship doesn't have much in the way of camping supplies on it," I said. "If the people from the school who organized this cruise loaded it up, then I guess they wouldn't expect us to stop at an island. I doubt Monokuma would forget, though."

"At least not if he had any intention of providing those supplies," Mihama said. "Clearly, his intention is to force us to survive without those."

"Seems that way," I said. "So, you two have any ideas for replacing what he didn't give you?"

"We asked Monokuma about the map," Sayuri said, "but unfortunately, it won't be loaded onto our handbooks this time. He said that there would be a map somewhere on the island, and chided us for relying on our technology too much. As for our various shelter needs, we'll have to see what we can get on the island, and hope that someone knows how to start a fire."

That didn't exactly inspire confidence, to put it mildly.

"If we can't do that, we won't be able to keep ourselves warm at night or cook any meat we find," I said. "Don't we have any portable stoves?"

"We also asked Monokuma about that," Mihama said, "but Monokuma said, 'If you need a light source, there are some flashlights right about here.'"

Mihama then pointed to the shelf that Monokuma had shown her. I made note of the location, once
I was finished puzzling over why a portable stove would be a good light source.

"There are many things we won't be able to do, Miharu-chan," Sayuri said. "Let's just grab what we need and make do with what we can."

I followed their example and ended up taking a backpack from the storage room, which was presumably intended for use at school, but it worked well enough for my purposes, and filled it with a couple water bottles, as well as a flashlight. Since I didn't have any more experience with camping than Higurashi did, I hoped this would do for now.

Once we were done, the three of us had backpacks full of gear, although Mihama was struggling with hers.

"Here, let me take a little of your load, Miharu-chan," Sayuri said.

Mihama complied, not at all ashamed of having to rely on the significantly older, taller and stronger Sayuri. She'd struck me as a somewhat proud and self-reliant girl, so either I was wrong about that, or she didn't mind relying on Sayuri.

"Thank you very much, Sasaki-san," Mihama said.

"You're welcome," Sayuri said. "I do sometimes think of you as like a little sister, so it's my duty as a big sister to help out, like my dad did for my aunt when they were kids."

I couldn't help but smile. Sibling relationships weren't always loving, as one of my fellow Summer's End costars was envied by her less successful sister. Despite- or perhaps because of that, I was glad to see that Sayuri and Mihama, two only children, had successfully forged a bond of sisterhood.

After dropping off the backpack full of gear in my cabin, and leaving a note to Chiyuri, I headed to the deck, where I found Tatsuki near the starboard side, staring out at sea. While I'd seen her over the past two days, I had no reason to believe that her condition had improved.

"Hey," I said.

Tatsuki turned around and said, "Hello," at which point I joined her. The view from off the edge of the ship was the same as the other days the ship was sailing- sea water as far as the eye could see, along with the occasional Monodrone to watch over us. It had always left me in awe of how big it was, but today, I recalled that it was vast enough to swallow up any of us- or even our entire ship- and become our watery grave, just like it was easy to bury someone in the earth. In fact, while the pool on deck wasn't much more than two meters deep, and wasn't deep enough to have a diving board, it was also possible to drown in there.

"You can relax, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said. "If I was brave enough to jump off the deck, I'd have done it the evening Taiga died for me."

"I guess that's a relief," I said. "But what do you mean 'brave'?"

"Apart from how drowning's a terrible way to go?" Tatsuki said. "It's probably because a part of me is afraid of dying. When I killed Kojima, I'd thought my life was over, but then Taiga told me that there was a way out... and look what happened."

I grimly nodded. Yamazaki must have known he was screwed when I accused him, and might have known that all along, so I could only imagine what he would have done. When he'd given up, it
was because he'd seen no other way out, and knew his death was inevitable.

"If you're so scared of death, then why'd you insist that Monokuma execute you?" I said.

"Because I couldn't live with myself for letting my sister die," Tatsuki said. "I didn't have the courage to end my own life, but that wouldn't matter if Monokuma would do it for me."

I sighed.

"Look, I get that you feel responsible for Kojima and Taiga's deaths," I said, "but like I said, that shitshow only played out as it did because of their actions, too. All of us are responsible for our actions here, and that includes the people who voted for you."

Tatsuki nodded.

"You're right," Tatsuki said, "but the fact is that I wasn't supposed to survive the last trial, while Taiga was. Sacrificing others to stay alive may be part of the killing game, but the trial ended the way it did because I killed Kojima-kun, and waited too long in exposing myself. I have to do something to justify my continued survival, but what can I do?"

I didn't know what to say to that. For as long as I'd been alive, I believed that my life had some inherent value that justified the sacrifices everyone made to raise me. Even Chiyuri, whose self-esteem was pretty crappy, believed that she was a unique individual who deserved to be alive. So what could people like us, who had reasons to live and people we'd loved, say to someone like Tatsuki, who'd lost the person she cared most about?

"I don't know yet," I said, "but whatever you do, don't throw your life away. Your parents already lost one daughter, so don't make them go through that a second time."

"I have no desire to," Tatsuki said, "but we all know that we don't always get what we want in the killing game. If I die, as I likely will, I hope my death will at least have some meaning."

I stayed with Tatsuki for a while, until she went back below decks, thanking me for listening as she departed. Obviously, Tatsuki would be an ongoing concern of ours, so it would be up to us to do what we could to help her... assuming she lived that long to take in what we said to her.

Shortly thereafter, I found Himeno inside the lounge, clearly not in a good mood.

"Hi, Himeno," I said.

"Hello, Akira," Himeno said. "I apologize if I seem a bit out of sorts, but I haven't had a very pleasant morning."

"Sorry to hear that," I said. "What's the problem?"

Himeno sighed, then invited me to sit down next to her.

"Kirishima-san held another meeting after breakfast today," Himeno said, "along with Karita-san and Asakura-san. This time, we discussed the fact that a second murder has occurred on Higurashi-san's watch, as well as the fact that Tachibana-san is still alive."

Hearing that made me glad that I'd skipped out on the meeting- or rather, that they hadn't invited me.

"I guess those are the big topics on everyone's mind right now, at least when it comes to recent
"news," I said, "but I guess this meeting wasn't any more productive than the last?"

"Not at all," Himeno said. "Which issue would you like to hear about first?"

"Let's start with Higurashi's leadership," I said. "I doubt his critics like him any more, but I'd like to know whether they plan to do anything about him."

"All right," Himeno said. "To put it simply, there is still not enough support to unseat Higurashi-san, and even if there was, no one is willing to replace him. The other three disapproved of Higurashi-san's performance, but only Kirishima-san proposed choosing a different leader, tentatively nominating himself but offering to step aside if anyone had a stronger candidate in mind. Karita-san and Asakura-san both contended that we do not need a leader."

I chortled.

"Yeah, because we've shown we're good at policing ourselves," I said. "Hell, Nagato-sensei should have just pointed us in the direction of the Ursa Major and wished us a happy trip, since we never needed her to chaperone us."

"Good one," Himeno said. "In all seriousness, those two seem to believe that no one is competent or trustworthy enough to handle the task of leading us. Perhaps Nagato-sensei would be, but since she's locked in a cell down below, and rarely sees anyone besides her daughter and our leader, she can do little to help us. As for me, I simply think it would be reckless to replace Higurashi-san at this juncture."

I nodded, reminded of part of the reason why I no longer had any desire to join those discussions. At this point, I wasn't all that afraid of them being able to overthrow Higurashi, but if they wanted, they could potentially cause some serious trouble... assuming they could actually work together.

Satisfied for now, I decided to move on to the next topic.

"Let's talk about Tachibana," I said. "What did you guys decide to do about her?"

'We couldn't come to an agreement," Himeno said. "My position, as I said before, was to give Tachibana-san a chance to regain our trust. Kirishima-san believes that we should keep an eye on her, and sacrifice her if we need someone to execute to satisfy Rule 16. Karita-san suspects that she will make a second attempt to graduate, but added that the only way for us to avoid any murders would be for all but one of us to commit suicide. As for Asakura-san, he expressed the hope that Tachibana-san would die, but said he would not kill her himself."

"So in short, even Asakura doesn't have the balls to murder her," I said. I guess we can be grateful for one thing- Tachibana probably won't get killed unless Monokuma sweetens the pot with the next motive."

"I'm sure he will," Himeno said. "That being said, I'm relieved that we're divided on matters like this. If we weren't, then we may have ended up lynching Tachibana-san after the trial."

"Maybe," I said, "but who'd be willing to take the 'credit' for killing her?"

"Good question," Himeno said. "I suppose we can also thank everyone's sense of self-preservation for ensuring that it doesn't come to that."

We talked for a little bit about the current state of things, but didn't come up with any really significant insights, except for that any murder, whether selfish or selfless, could lead to murder or stay one's hand. The desire to protect a loved one might mean that you wouldn't be willing to
graduate and leave that person behind, or you might kill to protect them, as Tatsuki had. Meanwhile, the desire for self-preservation could lead you to screw everyone over to get out of here, or refrain from killing someone to avoid getting executed. I could only hope that the selfless ones cared enough about everyone else to not want to see them die, while the selfish ones never concluded that their odds of graduating were good enough to take the plunge.

I checked the deck and saw Kumakura and Kurogane exercising.

"Hey, you two," I said. "Do you guys exercise here often?"

"As often as I can, Azuki-san," Kumakura said. "It's important to stay in good physical shape, even in a situation like this."

Kurogane shrugged.

"Not all that often," Kurogane said. "Sure, I do exercise regularly, but this is mainly an excuse to get out of my room. It's gotten fairly lonely ever since Kojima-kun died."

I could only say, "I see" in response. While I'd never liked Kojima even before he'd tried to kill Taiga, I had to admit that there were parts of him that I hadn't seen. He and Kurogane had probably bonded in their room, much like Chiyuri and I had... even if it wasn't the kind of bond Kurogane had hoped for.

"But I can't feel too sorry for myself," Kurogane said, "not when I'm not alone in this regard. Apart from Kumakura-kun here, there's also Himemiya-san and Tatsuki-san, both of whom knew their roommates much longer than I knew mine."

"That may be true," Kumakura said, "but perhaps you could think of it this way. The tragedy of losing someone you just met is that you won't get the chance to get to know them any better. On the other side of the coin, if someone dies and no one here misses them, it's a depressing thought. Because of that, I don't want to see any others die."

I nodded. While Yamazaki and Kojima's dying hated and unmourned was probably their fault, it was so pathetic I couldn't help but feel bad for them in some ways. At the very least, I hoped that however the others died in the killing game, myself included, we wouldn't end up like that.

During dinner, Higurashi sat down at my table, having apparently sought me down.

"You need something, Higurashi?" I said.

"I've been thinking about what you said two days ago, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "and I have a proposal for you, one that would be up your alley."

"You mean acting," I said, hoping to find out where this was going.

"More specifically, role-playing," Higurashi said, "I would like for you to play as our leader, and see what you would have done in my position. I have recruited some volunteers to play the more 'difficult' members of our class."

I chuckled, amused at how politely Higurashi put it, even though people like Asakura were probably more troublesome for him than for me. While I could afford to keep interactions with the people I didn't like to a minimum, he'd sworn to protect all of us, even those he didn't like.
"You've got yourself a deal," I said. "Let's meet up in the lounge after dinner."

"Good," Higurashi said. "I'll see you then."

We finished our meal in silence, then went straight for the lounge.

After dinner, Higurashi, Chiyuri and I headed to the lounge. We were joined by Himeno, Sayuri and Mihama, the latter of whom was wearing a somewhat crudely-drawn Monokuma mask.

"Good, everyone's here," Higurashi said. "Does anyone have any questions before we begin?"

"Why was I chosen to play Monokuma?" Mihama said.

"A few reasons," Higurashi said. "First, you are the most knowledgeable of Monokuma's rules. Second, your... small stature makes you the closest to Monokuma's size. Third, you have a similar pattern of speech."

"The fact that I use '-san' on everyone besides Nagato-sensei?" Mihama said. "I suppose we do, but if I were your age or older, I would use '-kun' on you instead."

Mihama wasn't alone in that regard, as Chiyuri, her mother, Himeno and Tsukimura were also similarly polite. Hell, as rude as I could often be, I could practice good manners whenever the situation called for it.

"What about the others?" I said.

"Himemiya-san and Sasaki-san will play each other," Higurashi said. "Meanwhile, Nagato-san will be playing Asakura-kun, and I will be the supervisor and narrator."

I chortled. Chiyuri was definitely playing against type, to put it mildly.

"Well, let's get started," Higurashi said. "Monokuma has taken Nagato-sensei away to parts unknown and informed you that he expects you to kill each other. At this point, the students are confused, so they're looking to you for guidance."

As Higurashi spoke Monokuma's name, he gestured at Mihama, and when he referred to me, he gestured to me. Knowing that was my cue, I cleared my throat and spoke.

"Listen up, everyone," I said. "I'm pretty sure I know what you're feeling, because I'm feeling it, too. You're scared shitless and you'd kill to get out of here- literally. But you know what? Your classmates also want to stay alive. If you commit murder in order to graduate, the rest of us will expose you, and we'll let you die in order to save ourselves. The odds of us finding a way out of here together are not great, but they're a hell of a lot better than you graduating by yourself, not to mention less likely to get you killed in the process. Capisce?"

The room was silent, and I could have sworn I heard crickets chirping. Finally, Chiyuri shook her head and gave a reply.

"What you just said is infinitely more insightful than anything I could have come up with on my own," Chiyuri said, "so kindly take a long walk off a short pier, Azuki-san."

The others, myself included, snickered, at which point Chiyuri blushed. Even though I wasn't into girls, she seemed pretty cute.

"I... was trying to give my impression of Asakura-san," Chiyuri said.
"You got the spirit down," I said, "but he isn't usually this polite."

Chiyuri giggled softly, but then turned serious.

"If you and the others don't mind, Akira-san, I'd like to break character for a moment to offer feedback," Chiyuri said. "What you said was perfectly fair, and I actually agree with it. However, it isn't what people want to hear."

I looked around, and none of the others seemed to disagree with Chiyuri, or disapprove of her request to stop the roleplay for a moment.

"So I should lie to them?" I asked.

"I wouldn't go that far," Chiyuri said, "but things are dismal enough that 'Behave yourself or you'll die' isn't half as appealing or convincing as 'Work together, and we'll get out of here.' After all, despair is the name of Monokuma's game, isn't it?"

"It sure is," I said, "but you can't make a convincing argument- honest or otherwise- if you don't believe in it yourself. I'm sticking to my guns."

"I thought you'd say that," Higurashi said, "but let's see how you handle a motive. Mihama-san, let's pick up where we left off."

Mihama cleared her throat and continued the roleplay.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" Mihama said. "I now announce a reward of 10 billion yen to the next graduate. Time is money, so if you're the first to kill and will get away with it, you'll be filthy stinking rich!"

Himeno rolled her eyes. That kind of money was a lot to most people, but it was a drop in the bucket compared to the Himemiyas' wealth. Of course, as the youngest child, Himeno's slice of the pie wouldn't be that large.

"Are any of the poor students in need of money?" Sayuri said. "I could easily give each of you 10 billion yen if I so desired, so please pay no attention to Monokuma."

Himeno couldn't help but crack a smile at Sayuri's impression of her.

"I thank you for your generosity, my lady," Himeno said, "but enough people buy my manga, despite its lack of appeal for heterosexual men and lesbians, that I have more than enough money despite my more modest upbringing."

Sayuri giggled.

"I don't know about you, but I'm taking Monokuma's offer," Chiyuri said, "since I, Yuichi Asakura, care more about the money than I do for our leader's platitudes. Unless she cares to entertain us with a speech about how killing for money is unconscionable?"

I shrugged.

"I guess I could say something," I said, "maybe something along the lines of how if you kill someone, I'll make sure you get caught and executed, right?"

Himeno shook her head.

"To be honest, Akira," Himeno said, "while you have proven your skill for detective work, the 'you' in this roleplaying exercise hasn't, so none of us have any reason to be afraid of you just yet."
Perhaps Nagato-san believes in you, but her character has little faith in yours, so she- or rather, he-will plot murder, fully confident that he will succeed and get away with it."

I nervously chuckled, and let off a long sigh.

"Well, I did what I could," I said. "I don't think I have what it takes to lead, after all... not that I'd ever claimed to."

"I appreciate your honesty, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "and your participation in this exercise, which I can say is now concluded. I fully admit that I am not the best leader, but would appreciate your help in doing better. If you have any suggestions, advice or constructive criticism, please feel free to share them with me."

I saw Himeno nod, and I followed suit. While Himeno didn't completely believe in Higurashi, she, at the very least, liked him better than those clowns in the anti-Higurashi group, which made two of us. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to stop the killing game on his own, but he was a valuable part of this group, so I hoped we wouldn't lose him.

Not long after the roleplaying exercise concluded, I decided to visit Nagato-sensei for the first time in a while.

"Good evening, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said.

"Good evening, Nagato-sensei," I said. "I'm sorry I haven't stopped by much lately; I've had a lot on my mind."

"As have I," Nagato-sensei said. "Losing Kojima-san and Taiga-san was troubling enough, but to think that Tatsuki-san might join them..."

I nodded, then sat down.

"There's actually something else I wanted to discuss with you," I said. "Chiyuri told me about her father, and why she's at this school."

Nagato-sensei took a moment to process what I'd said, then smiled faintly.

"I see," Nagato-sensei said. "At this point, there seems to be little reason to keep Chiyuri's parentage secret, despite the stigma. I'm glad that she willingly told you, though."

"I do have a question, though," I said. "While Asakura doesn't seem like a very good person, isn't it possible that Chiyuri ended up taking the spot of someone who might have deserved it?"

"Perhaps," Nagato-sensei said. "From what I understand, those who, like Chiyuri, benefit from connections, tend to be awarded relatively obscure Ultimate titles in which there are relatively few contenders- quite unlike your Ultimate Actress title, for one- but I will concede that it is possible that there was a Tech Support prodigy we overlooked."

So Nagato-sensei was honest enough to acknowledge the possible consequences of her actions. That being said, she wasn't done speaking.

"However," Nagato-sensei said, "I do believe Chiyuri has a talent for helping others, a talent that should be recognized. For much of her life, she's been dismissed as talentless, or judged for the circumstances under which she was born. Rather than pay for her parents' mistakes, she should be honored for what she has achieved on her own. The standards for Chiyuri may not have been as
rigorous as the ones you faced, the board hadn't seen some aptitude in her, she would likely have been sent to the Reserve Course free of charge. All I could do was recommend my daughter, and the final decision was up to the board. As for whether their decision was the right one... I, at least, believe so."

I couldn't argue with that point. It was only a stroke of good fortune that my dad's mistake didn't end up causing trouble for the wife and daughter he left behind. It made me wonder what would've happened if Chiyuri's dad had survived long enough to marry Nagato-sensei.

"Well, I guess what's done is done," I said. "For better or worse, Chiyuri's here, and I'll do everything I can to make sure that she gets out of here safely."

"Thank you very much, Azuki-san," Nagato-sensei said, bowing as she was seated. "Please look after my daughter."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. I didn't yet know whether I could keep this promise, but I damn well intended to.

As bedtime drew near, I rejoined Chiyuri in our cabin. She'd already chanced into her nightgown, having done the laundry for both of us to prepare us for tomorrow.

"So this is everything you were able to find?" Chiyuri said.

"Pretty much," I said. "I take it you didn't have any more luck, right?"

Chiyuri shook her head.

"Unfortunately, no," Chiyuri said. "By the time I got there, most of the supplies had already been claimed. By my rough calculations, we should have enough food and water to stay overnight, but if we're staying longer, we'll need to find some more."

I nodded. While it wasn't a good idea to assume we'd be able to scrounge up more food and water, we didn't really have a choice. There was a limit to how much water we could carry, and since most of the food we had would go bad if not refrigerated, there was a limit to how much we could bring with us. Unfortunately, Monokuma probably knew that, too.

"By the way, Akira-san," Chiyuri said, "thank you for taking part in the roleplaying exercise."

"You're welcome," I said. "You may not believe me, but I really tried my hardest back there."

"I do," Chiyuri said, "although it's a bit surprising that you don't think you're a better leader than Higurashi-san."

"I sure as hell wish I was," I said, "since we deserve a real choice when it comes to leaders. If, for example, the only people who audition for roles in a movie are phoning it in, then it'll end up sucking. Likewise, nepotism aside, Talent High School has a pretty large pool of prospective students, doesn't it?"

Chiyuri nodded.

"It does," Chiyuri said. "At first, there weren't that many students who wanted to come here unless they didn't have much of a chance of getting into a good high school, but as successful graduates bolstered the school's reputation, more talented individuals became interested in attending. Mom once said there's a bit of a chicken and egg process when it comes to schools- they need good
students for a better reputation, but they also need to prove that they're worth attending."

"Well, I guess that's the problem," I said. "The most Higurashi- or any other would be leader- can do for us is get us to not kill each other, and the only way to do that is by being really persuasive. Meanwhile, Monokuma's giving us concrete reasons for graduation, meaning that even those who don't think it's worth screwing over everyone else to save yourself can be tempted."

While Yamazaki and Kojima were probably selfish enough to at least consider graduating, Tatsuki wasn't. Sure, she cared more about her sister than the rest of us, but if not for that motive, she probably never would have considered graduation as long as Tatsuki was alive.

"I guess that's true," Chiyuri said, "but perhaps we could think of it as a question of what you want. Would you really risk your life and sacrifice one of your companions for a small chance of escaping the relative safety of the Ursa Major for a world that would be in ruins? I don't know how convincing that is, but..."

"It isn't half bad," I said. "If nothing else, it's better than anything I could think of."

As we went to bed, I realized that as much as I wanted to leave the ship, there were worse things than being stuck here. I had food, drinkable water and shelter. While a couple of my fellow passengers were real assholes, most of them were tolerable, and I'd actually made some friends. Maybe I could risk my life to get out of here, but I sure as hell wasn't going to risk the lives of the friends I made, or even the assholes I couldn't stand. I could only hope that no matter how bad things got, the others would continue to feel the same way.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*Since you had your chance to guess how things will turn out, I'll take the opportunity to spoil the ending.*

*All of the classmates turn out to be alive- their "deaths" were just part of some elaborate prank.*

*There wasn't just one traitor- everyone besides poor Azuki-san was in on the scheme.*

*Nagato-san's father is alive, and he's actually Asakura-san.*

*Psych! I really got you there, didn't I?*

*All I do is say the word "spoil" and people pee their pants.*

*But hey, even if I was kidding, at least you know what won't happen later on.*

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**Author's Notes**

So now you know Chiyuri's backstory. Not only is she a beneficiary of the schools' nepotism, but she's also an illegitimate child, something that bears a greater social stigma in Japan than it does in the West. Incidentally, one detail that isn't delivered in the narration (since it's one that Chiyuri wouldn't openly acknowledge), is that Chiyuri is the cousin of Reiko Mitamura, from my first fic.

Without spoiling too much, Chiyuri isn't the only beneficiary of nepotism in this fic- there are at least two other students who benefited from connections in the same way. Who else do you think got in on the basis of their connections, not their talents? And is the traitor among that group?
This chapter drives home the differences between Azuki and Miura. While in the third chapter of my previous fic, Miura tried to mediate a dispute, here, Azuki is a participant in said dispute. While Miura takes her first steps toward becoming a leader, Azuki realizes that she isn't any better at leading than Higurashi is.

The next chapter will feature the third island. If you want to guess who'll die next based on appearances, here's a hint- Tatsuki, Himemiya and Chiyuri will be fairly prominent this Chapter. If you'd like to choose based on who hasn't lost their roommates, here's a brief refresher about who's in which cabins; the deceased are in parentheses.

F1: Tatsuki (Taiga)
F2: Sasaki, Mihama
F3: Himemiya (Tsukimura)
F4: Azuki, Chiyuri
M1: Kumakura (Yamazaki)
M2: Kurogane (Kojima)
M3: Higurashi and Kirishima
M4: Asakura and Karita

The omake features Himemiya and Sasaki, after the roleplaying session.

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**Omake**

*Sasaki's POV*

Himemiya-san and I stayed behind in the lounge after the other roleplayers left.

"You're quite the comedian, Sasaki-san," Himemiya-san said, "not to mention good at making an impression of me even though we've known each other for only a little over two weeks."

"Thank you, Himemiya-san," I said, "and the same goes for you."

Himemiya-san giggled, but then turned serious.

"I do have a question for you, though," Himemiya-san said. "Do you think that the difference in our social status makes things awkward?"

I paused to think for a moment. As tempting as it was to say "no" without any hesitation, I knew this question required careful consideration.

"I think it does lead to some differences in perspective," I said, "but I don't think those are insurmountable. There's the old saying that you walk a mile in another person's shoes."

"Exactly," Himemiya-san said, pleasantly. "Kanae and I once swapped roles- she played my mistress, and I played her servant. I got a feel for what it was like to have to talk formally with her, and she found out what it was like to be treated so formally by a friend. Of course, the head maid saw us and Kanae got in trouble."
"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I guess that's why she found it difficult to treat you differently."

"It was," Himemiya-san said, "but to be honest, I enjoy interacting people who are different from me, since if they're willing to accept said differences, we can learn a lot from one another. That's why Talent High School is more fulfilling in some ways than the one I used to attend, and why I treasure the chance to interact with the rest of you, even the ones I may not get along well with."

I nodded. My old school was fairly strict, too, so most of the students were serious, hard-working and competitive. Miharu-chan would have fit in well there, but I probably wouldn't have met some of the others there, especially since it was an all-girls school.

"Anyway, I might have been joking around before, but I was serious about one thing," Himemiya-san said. "I do wish that the main couple of Breakneck Canyon were both women, rather than men."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Himemiya-san," I said, "but does that mean you're a..."

My heart fluttered as I waited for Himemiya-san's response. A few gay men had written me fan letters, but I'd never met someone who'd been willing to come out of the closet.

"A lesbian?" Himemiya-san said. "I am."

"Wow, really?" I said, and Himemiya-san nodded. "I didn't think you'd admit it so readily."

"I'd never tell my family about it," Himemiya-san said, "since I could very well be disowned if I ended up pursuing a relationship with another woman, rather than a respectable man. In fact, I've only ever told Kanae and Akira. But I feel I can trust you with it, Sasaki-san, since you seem like you have an open mind on that subject, not to mention that you accept those who are different for you."

I smiled and thanked Himemiya-san, but knew that she was only half right- the only difference between us was that I was also interested in boys. We were different in many ways- she was extremely rich while I was middle class, her family was large while mine was small, she was often formal and distant while I was informal and friendly, and her talent was a traditional sport while mine was a modern art form- but her being a lesbian while I was bisexual was probably the most important commonality we had that I knew of.

Of course, what would happen if we both were able to return home and get back to our old lives? We'd once again start going to our old schools, which were in separate prefectures, and quite possibly drift apart. Himemiya-san's parents probably wouldn't approve of her associating with someone like me, so she'd never introduce me to them. Maybe that was why she was still a bit distant, and if so, I couldn't fault her for that. Of course, it made me a bit sad, and I wondered if she felt the same way, too.
Chapter III, Part 2

Day 16

Chiyuri and I woke up to yet another morning of the killing game, wondering if we'd make landfall today, as we expected.

"Good morning, Akira-san," Chiyuri said.

"Morning, Chiyuri," I said.

We checked the weather, and saw that it would be sunny all day today.

"So I guess we're going to a new island today," I said. "The weather seems decent, all things considered."

While talking about the weather was probably the most banal conversation topic possible, it was actually of significant interest to me, so I'd written down all the daily forecasts in my notebook. Perhaps sooner or later, the small clues- from the things we observed on a daily basis to everything that seemed out of place- would become important for solving the big mysteries, just like they were in the class trials.

"True," Chiyuri said. "I've noticed that it seems to be roughly the temperatures for spring in the part of Japan where I live- cool enough that I'm comfortable wearing the blazer, but warm enough that I don't need additional layers of clothing."

"That sounds about right," I said. "I'm guessing that however many years have passed since we entered the school, it's probably still mid to late April."

"I wonder if the temperature will change as spring turns to summer," Chiyuri said, "since at the start of June, students usually switch to short sleeves and leave their blazers at home. As for Mom, she wears a short sleeved blouse and a skirt instead of a suit when the weather's warm."

"I don't know if our cruise will last that long," I said. "The worst-case scenario aside, we've taken three days to reach each island and spent three days at the previous two islands. At that rate, I guess we'll reach the final island by Day 33- which is early May if my previous assumption's true. As for what happens then... who knows?"

I had to admit that I wasn't looking forward to getting to the last island. Even if Monokuma decided to let us go for some reason, by that point, at least six more of us would have died, cutting the current group of survivors in half. How many friends would I lose if I survived that long, and how much suffering would the rest of us endure? Those weren't questions I wanted to answer, so I decided to forget about them for now.

We headed to the dining hall, and sat with Higurashi and Kirishima for breakfast. We'd only just started eating when Monokuma arrived.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "Are you, by any chance, getting sick of being cooped up aboard the Ursa Major day in, day out?"

Nobody seemed to agree. Three days wasn't an unreasonably long time to spend at sea, especially considering that we weren't getting seasick for some reason. While we were glad to set foot on dry
land, the worst things seemed to happen while the ship was docked there, even if the trials themselves took place in the bowels of the Ursa Major.

"Well, if you are, I've got some good news for you," Monokuma said. "At 8 AM, you'll arrive at the third island, where you'll be able to enjoy the great outdoors."

"Ah, yes, camping," Higurashi said. "I'm afraid to ask what you have in mind."

"It won't be too bad, Higurashi-san," Monokuma said. "After all, the killing part is up to you. You can stay on the ship if you like, but that'll mean breaking the rules and getting punished. You might as well take your chances with the island since in that case, your death is the worst thing that can happen there."

"So it's a no-win situation either way," Karita said.

"Depends on how you look at it," Monokuma said. "Eat up, and remember- if you want to explore the island, you've got to get off by 9. Later!"

Monokuma bid us goodbye, then disappeared.

"Well, it looks like our choice is pretty obvious," Asakura said. "Getting off this ship may have its share of downsides, but you can only stay on it if you have a death wish."

Asakura glanced at Tatsuki as he spoke. Higurashi, who was seated at his table, frowned disapprovingly and shook his head.

"I think most of us want to survive," Higurashi said, "for better or for worse. In the end, all of us have our own choices to make, and are responsible for the consequences."

With that one simple statement, Higurashi had made a statement that was profound in multiple ways. For most of us, that meant taking supplies to the island, and behaving ourselves while we were there. For Tatsuki, that meant reminding her she had a choice- to throw her life away (and possibly bring someone else down with her), or continue to live on and fight with us as a member of our group.

As we approached the island, I walked onto the deck and joined Himeno there. We were fairly close to the island, probably no more than a few kilometers away, but it was definitely a lot bigger than the last two- probably several kilometers wide, at minimum.

I saw Himeno wearing a button-down shirt and overalls, courtesy of Tatsuki. It was a bit smaller on her than it was on the other two, but she'd adjusted by loosening the suspender straps. She'd also taken her bow and arrows with her, possibly to hunt, although the lack of sharp metal arrowheads made them less than useful, to put it mildly.

"So how do I look?" Himeno said.

"Not at all like the daughter of an insanely wealthy family," I said.

Himeno giggled.

"Sasaki-san said the same thing," Himeno said, "although she has a matching outfit. Since we don't have gym uniforms or other casual clothing, this will have to do."

"What about Tachibana?" I said. "She has the remaining pair, doesn't she?"
Himeno sighed.

"She does," Himeno said, "but she hadn't changed when we went to breakfast. I told her to head back to her cabin and change before we land, but it's up to her to actually do so."

I nodded. If Tatsuki wanted to die, the easiest way, as well as one that wouldn't take anyone down with her, would be to simply stay on the ship until Monokuma's deadline passed. Like Higurashi said, it was up to her.

"Anyway, as you can guess, we'll probably be camping outdoors," I said. "How does that compare to the mansion you grew up in?"

Himeno giggled.

"Not well at all," Himeno said, "but the same goes for practically any room apart from a luxury hotel suite. I actually don't mind, though, since I thought my old room was a bit large for my tastes."

"Wow," I said. "I honestly never thought I'd hear you say that."

"It's actually not too surprising if you think about it," Himeno said. "If you saw your best friend living in accommodations that were much more modest than your own, wouldn't you feel a little guilty about being better off?"

I couldn't speak from personal experience. Since my mom and I lived in a relatively small apartment, my best friend, namely Chiyuri, would probably have to be living in a slum to be much worse off than me. That being said, I knew where Himeno was coming from.

"Oh, you mean Kanae," I said.

"Exactly," Himeno said. "Some children of privilege grow up spoiled and unaware of what their less fortunate peers have to go through, simply because they haven't experienced how the other 99 percent live, but I don't consider myself one of them. If nothing else, I understand that life can be terribly unfair."

I nodded. There were many times when I wondered why we were unfortunate enough to be betrayed by one of our own and end up lost at sea, stuck in this killing game. That being said, when I considered what must have happened to the rest of the world, maybe we were more fortunate than the millions- or even billions- who perished in the worldwide turmoil.

"Then again," Himeno said, "despite being a 'mere' servant, Kanae still had a comfortable and safe place to sleep, so I'm not sure how well she'd have taken to camping. Since she was more of an indoors type, save for her work in the gardens, I don't think she'd have much fun, at least not if she had to do it in her kimono."

"Well, we're all outside of our comfort zones in one way or another," I said, "and Monokuma wouldn't have it any other way."

They said whatever didn't kill you made you stronger, but maybe they had it backwards- how much you could survive proved how strong you were. The thirteen of us had endured a great deal so far, which meant Monokuma would probably up the ante to force us to our breaking points. The only question was who would end up snapping first.

Not long after 8 AM, we disembarked from the boat, walked down the gangplank and stood on the
beach on the south end. The island was relatively flat, with an evergreen forest in the center, and I
could see a few buildings above the tree line, although I couldn't clearly identify what they were.

A few of us had taken backpacks from the storage room. I did a last-minute sweep of the storage
room, and found we had revealed that we'd cleaned out the stock of water bottles.

By the time I joined up with the others, I counted ten people- apart from the imprisoned Nagato-
sensei, only Tatsuki was missing. A few minutes later, when I was beginning to think she'd chosen
to stay behind and commit suicide by Monokuma, she appeared, wearing her overalls and a button-
down shirt and carrying a backpack.

"So you decided to come with us, Tachibana-san," Higurashi said.

Tatsuki nodded.

"To be honest, I still don't know what the future holds for me," Tatsuki said, "or how I could ever
prove I deserve to stay alive when Kojima-kun and Taiga are dead. But everyone else who is still
alive has taken a step onto a new island, into the unknown, so I'll do the same."

Tatsuki walked down the gangplank and stepped onto the beach.

The moment Tatsuki arrived, Monokuma presented himself, standing at the doorway Tatsuki had
just exited.

"Good, it looks like everyone's here," Monokuma said. "Well, let's get this show on the road."

With a snap of his fingers, Monokuma caused the gangplank to retract. While I was never the last
to get off the ship, nor did I stick around wherever the ship docked when 9 AM rolled around,
something didn't seem right.

"Wait a minute," I said. "It isn't 9 AM yet."

"Of course not, Azuki-san," Monokuma said, "but I have two things to say to that. First, the
deadline's just to get the lot of you onto the island in a timely manner, so once you're all off, there's
no point in waiting until 9 on the dot. Second, I decided to change things up a bit while you're
here."

We froze in horror. We'd had various expectations about what the camping trip might involve, but
we were hoping that it wouldn't be this bad. In the best-case scenario, someone would get killed,
we'd solve the murder, and the killer would get executed. As for the worst-case scenario, it wasn't
a graduation that resulted in one murder victim, eleven executed spotless and one killer going free-
it was twelve of us starving to death and Nagato-sensei being left to her fate.

"Your motive this time is simple," Monokuma said. "You don't leave the island until someone gets
murdered. If that happens, we'll have a class trial, and you know the drill. If that doesn't happen,
you stay on the island for as long as your supplies allow you to survive."

"But what about the ship?" Higurashi said. "Isn't there a rule that requires us to return by 9 PM?"

"That rule's been waived," Monokuma said, "just like it was on the night of the costume party.
Check your handbooks."

I opened up my handbook and saw the new rule.

"What about food and water?" Tatsuki said.
"There's some hidden around the island," Monokuma said, holding up a plastic water bottle and a box of rations, "but there's not enough to go around, if you know what I mean."

In other words, Monokuma was probably hoping we'd kill each other in a fight over the food, which was probably more sadistic than not giving us any at all.

"Speaking of things to find," Monokuma said, "somewhere on the island, there's something that will enable you to leave without murdering something. Feel free to look for it, but watch out for the traps, which are triggered by pressure plates. Triggering one could cause your own death, or someone else's. In the latter case, it'd be a golden opportunity to fool everyone and get away, with no one else the wiser."

So that was Monokuma's ultimate goal- make us desperate, give us a small ray of hope, and watch us kill each other over it.

"If that's it, then I'll be going now" Monokuma said.

"Wait!" Chiyuri said. "What about Mom?"

"Oh, don't worry, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "Your mother will be given food, drink and free reign of the ship, save for your cabins, the courtroom and the bridge. I want to keep things fair for her, since she can't forage for food and water like you and the others can. Of course, there's a catch- after the first person dies of natural causes, I'll cut off Nagato-sensei's supply of food until a murder occurs. Think of that as a little extra incentive."

Chiyuri looked absolutely pale. The good news was that Nagato-sensei wasn't in any danger... for now. The bad news was that once people started starving to death, Nagato-sensei would probably have a few days to live, at most.

"With that, I bid you adieu," Monokuma said. "Stop killing time, and start killing each other!"

As I pondered this, Monokuma headed back inside the Ursa Major and shut the door behind him.

"So now what?" Kurogane said.

"First, we should take a moment to calm down," Higurashi said. "Our situation right now may be dire, but it's precisely because it's dire that we can't afford to make any mistakes."

We took a deep breath. When we thought about it, the situation now was in many ways like the situation we'd faced at the start of the killing game, just over two weeks ago- we were trapped in an unfamiliar location and told that the only way out was to kill someone. I wished I could say that we'd learned a lot since then, but while that wasn't quite true, our situation now was not an unfamiliar one.

"That's right, the traps," Karita said. "Of course Monokuma wouldn't leave a way out of here that doesn't involve murder- assuming even that isn't a trick- without making looking for it a dangerous prospect."

"Judging from what Monokuma just said, if anyone falls prey to one of the traps, it will count as a murder," Mihama said. "We must be careful around them."

"That's right," Kumakura said, "but that's not the only danger. We don't know how much food or drinkable water is on the island, so we could end up starving."

"Assuming we last that long," Himeno said. "Personally, I'm most worried about people killing
each other in a dispute over the essentials."

It seemed kind of strange that Monokuma would let us have any food or water, but perhaps, as Himeno just said, he was hoping we'd fight over our limited resources. In fact, I couldn't see Monokuma being happy if someone died of natural causes or in one of the traps, so perhaps the scarcity and the hazards were merely means to an end.

"Then let me propose another rule to impose on ourselves," Higurashi said. "All food supplies must be handed over to me or to Nagato-san- whoever is more easily accessible at the moment- and we will store them in an agreed-upon location. We will distribute the food and water equitably to ensure that no one starves."

"Yeah, totally fair," Asakura said. "So the people who work their butts off get the same as the ones who sit on their asses?"

"Our expectation is that everyone will work, or at least contribute in some way," Higurashi said, "but our goal is for everyone to live. I would rather not have to coerce anyone into working by threatening to deny them food, so I hope that each of us will understand that we must work together to survive."

Asking for cooperation and trust in the killing game was a tall order, but none of us wanted to starve, so I doubted that even the laziest person would slack off now.

"That's a fair point, Nobuhiro-kun," Sayuri said, "so what do you need us to do?"

"Our first priority is to explore the island," Higurashi said. "I see a potentially important building in the middle of the forest, so we should head there first."

With Higurashi leading the way, we walked through the woods, toward the center of the island. The hike through the forest wasn't more than a few kilometers, but took longer than we thought, since no one had blazed a trail through it. The fact that a group as large as ours had trouble moving quickly without leaving anyone behind or running into any traps didn't help. By the time we'd made it to the other side, and Higurashi had taken attendance to confirm that all eleven of his classmates had made it, it was about noon.

There was a ruined prison in the center of the island, which seemed surprisingly small- it could probably hold no more than a few dozen prisoners, as well as the warden, the guards and other staff. Then again, not only was I not all that great at estimating sizes or distances, it was hard to tell how many people the buildings we found here were meant for, especially not when only the sixteen of us seemed to have set foot in them.

We went into through the prison through the only entrance- what would have been the entryway in the south of the prison, which was barely working and had a green circle spray-painted on the front. There was a security gate and checkpoint that, without locks to keep them shut or guards to man them, were functionally useless. I saw a metal detector that looked like the one we'd passed through to get to the party, but it didn't go off. Curious, I grabbed a pair of handcuffs from the nearby guard station, the largest and densest piece of metal I could find, and ran them through the detector.

"What's with this?" I said. "It doesn't seem to be picking up the metal."

"It seems as though the device, while connected to an outlet, is not receiving electricity," Kirishima said, "so if there is a generator or power plant on the island, it no longer works.."
"So in other words, there is no refrigeration," Mihama said, "meaning that we will have to improvise when it comes to preserving our food."

In short, the food we'd taken with us to the island would likely go bad within a matter of hours. While it wouldn't have lasted us all that long, it was a bit unsettling that we had no way of keeping our food edible.

"By the way, I'm curious about something," Sayuri said. "Why have we never had to charge our student handbooks?"

As I took a look at my handbook, and realized that there wasn't anywhere I could plug in a charging cable, Monokuma appeared out of nowhere.

"That's easy, Sasaki-san!" Monokuma said. "These babies have high-tech batteries that can last for years without needing to be recharged. Besides, how long would you say you use yours every day?"

"No more than an hour," Sayuri said. "I sometimes check the map if I get lost, look at the Monokuma File in the documents folder during an investigation, and occasionally check other things. The rest of the time, it's dormant. Of course, my smartphone doesn't last sixteen hours without being charged."

"That's because your phone's a primitive piece of trash," Monokuma said. "Can it survive being stepped on by an elephant? Hit with a thousand baseballs shot out of a pitching machine? Anything short of being tossed into a sauna? If the answer's no, then get an upgrade the next time you're in civilization... if you do ever return, that is."

Monokuma departed as suddenly as he'd arrived.

"I don't get why he'd pop in so suddenly just to answer Sayuri's question," I said, "but at least we won't have to worry about our handbooks running out of juice on this island."

"My thoughts exactly, Akira-chan," Sayuri said.

We found a floorplan for the prison nearby, which was weathered with age. It showed the prison as a set of walls, with stairways to them in the guard towers at each corner, as well as a few buildings in the central courtyard. Just south of the center, there was a cell block, with four two-person cells on the ground floor and four more on the second floor. Directly adjacent to the cell block, on the west, was the cafeteria, while the gym was on the east. The guards' command center and the warden's office was in the northwest corner, with a gallows just outside it.

"That's odd," I said. "It seems to have most of the facilities a prison would need, but it doesn't seem like a real one."

"Perhaps it is no ordinary prison," Kirishima said, "and its purpose is the reason why it was hidden away on this remote island."

"So we're still pretty far from civilization, huh?" I said.

Kirishima shrugged. Either he'd have to check his notes for the answer, or he wasn't sure of it himself.

We also saw a crude map of the island, shaped a bit like a bullseye, each ring a different terrain. The outermost ring was the beach, which was probably the thinnest of the rings. The next ring was a wooded area, which broke at a few points- a building to the north labeled "Office Complex," a
building to the west labeled "Mall," and a few buildings to the east labeled "Dormitories." Past the woods, there was a grassy area, and in the center, lay the prison.

We took a look inside the monitor room, which had monitors connected to all the cameras throughout the prison. While I had seen a few cameras on the way in, thanks to the power outage, the monitors showed nothing but our own reflections. On this island, security seemed to be up to the Monodrones, at least while we were outdoors, since I'd seen a few following us as we'd trudged through the forest. As for the prison cameras, maybe they weren't connected to this room, but to wherever Monokuma was watching us.

While inside, Chiyuri checked under the desk and found our first ration and water bottle, which looked exactly like the one Monokuma described.

"I found some food and water, Higurashi-san," Chiyuri said.

"Good, Nagato-san," Higurashi said. "Please hang onto them for now. We should hold off on eating them until after we've exhausted our supply of perishable foods."

Chiyuri nodded, then opened up her backpack and put what she'd procured inside.

I decided to check out the first aid box near the guard station, and pried it open to see if there were any supplies inside. Instead, I found another water bottle and ration, as well as the fourth Hidden Monokuma.

"Congratulations, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "That's three for you, one for Nagato-san. At this rate, Cabin F4 will win the Hidden Monokuma Collectathon."

"I didn't know that there was even such a competition," I said, "or even that anyone else was competing. It's a bit like winning a part that no one else auditions for."

"Maybe so," Monokuma said, "but you two girls are winning nonetheless, and you should be proud. Let me take it back to your cabin."

Monokuma took the Hidden Monokuma and returned to the ship.

"What was that about?" Higurashi said.

"It's pretty much what Monokuma just told you," I said. "He's challenged us to find all six Hidden Monokumas- one in the ship, and one on each island except for where we started and the last one- just for bragging rights."

"And you took him up on it," Asakura said. "I should've known that you'd waste your time on that bullshit."

I let off a faint sigh, since a part of me had hoped I could rub my "victory" in Asakura's face, along with the fact that Chiyuri had collected more than he ever would. The problem was that he only seemed to care about being the only Ultimate Tech Support on this cruise, so if I gloated at me, he'd just laugh it off.

"In any case," Higurashi said, "both Azuki-san and Nagato-san have found their first rations, which will help keep us alive for longer on this island. Keep up the good work, you two; I hope everyone else can be as productive."

With a "Thanks, Higurashi," I handed him my newfound food and water supplies, smirking as Asakura glared at me. It seemed as though in the end, I had gotten one over on him.
Once inside the prison courtyard, we headed straight to the cafeteria, a large and spacious building with several long tables that could seat dozens of prisoners.

We sat down and had lunch, eating up the food we'd taken with us. A preliminary scan of the kitchens and food storage had uncovered no food at all apart from a few rations; even the broken-down refrigerators were essentially empty. Once we were mostly finished with our meal, Higurashi called for our attention.

"May I have your attention, everyone?" Higurashi said. "This island presents a unique challenge for us. Not only is it the largest of the three islands we've stopped at since we set out, but it is also so far the only one in which we do not even have our basic necessities. Because of that, we cannot afford to simply wander aimlessly like we had in the past. I would like to divide us into teams, each of which has a specific goal for their search, and an area to search."

I listened attentively, as did the others.

"I'd like four people to search the prison," Higurashi said, "namely, Nagato-san, Azuki-san, Tachibana-san and Mihama-san. Your job will be to survey the prison and determine whether it will be a safe place for us to rest at night."

In other words, a group composed entirely of girls. That was fine by me, since I generally got along better with the girls than the guys, and considered Chiyuri my best friend in the class. One of my old schoolmates, a fellow tomboy who considered me her only female friend, probably wouldn't have been happy with the arrangement, at least until she got to know the Asshole Trio.

"Sounds easy enough," I said.

"I suppose it is," Higurashi said, "but it's also important work, so I'll be counting on the four of you to do a good job. Nagato-san, you're in charge of the group."

"Yes, sir," Chiyuri said enthusiastically.

Tatsuki and Mihama nodded. So far, nobody objected to their group assignments, since while this was outside all of our comfort zones, we realized we could have gotten stuck with a worse job.

"I'll lead a group to search the island," Higurashi said, "and would like Asakura-kun, Kurogane-kun and Sasaki-san to come with me. Our goal will be to get a feel for the terrain and scout out the various buildings on the island. We'll mainly stick to the edges of the island, but will investigate anything that piques our interest. Of course, if we find anything worth investigating in detail, we will do so as a group."

While my group's task was important for the short term, Higurashi's group's task was for the long term- relatively speaking, of course, since a few days from now counted as the distant future in the killing game. My group's efforts would help us find a place to sleep for the night, while Higurashi's would potentially find us a way off this rock.

"I'd like one last group to search the woods," Higurashi said, "a group composed of the remaining students- Himemiya-san, Kirishima-kun, Karita-kun and Kumakura-kun. You will be responsible for finding possible sources of food on the island- animals, fruit, whatever you can get. It may be possible that we will be here for a while, and will need to keep ourselves fed."

Kirishima looked rather skeptical. While Higurashi wasn't the most successful leader, we at least recognized him as being in charge of us in Nagato-sensei's absence, and understood that Chiyuri, his assistant, would serve as his replacement in his absence. Unfortunately, none of us were real
leaders, so Kirishima was probably wondering why he'd been chosen.

"That is all well and good," Kirishima said, "but unless I am mistaken, none of us have any sort of survival training, so we will not be of much help."

"I know," Higurashi said, "but this is a task that must also be done. Can I count on you to lead the group?"

"You can," Kirishima said, "so long as you keep your expectations reasonable."

Higurashi smiled and nodded. Having finished his assignments, he decided to move on to his next step.

"I'd like to say a few words about the group leaders' roles," Higurashi said. "Your task is to guide your search and coordinate your efforts, so when you give an order, the others should follow it. However, you should also listen to your groupmates, particularly if they raise a concern or notice something. After all, your role as a leader is to help the group as a whole work more efficiently, so helping one another do your jobs is part of your job. Does anyone have any further questions or wish to swap places with someone?"

No one responded. Sayuri and Kurogane probably weren't thrilled about being stuck with Asakura, but they knew someone had to put up with them. Since the two of them and Higurashi were probably the nicest classmates who were still alive right now, and they could at least tolerate Asakura, they were probably the best choices for his groupmates.

"Very well," Higurashi said. "Our search will now begin. Once we have finished, or the sun has started setting, we will meet back here for dinner. My team and Kirishima-kun's group are only doing a preliminary sweep of the island, and it would be unwise to wander around after dark."

Higurashi and Kirishima's groups set out for the wilderness. While their destinations were separate, they moved as a single group, at least as far as the gates. After watching them leave, we decided to get to work, splitting up and searching the prison.

After taking a look around the cafeteria and part of the courtyard, Chiyuri and I checked out the cell block building, which was smaller than the map made it look. Of course, considering that there was no indication of what scale the map was, such as one centimeter on the map equaling ten meters in real life, maybe my expectations were off.

The building, like the rest of the prison, had seen better days, with holes in the walls, floors and ceiling; I was amazed that the building didn't come down on my head. The doors opened surprisingly easily; I'd thought that some of them would be stuck, rusted shut or something of the sort.

The cell block had three stories, although the stairs to the upper level had collapsed, and each floor had eight two-person cells. The only furniture inside were two beds, on opposite side walls of the cell, and a small toilet in the back left corner. Tatsuki was inside one such cell, sitting on one of the beds. Chiyuri politely knocked on the bars.

"Please, come in," Tatsuki said. "The doors to these don't lock."

"All right," I said as I opened the door and walked in. "I guess that's a good thing, or else you'd be trapped in here."

We both came in and sat down on the other bed.
"I'm glad we can use these cells," Chiyuri said. "I was afraid we'd have to sleep on the rocks and dirt outside, but with these, it's almost as though we're back in our cabins."

"Almost," I said, "except we're missing a lot of amenities. There's no running water, which means we can't bathe or shower, wash our hands, do laundry, get a glass of water or flush the toilet. We don't have any of the possessions we brought aboard the ship. Like Tachibana said, there aren't any locks, which means nothing to prevent someone from sneaking in and killing us in our sleep."

"Good point," Tatsuki said, "but I think that anyone who'd want to kill you or Nagato-san would end up waking your cellmate, not to mention everyone else here, up."

Just as I assumed that Tatsuki was only saying this because we were sleeping in such close proximity, she got up and pushed open the door to the cell. As it opened, I heard an awful creaking sound.

"So with that, your cellmate would wake up," Tatsuki said, "and once she yells for help, everyone else will come to your aid."

"Got it," I said. "Of course, it still kind of gives me the creeps to sleep in a prison."

"I don't mind," Tatsuki said. "In fact, I'd rather be in a juvenile detention center right now."

I had to admit that Tatsuki had a point. If she'd earned enough money to get a good lawyer, she could easily get a lightened sentence through a plea bargain, if not beat the rap entirely. Japanese juvenile detention centers were hardly five-star hotels, but they were a hell of a lot better than prisons in third-world countries, much less the dungeons of Summer's End. At the very least, her being a minor, combined with the extenuating circumstances, probably meant the death penalty was off the table. Despite that, what she said still bothered me.

"You really think so?" I said. "Sure, I'd rather be anywhere other than here, but ex-cons don't have very good career prospects. All the bad press from a murder conviction would probably make Dragon Girl deader than Kojima."

"Maybe so," Tatsuki said, "but if that did happen, I would think of it as paying my debt to society. Unlike Yamazaki-kun, I have yet to be punished for the murder I committed, or for letting Taiga die in my place."

I glanced at Chiyuri, who shook her head.

"Maybe Monokuma thinks this is your punishment," Chiyuri said, "to be denied what you wanted, and to live on with people hating and distrusting you. I, however, see it differently. Even if you don't think God has a plan for you, there are things you can do while you're still alive, even though your sister is dead."

"I suppose you're right, Nagato-san," Tatsuki said. "I don't know what those things are just yet."

While Chiyuri had wisely chosen to limit how much she spoke to her religion when dealing with someone who probably didn't share it, Tatsuki's issues were too deep-seated for any of us to deal with easily. Her coming to terms with her actions and her sister's actions would be a process that would take a long time, assuming tragedy didn't strike midway through it.

We decided to give Tatsuki some space for now and resume our investigation. The prison was the smallest part of the island, but there was a lot of ground to cover, and a lot of things to examine in detail, so we had to get cracking if we wanted to give Higurashi a good report.
Chiyuri and I examined the courtyard, a large barren expanse of dirt, and saw a gallows set up in the middle, with a noose tied to the beam and a trapdoor beneath it. There was a pressure plate next to the trapdoor, a slightly raised board. Mihama was examining this device from a safe distance.

"Hello, Azuki-san, Nagato-san," Mihama said, pointing at the pressure plate. "Please be careful around the device, since this pressure plate will trigger the trapdoor."

"Got it," I said. "I guess this thing's supposed to be used to execute prisoners, but what does Monokuma expect us to use it for? To kill someone?"

"That seems most likely," Mihama said, "although I doubt it would be possible to use it for murder. After all, a hanging requires the condemned to be restrained and semi-cooperative."

One thing I'd struck me as odd about all the fictional executions I'd seen and read about was that the prisoners, despite being restrained, didn't even try to run away. Even Yamazaki, who had to be pulled into the execution chamber, didn't even try to escape the courtroom. But when I did Summer's End, and I considered my character's perspective of her impending execution, it all made sense. Even if she somehow escaped the prison, then she'd have to spend the rest of her life as a penniless fugitive, barely eking out an existence and knowing that she'd failed at what she'd been raised to do all her life. Her only way of achieving anything resembling redemption was to face the headsman's axe with dignity, and that's what she did.

While I was looking around the courtyard, I accidentally stepped on another pressure plate, buried in the dirt nearby. At that point, the trapdoor beneath the noose suddenly opened, startling Chiyuri and Mihama.

"Wh-What was that?" Chiyuri said. "Did someone trigger the pressure plate?"

"I did not, Nagato-san," Mihama said. "Azuki-san pressed a different one, but that was not supposed to trigger the trapdoor."

"Wow, it looks like you've stumbled upon the first death trap on the island!" Monokuma said as he arrived in the courtyard. "There are various pressure plates, tripwires and other hazards that trigger nasty traps when you touch them."

I looked at the gallows and saw a hole in one of the supports for the gallows. Apparently, if it had worked as intended, a dart would have flown out the hole and struck me in the chest.

"About that..." I said. "Mihama was pretty sure that the one over near her was supposed to open the trapdoor, but the one I triggered did. Are there two triggers?"

"There aren't supposed to be," Monokuma said. "Each trap only has one trigger, but I'm guessing those two got mixed up somehow. I'll fix it, but be careful; there might be others like it out there."

Monokuma then left, and I let out a sigh.

"Yeesh," I said. "One misstep here, and it'll probably be the death of me."

"Or of someone else," Mihama said. "Please be careful from here on out; I only hope that the other teams are doing the same."

I nodded. In the killing game, even seemingly innocuous mistakes could have deadly consequences, so it was a bit surprising that the link between the mistake and the consequences was as direct as "You step on a pressure plate, you get shot with a dart and possibly die." Of course, when you died, you died, so everyone had to be extra careful here.
Our last stop on our tour of the prison was the command center and warden's office. The place was in bad shape, with the guards' barracks and other facilities being a disheveled mess, with broken furniture and bullet holes in the walls. It almost looked as though a prison riot had occurred, but I personally didn't think that a disorganized bunch of convicts who'd been locked up for violent crimes and weren't willing to behave themselves for the duration of their sentence were disciplined enough to focus their rage on the guard headquarters.

We managed to make it up to the warden's own office, which was mostly intact, albeit guarded by a pressure plate outside the front door. Said pressure plate, when triggered, caused a dart to launch from a hole in the nearby wall, fly through the air and shatter against the opposite wall, so after testing the trap, we made sure to carefully avoid inadvertently triggering it.

The office itself was relatively spacious, with a few bookshelves, a large desk and a window that offered a nice view of the gallows, and a preliminary examination found no booby traps inside it. Most of the books were in pretty terrible condition, to the point of being completely unreadable. Since they were mostly books of records, books of penal codes, and other things you might find in an office, they didn't exactly make for good light reading.

We did, however, find some potentially interesting finds. There were the blueprints for the prison, which apparently showed how it would look in happier times. The blueprints were meticulously detailed, but left out two things- all the things that were broken down when we got here, and the booby traps.

"That's odd," I said. "I don't see any pressure plates or other traps on these plans."

"They must have been added later," Chiyuri said, "but I'm not sure how they managed the task."

"Me neither," I said. "If the people who built the prison added them, then they should have been part of the plan. If they were meant to keep us out, the people in charge would've been better off removing the stuff they didn't want us to find or burning the whole damn place down."

Inside the warden's desk, Chiyuri discovered a manila folder titled "Experiments," which she showed to me.

"What the hell is this?" I said. "Are they using the prisoners as guinea pigs in their science projects?"

"It seems so," Chiyuri said. "Apparently, the warden is in charge of this privately run prison, and uses various people in it to test the devices being manufactured at the office complex on the island."

"That's pretty fucked up," I said. "I don't care what they did- if, that is, they're guilty of any crimes- but I'm pretty sure that's illegal to keep them in a place like this."

As Chiyuri nodded, I wondered whether this was actually real, Monokuma had decided to spin some sort of elaborate backstory for the ruined area that we'd be exploring, or if it even mattered. Something was very wrong, considering that we hadn't even seen anyone on these islands, and that despite us being missing, no one had come for us. Had three years passed since we'd arrived at Talent High School, or was it closer to three decades, if not centuries? The more clues I got, the less I liked where they seemed to lead.

After looking around the rest of the prison, Chiyuri and I fetched Tatsuki and Mihama, then waited
in the cafeteria. Hoping to conserve energy and avoid fruitlessly burning calories, we sat at the table, chatted about what we'd found, and sipped some of our personal water supply.

Some time later, Himeno's group got back from exploring the woods, exhausted and dirty, but alive and unharmed.

"You're back," Chiyuri said, "I'm glad to see you're all safe."

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Himeno said, "but I wish I had better news. There's no signs of any wildlife on this island whatsoever. I had hoped to use my bow to hunt some prey and cook the meat for dinner, but it seems as though there are no targets whatsoever."

"Are you sure about that?" I said. "Animals can sense people's presence, so maybe they fled upon hearing you approach."

Kirishima nodded.

"We searched the island for any trace of wildlife presence," Kirishima said, "from tracks to droppings to nests and other habitats, but found no trace of them. On the positive side, we did not encounter any insects that could, at best, be a nuisance, and at worst, be carriers of infectious diseases."

I let out a sigh of relief. As desperate as the food situation was, we'd be completely and utterly fucked if we got life-threatening illnesses hundreds of kilometers away from the nearest doctor, even if we weren't in a killing game.

"There is some good news, though," Kumakura said. "We did find some rations on the island."

Kumakura opened his pack and showed several ration packs and bottles of water.

"I'm glad to hear that," Chiyuri said.

"And before you ask, we didn't eat any, as tempting as the prospect was," Karita said. "My word might not mean much, but the other three can vouch for me."

As bleak as the situation was, we could still work together. It probably would only last until people started going crazy with hunger, but as long as we could manage at least this much, then we had a chance.

We waited in the cafeteria for the others to arrive. While we were waiting, I had to take a shit, so I ended up doing things the medieval way and using a makeshift chamber pot, disposing of the piss and shit just outside the prison, then using a convenient container of hand sanitizer on my hands.

Higurashi's team came back just before the agreed-upon deadline of sundown, and convened the meeting inside the cafeteria. The prison and woods teams shared their findings first. Higurashi seemed mildly interested in what we found in the warden's office, but was more concerned about whether we could sleep in the cell block.

"I see," Higurashi said. "It's unfortunate that our food supplies are limited, but I am glad to hear that the prison is a viable shelter."

"Thanks," I said. "What about you guys?"

"We found three buildings that could be worth exploring," Higurashi said. "A mall, some
"You're talking about the traps, aren't you?" Chiyuri said. "Akira-san and I found one near the warden's office, a pressure plate that launches a dart at whoever triggers it. There is also a similar one near the gallows, which triggers the trapdoor during a hanging."

"Indeed I am," Higurashi said. "There seem to be even greater concentrations of traps hidden in the other buildings, but perhaps Monokuma has hidden his secret there."

"You're sure there's more in the others?" I said.

Higurashi nodded, then took out a notebook.

"I found various symbols outside the buildings," Higurashi said, "the kind you'd see on ski slopes. Outside the prison, I saw a green circle painted in graffiti, indicating that the prison was the least dangerous. There were blue squares on the entrances to the mall and dormitories, indicating moderate difficulty. On the office complex door, there was a black diamond."

Technically, those were the difficulty ratings used in America and Europe, but maybe this was a clue. Maybe the prison got taken over by the Americans or something, although it wouldn't explain why all the documents Chiyuri and I found were in Japanese.

"I would also like to discuss the gallows that Nagato-san's group mentioned earlier," Higurashi said. "From this point onward, no one should approach it for any reason."

"A prudent suggestion, Higurashi-kun," Kirishima said, "but in the end, it is most likely that if we hope to leave the island, two people- one victim and one killer- must die. If that is the case, why not use the gallows for its intended purpose?"

Most of us gasped or stared in horror. While we'd experienced two murders and one attempted murder, and voted to sentence two people to death, it was another thing to openly discuss killing someone.

"You can't be seriously proposing such a thing, Kirishima-kun," Higurashi said.

"I am," Kirishima said, "and I would like to discuss this possibility while we are not too hungry or desperate to think clearly. Two deaths in the near future are preferable to the twelve of us and our teacher starving to death over the next few days."

I paused to think. The proposal did have some merit, at least from a purely utilitarian perspective, but I couldn't help but find that it rang a bit hollow.

"Fair enough," I said, "but does that mean that you're volunteering?"

"I said no such thing, Azuki-kun," Kirishima said. "All I said that this was a sacrifice we, as a group should be willing to make, sacrificing those we would be better off without or who are of no use to us."

"Figures," I said. "Ideally, the person who proposes an idea like this should be the one willing to take one for the team. Of course, that's going to be two people in this case."

My theory was that Monokuma had tried this killing game before, and someone had committed suicide for some reason, resulting in a class trial without a living blackened to execute. It would explain why he wanted to be sure to close off that loophole, since I doubt he could've foreseen
"In that case, I'll volunteer," Tatsuki said. "Because Taiga was executed in my stead, I did not end up paying for killing Kojima-kun, so now is as good a time as any."

I saw Karita, Asakura and Kirishima nod in approval, while Himeno, Chiyuri, Higurashi, Kurogane and I looked noticeably unhappy about it.

"I thought you'd say that," Chiyuri said, "but are you certain?"

"I am," Tatsuki said. "I'm not naïve enough to think this will earn me redemption, but it's the least I can do to make up for what I've done."

"Very good, Tachibana-kun," Kirishima said, "but as Azuki-kun said, we will need an additional person to kill you, and then be executed for that murder."

Himeno nodded grimly.

"Indeed you do," Himeno said, "so I will volunteer to execute Tachibana-san."

Sayuri gasped and turned pale.

"Himemiya-san?" Sayuri said. "But why?!

"Apart from the fact that it is the only way to save the rest of us?" Himeno said. "Or the fact that Monokuma's punishment will kill me more quickly than dehydration will? We need someone to serve as an unambiguous culprit for Tachibana-san's murder, lest Monokuma conclude that she committed suicide, and failed to fulfill the requirement."

"You're not wrong about that," Sayuri said, "but why does it have to be you? If you die here, your family will grieve for you."

"Perhaps," Himeno said, "but the Himemiya family has its heir. My eldest brother is a respected executive, and he has a young son who will succeed him. My parents and siblings will grieve my loss, but if they learn that I returned home without doing my utmost for the others, then I doubt they will forgive me."

I found this sort of reasoning hard to accept. Throughout history, many people died for the sake of honor, duty and other virtues that demanded that they sacrifice themselves for a greater cause. Those sacrifices earned empty words of praise that the dead would never get to hear, while those who chose themselves over their duty were mocked as selfish cowards. Maybe I owed a lot to people who had made such sacrifices in the past, but I found any system that conditioned people to give their lives for reasons like that to be pretty fucked up.

Himeno, evidently sensing my discomfort, as well as the fact that Sayuri wasn't any happier, then continued.

"I will admit that I want to go home," Himeno said, "to hold a funeral for Kanae, and to see my family and other friends again. Of course, I know that all of you have your own reasons to want to go back, too. It isn't fair for me to crush all those hopes by graduating, or for all of us to die here on this island because no one is willing to make that sacrifice. I wish it wouldn't have to come to that, but compared to either one of those outcomes, being executed by Monokuma is the lesser evil."

"I can get behind that," I said. "I'd rather not see you die, but the situation is pretty desperate."
Higurashi sighed.

"I must admit that we are short on options," Higurashi said, "but while I agree to Tachibana-san and Himemiya-san's proposal, I would like to do so under three conditions. First, we must spend the next two days investigating this island and seeing if there is anything we can use to find a way out, at which point we will return to the prison. Second, while Tachibana-san and Himemiya-san may be willing to give their lives, I will offer them one last chance to back out. If they are still willing to go through with it, then I will not stop them. Third, the majority of us, including the two who will be sacrificed, must approve of the plan. All those in favor, say 'Aye'."

Higurashi said "Aye" to start the vote, since it was his proposal. Kirishima, Karita and Asakura followed suit immediately, followed by Himeno and Tatsuki. Mihama, Chiyuri and I agreed, while pointing out that we were only doing this with Higurashi's stipulations. Since the proposal had nine out of twelve votes, and would pass anyway, Kumakura and Kurogane remained silent, but Sayuri let out an emphatic "Nay."

"So it seems the majority of us are in favor of the plan, should it come to that," Higurashi said. "I accept this decision, but please remember- this is strictly a last resort. We must do everything in our power to ensure that it does not come to that."

The meeting soon adjourned on a somewhat depressing note, but I . While the idea of finding an alternative way out here was nothing more than a pie in the sky proposition, I had to wonder if Higurashi was more shrewd than I'd given him credit for. He'd said the proposal belonged to Tatsuki and Himemiya, the one who was willing to give her life, not Kirishima. He'd also become willing to accept the fact that some of us might need to give our lives for the rest to survive, although it was possible that he was still confident enough in his Plan A working that we'd never need to resort to this Plan B. While I wasn't terribly optimistic about our chances, I definitely hoped that Plan A would become our ticket off the island.

After the meeting adjourned, I met up with Tatsuki and Himeno, who were still in the cafeteria.

"I'd like to ask you something, Tachibana," I said. "Is this really what you want?"

"Not at all, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said, "since it means Himemiya-san will have to die with me. The last thing I want is another person to die on my account."

Himeno shook her head.

"Not for you, Tachibana-san," Himeno said, "but for each of the ten others trapped on this island, as well as for Nagato-sensei, whose fate is intertwined with our own."

"I feel the same way," Tatsuki said. "The reason I chose to live on after my actions caused Taiga and Kojima-kun's deaths was because there had to be something I could do with my life. By giving my life, I can atone for being willing to sacrifice everyone else here. If someone has to die, it may as well be the person who should have been executed at the end of the second trial."

So that was why Tatsuki hadn't committed suicide just yet.

"I get where you're coming from," I said, "but what if it doesn't have to be that way?"

"Are you talking about Higurashi-kun's idea of searching for the way out?" Tatsuki said. "That doesn't seem likely."

"No, it doesn't," I said, "but there is a possibility, and it should be explored. After all, if Taiga was
the one who was going to hang, would you take her place on the gallows, or find a way to ensure that neither of you has to die?"

Tatsuki paused.

"The latter," Tatsuki said. "The only reason Taiga chose to die in my place was that she believed that the cost of us graduating together would be too high."

"Exactly," I said. "Even if you don't see life as worth living, there are people out there who are sick and tired of the killing game. I, for one, don't want to see two of my friends die."

Himeno gave a bittersweet smile, appreciative of my speaking out and calling her a friend, but clearly regretting that she would choose to die and leave me behind. Tatsuki, however, was downright surprised.

"Friends, huh?" Tatsuki said. "I knew you and Himemiya-san got along well, but I didn't know we were that close."

"If I didn't care, I would have kept my mouth shut at the end of the last trial," I said. "Maybe there was a time you thought your sister was the only one who mattered to you, which was why you chose to save yourself and her while dooming everyone else. If you regret that, then the way to atone is to continue this fight with all of us, and help us make it through alive."

"Thank you, Azuki-san," Tatsuki said. "I do hope that there's another solution to our problem. If not... I hope that you and everyone who hasn't chosen death will make it off the island."

As I left Tatsuki, I realized that as noble as the concept of atonement was, society didn't always accept that. Repentant criminals were sometimes executed even in more civilized societies, since courts often decided that the only way for them to pay for their crimes was with their lives. I'd long accepted and even approved of this, but after seeing Yamazaki's grisly demise, and seeing Taiga die in Tatsuki's place, I began to have second thoughts as to whether it was right for Tatsuki to die for what she'd done, or even for the rest of our sakes, when she could live and seek redemption.

I happened upon Higurashi in the cafeteria, taking out the trash.

"Hey, Higurashi," I said. "Do you need any help?"

"Thank you for offering, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "but I'm fine. I was just taking out the trash to an appropriate receptacle, so as to obey the no littering rule."

For a ruined prison, there wasn't a whole lot of trash laying around. Maybe we had Monokuma's rule to thank for that, or the fact that hardly anyone set foot on the island. After all, if no one set foot on this island before us, then no one could litter, even if there wasn't anyone around to pick it up.

"I'd like to ask you something, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "Do you believe it is ever morally right for leaders to order their subordinates to sacrifice their lives for the greater good?"

I shrugged, wondering why Higurashi was asking me. After all, I was an actress, not an officer in the Self-Defense Force, and even if some of my characters racked up a pretty high body count, I never actually killed anyone.

"I honestly don't know," I said. "On the one hand, I would have more than a few ethical problems with telling someone 'Strap yourself with explosives, walk up to the enemy while pretending to
surrender and then blow yourself up.' On the other hand, if storming an enemy position would result in heavy casualties but change the tide of the battle, as well as the war, I'd do it. Maybe it's because the casualties wouldn't necessarily be inevitable, or because it's for the greater good, but I'd say yes."

Higurashi sighed.

"You're probably right," Higurashi said. "You can't gain anything without giving something up, and there are times when that 'something' is people's lives. But what if you don't get what you want? What if the explosives fail to go off and the suicide bomber is shot dead?"

"Then those people you sacrificed died for nothing," I said bluntly.

"Exactly," Higurashi said. "Some may call people like me naïve for being reluctant to sacrifice anything, but I believe excessive willingness to make sacrifices also has an element of naivety to it. Those who sacrifice others in a cavalier manner tend to place too much faith in the possibility of a reward and forget about the value of what is lost. After all, the soldiers that you'd be losing in that hypothetical scenario aren't just people, but from a practical standpoint, are skilled and highly trained assets that you will need to win the war, and may be talented workers in peace time."

I had to admit that Higurashi had a point. He'd probably be a decent Self-Defense Force officer if he actually had it in to kill someone for his country. Of course, even he had chosen to vote for the blackened in the class trial, if only because the circumstances hadn't left much choice.

"You're probably right about that," I said, "but we probably won't get off this island until there's a murder and an execution, will we?"

"I believe so," Higurashi said solemnly, "but if we do, then two of us will have given our lives so that the rest of us can stay alive, but survival is rather tenuous in this killing game. After all, Kojima-kun and Taiga-san were among those who survived the first class trial, and only lived for days after that."

I considered pointing out that it was their choice. Kojima's decision to try to kill Taiga had resulted in his death, while Taiga would still be alive if she'd simply confessed and allowed her sister to be executed. Of course, the rest of us didn't want to die, either, which was why we'd voted for the blackened both times, and why no one else was willing to volunteer.

"Such is life in the killing game," I said. "Don't get me wrong; I do hope that we find whatever it is we're looking for here, so Himeno and Tachibana won't have to die. It's just that Monokuma wants us to play his 'game,' and so he's giving us all the reasons we need to kill each other."

"I know," Higurashi said. "If it does happen, we may end up having to sacrifice yet another murderer just to stay alive."

While Higurashi was understandably not too keen on the idea of letting some of us die, I noticed that he wasn't dismissing the possibility out of hand, either. It was nice that he was being a bit more realistic for a change, but it was a depressing reminder of how hopeless the situation was. All I hoped for was that even if he came to understand that there was little he could do to stop us from killing each other, a part of him would always remain the same optimistic and kind-hearted young man who didn't want to see any of his classmates die.

As night fell, we settled into our cells for the night. Most of us went with the room assignments we had, with the girls on one side of the hall and the guys on the other. Kurogane, however, offered to
stay with Kumakura so that Karita and Asakura could have cells of their own.

Once we were almost ready for bed, I sat down with Chiyuri.

"So, Chiyuri," I said. "How're you holding up?"

"I'm managing... for now," Chiyuri said. "I never thought I'd end up saying this, but after spending the day trapped on a dangerous island with scarce food, I'm starting to miss the ship."

"Because you can't see your mom?" I said.

Chiyuri looked a bit uncomfortable, but nodded, so I'd clearly hit the nail on the head.

"That's... only part of it," Chiyuri said. "I mean, I do feel that way, but it doesn't seem right for me to complain about it. After all, I'm the only one apart from the twins who's seen any of my family since we found ourselves in this killing game. As for Himemiya-san, she told me that she was only close with her mother- as well as Tsukimura-san, whom she considers family- but I can tell she's torn up about not seeing any of her family again."

"That might be true," I said, "but while I know my mom would be heartbroken if I died here, at least I know she's safe. Meanwhile, if the next blackened gets away with murder- assuming someone can't wait two days or wants to graduate that badly- both you and your mom will get executed. In fact, if someone starves to death here, it's only a matter of time before Nagato-sensei also starves."

"I know," Chiyuri said. "Perhaps Himemiya-san and Tachibana-san's sacrifice will solve that problem, but I don't want to sacrifice them to save my mom... or even the rest of us."

"Me neither," I said, "but we can't always get what we want, especially not here."

Since there were no monitors in the prison to deliver the Night Time announcement, we decided to go to bed when our watches showed the time as being 10 p.m., even if it took a while to actually get to sleep in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable prison cell. In the end, we were tired enough that before long, it didn't matter that this was a less than ideal place to go to bed- our bodies needed rest, and they'd get it.

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**Monokuma Theater**

I've got a killer money-making scheme in the making.

I'm gonna make a blockbuster hit, one that'll leave people demanding a sequel.

After cranking out a few entries, I'll start a spinoff series or two, each of which'll become successful in its own right.

All of them will have merchandising, licensed tie-ins and even adaptations.

My magnum opus will keep going on for years, or even decades- 50+ years would be a good goal.

There's only one problem.

I don't have an idea for a story that'll get the ball rolling.

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Day 17
Chiyuri and I woke up as the dawn of a new day shone through the bars of our windows; the back wall of our cell faced east. Even though I wasn't technically a prisoner, since I could leave my cell and the prison, if not the island, it still didn't feel good to wake up behind bars. Maybe this was what Nagato-sensei felt every morning.

"Good morning, Chiyuri," I said.

Chiyuri let off a faint giggle, since I'd switched my informal morning greeting for her more formal variant, save for not including an honorific after her name.

"Morning, Akira-san," Chiyuri said.

I checked my handbook, and couldn't find the battery life indicator. Apparently, the battery was as long-lasting as Monokuma had advertised, which was a good thing, even though we didn't use our handbooks that much. Without the monitors, they would be our only way of viewing the weather report.

Speaking of which, the weather was completely sunny today, but Chiyuri was disappointed, morosely muttering "Sunny again today..." under her breath.

"You don't seem happy," I said.

"I'm not," Chiyuri said. "The good news is that we won't be rained on while we're out exploring. The bad news is that we can't use rainwater to replenish our water supplies."

I nodded grimly. Even the lack of rain wouldn't be that much of a good thing, since we could take shelter inside the buildings. Unfortunately, there was nowhere to run or hide from our shortage of resources, the consequences of which would catch up with us when we burned through our supplies of food and water. Once that happened, someone would die, even if it wasn't the pair who'd chosen to sacrifice themselves, and the only question was who.

Chiyuri and I ate with Himeno, eating the last of the rations we'd scrounged up yesterday.

"I notice we're all wearing the same clothes we were wearing this time yesterday," I said. "Wearing the same thing you did 24 hours ago isn't all that unusual, but not changing clothes at all in the intervening time is."

"Quite true, Akira," Himeno said. "If I'm stuck wearing the same thing for 24 hours, I'd rather have clothing I don't mind getting dirty."

I saw that the ankles of Himeno's overalls, her shoes and her socks were covered in mud. She probably would have a heart attack if her good clothing was in that condition, at least until she realized that the laundry on the ship could clean it. Since all three pairs of overalls that had once been in the twins' possession- from Tatsuki's costume, from Taiga's costume and from the farmer costume- were now being worn by Tatsuki, Sayuri and Himeno, that meant that the one with Kojima's blood on it had been quite thoroughly washed. My clothes would probably be in pretty dismal condition by the time we got back to the ship, but that wouldn't be anything the laundry couldn't fix.

"I suppose this is the least of our concerns right now," Chiyuri said, "but I'm starting to miss the laundry machine and our closets. Even if we wear the same clothes all the time, it's nice to be able to wash them when we need to."

"I agree," Himeno said. "Times like this make me remember how often I change clothes in a given
school day. In the morning, I change from my nightgown into my school uniform. On days when we have PE, I change into that uniform when we go outside, and back into my uniform when classes resume. On days when I have archery practice, I change into my training outfit- which has become my everyday clothes here- once school lets out, then change into my uniform when walking home. Once back, I change into casual clothes, usually a dress or a nice blouse and skirt, or a fancy kimono for special occasions. In the evening, I get undressed to use the bath before changing into my nightgown, at which point the cycle repeats.

Using my fingers, I counted a total of seven times changing clothes, and five different outfits. I once thought that all those fancy Japanese weddings in which the bride wore a few different outfits sounded like a pain in the ass, especially since my parents had a Western style wedding, but that really went to show how many different kinds of clothes we wore.

"I guess there is some good news, though," I said. "If someone commits a murder with a knife or by bashing their victim on the head, and gets blood all over their clothes, then they won't be able to wash it off. Once the investigation starts, they'll be caught red-handed... probably literally."

"That may be true, Akira," Himeno said, "but there are alternative ways of killing someone that do not spill the victim's blood. Breaking the victim's neck and strangulation come to mind."

Chiyuri and I were uncomfortably quiet, knowing full well what Himeno meant.

"That being said," Himeno said, "I personally hope that the knowledge that it will be difficult to get away with the murder, combined with the promise of two people to lay down their lives for the group, will stay any potential blackened's hands."

We silently concurred. As desperate as our situation was, with us trapped on an island with virtually no food or water, the tenuous peace had endured so far, and that was something to be grateful for.

We set out to explore today, starting with the dorms. There were trails through the woods leading from the prison to each of the other three buildings, so it was a hell of a lot easier getting from the prison to the dorms than it was getting from the beach to the prison.

The dorms were four rectangular buildings, numbered 1 to 4 in ascending order from north to south. Like we'd heard yesterday, they all had blue squares spray-painted on their walls, near the front doors.

"It looks like we're here," Higurashi said. "There are four dorm buildings, so I will split us into four teams, each of which will be assigned a building."

"Is that why we aren't using the groups from yesterday?" Sayuri said.

"Part of the reason," Higurashi said. "Not only do we have more ground to cover, but I'd also like people to work with different members of the group."

In a way, it was fairly convenient that there were twelve of us on the island- the smallest number that could be divided by three as well as four. Higurashi's goal of getting us to work with people other than the ones we talked with on a regular basis was a good one, even if it didn't much for those who'd never quite hit it off with the others, or who practically everyone hated.

"First is Building 1," Higurashi said. "The group will consist of Sasaki-san, Himemiya-san and Tachibana-san. Sasaki-san will be in charge."
I noticed three patterns here. The first was that Higurashi had chosen a member from each of the three existing groups. The second was that all the members were female. The third was that they all happened to be dressed the same. I wasn't sure which one was most relevant, but I was pretty sure it wasn't the latter.


Mihama hesitantly nodded, and said, "Yes, sir," while Asakura quietly seethed at the prospect of taking orders from an eleven-year-old girl. The only thing that would have pissed him off more would be having Chiyuri in charge.

"Next is Building 3," Higurashi said. "Nagato-san, Kurogane-kun and Kirishima-kun will search the building under Nagato-san's leadership."

With nine out of twelve of us accounted for, I could figure out who I was with, but Higurashi chose to say it anyway.

"Last is Building 4," Higurashi said. "I will lead the search, and would like Azuki-san and Karita-kun to come with me."

We found our groups, each of us joining up with our respective leader. Higurashi then led me and Karita into Building 4, while the other groups followed suit.

Higurashi, Karita and I searched the building together, barely saying a word to one another apart from pointing out traps. As awkward as the relative silence was, we did manage to stay on task, searching the building in a cautious and thorough manner, so the arrangement wasn't half bad.

I wish I could say the same for the results of our search. The three of us only found three rations and water bottles total in the building, which was meant to house dozens of employees. Oddly enough, we didn't seem to find any diaries, letters or other documents that might tell the stories of the inhabitants of this building. Then again, there weren't even any dead bodies, so maybe they just evacuated and took all their stuff with them... if they were ever here in the first place.

"So, I have a question," Karita said. "Why not sleep here instead of the prison?"

"There are a few reasons," Higurashi said. "First, the prison is a more central location. Second, it is safer, with no traps inside the cell block area. Third, whatever happens, we should only be here for another day, at most, so there is no need to move elsewhere."

The twelve of us met up outside the buildings. We all seemed to get done at the same time; while our tasks were the same, it was a bit surprising that we completed them all at the same rate.

Higurashi listened to each team give a report, then gave one of his own. To sum it up briefly, the other three groups weren't any luckier than we had been.

"It's unfortunate that we weren't able to find anything here," Higurashi said, "but there's still a fair amount of time left in the day. As such, I would like to propose something- unless anyone has any objections, we should take a short break to rest and eat, then head to the mall."

"You mean the building to the west?" Karita said. "Isn't the office complex closer?"

"Yes, it is," Higurashi said, "not to mention the most dangerous place. We should examine the
moderately dangerous mall before we go to the office complex."

Karita paused to think.

"Hmmm..." Karita said. "It does seem like Monokuma to put this way out that doesn't involve murder- assuming such a thing exists- in the most dangerous place, unless he was trying to put it somewhere we wouldn't look. In that case, though, it might be somewhere relatively safe, hidden in plain sight, like the courtyard of the prison."

Technically, there weren't any traps in the woods- only in or around the various buildings- so in some regards, the woods were safer than the prison.

"You have a point about the 'way out' possibly being nothing more than a lie to lure us to our deaths," I said, "but if Monokuma wanted to hide it in a place that is neither the first place we'd look nor the last, he'd have two choices- the dorms or the mall. At the very least, you could make an argument for it being hidden in the mall."

"Indeed, Azuki-san," Higurashi said. "If no one has any other questions or concerns, we'll explore the mall after lunch."

"Fine by me," Karita said. "Let's eat."

We ate the rations that we'd gathered, with everyone getting between half a ration and a whole one. It wasn't quite as bad as Monokuma had predicted, but it was clear that if cleaning out the dorms had only gotten us enough rations for one meal, then it would only be a matter of time before we all starved.

I couldn't help but glance at Karita suspiciously during the course of the meal. For someone who had doubts about whether we'd ever find what we were looking for, he wasn't trying very hard to argue against Higurashi's course of action. Maybe he'd realized that the rest of us had made up our minds, or maybe he knew this was a bad idea, and was counting on us doing it. Considering that he'd lied may times for his own personal gain, I had every reason to distrust him.

Of course, paranoia was only natural in a situation like this. In all likelihood, the traitor was somewhere on this island (or if it was Nagato-sensei, in the relative comfort and safety of the Ursa Major). Even if they didn't have a secret stash of food and water that would enable them to outlast everyone else, and/or some other escape route they could use once everyone else was dead, they were able to count on Tatsuki and Himeno being willing to die for everyone else, including them. Because of the desperate circumstances, our group was probably the most unified it had ever been, even if that wasn't saying much, but that didn't change the fact that one of us was a traitor. I didn't know what sort of punishment that person deserved, but if we wanted to escape, we'd have to find and unmask them, no matter how difficult that truth might be to face.

We then headed over to the mall. It was a hell of a lot smaller than the various places I visited, and, despite what the map said, looked more like a department store. There were three floors, each of which had a couple different kinds of merchandise, as well as a food court.

Higurashi decided to split us up into teams once again, although the leaders stayed the same. Himeno and I ended up working for Sayuri on the ground floor, which only meant that Tatsuki and I swapped places. Chiyuri got Kirishima and Karita, as well as the task of exploring the second floor. The third group's team was Kumakura and Tatsuki, under the leadership of Mihama. As for Higurashi, he decided to take Asakura and Kurogane with him to the food court.
The inside of the department store was surprisingly well-lit, since sunlight seeped in through the holes in the walls. The store looked like what you'd expect, with a series of escalators in the center, as well as a broken-down elevator, connecting the four floors. Most of the floors were square-shaped with a hole in the center, and the only things we could find in the center of the ground floor were the bottom of the elevator and escalators.

Our first stop was the grocery department, which was guarded by a couple pressure plate traps, which we avoided, and contained a few rations and bottles of water, about as many as we'd found in the dorms. Unfortunately, the other food wasn't exactly edible.

"Ugh, it smells in here," I said.

"Of course it does, Akira-chan," Sayuri said. "Not only did the refrigeration break down a long time ago, but a lot of the food is past the expiration date, anyway."

Sayuri pointed at a block of cheese that had gone bad over two years ago. If the date printed on the plastic wrapping wasn't proof enough, I felt sick to my stomach looking at it, as did Himeno.

"You all right, Himeno?" I said.

"I'm managing," Himeno said. "Growing up, I've been rather sheltered, but even though I always knew most people weren't nearly as well-off as my family was, I never imagined ever having to scavenge for food inside a ruined department store."

"Me neither," I said. "Of course, keep in mind that we aren't literally starving, since we still have places we haven't searched."

"I don't think any of us had to go through this," Sayuri said. "When I was trying to get serialized, I presented a storyboard for a yuri manga about two teenage girls trying to eke out a living in a post-apocalyptic Tokyo, but it was rejected for being too fantastical, not to mention too similar to an existing series. I did manage to publish one-shot, Discount Love, about a lesbian couple that had to work overtime in order to afford things like birthday presents and romantic dinners out, but there wasn't enough interest in it for it to get serialized."

"Well, I wish it had," Himeno said.

Sayuri giggled.

"But my point is that while I'm not rich, I've never wanted for anything," Sayuri said. "Not only was I able to get an education, a privilege many children across the world, especially girls, lack, but I was able to pursue my dream of becoming a manga artist. I once got a fan letter from a woman a few years my senior who'd wanted to become a manga artist, but was forced to return home and find a job when her father fell ill. She didn't begrudge me for my success, but asked me to appreciate what I'd had."

"Yeah, I get that a lot, too," I said, "from those who once dreamed of being an actress, and even from a lot of my colleagues. I think that the only ways to prove you deserve what you've been given are to make the most of it, and never stop being grateful for what you have."

"I appreciate your kind words, Akira, Sasaki-san," Himeno said, "and I feel the same way. My life will most likely end tomorrow, in whatever horrific way Monokuma thought up, but I'm grateful that I lived a relatively happy and comfortable life, grew up alongside my dear friend Kanae, and met the two of you."

Sayuri blushed, but then shook her head.
"D-Don't talk like it's already over, Himen-er, Himemiya-san," Sayuri said. "If there's a way to save you and Tatsuki-chan, we will find it."

"Thank you," Himeno said. "Even if there is no such way, I'm glad you're thinking of us."

We dropped the conversation there. While the three of us were friends, none of us quite knew what to talk about in what might be our last conversation, especially when we were having trouble accepting that idea. For now, all we could do was simply not think about it.

On our way out, Sayuri stepped on a pressure plate in the middle of an aisle. A dart flew out of a trap and whizzed past her head, burying itself in a bag of flour.

Himeno plucked the dart out of the bag of flower, and eyed it suspiciously.

"Please be more careful, Sasaki-san," Himeno said. "While we are searching for a way out, suffering any casualties in the process would defeat the purpose."

"You're right," Sayuri said. "I'm sorry, Himemiya-san; I'll watch where I'm going."

Himeno stashed the dart into the bib pocket of her overalls, so as to avoid littering, and we continued our search. As much as I hoped that Himeno and Tatsuki wouldn't have to die, the reality of the killing game- and perhaps life itself- was that anyone could die at almost any time. Our efforts to find another way off the island might change the fates of those who had chosen to sacrifice themselves, but it wouldn't change how omnipresent death was.

Once we were finished with the search, the four groups met up out front, and each of us gave our reports. The teams that had investigated the floors above us pretty much found what you might expect in a standard department store, none of which was any use to us.

"So none of us found anything that would help us," Higurashi said, "but did you find any information about this island?"

"The three of us found a grocery section full of food that had gone bad," Sayuri said. "It has likely been a long time since the original occupants of the island were here."

"My group found a clothing section," Chiyuri said. "The store seems to be mainly stocked with clothing that people might need on the job- for example, an administrator might wear a suit, while a maintenance worker might wear overalls."

Chiyuri had a shopping bag full of clothes, including a dark suit and a blue pair of overalls. At least one of us had found something useful.

"My group investigated the outdoors section, looking for a boat," Mihama said. "Unfortunately, all the kayaks and other supplies were missing."

Something told me that it wasn't going to be that simple to get back on the Ursa Major. Even if we made a raft, then climbing up to the deck of the ship would be next to impossible.

"Thank you for your reports," Higurashi said. "I wish I had more to share, but, it seems as though we've once again failed to find anything except rations and water."

Asakura scoffed.

"Why am I not surprised?" Asakura said. "We don't have a damn clue what we're supposed to be
looking for, let alone where to find it."

I personally agreed with him, but decided to stay quiet, not wanting the knowledge that he was right to go to the smug bastard's head. Apparently, no one else was any keener on the thought than I was, so we remained silent for a moment.

"Well, what would you propose, Asakura-kun?" Higurashi said. "Go back to the prison and have Himemiya-san execute Tachibana-san this evening?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Asakura said. "There's no guarantee anyone desperate enough to kill to get off this island will wait that long.

Higurashi sighed and shook his head.

"I'll admit that we aren't likely to find some way to escape the island that doesn't involve sacrifice," Higurashi said, "but we owe it to ourselves, and especially those who would lose their lives, to try. As such, unless the majority of the class, including both Himemiya-san and Tachibana-san, are in favor of your proposal, I suggest we wait another day."

Asakura sighed and shook his head.

"Fine," Asakura said. "At the very least, I hope I won't have to take one for the team."

"Then that's settled," Higurashi said. "The sun is starting to set, so we should return to the prison and rest. Tomorrow, we'll set out for the office complex."

We began the hike back to the prison, and were able to make it back before it was dark out. The island had seemed so large when we'd first set foot on it, but now that we were running out of places to look, it was starting to feel fairly small, and not in a good way. Either we'd find what we were searching for in the office complex, Himeno would have to kill Tatsuki, or someone else would snap and try to graduate. With one unlikely outcome and two unpleasant ones, our situation looked pretty damn grim.

When we returned to the prison, we had dinner. While Chiyuri ate with Higurashi to discuss possible problems that might arise tomorrow, and Himeno went to dispose of the dart in the trash, I sat down with Mihama.

"So, Mihama," I said, "do you think the traitor is one of us who are stuck here on this island?"

"Statistically speaking, that would be most likely." Mihama said, "since the only alternative would be Nagato-sensei. She is a likely suspect, as the only one not in immediate danger on the island, but she is still only one suspect out of thirteen- or rather, sixteen."

I was about to say "You mean seventeen," but I remembered that Monokuma had specifically said Tsukimura wasn't the traitor. He might have been lying about that, but not only was Tsukimura probably the least suspicious person here, but if she was the traitor, that would mean Monokuma had lied to us when he said she was innocent. I wouldn't normally think Monokuma was above dishonesty, but his killing game seemed to operate relatively consistently, albeit not fairly. The only exception so far was Taiga dying in her sister's place.

"True," I said. "Our food and water supplies won't hold out forever, but nobody's going to starve or die of dehydration before the end of the day tomorrow."

Mihama looked somewhat troubled.
"You do not think either of them are the traitor?" Mihama said.

"Do you?" I said. "Maybe they don't care if they end up dead, but the ones who are willing to take one for the team seem least likely. By offering to take one for the team, they make it less likely that someone who just wants to survive will end up committing murder before tomorrow evening. After all, the traitor wants to see us murder each other."

A part of me worried that Himeno hanging Tatsuki wouldn't fulfill Monokuma's requirements, but there wasn't anything natural about that kind of death.

"You may be correct," Mihama said, "or perhaps the traitor does not care whether they live or die. After all, they chose to enter this game along with us, rather than abandon us to our fates."

"They did," I said, "and Himeno and Tatsuki both lost the people dearest to them in the process. Do you think that the two of them are faking their grief and despair?"

Mihama shrugged.

"I cannot say," Mihama said. "Perhaps you would know, as an actress?"

"I have some idea," I said. "Unskilled actors and actresses have difficulty getting into character, whether hamming it up or simply reading the script as if they were bored, so it's pretty obvious to see when they're having trouble. In movies and TV shows, you can obviously cut out those takes, but anyone who's trying to play a role out here will inevitably slip up and reveal themselves sooner or later. Either Tatsuki and Himeno are telling the truth... or they're even better actresses than I am."

Mihama chuckled softly.

"You have a point, Azuki-san," Mihama said, "so perhaps I was wrong to suspect those two. Even if I am considered an academic prodigy, and an Ultimate when it comes to the laws of our country, there is still much I do not know."

"Of course there is," I said, "since you're still young, after all. If we get off of this island, and out of this killing game, maybe you can act your age a little."

Mihama let off a giggle full of mirth and warmth. She'd seemed rather serious, so I was glad to see she could be lighthearted, even in a situation like this, since if we reflected on the hardship and tragedy we were going through too much, it'd probably break us. Perhaps Tatsuki could eventually learn to smile and laugh again... assuming she lived that long, of course.

After dinner, I struck up a conversation with Kurogane while we were disposing of our trash.

"So, Kurogane," I said. "Unless something happens between now and tomorrow afternoon, the girl who killed Kojima will be hanged. How do you feel about that?"

Kurogane sighed and shook his head.

"Not good at all, if that's what you're asking," Kurogane said. "Maybe it's because Kojima-kun betrayed us by trying to kill Taiga-san, but I don't think killing Tatsuki-san will make anything better. It may enable us to get off this island, but it will also cost Himemiya-san her life. In terms of the death toll, it won't be any different from if someone murders a classmate tomorrow."

"You've got a point," I said, "but to play Devil's Advocate, what about the 'killer' and 'victim'
choosing to die so that everyone else can live? Wouldn't that be better than someone betraying us and being willing to let everyone else die?"

"Maybe it would, in some ways," Kurogane said, "but in the end, while all the killers made a conscious choice to commit murder-or attempt it, in Kojima-kun's case-their circumstances also forced their hand. In that regard-the belief that someone's death is an acceptable price to pay for the greater good-is no different."

I frowned. The worst part of the game was that if someone got away with murder, then those of us who'd done nothing wrong would be executed. If that were the case, then I don't think as many people would have judged Tatsuki for killing Kojima, and there wouldn't have been nearly as much pressure to catch her.

"Look, I'm not saying that I'm really enthusiastic about killing Tatsuki and letting Himeno be executed," I said, "but the alternative is us starving to death. The two of them will die anyway in that case."

"I know," Kurogane said, "but that's the problem. Idealistic as it might sound, I don't want to accept that most of our class is doomed."

It wasn't hard to see why Kurogane thought that. If Kojima had succeeded in killing one or both of the twins, we would have had to convict and execute him in order to stay alive. At the current rate we were going, half of us who'd set foot on this island would be dead by the time of our arrival on the final one. Whether I liked them or hated them, I didn't want to accept that the classmates I'd come to know over these past two and a half weeks were going to die, even if I didn't know what could be done about it.

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After nightfall, I met up with Himeno on the prison wall, and looked up at the stars. Having spent most of my life in the city, it was amazing how much you could see without light pollution.

"So, Himeno, I have a question," I said. "Are you in favor of the death penalty?"

Himeno nodded.

"I am," Himeno said solemnly. "There are some crimes that cannot be forgiven, and some people who are too dangerous to be allowed to go free. It only seems fair that those who intentionally and maliciously take others' lives should give up their own."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. There was a time, less than two weeks ago, when I could wholeheartedly say the same thing. Unfortunately, I couldn't do so anymore, and it sounded as though Himeno couldn't, either.

"However," Himeno said, "there's nothing right about this. Monokuma's executions are brutal spectacles, more for Monokuma's entertainment than any sort of justice. Those who are executed are not sociopathic, murderous adults, but simply desperate teenagers... and Taiga-san did not even commit any crime."

"What about Tatsuki?" I said.

"Tatsuki-san deserves better," Himeno said, "namely, a chance to rebuild her life and atone for her sins. She probably should spend some time behind bars, assuming there is a court willing to try her for her actions here, and I'm sure she agrees with me on that point. However, I also believe that she would emerge from prison as a rehabilitated member of society, willing to make the most of her second chance. No one would benefit from sentencing her to death."
I shook my head.

"I'm with you there," I said. "I don't think either of the Tachibanas, Kojima, Yamazaki or Tsukimura deserved to die. Of course, neither do any of us on this island, but..."

"I know," Himeno said. "We'll starve to death if we don't do something. Two of us dying is a tragedy, but it's the lesser evil compared to all twelve of us perishing here."

The two of us remained silent for a moment.

"That may be true," I said, "but it still leaves a bad feeling in my mouth. Even if you and Tatsuki chose to sacrifice your lives, Monokuma might conclude that we made our choice, and consider this motive a success... assuming he decides this doesn't count as a murder."

"Quite right," Himeno said, "which is why we're waiting until tomorrow night. I don't know if there's anything we can do, but we owe it to ourselves to try."

"I think so, too," I said. "If nothing else, I want you two to get off the island... with the rest of us, of course."

Himeno smiled.

"Yes, I feel that way too," Himeno said. "I do want the rest of us to survive, especially Sayuri."

"Especially her, huh?" I said. "Are the two of you, y'know...?"

Himeno blushed and shook her head.

"Unfortunately, no," Himeno said, "since while I like her, as more than a friend, there are a few reasons why it wouldn't work, even apart from how I'll probably die tomorrow. First, I'm sure that I come off as a bit cold and distant."

I shook my head.

"I don't think so," I said. "Just say 'Go ahead and call me by my first name if you like; can I call you by yours?' and that should solve your problems."

Himeno didn't dispute my point, but wasn't done talking.

"Second," Himeno said, "even if there is a future for us outside this cruise, my family will not accept us being in love. They are rather old-fashioned when it comes to matters relating to gender and sexuality, among other things, and cannot accept a union that will not result in grandchildren."

"You've got a point there," I said, "but seeing as how all hell broke loose in Japan, is your family even alive?"

That didn't make Himeno very happy, even if it had to be said. Of course, I didn't have any idea what I could say to make her feel better without lying through my teeth.

"I don't know," Himeno said, "but I hope so. In any case, considering that death could come at any time, I have no desire to give Sayuri- Sasaki-san- false hope, or cause her the pain of losing someone important to her. So please keep this to yourself."

Our conversation just now was, in some ways, similar to the time we'd talked about why Himeno had no romantic feelings for Tsukimura. Back then, I'd agreed with her, but while I still felt that way, I had to wonder if Himeno was simply afraid to reach out to the person she loved. Maybe if
Kojima was here, I could take a little of his aggressiveness and give it to her.

For now, though, all I could do was honor Himeno's request.

"I promise," I said.

"Thank you, Akira," Himeno said, "for accepting my request and for being my friend. I haven't had many friends besides Kanae and a few others, but you earned that honor. I just wish we had more time to get to know each other."

"Me too, Himeno," I said. "Maybe in our next lives, if you get born into a rich family again, I could be your servant."

Himeno giggled.

"If your next life is anything like your current one, you'd probably be terrible at it," Himeno said, "but even so, I'd still keep you around."

While we shared a laugh at that, as we parted ways, I hesitated, fearing that this might be the last time w would speak.

I retired to my cell for the evening, where Chiyuri was waiting.

"So, Chiyuri," I said. "If you were in charge of us, would you do anything differently from Higurashi?"

Chiyuri shook her head.

"No, I don't think so," Chiyuri said. "The choice is relatively simple- sacrifice a few people to avoid all of us dying, and seek to find an alternative solution so we won't even have to make those sacrifices."

"Got it," I said. "Do you think Higurashi agreed to Himeno and Tatsuki's proposal because he knows sacrifice might be necessary, or because he's that confident that we won't need to resort to it?"

"The former," Chiyuri said. "No matter how strongly you believe in something, there are times when you must compromise your principles. Any situation in which doing so is necessary to save people's lives is certainly one of those times."

I nodded.

"However," Chiyuri said, "I think that you also need to stay true to your personal values, rather than simply abandoning them whenever they're convenient for you. Because of that, I do my best to be a good Christian, even in a situation like this."

"Do your best?" I said. "Are you saying you can't always be that way?"

"Unfortunately, no," Chiyuri said, "and I make a list of all those times whenever I visit the confessional. Because of that, I know that while we most likely will never make it through the killing game without suffering many more deaths, what Higurashi-san asks of us- to work together and not betray others for personal gain- is a reasonable request. For that reason, I stand by Higurashi-san's decisions, as I would if Mom- or rather, Nagato-sensei- were here to lead us."

As we went to bed, I once again thought about how fucked up this situation was; half of the reason..."
behind why we did what we did was because of desperation, and the other half was because we didn't have any real authority figures. Murder was a crime, but while Mihama could probably guess what sort of sentences judges would hand down for the blackened's actions in the killing game, what would be the right verdicts in those cases? As I drifted off to sleep, I realized that in all likelihood, no one knew that.

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**Monokuma Theater**

They say everyone's the star of their own story, but everyone's also an extra in a lot of other people's stories.

Every time you go to a rock star's concert, a sports game, or a politician's speech, you get a small appearance in that person's story.

So why bother growing up to be someone special?

You're already a part of something a lot bigger than yourself.

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**Day 18**

We woke up shortly after dawn once again. Although we didn't have to go to school, we still had a schedule of sorts on this killing game, even on this deserted island.

The weather was once again sunny all day. I had to wonder if this was simply awful luck, or if Monokuma had set us up to arrive at the island when we wouldn't get any rain. Three days without rain wasn't too odd, but it was convenient for Monokuma.

"No rain again today, either," Chiyuri said. "At this rate, we'll run out of water by the end of the day."

I nodded dejectedly. Once our water ran out, it would only be a matter of time before we died of dehydration.

"Hypothetically speaking, let's say there was rain and we had more time to search the island," I said. "Would Higurashi grant Tatsuki a 'stay of execution'?"

Chiyuri shrugged.

"That would be up to Tachibana-san and Himemiya-san," Chiyuri said, "even though usually, the prisoners aren't the ones arguing in favor of being executed."

"Good point," I said. "Well, if our search turns up nothing, what do you think they'll do?"

"I think they'll go through with their plan," Chiyuri said, but before that happens, I would like to discuss the situation and our options with everyone one more time."

"Me too," I said. "As tragic as the idea of letting two of our classmates die just to stay alive is, it'd be even more tragic if we resorted to that while we still had another way out."

Chiyuri nodded.

"Do you mind if I take a moment to get changed, Akira-san?" I said.

"Sure thing," I said. "I'll step out of the cell for a moment."
While I was out, Chiyuri changed out of her uniform, switching her skirt for her newfound pair of overalls and tying her blazer's sleeves together so it would go around her waist. She then stashed her skirt and her necktie in her backpack.

"All done," Chiyuri said. "How do I look?"

"Probably the way you would if you could wear whatever you want to school, within reason," I said.

"Thank you, Akira-san," Chiyuri said. "I don't mind wearing my uniform, but it's nice to have something else to wear for a change."

One's clothing could say a lot about the person, and the same went for Chiyuri. She often felt pressure to be a "good girl," but I hoped that she'd find the courage to be herself.

"Anyway, let's go," Chiyuri said. "We don't want to be late for breakfast."

"Yeah, let's," I said. "Just make sure you don't forget anything; we might not make it back here."

"I know," Chiyuri said. "I'll swing by the cell to get my things before we set out. While we were in the store, I got an extra suit for Mom, and I'd like to be able to deliver it to her."

I nodded in understanding, then headed to the cafeteria with her. All of us had things we still wanted to do, promises we had yet to keep and reasons to return home, which is why it was so hard to accept that not everyone would make it off this island, let alone get away from this killing game.

We gathered for breakfast, where we ate up the few rations we had left. Chiyuri then shared her proposal with Himeno, who listened politely and carefully considered it.

"I appreciate your thinking of us, Nagato-san," Himemiya said, "and I do agree that what Tachibana-san and I are proposing is strictly a last resort. Of course, considering that we are out of food, we may be forced to use that last resort if we don't find what we're looking for inside the office complex. If we fail to find food or water, people will begin dying of thirst... assuming they don't kill each other before then."

"You have a point, Himemiya-san," Chiyuri said, "but why haven't they done so already?"

"Most likely for two reasons," Himeno said. "First, thanks to you and Higurashi-san distributing our provisions, no one is going hungry or thirsty. Second, those who want to survive can simply wait until Tachibana-san and I die in their place. Third, if someone does commit a murder, Akira will likely expose them in the class trial."

"And what if that murder does happen?" I said.

"Then I'll do what I can to find the person responsible," Himeno said, "and I will do the most to ensure that I do not waste my new lease on life. If, however, I end up the victim, then all I can do is ask you to do the same in my stead."

As we continued to eat, I wondered why Taiga had chosen to sacrifice herself even though her sister would remain in the killing game. Perhaps she was naïve, as Kirishima had suggested, or perhaps she believed we could solve all the crimes, get through the trials and keep Tatsuki safe for as long as possible. Our efforts weren't just for the sake of keeping the survivors alive, but were also for those who perished, likely hoping that they would be the last casualties in the game. It wasn't a wish we could easily grant, but like Higurashi said, we owed it to ourselves to try.
We had a little time before we set out, so I headed to the courtyard and saw Tatsuki staring at the gallows.

"Whoa, there, Tatsuki, don't get ahead of yourself," I said. "We've still got one last building we haven't searched."

"I know," Tatsuki said. "I'm not so impatient that I'd hang myself before searching the office complex, even if we probably won't find anything there."

"Good," I said.

Tatsuki stared at the noose.

"I can't help but wonder," Tatsuki said. "Is it painful to be hanged?"

"Depends," I said. "If it's done right, your neck will break and you'll die almost instantly. If not, it'll take you several minutes to strangle to death."

Unfortunately for a lot of the commoners who were put to death on Summer's End, the executioners hadn't come up with the idea of a long-drop hanging, so they had the latter outcome. Of course, while Princess Ophelia was "lucky" enough to get beheaded, as opposed to being hanged or executed by even worse methods, one of the main writers said that her head would probably remain alive for a few seconds after being severed from her body.

"So a few minutes, huh?" Tatsuki said. "As opposed to dying of dehydration over a period of days, or starvation over a period of weeks? That works for me. It wouldn't leave enough time for me to get scared, after all."

I paused for a moment.

"I do understand where you're coming from," I said. "Your circumstances aside, I do understand why you'd want to be able to choose the manner of your death. That being said, being hanged like a criminal sure as hell isn't my first choice."

Tatsuki nodded.

"Me neither," Tatsuki said. "My parents would be heartbroken if I were sentenced to death for murder, half because their daughter was about to die, and half because I'd do such a thing. Because of the first half, I'm scared to face them even if we do get out of here."

"Yeah, I know how you feel," I said, "but even if I did something really bad and my mom disowned me, I'd still be happy to know that she's fine."

"You're right," Tatsuki said, "but what about your dad?"

I paused for a moment, having hoped someone wouldn't ask. Chiyuri definitely hadn't, whether because she was considerate of other people's feelings, or because she'd gone through something similar.

"I don't have one," I said, "not since..."

I stopped short, then shook my head.

"Sorry, I'm not comfortable talking about it," I said, "since it's rather personal. I will say, though, that I do know what it's like to lose someone close to you."
"Fair enough," Tatsuki said. "I'll accept that as your answer for now. If we return to the prison empty-handed, you can tell me the rest of your story, and I promise I'll take your secret to my grave."

I said "Deal," all the while hoping that the time would never come. If I did tell Tatsuki the story, it would only be after I felt comfortable enough doing so, not because I knew that she'd die before she could repeat it.

"By the way," Tatsuki said, "I notice that you called me by my first name for the first time since the last trial, and the first time when it's just the two of us."

"Oh," I said. "I guess I did it subconsciously. Don't think too much about it; my standards for calling someone by their first name aren't as high as Chiyuri or Himeno's. What about you?"

"I do that for Taiga and some of our closer friends," Tatsuki said, "so if it's all right with you, I'd like to call you part of the latter group, Akira-san."

I smiled and expressed approval, but hoped that our friendship would last longer than today. If there was any way to ensure that both Tatsuki and Himeno got through today without dying, I'd pay almost any price to see that it'd happen.

The twelve of us met up at the entrance to the prison and headed to the final place we hadn't explored- the office complex on the north edge of the island. It was a three-story building built on the edge of a cliff, with a gentle slope nearby leading to the north beach. The ground it was on was several meters above sea level, so there was probably a story or two below the ground floor.

A black diamond was painted on the front door, meaning that we'd need to be extremely cautious when exploring this building, and mistakes could easily result in people's deaths. That being said, we'd handled the blue circle and green square buildings without much trouble, so while this would be a risk, it wouldn't be anything we couldn't handle.

We assembled inside the lobby, a wide-open area with a reception desk and several seats for people to sit and wait. Above us, there were windows to rooms on the second and third floors, and I could see what looked like an office, a meeting room and a break room, among others. Near the entrance, there was a floorplan of the building, with the layout of each floor- the three above-ground floors and the basement- and a bunch of other details, such as where everyone's offices were.

"This building looks fairly large, so we should divide into teams of three- one for each floor," Higurashi said. "Once again, we'll be changing up our groups."

I nodded. Practically anything would work as long as I didn't get stuck with one of the guys I hated.

"The groups are as follows," Higurashi said. "Nagato-san, Azuki-san, and Kumakura-kun will explore the ground floor. Mihama-san, Sasaki-san, and Himemiya-san will explore the second floor. Kurogane-kun, Asakura-kun and Tachibana-san will explore the third floor. And Kirishima-kun, Karita-kun and I will explore the basement."

The arrangement made sense. Each one of the groups consisted of one of the four remaining pairs of roommates, with the exception of the third floor group, since Higurashi had wisely chosen to separate Asakura and Karita. Of course, Asakura didn't get along with anyone here, and Karita was only marginally less hated, so they didn't exactly fit in anywhere.

"Investigate the building and find anything that can be used to escape from here, or any clues," Higurashi said. "Rations and water would be nice to have, but we are running out of time and..."
places to explore. Meet back here at noon or when you're finished with the floor."

I checked the time on my handbook, and saw that it was around 10 a.m., so we'd have about two hours to explore. Even in a building this size, that would be more than enough time to scour every nook and cranny of our assigned floors.

"I have one more thing I'd like to say to you all," Higurashi said, "especially Tachibana-san and Himemiya-san. Our situation right now is desperate, perhaps more so than any other time since this killing game started, but it is not hopeless. We still have choices to make, and we can choose not to play by Monokuma's rules. If there is a way out of here that does not involve killing, then we should spare no expense short of our lives to make it a reality. So go forth and search this building as though your lives depended on it, because they do."

I saw a glimmer of hope in Tatsuki's eyes, and Himeno nodded approvingly. Perhaps at least one of us would be dead by the end of the day, but because all our lives were at risk, we were able to work together, if only while on this island. Maybe it was a bit premature to assume that no one would betray the group, or that we'd be able to succeed in our task, but for once, I actually felt confident in what we could accomplish together.

The three of us investigated the offices, going room by room. While there were a lot of advanced books about programming and other tech-related subjects on various people's bookshelves and workspaces, most of the really important documents were probably stored on their computers. Even if we could turn them on, we'd need a user ID and password to get at the really good stuff.

Midway through the investigation, as Chiyuri led us to the office of what seemed like a real big-shot at the end of a hall, I felt my foot sink slightly into the floor and heard a clicking sound as I stepped on a pressure plate just large enough for my foot, one that Chiyuri had avoided. I'd been pretty good about avoiding the traps since my slip-up at the gallows, but I guess I got careless.

"It's a pressure plate!" Chiyuri said. "Get back!"

As soon as the sound reached my head, I quickly pulled my foot back. Moments later, a dart shot out of the hole in the wall to our left, causing it to harmlessly strike the wall to our right. I let out a sigh of relief, knowing that if it had fired instantly, I wouldn't have been able to avoid it.

Immediately afterward, we heard a loud crash from inside the office, like a large and heavy stone falling. Kumakura, who'd followed a few paces behind us and hadn't seen me step on the plate, caught up.

"What was that sound?" Kumakura said.

"I think I stepped on a trap," I said, "but if you're talking about the really loud one just now, my screwup isn't what caused it."

Kumakura and I carefully stepped over the pressure plate and tried to open the door to the office, only to see that it was locked. Luckily for us, none of the doors seemed to be trapped.

"I'll get this open," Kumakura said. "Stand aside, ladies."

Kumakura then rammed into the door and forced it open. He then froze in his tracks, before stepping back, making me wonder if the room was dangerous. Chiyuri and I walked past him, into the room, in order to get a better look, but we weren't prepared for what we found.

Mihama's dead body lay on the desk, with a dart in her left eye.
Author's Notes

This was a fairly long chapter, since not only is it a fusion of the "landfall" and "motive" chapters, but there were more places to explore on this island, resulting in the setting requiring the most description (and there were some places that Azuki hasn't gone yet). You may have noticed that the chapters go in the following cycle- Sailing, Landfall, Motive, Investigation, Class Trial- but while the formula will mostly hold steady, some chapters will shake things up.

While the characters accept that some sacrifice is necessary, unlike most of the cast of the second game did in Chapter 4, they're understandably conflicted about it, which is part of the reason why Azuki feels the way she does. The fact that even Higurashi is (albeit reluctantly) willing to consider such a measure is proof of how desperate the situation is and/or how much he's changed.

I may eventually do a Side Story about how crimes such as murder would be dealt with in a civilized society, from Iwasawa's village hanging a murderer to Tatsuki serving time in prison for killing Kojima. I'm also considering doing one about what would happen if Himemiya ended up having to execute Tatsuki.

Next up is the investigation. Who do you think is responsible for Mihama's death, how and why? This chapter provides hints at a possible method for killing her, as well as a possible motive for the murder apart from survival/graduation.
Chapter III, Part 3

Deadly Life

As we saw Mihama's dead body laying on the desk, the three of us stood there, frozen. We'd known that in all likelihood, someone would have to die for us to leave this island, but we thought we'd have time to explore the office complex. If nothing else, the prospect of Tachibana and Himemiya's sacrifice meant that this wouldn't end with a murder. Despite that, we'd been too naïve, even in a situation like this, and now the worst possible outcome had come to pass.

"Oh no... Mihama-san!" Chiyuri said. "She's not dead, is she?"

Moments later, the answer came- a ping from our student handbook informing us of the body discovery. A second later, we heard a voice from the ceiling.

"Is that you, Chiyuri-chan?" Sayuri said. "Are Akira-chan and Kotaro-kun with you?"

Chiyuri looked around for a minute, as did Kumakura and I. We were all confused as to why we were hearing the voices of someone who was supposed to be on the second floor, along with the dead body of her group leader... until we saw a hole in the ceiling, directly above Mihama's body, which answered both our questions. The hole was at least one and a half meters wide, and I could see Sayuri peering through.

"We're here, Sasaki-san," Chiyuri said. "What about your group? How did you get separated?"

"Himemiya-san's with me," Sayuri said. "Miharu-chan went on ahead to check the office for traps, and..."

Sayuri choked back a sob. While she was one of the top two suspects for Mihama's murder, a part of me didn't want to believe that she could do it. It would've been virtually impossible for Sayuri to kill Mihama without Himeno catching her in the act or at least realizing that she'd done it, and it seemed most reasonable to assume that Mihama had simply gotten caught in a trap and died. Of course, while that would be the simplest explanation for her death, it wasn't necessarily the right one.

"Should I go get the others?" Himeno said, her voice coming from the second floor. "They probably won't realize something's wrong until they meet up and we aren't there."

In this moment, I thought of another use for our cell phones, apart from calling for help. If we had service on this island, Chiyuri, Kumakura and I could each text or call one of the other groups, and they'd know about Mihama's death instantly.

Suddenly, Monokuma appeared, jumping on the desk and standing near Mihama's corpse.

"Well, looky here," Monokuma said, speaking a bit more loudly than usual so that Himeno and Sayuri could hear him through the hole in their floor and our ceiling. "I thought we'd have to wait for Himemiya-san to string up Taiga-san, but it looks like someone jumped the gun and got this party started!"

"So Mihama's death was a murder, not an accident or suicide?" I said.

"Not telling," Monokuma said. "It's up to you to find out the truth... assuming you can handle it, of course."
"I think we can," I said. "It may be difficult to accept that one of our number betrayed the group and will have to die for that betrayal, but if finding the truth enables the rest of us to survive, then I can live with that."

"That's the spirit, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "Check your notebooks for the Monokuma File, and get cracking. I'll bring the Ursa Major around to the north beach, so you won't have to walk all the way to the south end of the island."

That was a bit of a relief, since it meant I wouldn't have to hike through the woods between the prison and the south beach again.

"What about everyone else?" Chiyuri said.

"Oh, don't worry," Monokuma said. "I'm telling them as we speak now, so you won't have to waste time getting everyone back together."

I couldn't help but wonder what Monokuma meant, and how he could be in multiple places at once. That being said, I had more pressing questions to answer, namely who killed Mihama and how, so I checked my handbook and accessed the Monokuma File.

**Monokuma File 3**

*The victim is Miharu Mihama, the Ultimate Legal Expert*

*The approximate time of death is 11 AM.*

*A dart pierced the victim's eye, and she has multiple bruises on her back.***

At the time of her death, the victim had a healthy body temperature and hydration level, and was not suffering from any diseases or allergic reactions. While she had eaten a few hours prior to her death, no drugs or chemicals were detected in her body.

So the cause of Mihama's death wasn't natural at all. The good news was that someone had satisfied Monokuma's motive, and if we got through the class trial, most of us would get to leave the island. The bad news was that to do so, we'd need to convict and sacrifice the killer... or if it was an accident, someone who wasn't at fault. In the latter case, even if we went the obvious route and chose Tatsuki, then even that would feel like an injustice; even if she believed she didn't deserve to live, she didn't want to die.

I then checked my watch while I had the chance. Since it was only a few minutes past 11, Mihama had died just before we set foot in the room.

"I'd also like to announce another one-time rule," Monokuma said. "Since this island's fairly dangerous, the trial is only for Mihama-san's death. If someone else gets killed during the investigation period, the killer won't be eligible to graduate, but they won't be executed if they're caught."

A chill went down my spine. If anyone hated someone badly enough to kill them and didn't care about graduation, they'd act now. Now that Tatsuki wasn't going to be hanged, and probably wasn't the one who'd killed Mihama, she would most likely survive the trial, and the people who couldn't forgive her knew it.

"That's all for now," Monokuma said. "I'm willing to answer any questions that you have about the murder or this island, as long as they're not about the blackened's identity."
"Yeah, I've got a question," I said. "There wasn't really something that would let us get off the island without murdering someone, was there?"

Monokuma let off a "Puhuhuhu!" laugh, making me wonder if my question was _that_ stupid.

"I can't believe you would ask that, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "After all, you and Nagato-san, as well as the late Mihama-san, found that thing on the day you arrived on this island."

After hearing the specific combination of people who'd found it, I knew that only one thing could qualify. So did Chiyuri, who'd been with me when we discovered it.

"You mean the gallows," Chiyuri said.

"Bingo," Monokuma said. "If you'd let Himemiya-san hang Taiga-san, then executed Himemiya-san, the rest of you would have been able to leave, and no one would have had to murder anyone."

"If you say so," I said, "but essentially, at least two people would have had to die here."

"That's right," Monokuma said, "but I have to admit; I wasn't expecting Mihama-san to be one of those two people. The investigation and trial will determine who joins her, so get cracking- your lives depend on it. Later!.

Monokuma jumped behind the desk and disappeared.

"So, it's started," Himeno said. "Once again, we'll have to find out who the killer is if we want to survive."

"It seems so," I said. "Don't go too far; I'd like to talk with you and Sayuri at some point."

"All right," Himeno said. "We're counting on you to investigate the crime scene."

I nodded, then turned to the other two in my group. While it was possible that no one would even make it over here, considering the dangers, we couldn't be too safe. Unfortunately, one of our two crime scene guards was now dead.

"Ordinarily, I would ask Mihama-san to guard the crime scene with me," Kumakura said, "but now that she's dead, I'm not sure I should do by myself."

"It's fine, Kumakura-san," Chiyuri said, "since Akira-san and I can vouch for the fact that you're not her killer. If it would make you feel better, though, I can do it with you."

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Kumakura said. "Mihama-san and I didn't talk all that much, but we came to trust each other. I'm counting on you, too."

"Me too," I said. "While you two are holding down the fort, I'll investigate."

I looked around. Considering the condition of the room, and the fact that I hadn't been in it before, it was hard to tell how things had been before Mihama's body dropped down. That being said, since there wasn't any rubble below Mihama's body, the hole in the ceiling had probably been there all along.

I quickly scanned the area. The window was intact and relatively clean, although it also seemed to be stuck, meaning that the only way to get it open was to break it. The walls were lined with bookshelves, but there were no holes for dart shooters anywhere, much less anywhere that could have hit Mihama.
"Do you two see any dart shooters in this office?" I said.

"Not at all, Akira-san," Chiyuri said. "They're usually somewhat noticeable, so it's a bit of a surprise that I don't see any in this office."

"Me neither," I said. "Mihama probably got killed by one of the dart launchers, or at least a dart, but if that's the case, it didn't happen up here. It was probably upstairs, in the room Sayuri's group was investigating."

"Probably," Kumakura said, "but what if one of those two killed her? Or maybe a third party, presumably from the third floor's group?"

Chiyuri shook her head.

"I doubt they did, Kumakura-san," Chiyuri said. "There are more than a few problems with that, particularly that it's unlikely that a killer would stay around long enough to get caught."

"Yeah, that's true," I said, "and they would've been spotted by our group, or Sayuri and Himeno. Unless..."

As I tried to find a way to finish that half-formed thought, I checked the floor for pressure plates, and I couldn't find any, either. What I did find, however, was a hole behind the desk, one large enough for a person to fit through.

"You know, I think I've found a possible escape route for the killer," I said. "They could drop down that hole and escape to the basement, then possibly circle back around and rejoin their group, with their teammates none the wiser."

"That's possible," Chiyuri said, "but what's at the bottom of the hole?"

"Good question, Chiyuri," I said. "Looks like I'll have to find out."

Having investigated all I wanted to, I then headed out of the office, being careful not to step on the pressure plate on my way out.

It took me a while to find my way around the building, since apart from the route my group had taken to reach the office with Mihama's body, the rest of the building was unfamiliar territory. The fact that I had to keep an eye out for pressure plates didn't help; even in places where running in the halls was forbidden, you moved a lot faster when you didn't have to worry about what you were stepping on.

Eventually, I reached the basement, which was a series of twisting corridors full of storage rooms and offices. As I followed the floor plan, I ran into Higurashi near a map of the floor. Karita was nearby, peering inside a door that was partially open.

"Oh, hello, Azuki-san," Higurashi said.

"Hey, Higurashi," I said. "I guess you heard about the murder, right?"

"I do," Higurashi said. "We got a notification on our handbooks, and Monokuma showed up to personally inform us within a minute of the body discovery announcement. Since we were all together at the time, he was able to tell us everything we needed to know- about the murder, the new rule, and where we'll meet up with the ship."
"Wow, that's fast," I said, "but something's strange. Since Monokuma spoke to my group and the other members of Mihama's group, would have to literally be in two or three places at the same time."

As Higurashi shrugged, I jotted down this information. It would probably come in handy later, assuming we lived long enough to find a use for it.

"That's probably true," Higurashi said. "Anyway, since no one in my team left the basement since our investigation began, all of us have an alibi for the time of the crime."

"Got it," I said. "Did you see anyone besides Kirishima and Karita in the basement?"

"No," Higurashi said, a bit confused. "How would they even get inside?"

"They could have jumped down," I said, "and gotten in through this hole in the floor of the crime scene."

I pointed out the room I was talking about. Karita, who'd been listening to our conversation, walked over to get a closer look, then shook his head.

"That isn't possible, Azuki-san," Karita said. "Want to see why?"

"Yeah," I said. "Show me the reason and I'll see if I can't find a way a suspect could have managed a workaround."

Karita walked over to the door, which opened inwards and had a small window in it, and tried to open it further. The door slammed against a hard obstacle midway through, and was only open a crack, barely large enough for me to stick my arm through. Peering inside, I could see rubble strewn across the room. Through the window, I could see the hole in the ceiling, confirming that it was, in fact, the same room. While the visibility was so-so at best, there was one very important thing that I couldn't see- any sign that anyone else had been there or was still inside.

"As you can see, it isn't possible to open the door wide enough to get through," Karita said, "so even if someone jumped down, they couldn't have gotten out of here."

I sighed. Karita had won our impromptu bet of sorts, but the jury was out on whether that was a good thing.

"Well, that simplifies matters," I said, "or maybe it complicates them. I'd assumed that the killer got away by jumping down the hole and into the basement, but if you didn't see them, that couldn't have happened."

"What about the office windows?" Karita said.

"They weren't opened or broken open," I said, "and they overlook the cliff, so it wouldn't be safe to jump down without a rope. I'm going to head back upstairs and find out what I can."

I said goodbye to the others, wondering why I'd ever thought this was a good idea. I'd scratched off one theory about how the culprit had gotten away, but I'd have to stop eliminating theories I knew to be wrong and start confirming what I knew to be right, or I'd never solve the mystery.

As I started to leave the basement, Kirishima, who'd waited nearby during my conversation with Higurashi and Karita, approached me.
"Do you have a minute, Azuki-kun?" I said. "There is something I would like to show you."

"I do, if you make it quick," I said. "Time's a precious commodity in an investigation."

"Then I will be brief," Kirishima said. "While our luck was not as dismal as Mihama-kun's, we found nothing that would help us get off the island in the basement. Despite that, we did find something intriguing. It is right this way, but please be mindful of the trap."

Kirishima showed me to a room off to the side, and tested the pressure plate to show me. I heard the dart shooter nearby give off a clicking sound, like when someone tries to fire an unloaded gun. Maybe these traps could run out of ammo, too.

Kirishima opened a door and showed me a large room. In it, there were about two dozen vaguely cylindrical pods that were each large enough to house a person, even someone as tall as Kumakura. The pods were busted up pretty badly, so they probably wouldn't work even if the office complex had power.

"What the hell is this?" I said.

"Apparently, a major research project," Kirishima said, "codenamed Project Phoenix. According to the documents I found, the prisoners were meant to be used in this experiment, although it does not say what it was for."

"So this isn't relevant to our investigation," I said.

"Perhaps not," Kirishima said, "but it will most likely be important later, and considering that we will leave this island if we find Mihama-kun's killer, then this is our only chance to retrieve this information."

I sighed, then jotted down the basics in my notes, and making a note to ask Kirishima later. Since he probably wasn't the killer, I could talk to him after the trial once we caught whoever was responsible for this.

"Got it," I said. "Anything else?"

"There certainly is," Kirishima said. "I found a document inside with a list of serial numbers connected to seventeen names- the students in our class and Nagato-sensei."

"Why the hell would they know our names?" I said. "And what's the list for?"

"Unfortunately, I do not know," Kirishima said, "since while this was one of several pages, it was not the first one. All the other pages were illegible, so the rest of the document has likely been lost forever."

"Well, that sucks," I said, "but we'll puzzle over it some other time. I've got bigger fish to fry right now."

I said goodbye to Karita and quickly headed upstairs.

Since the investigation of the basement didn't pan out, I decided to check out the second floor. The central stairway connected the four stories, so it wouldn't be that hard to get from one floor to the other. Luckily, the stairs didn't seem to have any booby traps on them.

Once there, I found Sayuri, still in the office above the room where we found Mihama's body. The
hole in the floor in the middle of the office was recognizable, even from the other side.

"Oh, hello, Akira-chan," Sayuri said. "Watch out; there's a trigger over there, and the dart trap is over there."

Sayuri pointed at the floor between the hole and the wall to the left of the entrance, then the wall itself. There was a short distance between the trigger and the dart shooter, probably half a meter, so if I triggered the trap, I wouldn't be able to dodge the dart, at least not without accidentally falling into the hole.

"Got it," I said. "Any other traps?"

Sayuri shook her head.

"Good," I said. "Anyway, how are you feeling?"

"Awful," Sayuri said. "A part of me hoped that Tatsuki-chan and Himemiya-san wouldn't have to die, but I certainly didn't want Miharu-chan to die, either, to say nothing of whoever killed her... which might be Himemiya-san."

"Do you think Himeno did it?" I said.

"I don't know," Sayuri said, "so it could be any one of us, including her. A part of me actually felt relieved that she wouldn't have to die, but then I realized that might happen anyway."

I could sense a bit of disgust in Sayuri's voice, clearly hating herself for wanting someone to die in her friend's place. I personally couldn't judge her for feeling that way, especially not when I was in a field as competitive as acting. My mom always celebrated whenever I got a part, even knowing that many other people's daughters walked away empty-handed, so I'd long accepted that it was only natural to care more about yourself, your friends and your loved ones than it was to care about random strangers. Maybe that was why I didn't judge Tatsuki as harshly as some of our classmates did.

"I know this is difficult," I said, "but I'd like a full account of what you, Himeno and Mihama did when you got onto the floor."

Sayuri nodded.

"All right," Sayuri said. The three of us were together the entire time, but while exploring, I accidentally stepped on a pressure plate, barely dodging a dart trap. Noticing the danger, Miharu-chan decided to scout ahead for traps, having us wait around the corner until she called out to give the all-clear and let us in to investigate. We proceeded room by room, until we reached the office above where you found her body to scout it out so we could investigate. As she did so, Himemiya-san and I stood perfectly still, While inside, the trap must have triggered, killing her. I then convinced Himemiya-san to investigate the room, and then saw Miharu-chan's body."

I wrote down Sayuri's testimony in my notes.

"Got it," I said. "That pretty much covers between when we split up and you saw us through the hole?"

"It does," Sayuri said. "I went around the hole to get a better look, which is when I saw her dead body, as well as you."

Sayuri gestured at the hole, then at the far end of the room. If the office were like the one below it,
there should have been a desk where the hole was, but either they moved the desk out, or it fell below.

"So my group found the body first, right?" I said.

"I think so," Sayuri said, "since the body discovery announcement played a few seconds after I looked down. I heard Chiyuri-chan's voice almost immediately after I did, although I don't think she noticed me until I called out to her."

"I see," I said. "I'm going to go talk to Himeno to see what she knows."

"Please do," Sayuri said. "I think she's looking around the second floor."

I headed out of the office, in search of Himeno.

I then decided to talk to Himeno, who was in the corridors of the second floor, peering into the rooms on the hallway. Said rooms were smaller offices, which my group had looked into on the way to the one where we'd found Mihama's body. If the second floor group's luck was anything like ours, they probably hadn't found anything in those offices, either.

"Hi, Himeno," I said. "What are you looking for?"

"A possible escape route for the culprit," Himeno said. "Unfortunately, the only way into the office Mihama-san was investigating at the time of her death would have led past the spot where Sasaki-san and I were waiting, while the hole into the floor would have led to your group."

"Yeah," I said. "There's another hole in the floor of the office where I found Mihama's office, but if the killer dropped through there, they probably would've ran into Higurashi's group... if they could get out of the room that the room below the office where Mihama's body fell."

"Then that eliminates another possibility," Himeno said. "A few rooms on this floor are similarly inaccessible, so it seems unlikely that they could be used as escape routes."

The more we explored, the more unlikely the killer escaping through a hole in the floor seemed. Falling a story onto a hard service might not necessarily be fatal, but anyone who tried it wouldn't walk away unscathed.

"By the way, I have some questions for you," I said. "I'd like a full account of what you, Sayuri and Mihama did when you got onto the floor."

"Very well," Himeno said. "I was investigating the floor with Mihama-san and Sasaki-san when the latter accidentally triggered a dart trap. After she did, Mihama-san offered to scout ahead for possible dangers. She entered each room to search for traps, with us waiting around the corner and out of danger. After she confirmed each room was safe, the two of us went in and investigated in more detail. Unfortunately, when we reached the office, a trap seemed to have killed her. At Sasaki-san's insistence, we investigated the office, whereupon Sasaki-san found Mihama-san's body."

I wrote down Himeno's testimony in my notebook, on the opposite side of the page with Sayuri's testimony. Before I finished, I noticed that Himeno was staring at me intently.

"I would like to know something, though," Himeno said. "How suspicious am I?"

I sighed. It wasn't pleasant to be asked this question, or to answer honestly, but considering what
was at stake, and Himeno realized she was a suspect, I had to tell the truth.

"Very," I said, "since you and Sayuri were on the same floor as Mihama when the latter died, and the only ones in a position to kill her. After all, you were willing to be the one to execute Tatsuki to save us, so maybe you're willing to kill someone and die to get us off of here."

"Yes, that is true," Himeno said, "but while I hoped that Tatsuki-san would not have to give her own life to save us, she, at the very least, would have chosen to do so, as would I. Saying that we were 'willing' would be going a bit far, but at least we had a choice."

I nodded. Just as the killers so far (or attempted killer, in Kojima's case) had made their choices, so too had Tatsuki and Himeno.

"True," I said. "For what it's worth, while you're a likely suspect, I can't prove that you did it. All I can think about at the moment is a possibility- that you put one of the darts on the tip of an arrow, then fired that arrow at Mihama's eye."

"It's not a bad theory given my talent," Himeno said, "but there are more than a few holes in it. First, as Sasaki-san can also attest to, neither of us had a clear line of sight to Mihama-san at the time of her death; while arrows don't fly in a perfectly straight line, they can't go around corners. Second, I would need some sort of adhesive to bind the dart arrowhead to my arrow. Third... if Mihama-san's body fell to the floor, where do you suppose the arrow went?"

I paused a moment, before realizing that Himeno actually hoped I'd answer.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess it might break off from the dart, but we'd most likely find it in the office."

"Exactly," Himeno said. "Since Sasaki-san went into the office besides me, she would have found it first, assuming it had landed on the second floor and not the first. Fourth, I have not used any of my arrows since we set foot on the island; check my quiver if you aren't convinced. Fifth, if I were aiming at Mihama-san with the intent to kill, I would most likely target her torso or her neck, not her eye, even if I was confident I could hit the latter."

"Because she'd see you?" I said.

"That, too," Himeno said. "The main reason that it would be more practical to strike a larger target, even if I have the element of surprise. Of course, I can only speculate, since I've only ever shot arrows at targets, not people."

While Himeno was a high school-level archery champion, I didn't know how well she'd fare as an archer for a medieval army. She could expertly aim her arrows at targets while taking factors such as the wind into account, but she'd have a hell of a lot more trouble doing so against a moving target on the chaos of the battlefield, knowing that if she didn't kill the enemy, they'd kill her.

"And the last and most important reason," Himeno said, "is that Sasaki-san and I were watching each other the whole time. She would not have sit back and watched me kill her friend and roommate."

"Gotcha," I said. "Your story seems to check out, so I'll have to investigate elsewhere."

While asserting that Sayuri wasn't the type to kill Mihama didn't hold a lot of weight in this killing game, there didn't seem to be any possible way for Himeno or Sayuri to be the killer, unless they were both lying about it. But if neither of them did it, who could have?
I went up to the third floor and decided to question the group that was up there. Tatsuki, Kurogane and Himeno were together, at the top of the stairs.

"Hey, you three," I said. "I'd like to hear where you were at the time of the crime."

"You first," Asakura said. "You, Nagato and Kumakura were the first to discover the body, so I'd say that makes you three the most suspicious."

"But they discovered the body, didn't they?" Tatsuki said. "If the three of them triggered the announcement, then none of them are the culprit."

"If you believe that Monokuma can be trusted, I've got a bridge to sell you," Asakura said. "There's no saying he won't change the rules when it fits- it's the only reason you're still alive, after all."

I sighed and shook my head, wondering why the hell Higurashi thought it was a good idea to put Asakura in the same group as Tatsuki. Of course, since Asakura's shit list was pretty long- at minimum, Chiyuri, Karita, Tatsuki, and I- it was pretty hard to assemble a group without someone who hated his guts.

"If you want my alibi, you can ask Kumakura," I said. "Or Chiyuri, of course, if you can actually be nice to her for a change. Either way, if I'd killed Mihama, either one of my teammates would have seen me."

"Sure," Asakura said, "and what if they're covering for you? You and Nagato seem pretty buddy-buddy, so maybe one of you's lying to protect the other."

"If Azuki-san gets away with murder, both Nagato-san and her mother will die," Tatsuki said. "As for Kumakura-kun, he isn't close enough to Azuki-san to die for her. If they know Azuki-san is the blackened, they'll tell us at the trial."

I smiled at Tatsuki, then shot a dirty look at Asakura.

"I don't have all day to deal with your bullshit, Asakura," I said, "or even all morning. Tatsuki, Kurogane, I'd like to hear your alibis."

"All right, Azuki-san," Kurogane said. "The three of us were together the entire time. I didn't let either Asakura-kun or Tachibana-san out of my sight."

Tatsuki nodded and said "That's right," while Asakura scoffed.

"That's what I wanted to hear," I said, "but you're sure about that?"

"Absolutely," Kurogane said. "I was afraid that if I got separated from the others, Asakura-kun would kill Tachibana-san. There's also the traps, like with what happened to Mihama-san..."

While this seemed more or less airtight, I decided to make absolutely sure that the three of them couldn't have made it downstairs.

"I'd like to know something," I said. "Are there any holes in the floor connecting this floor to the one below it?"

"None more than a meter wide," Tatsuki said, "so it's impossible to climb up or jump down through them. We found an elevator on this floor, but it can't be used, and there isn't anything like a maintenance ladder available. That leaves the stairs as the only way to go between floors."
I jotted down those facts in my notebook. If this was anything like an ordinary investigation, I'd have taken the time to scout out the building in advance, like I'd done with the inn on the first island and the house on the second, but I didn't have that luxury this time. All of us were exploring the building for the first time, so I'd have to rely on those whose job it was to explore this floor.

"So in other words, none of you guys could get to or from the second level without going downstairs," I said, "and if you had, Mihama's teammates would probably have noticed you."

"That's right," Kurogane said. "Believe me, the three of us were really surprised, and not in a good way, to hear Monokuma say that a murder had occurred downstairs."

While it was probably not a shocking as being the one to actually find the body, I had to admit that I'd freak out if I got an announcement of a murder being committed on my student handbook.

"Speaking of murders," I said, "I'm relieved that Asakura didn't kill Tatsuki during the investigation."

"You're welcome," Asakura said, "but there's no point. Because Mihama died, Monokuma got what he wanted. The only question is who's going to have to die for killing her."

Ordinarily, that would include the blackened, or in the worst case scenario, everyone else, but there were two new possibilities. The first was that someone else would have to be sacrificed if Mihama had caused her own death, with Tatsuki being the most obvious volunteer, and the second was that Monokuma might "accidentally" kill someone in the culprit's place. None of these were at all pleasant, but if I got too distracted by the possibilities, we'd most likely end up with the worst possible one.

I said goodbye to those three. Having ruled out most possible ways out, as well as everyone besides the people on the second floor, there was one more thing I wanted to check out, even if it was a bit of a long shot. Perhaps by doing so, I'd be able to determine once and for all whether her death was an accident or a murder.

I headed back to the office above the crime scene, and found that Sayuri had departed. I looked at the pressure plate, as well as the dart trap nearby, which was probably between a meter and a meter and a half off the ground. One way or another, the dart that killed Mihama had most likely come out of the slot on that wall, whether it had shot Mihama in the eye, or someone had thrown it. Now that no one else was around, the time had come for a little experiment to settle that.

"Time's up!" one of the drones outside the window announced. "All of you, please meet up at the north beach and report to the ship for the trial!"

Moments after the announcement, I saw a dart fired out of the shooter in the wall. The dart flew toward the bookshelf on the opposite wall, and lodged itself in one of the books. I nearly pissed myself, since while I'd wanted to test the trap, I was damn sure that I hadn't pushed the pressure plate.

Wondering if the trap was faulty, about a minute later, I pressed down on the plate... and nothing happened. The trap didn't go off or even make a sound. I'd pushed hard as possible, and these things were sensitive, so it should have triggered the trap. I tried it again for good measure, but it did jack squat— no dart, no sound, nothing.

I then took the dart out of where it had lodged itself in a book, and tossed it at the office chair, causing it to sink into the padded backrest. In other words, the darts were still sharp, but since there...
only seemed to be one dart hole in the office, I couldn't see how any possible blackened could have gotten a dart without launching a dart into a relatively soft wall, before retrieving it to use on the victim.

That seemed to get me a bit closer to the truth. If the pressure plate didn't trigger the trap, then either Mihama just happened to be in the line of fire when it randomly went off... or someone had murdered her and made it look as though the trap had killed her. I'd need to determine how she had died, and once I did, the answer would lead me to whoever was responsible.

It took a while for everyone to get back to the ship. Even though I'd stayed behind for a couple minutes due to my experiment, I wasn't even the last one; Chiyuri was right behind me, as was the group from the third floor. Luckily for us, though, Monokuma was patient. The gangplank was down when I got here, and I quickly walked up it toward the elevator. Before long, I was joined by the rest of my classmates, and the eleven of us waited for the elevator, knowing that at least one of us wouldn't be riding it back up.

While the killer obviously was the one responsible for us ending up in a class trial, whose fault was it if we couldn't find the blackened? I didn't think any of us was clever enough to commit an unsolvable murder, so the responsibility would lie with all the spotless, since in that case, the outcome could have been prevented if any of us had done more. Because of that, I was willing to do whatever it took to find the culprit, no matter the cost.

I turned to Chiyuri, who was fidgeting nervously, and was still carrying the shopping bag with the extra suit for Nagato-sensei. She hadn't gotten to visit her mother since we'd left for the island, and if we didn't solve Mihama's murder, the Nagatos would never see each other again.

"I see you still have your bag with you," I said.

"That's right," Chiyuri said. "If I get through the trial, I can deliver the bag to Mom. If not... it won't matter."

An awkward silence followed. Since I knew Chiyuri was innocent, the only scenario that would result in her death was if the person responsible for killing Mihama got away with it. Of course, even if we found and convicted that person, which was by no means guaranteed, it wouldn't be a happy occasion.

"So, Chiyuri," I said, "are you scared?"

"Yes, I am," Chiyuri said. "We're already up to the third class trial, but I don't think I'll ever get used to this."

"Neither will I," I said. "In fact, I'm scared, too."

"Really?" Chiyuri said. "You don't seem to be afraid at all."

"Appearances can be deceiving," I said. "Being brave doesn't mean not feeling fear- it's being strong enough to overcome it. Anyone who values their life would be more than a little nervous going into a trial that could end with all of us being executed, but that will happen if we don't keep our heads on straight."

Chiyuri only ended up looking more frightened, which only further proved that pep talks were more Higurashi's thing (and even he had mixed success). By now, I'd learned to manage my stage fright, but helping other people with problems like that wasn't my thing. All I could do was be honest and hope for the best.
"That being said," I said, "that outcome is by no means predetermined or inevitable, especially not when we've done this two times before. The killer left behind clues, and all we have to do is follow them to find whoever's responsible."

"You're right, Akira-san," Chiyuri said. "I'm counting on you."

I shook my head, a faint smile on her face. As a girl with no special characteristics save for the stigma of being born out of wedlock, so it wasn't surprising that she didn't have too high of an opinion of herself. She probably thought that her existence caused trouble for her mother, but I hoped to show her that she had the power to help people.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said, "but I only can do the job because you and the other spotless help me. If all of you do your part, we'll find the truth."

Chiyuri nodded confidently, which helped me feel at ease. Whether acting or in a class trial, I couldn't do my job if my co-stars couldn't do theirs, so having people like Chiyuri around helped me feel at ease.

We then boarded the elevator and rode it down again. It was already a little roomier with eleven people on it, rather than the fifteen who'd gone down the first time, and if we returned to it for the return trip, that number would drop to ten. This outcome was preferable to everyone starving to death on the island, but I sure as hell wasn't happy about it.

Miharu Mihama was the Ultimate Legal Expert. She didn't act very much like a girl her age would but she was one of the most intelligent and mature members of the group, which was saying a lot for an eleven year old. She'd had a promising legal career ahead of her, and had died far too young. She'd deserved better, and should have had a longer live, with her youth as idyllic as mine had been when I was her age.

Perhaps Mihama's death had been an accident, but considering our circumstances, I wouldn't be surprised if someone was willing to kill her to escape this island and the killing game. I couldn't imagine who in their right minds would want to kill a kid like her, but I couldn't let them get away with it. There was no justice in Monokuma's killing game, but there was the promise that the spotless would be executed if they failed to find the murderer, so that's what we'd have to do, no matter the cost.

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**Author's Notes**

One unfortunate trend in the Danganronpa series is that the third trial tends to have less of an impact than the others. The first trial sets the tone for the game, and the second tends to have at least one surprise apart from the culprit's identity, so it can be difficult to follow up on these. Luckily, the fourth trials shake things up, while the fifth trials set the stage for the climax.

Next up is the trial itself. I'm interested in hearing your guesses as to who the culprit is this time. While it seems as though Azuki's a bit farther from the truth than in the previous trials, she has all the information she needs; the only question is whether she understands each piece of evidence's significance well enough to find the culprit.
We returned to the courtroom, once again not knowing who would get to leave. In most cases, we'd assume that the blackened would get to live if they got away with it, but if Mihama was responsible for her own death and we didn't convict her, no one would survive.

Two more portraits had been added since the end of the previous trial, and once again, they belonged to the most recent murder victim and the person who had been executed last time. Taiga's X consisted of two crossed musical notes, while Mihama's X was like the kind shown in the "Sign Here" lines on certain documents. Of course, the former was actually at Tatsuki's seat, as Tatsuki found out when she tried to return to her old seat.

"Wrong seat, Taiga-san," Monokuma said.

With the same expression as a kicked puppy, Tatsuki complied, assuming Taiga's position. By the time she was in her place, everyone else was in theirs, ready to begin.

"All right," Monokuma said. "Once again, you've got to find who was responsible for the victim's death this time if you want to live."

"And what if Miharu-chan's death was an accident or suicide?" Sayuri said.

"Then she's her own killer," Monokuma said, "and if you find her guilty, you'll have to pick someone to get punished, as per Rule 16. If the majority of you vote for someone else when it's actually her, then all of you die."

"I see," Tatsuki said. "If it turns out that Mihama-san's death was an accident or a suicide and Monokuma wants an execution anyway, please sacrifice me so that the rest of you can live."

"If, Tachibana-san," Himeno said. "That will only be necessary if Mihama-san caused her own death, whether accidentally or deliberately. If someone else did, then we'll have to find that person, or you'll die with the rest of the spotless."

That was assuming Tatsuki wasn't the killer, of course. Then again, circumstances aside, I didn't think it was all that likely that Tatsuki cared enough about Himeno that she'd kill Mihama to spare Himeno from having to kill her. Maybe she'd have done it if Taiga was playing Himeno's role, but if Taiga was still alive, then Tatsuki probably never would have made her proposal.

"What about Himemiya?" Asakura said. "She was just as eager to take one for the team, wasn't she?"

"No, she wasn't," Tatsuki said. "She only agreed to be my executioner after I made my proposal, and only because under Rule 16, someone would have to die anyway if I committed suicide. Her actions were those of someone who wanted to sacrifice the few to save the many, not someone who embraced her own death."

Himeno nodded in agreement, as did I. Of course, while Tatsuki was mostly right, I still didn't think that she really was ready to die. Of course, there would be time to discuss that with her later.

"I agree," I said, "and let's leave it at that for now. Our lives are in as much danger now as they were on the island, and that probably includes whoever killed Mihama."
"That's true, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "and before we begin the trial in earnest, I'd like to say something to the person who might have killed Mihama-san. I don't know why you felt compelled to do such a terrible thing, but now that we are in a class trial, our lives are in danger. If you killed her to save all of us, then please confess, so that we will not be executed. If you did it to save yourself, then I'm sorry, but we must expose you to save our own lives, even if it means your death."

The courtroom fell silent for a few moments, as everyone processed what they'd heard. Higurashi had always been so idealistic and averse to sacrifice, but in the end, he'd come to realize that once we'd set foot on this island, we wouldn't have been able to leave until someone died.

In the end, no one answered Higurashi's request. As I looked around, I saw Asakura playing the world's smallest violin; the courtroom was quiet enough that I could have sworn I heard the imaginary bow slide across nonexistent strings.

"What did you think would happen, Higurashi?" Asakura said. "That the killer would give up a shot at escaping here for good just to die a gruesome death? Or that anyone's selfless enough to take one for the team after Tachibana and Himemiya already offered to do it for them? I can't say I know for sure what's going through those two's heads, but no one's that selfless."

"I will admit that the likelihood of either scenario was slim at best," Higurashi said, "but because I asked this question, and because no one chose to step forward, I was able to ascertain one thing. If a third party is responsible for Mihama-san's death, that person is willing to not only commit murder, but sacrifice us all to graduate. We must find out how Mihama-san was killed, and the identity of the one responsible."

"Yes," Tatsuki said. "I don't know for certain why someone would kill Mihama-san, but it doesn't matter. No matter the killer's motives, we can't allow them to get away with what they've done."

What Tatsuki just said would, by itself, come off as hypocritical, but when considered in context with her words and actions over the past week, it made sense. She believed she deserved to die for killing Kojima- or at least more than her sister did- and probably wasn't too happy about the idea of someone else dying to save us. That being said, she knew the stakes as well as the rest of us, so she knew what had to be done.

Equally aware of the stakes, I got my head in the game, and prepared to get to the bottom of this crime, even if it was the last thing I did.

"So, with that out of the way, I suppose we should start with alibis," I said. "Chiyuri, Kumakura and I were together when we found Mihama's body in the office on the ground floor, so it's not as though one of us could have wandered off and killed her."

"Yes, but something's odd," Kurogane said. "Mihama-san was assigned to search the second floor, so how did her body end up on the ground floor?"

"Good question," I said. "There was a hole in the ceiling- or rather, the floor of the second story-just above Mihama's corpse, so it's possible that Mihama was dropped down there from the floor above after she was killed. Kumakura had to force the door open, too, so even if Mihama wasn't on the ground floor, she couldn't have opened it by herself."

"So if that's true, then the culprit has to be Himemiya or Sasaki," Asakura said, "or perhaps both of them."

While it was obvious that Asakura was making wild accusations as usual, this was especially
unconvincing. If one of them had killed Mihama, then the other would be a witness who could incriminate her, since they'd have nothing to gain from the first getting away with murder. If the first girl killed the other witness, then they'd be the only one alive on the second floor team, and the only viable suspect for the murders.

"Sasaki-san and I were together the entire time," Himeno said. "Mihama-san decided to check the room ahead for traps, but didn't come back. We heard a sound from the room Mihama-san was investigating, and then checked it out."

"A likely story," Asakura said. "Surely you two could be lying about it to protect each other?"

"The motive from last time no longer applies," Sayuri said, "so there would be no benefit to protecting Himemiya-san. I like her, and consider her a friend, but I'm not willing to die for her."

"The feeling is mutual," Himeno said. "While I was prepared to sacrifice myself, a part of me was relieved that Sasaki-san would not share my fate."

"Perhaps not," Kirishima said, "but what about everyone else?"

Himeno frowned disapprovingly.

"Sasaki-san voted against plan to have me sacrifice Mihama-san," Himeno said. "If she didn't want me to die, she could have volunteered to take my place."

"That's true," Sayuri said. "Naive as it may be, I honestly hoped we could get off this island without any of us having to die."

"I'll admit that it's rather unlikely that Sasaki-san or Himemiya-san could have committed the murder without being seen by the other," Karita said, "but can you prove that they didn't do it?"

I sighed. Ordinarily, this would be a job for Mihama, but with her dead, someone had to step in. Luckily, Sayuri picked up the slack.

"You've have it backwards, Karita-kun," Sayuri said. "In criminal trials, you have to prove that the defendants are guilty. The rules may be different here, but the stakes punish a false conviction even more harshly, so it's no exaggeration to say that jumping to conclusions can be a fatal mistake."

"That's right," I said. "Besides, how could you prove that either of them killed Mihama without being in the same room as her?"

Karita shrugged.

"Not really," Karita said. "The only way for them to kill her that way would be to trigger a pressure plate, but all of the pressure plates- or at least the ones I know about- triggered dart traps that were close enough to strike someone near them. That being said, it is at least possible for someone to pick up a dart that was fired and throw it into Mihama-san's eye."

"There's a problem with that," Chiyuri said. "The darts shatter upon hitting the walls. Only the one that went into Mihama-san's eye stayed intact. As such, anyone seeking to use a dart would have had to catch it in mid-flight and somehow avoid breaking it."

"Actually, Nagato-san, there is another way," Himeno said. "If the dart strikes a soft surface, it may remain intact and can be retrieved, a bit like arrows stuck in a target during archery practice."

Both Sayuri and I nodded, but Himeno wasn't done speaking.
"That being said, Himeno said, "there would be a hole in the dart's final destination, and I couldn't find any such holes in the office when I did my preliminary investigation. As such, if the trap went off, it could only have hit Mihama-san in the eye."

"Fair enough," Karita said, "but is it possible for you or Sasaki-san to have triggered the trap by mistake?"

Both of them shook their heads once again.

"Miharu-chan asked us to stay still, around the corner, while she was investigating the room for traps," Sayuri said. "When I suspected something had happened, I was worried about her, but Himemiya-san insisted that I stay put."

"Yes, I did," Himeno said, "because I was worried that either of us might trigger a trap and cause harm to ourselves or Mihama-san. Little did I know that the worst had already happened..."

As I thought, their stories seemed to corroborate each other. They didn't always agree, but they probably weren't lying about this.

"There was a pressure plate at the left edge of the hole in the floor," Sayuri said, "and a dart shooter in the wall to the left of the entryway. If the dart fired and struck Miharu-chan in the eye, she must have fallen backwards, into the hole and landed on her back."

That was probably the most ironclad theory of how Mihama died that I'd heard so far, so I nodded to concur. The only question was how the killer played into all this.

"So if Sasaki-san's analysis is correct, Mihama-san's death was most likely an accident," Higurashi said, "unless we can prove that there was some other way for her or her killer to get into the second floor."

"I think there's a more relevant question," Chiyuri said, "specifically, how the killer could have gotten out of the office. The window overlooks the cliff, and the killer couldn't have gotten through without breaking it, but it was intact when we found it. There was no way for them to leave without my group seeing them."

"No way out except for the large hole in the floor," Asakura said. "Didn't you notice that?"

I saw that Asakura had a smug smirk on his face, as though he thought he'd noticed something Chiyuri hadn't, but she glared at him in response. She was trying to be polite, but even she had her limits. Asakura must have stopped by the crime scene on his way back to the ship, but if he'd investigated, he'd probably done a pretty half-assed job.

"We did, Asakura...-san," Chiyuri said. "We also noticed that the hole leads into the basement storage room, the door of which could not be opened wide enough for someone to enter."

"That's right," Karita said. "There's a bunch of heavy rubble there, and the door opens inward, so it's not as though it could have been put there later."

Asakura bit his lip. Considering how much stupid crap he'd said so far, I was tempted to conclude he was the blackened, but thought better of it. He had an alibi that placed him far away from the crime scene, so it wasn't physically possible for him to kill Mihama. Instead, if there was a killer, I had to find out where they'd made a mistake.

"Speaking of holes," Karita said, "I don't suppose there were any between the second and third floors?"
"Not in the office Miharu-chan was investigating when she died," Sayuri said. "As for the rest of the floor... you'll have to ask Hikaru-kun or Tatsuki-chan."

I snickered as I noticed that Sayuri had snubbed Asakura, probably deliberately.

"There were several holes throughout the third floor," Kurogane said, "but none were big enough for a person to fit through."

"That's right," Tatsuki said. "Besides, even if the killer descended from the third floor, they'd need a rope- or something that worked the same way- and a place to tie it to if they wanted to climb back up. I should know, after all."

I thought about the noise that I'd heard, which could have only been Mihama's body falling onto the desk, and wondered if I'd overestimated how loud it was. Considering that I'd rarely heard anything weighing more than a couple kilograms fall from a height greater than a meter or two, I wasn't too good at guessing what heavy stuff falling sounded like. In any case, if the culprit had also jumped down from the second floor, we'd probably have heard a second thud, even if we probably couldn't hear the sound of them jumping down and landing in the basement. The fact that there was only one crash seemed to prove that no one had set foot in the first floor office besides Mihama.

"So I'm just asking to double-check," I said, "but you guys stayed together the entire time, right?"

The three of them nodded. Judging from Kurogane and Tatsuki's expressions, they enjoyed spending time with Asakura as little as I did.

"We did," Asakura said, "because I sure as hell wasn't letting her out of my sight. What about the basement group?"

"Our discussion has already established that descending from one floor to another through the holes is difficult," Kirishima said, "and ascending is even more so. There do not seem to be any ways upstairs except for the stairway."

I paused to think and try to cool my head, since I was growing increasingly frustrated. Usually, at some point in the crime, the killer made a mistake or ran into bad luck, which ended up being their undoing. Yamazaki had allowed Tsukimura to see him, Tatsuki had left the tag on her other pair of overalls, and even if Kojima had successfully killed both the twins, he wouldn't have had any way to escape undetected. Assuming someone had killed Mihama, they would have been able to avoid leaving behind any physical evidence and somehow leave the room without a trace, a plan that seemed too perfect.

Speaking of mistakes, I also noticed that while some people had said things that weren't necessarily true, I hadn't noticed any behavior that was characteristic of a killer trying to cover up their crime. Yamazaki knew that he'd have been screwed if anyone found the blue yukata with Tsukimura's blood on it, so he put it in the wash and made a beeline back to his cabin to pick it up. Tatsuki knew that she'd be convicted instantly if anyone saw a drop of blood on her overalls, which is why she'd changed clothes in the store. We were all pretty desperate, but nobody seemed at all scared of the evidence that had come up so far in this trial.

"So at the time of Mihama-san's death, everyone was in a group of three or more people," Karita said, "or better said, almost everyone."

"That is true," Higurashi said, "but what are you implying?"
"It's simple," Karita said. "Since Sasaki-san and Himemiya-san were in the smallest group, as well as the closest to the crime scene, they are the most likely to have killed Mihama-san, whether intentionally or not."

I sighed. Karita hadn't admitted he was wrong, but he should have known that the facts were against them.

"This again?" I said. "We already established that Sayuri and Himeno can't be in cahoots, since they have nothing to gain from protecting the other."

"Maybe not," Karita said, "but think about it this way. If one of them is the killer, then the other would be certain of the killer's identity, but have no conclusive proof beyond asserting that the other was the only possible culprit. To avoid accusing each other, they could very well be lying in order to have an alibi at the time of the crime."

"Is that so?" I said. "Well, take a look at this. It's what I got after questioning the two of them separately. Sayuri's testimony is on one side, while Himeno's is on the other."

I passed Chiyuri a piece of paper with the testimony I received from Sayuri and Himeno. After looking at both sides and nodding, she passed it to Karita.

"So, this is Sasaki-san and Himemiya-san's accounts of where they were at the time of the crime?" Karita said.

"That's right," I said, "and it matches up perfectly. If they were lying, then one of them would have a different story. With this, we can confirm that they were together the entire time, and would have known if the other had carried out the murder."

While it was almost completely impossible for one of the two to have committed the murder (unless they were in cahoots, in which case we were screwed), it didn't feel as though we were getting any closer to the truth. At this point, the only viable theory was that Mihama had died by accident, and I didn't have nearly as much evidence to prove that as I did for the other murders.

Karita shrugged, silently conceded the point, then continued to pass the paper around the circle. He was probably the only person who needed to see it, but it couldn't hurt to get everyone else on the same page.

"While I agree that Karita-kun's theory has a few holes in it," Kurogane said, "what if it wasn't a murder? What if one of Mihama-san' groupmates accidentally killed her, and didn't notice?"

"I'll admit that's a possibility, Hikaru-kun," Sayuri said, "but that's why Himemiya-san and I stayed completely still while Miharu-chan was investigating. We didn't want to trigger any traps by mistake."

"She's right," I said. "I think we've proven as conclusively as possible that Sayuri and Himeno can't be responsible."

While a part of me was relieved that two of my closest friends here weren't the blackened, I knew they weren't safe just yet. If we fucked up here, then the two of them, along with everyone else who played no role in Mihama's death, would suffer a grisly fate.

"So with Sasaki-san and Himemiya-san more or less exonerated, it seems most likely that Mihama-san caused her own death," Higurashi said, "unless anyone has an alternative theory."

"What about the other groups?" Himeno said. "Should we confirm where they were, and whether
any of them could have caused it?"

"That won't be necessary," Chiyuri said. "It isn't possible for anyone from the third floor or the basement to have gotten to Mihama-san without being seen by Sasaki-san or Himemiya-san. In fact, there's no proof that anyone left their assigned floors...besides Mihama-san, that is."

"That's nice," Asakura said, "but what about your group?"

"The same goes for us," Kumakura said. "Not only did we only see Mihama-san when her body was discovered, but if one of us had somehow killed her, then at least one of other two would have seen it happen."

"True," Higurashi said. "My group also stuck together most of the time, and while there were times when Kirishima-kun went on ahead to investigate, he could not have reached the first- much less second- floor to commit the murder."

I paused to think for a moment, long enough for the piece of paper with Himeno and Sayuri's testimonies to make it back to me. I didn't necessarily care about getting it back, since after today, I'd have no further need of it, but I did want everyone to see it.

"I think someone must have triggered the trap," I said, "whether Mihama or a third party, so we should find out who triggered pressure plates while in the office complex. I stepped on one just outside the office where we found Mihama's body."

"I stepped on a plate in the basement just after we arrived," Higurashi said, "resulting in a dart being fired instantly. Kirishima-kun also triggered a trap, but it was apparently broken and made a clicking sound."

"Asakura-kun did," Kurogane said. "It went off the second the plate was pressed, and he barely avoided it."

Asakura glared at Kurogane, clearly not happy about Kurogane blabbing. I noticed a pattern- the darts went off immediately.

"Shortly after we got here, I stepped on a plate by mistake," Sayuri said, "and barely dodged the dart that fired the instant the plate went down. This is why Miharu-chan decided to scout out the office, only to step on the pressure plate while doing so."

Chiyuri shook her head.

"I'm not so sure, Sasaki-san," Chiyuri said. "What if the trap was defective, and fired without Mihama-san activating the pressure plate?"

"That may be possible," Kirishima said, "since the basement trap Higurashi-kun mentioned failed to fire when the pressure plate was pressed. But while actions do not always have the desired results, results do not happen spontaneously; something would have had to trigger the trap, even if it was not the pressure plate. What proof do you have that the trap fired on its own, and how do you propose it happened?"

"I can't say how," Chiyuri said, "but I know what I saw. Just after Monokuma announced the end of the investigation, while on my way out of the crime scene, I tested the pressure plate outside the office where Mihama-san's body was discovered, but nothing happened, at least not at first. There wasn't even the clicking sound Higurashi-san mentioned"

I furrowed my brow. Out of everyone here, I knew best of all that these things didn't just go off on
"That's weird," I said. "It fired when I stepped on the pressure plate, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did," Chiyuri said, "but it fired a few seconds later. If the plate you pushed triggered the trap, it should have gone off instantly. The fact that it didn't means that something else triggered the trap."

I had to admit that Chiyuri was on to something there. It was hard to tell the difference between going off instantly and going off a few seconds later, but that would determine whether the pressure plate next to the trap had actually triggered it. Considering how cautious most of us were around the traps, there weren't many people who could confidently say how they worked.

"Ok, so maybe I didn't actually trigger the trap by pushing the pressure plate," I said, "but what do you mean when you said nothing happened 'at first'?"

Nagato sighed and shrugged.

"I didn't mention this earlier because I didn't know how to explain it," Nagato said, "but a minute after I tested the pressure plate near it, the dart shooter fired twice in rapid succession."

I went pale as I heard what Chiyuri had said. She didn't fully understand the significance of what she was saying, but I sure as hell did.

"You said it fired twice?" I said. "And a minute after you tested it?"

"Yes, that's what I said," Chiyuri said. "Is something wrong with that?"

"There might be," I said. "Just after the investigation period ended, I saw the trap that killed Mihama go off, then tested the pressure plate near it twice. If what you're saying is true, then the pressure plate downstairs controls the trap in the office, and vice versa. If that's true, then... then... oh fuck..."

"Akira-san?" Chiyuri said, and the others were staring me after that outburst.

A horrific realization came over me. What seemed like a very complicated and impossible to solve mystery was, in fact, incredibly simple. It wasn't that I hadn't realized the truth- I had known, but simply couldn't accept it. Now that I'd come to grips with what had happened, it was time to tell the truth, since I knew that the cost of doing so would be easier to accept than the consequences of my staying silent.

"Now that we know where the trigger to the office trap is, there's only one person who could have set off the trap that killed Mihama," I said, "namely, me."

The rest of the courtroom fell into a stunned silence, as everyone looked in my direction. The others could hardly believe what I was saying, and I personally couldn't blame them, since I never would have imagined that I'd end up in a scenario like this.

It was only after I'd spoken that I realized the ramifications of what I'd just said- or rather, the situation in which the only way to tell the truth was to accuse myself of being responsible for Mihama's death. I would not be able to go home, see my mom or other friends again, or even live to see tomorrow morning. All that awaited me was a gruesome death, one that Monokuma had tailor-made for the Ultimate Actress.

A part of me was tempted to laugh it off and claim that I was telling a joke. Another part wanted to
blame Himeno and Tatsuki for not sacrificing themselves sooner, to blame Higurashi for suggesting that we search the island in order to find an alternative, or to blame Mihama for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, all of which were as ridiculous as they sounded. Yet another part wished I'd let myself be hanged in Tatsuki's stead, thrown myself out the third floor of the building before the trial even commenced, stayed behind on the Ursa Major when we made landfall or even tried putting 11111 into the keypad on the lock to the bridge. Any of those deaths would have had more meaning and less agony than the one I was about to suffer.

But it was too late for that, ever since the dart had hit Mihama in the eye. Since I'd become responsible for Mihama's death, I had a choice- die for what I'd done, or sacrifice everyone else here in order to escape. As terrifying as death was, I knew that I could never live with myself if I graduated. The only choice I had was to stand by my words, even if doing so cost me my life.

"No..." Chiyuri said. "That can't be possible!"

I grimly shook my head.

"It is," I said. "Apart from what we noticed after the end of the investigation, the gallows' trapdoor wasn't controlled by the right pressure plate, so this has happened before. Right, Monokuma?"

"You're right about that, Azuki-san," Monokuma said, "since I had to fix it after you stumbled upon it. Of course, while you are right that some trap triggers got switched around, I'm not going to remark about whether you're responsible for Mihama-san's death, though."

"Because it'd spoil the surprise?" I said. "That's all the more reason to believe I did it."

Even as I said that, a part of me was hoping that Monokuma would say that I was wrong and that I hadn't really killed Mihama. Then again, the facts aside, that wasn't possible.

"So that explains why the trap didn't go off when Akira tested it," Sayuri said. "If Miharu-chan had stepped on it, then the one downstairs would have gone off, and she wouldn't have been harmed. She must have been standing there and examining the trap while scanning the room, never dreaming that it would go off in her face. When the trap fired, she must have stumbled backwards before falling through the hole, causing the trap downstairs to go off."

I winced, before realizing that Sayuri wasn't trying to guilt-trip me over Mihama's death; she was merely talking about the power of coincidence. The odds of this clusterfuck happening were pretty damn low, but so, too, were the chances of Tsukimura happening upon Yamazaki in time to see something he'd kill to keep secret, or of Sayuri and Himeno watching the window while Tatsuki passed by. I guess the only surprise was that no one had fallen prey to the traps or gotten murdered before this had happened.

Of course, after thinking about it for a moment, I realized that this wasn't a question of coincidences, but consequences. When Yamazaki set out to kill Karita, he ran the risk of getting caught, whether by his target or a third party. When Tatsuki became the blackened, she had to make a choice- save herself and her sister, or sacrifice herself to let the rest of us live. When we decided to wait until we'd investigated the island before going with Tatsuki's proposal, we ran the risk of someone else dying first. None of the outcomes were the ones we anticipated or wanted, but they were possible, and I had better ways to spend the little time I had left than agonizing over how things could have turned out.

"There's one thing that doesn't fit," Chiyuri said. "The body discovery announcement requires three people, excluding the culprit, right?"
"You're right about that, Nagato-san," Monokuma said, "but I'm not saying which three of you triggered the announcement this time."

"I think I understand what you're getting at," Kurogane said. "If you, Azuki-san and Kumakura-kun were the only people who found the body, then Azuki-san couldn't have been the culprit. If she was, she wouldn't have counted toward those three, and the announcement wouldn't have gone off."

I shook my head. Monokuma refusing to say which three of us had triggered the body discovery announcement wasn't just him being uncooperative; he'd inadvertently given us an important clue. There was a way for our group of three to trigger the body discovery announcement, even with the culprit among us; a fourth person had discovered Mihama's body.

"It's true that assuming I'm the culprit, you and Chiyuri would have needed an additional person to trigger the Body Discovery Announcement," I said, "but you did have that person- Sayuri. She peered into the room and noticed Mihama's body at the same time as we did."

"I guess you're right," Sayuri said, "since this would explain why the body discovery announcement went off after I saw Miharu-chan's body. I'm sorry; things would be simpler if I hadn't looked."

"No, don't apologize," I said. "If you hadn't looked, and the body discovery announcement hadn't been sent, we probably would've thought that Mihama wasn't actually dead. In fact, your timing helped prove that the culprit was one of the three to discover the body- namely, me."

I looked around at the others. In the end, while I'd done most of the work when it came to solving the crimes, my efforts wouldn't amount to shit if I couldn't all- or at least most- of my classmates to vote for the culprit with me. So far, no one besides Chiyuri was objecting, but at the same time, the others didn't seem fully convinced.

"So, everyone," I said. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't think you have any reason to lie," Karita said, "since if you get convicted for Mihama-san's death, you'll regardless whether you actually did it. The only question is whether the rest of us will end up going down with you."

"I doubt that Azuki-san would want such a thing," Higurashi said. "If she truly believes herself guilty, she could have hidden that knowledge and graduated by herself. If not, then I don't see who she could possibly be protecting. I certainly don't think she's the type to throw her life away just to ensure we meet the same fate."

The others didn't argue with that. Not everyone could be trusted in here, but even the untrustworthy ones had understandable and rational motives, and there was nothing rational about trying to kill off my classmates, along with myself. Chiyuri, however, sighed, since she wasn't fully convinced.

"I... don't think you're lying, Akira-san," Chiyuri said. "It's just that this is all so hard to believe. You, the person who saved all of us twice over, have become the blackened and endangered us, albeit unwittingly? And you somehow killed Mihama-san without even being in the same room as her? It doesn't seem very likely to be true, and I don't want it to be."

That made two of us. Not only had my screw-up killed Mihama, but it had put us all in danger, and the only way to save everyone who'd done nothing wrong was for me to lay down and die. That being said, while it was tempting to throw a pity party for myself for ending up in this mess, a part of me was glad I'd been the one. If I hadn't, there was no guarantee that we'd have been able to
figure this out and realize who was responsible.

"Me neither," I said, "but that's the conclusion that all the evidence thus far points towards. If you're still not convinced, why don't I summarize everything that happened one last time?"

Earlier today, the twelve of us explored the office complex. The culprit, Chiyuri and Kumakura went to the ground floor. Mihama-san, Himeno and Sayuri headed to the second floor. Kurogane, Asakura and Tatsuki explored the third floor. Everyone else- Higurashi, Kirishima and Karita- explored the basement. While we were exploring the building, everyone could account for their teammates' whereabouts.

Shortly before the crime, Sayuri accidentally triggered a trap on the second floor, prompting Mihama to offer to investigate the offices in advance. While Mihama was investigating one office on the second floor, which would be the true scene of the crime, she had Himeno and Sayuri stay out of the way until she cleared it, unaware that disaster was about to strike.

While the culprit was about to enter the office on the ground floor, they stepped on a pressure plate, causing the trap upstairs to fire a dart at Mihama, who was investigating the office on the second floor, hoping to clear out traps in advance of Sayuri and Himeno's investigations. Mihama, fatally wounded, stumbled backward and onto the pressure plate, thereby triggering the trap downstairs. The culprit barely dodged in time, since the plate they triggered didn't fire a dart immediately.

Mihama then fell down through a hole in the floor, into the office, and landed on the desk with a loud crash. At that point, the second floor team burst through the door and found her body, unaware that her killer was among them. At that point, Sayuri peered down from the hole in the ceiling, becoming one of the three to trigger the body discovery announcement. The culprit then set out to find the true killer, unaware of their own responsibility for what had happened. But now they know- now we all know- and must accept this truth.

This has been my confession. I, Akira Azuki, am the culprit.

The rest of the class was silent. My summary had been shorter this time, largely because the case was a lot simpler, but I hoped it had answered all the questions. In fact, the part between my confession and this speech had also been shorter than the previous trials, since I didn't need to force the culprit (i.e. myself) into admitting their guilt; I just had to get Chiyuri and the others to accept that I was guilty. The only question was whether I'd succeeded.

"Normally, this would be where the culprit confesses," I said, "but I just did. Does anyone have any questions or objections?"

No one spoke up, which was a bit unnerving. Normally, the culprit, by confessing and accepting their fate, would acknowledge that I'd presented an airtight case proving their guilt, one that would convince everyone else to realize that as well. I staked my life on this final confession, and hoped that would be enough reason for my classmates to believe it.

"It looks like all of you have made up your minds," Monokuma said. "Well, except for Nagato-san, but she's only one person, and I think this trial's gone on long enough."

"That's right," I said. "Let's get this over with."

"Good plan!" Monokuma said. "Will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one?"

The vote began. As I reached for my own button, I noticed that my hand was trembling so badly I
could barely press the button. The only reason I managed to was because I knew it was for the best, knowing that even if I died, the others would be able to live on.

The vote results were tallied. I got nine votes while Mihama herself got one. I wondered who didn't have the heart to vote for me, but that didn't matter.

The display then showed the die landing with my face up, along with "GUILTY." One way or another, it was all over for me, but what about the others? That was all I cared about at the moment.

The courtroom was eerily quiet in the aftermath of the vote. I'd never enjoyed any of the verdicts until now, and this was no exception.

"And that's a three-peat!" Monokuma said. "The blackened who killed Miharu Mihama-san is none other than... Akira Azuki-san!"

It was always bittersweet when we found the right answer in a class trial, but this time was especially so. As glad as I was that I was the only one who'd have to pay the price for my mistake, there were no two ways about it... my life was over.

"But this time, the verdict wasn't unanimous," Monokuma said. "Nagato-san, you voted for the culprit in the last two trials, so why'd you make a mistake now?"

As Monokuma delivered his lecture, sounding like a disappointed parent, we all looked at Chiyuri, who fidgeted sheepishly. I should have known that out of everyone here, she'd be the one who'd hesitate to make this decision.

"I... I'm sorry," Chiyuri said. "I just couldn't accept that Akira-san was the blackened."

I sighed. Usually, this was the part where the blackened explained their motivations, since while I could figure out how the blackened had committed the crime, I could only guess why. This time, though, the events spoke for themselves.

"I'm the one who should apologize, Chiyuri," I said. "The truth is that I never intended to kill Mihama, but it ended up happening anyway. I've always seen it as my duty to solve the murders... including the one I committed."

"I don't get you, either, Azuki-san," Monokuma said. "You were this close to getting off scot-free, but you actually told the others to vote you guilty!"

"My life for all of theirs?" I said. "That's not a bad trade, even if it wouldn't have come to this if not for you."

"But does it really have to be your life, Azuki-san?" Tatsuki said. "Monokuma, since you don't care about getting the right person, please execute me in her stead!"

"No can do, Taiga-san," Monokuma said. "Tatsuki-san paid for her crime already. If you want to join your big sister so badly, you can also commit murder!"

Tatsuki's shoulders slumped in despair.

"Please, Tatsuki, just give it up," I said. "Taiga gave you a second chance at life, so don't waste it."

"I wasn't going to," Tachibana said. "I just think that you deserve that second chance more than I
do. If I lived long enough to give it to you, then my life wasn't in vain."

"Well, Monokuma clearly doesn't see things that way," I said. "It's just as well, since the last thing
I'd want is someone else dying on my account. We got off this island with only two casualties,
myself included, so I guess that's the best we can hope for."

"I believe so, too," Himeno said, "which is why I volunteered to die along with Tachibana-san.
You and Mihama-san, however, did not make that choice, so I regret that you two ended up being
the ones to lose your lives here."

At this point, since we'd realized that I was the killer, and that Monokuma wasn't going to
substitute anyone for the blackened a second time, everyone here, myself included, had to accept
that I was going to die. I didn't know how long I had left, save for that it wasn't as long as I'd like,
but I probably had at least a few minutes, and hoped to use those minutes as well as I could.

"I'd actually like to say a few words to each of you while I have the time," I said, "whether
apologies, advice, thanks or simply last goodbyes."

The others listened quietly and attentively, knowing that whatever I had to say was important. I
decided to start with my three least favorite survivors, so as to get them out of the way.

"Asakura, Karita, Kirishima," I said. "I don't like you three, but I don't think you deserve to die
along with the rest of the class. What I do isn't for your sake, so you don't need to feel indebted to
me."

"Don't worry, I won't," Asakura said. "The feeling's mutual, after all."

"Indeed," Kirishima said. "Your death is a meaningless one, so I will not accept the blame."

"You never did have what it takes to be a con artist, Azuki-san," Karita said, "but you're true to
yourself, and I respect that."

I chuckled mirthlessly. While it was obvious that they didn't give a rat's ass whether I lived or died,
I'd probably have felt odd if they did reveal that they cared about me at the end, so I was a bit
relieved. As for me, I didn't really care about them, but was glad I didn't have their blood on my
hands.

"Kumakura, I don't know what to say, really," I said, "except... I wish I'd gotten to know you
better."

"Me too, Azuki-san," Kumakura said.

"The same goes for you, Kurogane," I said. "I hope you get out of here and hook up with someone
who loves you as much as you do them, and who deserves that love."

Kurogane nodded, then wiped away a tear.

"Higurashi, I may not have always agreed with you," I said, "but I know that you're more of a
leader than I will ever be. Do everything you can to keep the class safe, and remember- even if
more people probably will die, no one has to."

"I swear on my life, Azuki-san," Higurashi said, "and I will remember that."

"Sayuri, I'm sorry about Mihama," I said, bowing deeply. "You might not be able to forgive me for
killing your friend, but I hope you understand that I never wanted this to happen."
"I...I don't blame you, Akira-chan," Sayuri said, choking back a sob, "and neither... do I. Y-You're my friend, too..."

I allowed myself a bittersweet smile. As awful as it was that Sayuri was losing two of her friends today, I couldn't help but feel happy that I still counted as one, at the end.

"Tatsuki, promise me you won't give up on life," I said. "Your sister gave you a second chance, so don't waste it."

"I... I won't," Tatsuki said, "but I can't accept sacrificing people so I can live."

I didn't have anything to say to that. Perhaps Tatsuki would one day forgive herself, but it wouldn't happen here and now, not when she probably blamed herself for my death. In the end, it was up to her, and all I could do was believe in her.

"Himeno, you've been a good friend," I said. "There aren't many people who have been as honest and good-hearted as you."

"Same for you, Akira," Himeno said, blinking back tears. "I'm... sorry I can't do anything for you."

Himeno had always considered apologies to be a hollow and insincere gesture... so it was telling that apologizing was the only thing she felt she could do for me.

"It's fine," I said. "By the way, I never told a soul about our conversation last night, and never will."

As Himeno said, "Thank you, Akira," I glanced over and saw Sayuri continuing to weep inconsolably. She probably didn't know how Himeno felt about her, but I hoped she'd learn about it someday... from the girl herself.

"And last, but certainly not least, Chiyuri," I said. "I appreciate that you trusted me with... certain secrets of yours, so allow me to return the favor. From here on out, I'm trusting you to do the right thing, to unearth the answers to the mysteries, to find the truth, no matter what comes of it. Can you do that?"

"I'll... do my best," Chiyuri said. "Akira-san... thank you for being my friend."

I smiled and wrote one last message to Chiyuri in my notebook, before handing it to her. I then turned to the camera near Monokuma's seat.

"That's about it," I said. "Nagato-sensei, I'm not sure if you can hear me, but it was an honor to have you as my teacher, even in a time like this. I'm sorry I can't keep my promise."

As I bowed in apology, I rose to see Chiyuri looking utterly confused. Evidently, Nagato-sensei had kept my secret to the end.

"I think it's about time," Monokuma said. "Are you ready for your final curtain call, Azuki-san?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said. "Let's just get this over with."

"I'm not!" Chiyuri said, tears streaming down her face. "Please don't do this, Monokuma!"

While Monokuma ignored Chiyuri's pleas for mercy, or how the others were indifferent at best and heartbroken at worst, I couldn't help but smile one last time. There was a time when I'd thought of the others as tolerable at best and untrustworthy at worst, and even now, I still couldn't stand some
of them. But the rest of them—Himeno, Sayuri, Kumakura, Kurogane, Tatsuki, Nagato-sensei and especially Chiyuri—had proven to be true friends. They didn't deserve to be stuck in this hell, but they also didn't deserve to die, so if I could help them live at least a few more days, then this would be worth it.

My time had come and I was still scared shitless, but I was dead-set on not showing it. The last thing I wanted was to give Monokuma the satisfaction, or make my demise any more painful for those I cared about. This was the most important decision of my life, and I didn't want to go to my grave regretting it.

"Now then, I've prepared a very special punishment for the Ultimate Actress!"

"Take care, everyone," I said. "The rest, as they say... is silence."

"Let's give it everything we've got! IT'S PUNISHMENT TIME!"

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**Game Over**

**Azuki-san has been found guilty**

**Time for the punishment!**

The metal clamp seized me by the neck—tightly enough to fit but loosely enough not to strangle me—and dragged me into the execution chamber. It would've been more dignified if I'd been allowed to walk, or even marched there in shackles, but such was life... or rather, death.

*The Ultimate Actress, Akira Azuki's Execution: Executed*

*The Ides of March*

I found myself on a stage, wearing a toga over my school uniform. It was set up to look like the Roman Senate, and I was surrounded by fifteen Monokumas, each of whom held a knife and had a photo of one of my classmates taped to their faces.

The Monokumas took their turns stabbing me, being careful to avoid any arteries or vital organs. Of course, each of those stabs hurt like hell, and with knife wounds all over my arms, legs and torso, blood was pouring out of me like a pipe that had burst.

By the time fourteen of the Monokumas had their turn, I'd lost a lot of blood, and thought I was going to bleed to death, but then there was one last Monokuma left—the one with Chiyuri's face, apparently ready to perform the coup de grace. Its knife had a much longer blade than the others, and I knew that I probably wouldn't survive getting stuck with that. While I'd always been afraid of dying in this killing game, now that I was actually being executed, I wasn't nearly as afraid. Once I was dead, I wouldn't feel any more pain.

Faint from blood loss, I couldn't help but let off a faint chuckle and smile weakly. Even though I knew that the Monokumas were soulless automatons whose "costumes" were too cheap to pass muster in even an amateur production, they did have my classmates' faces. In a way, I wouldn't be dying alone.

As that final Monokuma leaped forward, Chiyuri's face was the last thing I saw before the knife pierced my heart.
Author's Notes

Do not adjust whatever device you're using to read this fanfic—our heroine, Akira Azuki, is dead.

I'd like to thank you for the kudos, comments and theories. I'd like to congratulate No0o0o for finding out who was responsible; I was afraid that it would be a bit too hard to figure out, but it seems to be just right.

I'd planned this outcome all along, gradually intending for Nagato to gradually develop and eventually have to replace Azuki as the class's primary mystery solver, a bit like Shuichi did for Kaede in V3, albeit more gradually. In that case, part of the reason why the plot irked me, apart from the fact that Kaede was a more interesting character and the main series' first female protagonist, is that she got killed off fairly early on in the story. In this fic, Azuki's developed, gradually connecting with the rest of the group and learning compassion for the other killers, especially since she inadvertently becomes one herself.

The execution of the murder was a challenge, and I decided to have it be an accidental murder that Azuki could solve herself. It's also a deconstruction of the typical Danganronpa murder formula; since there isn't a culprit to outwit in the class trial, nor is there even a detailed plan like there was in Chapter 2-5, Azuki wasn't able to figure out where the culprit made a mistake. Since Mihama's death isn't the result of someone having committed murder and trying to hide their guilt, the case is somewhat simpler, although Azuki has to come to grips with the fact that she's responsible for Mihama's death, and that she must die in order to save the others.

The rest of the fic will be from Chiyuri's POV, and will force her to come into her own as a protagonist. Without spoiling too much, I won't kill off Chiyuri, at least not until the very end of the fic, but no one else is safe. Of course, I will note that if someone does kill Nagato-sensei, they will be punished for breaking the rules with a summary execution.

As for Azuki, she had her role to play. She served as an outsider's perspective on the Nagato family, as well as the initial protagonist, who'd come to care for her classmates (including the ones she didn't like), and had her own arc. Naturally, her death will have its repercussions on the rest of the group, but as for what they are... you'll have to wait and see.

I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on this development and the rest of the trial.

Chapter IV might not be out for a while, for a few reasons. One is the usual; that while I have the basics of each chapter planned out in advance, it takes a while to write it up. Another is that since Himemiya turned out to be significantly nicer than I'd originally envisioned her, I may need to tweak some of her scenes in Chapter IV (but without spoiling too much, it won't change the killer or victim). Yet another is that Chiyuri has her own Free Time Events, which will cover various sides of her classmates that Azuki's Free Time Event chains don't (especially when Chiyuri spends time with Azuki herself).
Chapter IV: The Melancholy of Chiyuri Nagato

Daily Life

Chiyuri's POV

As the last knife pierced Akira-san's heart, I felt as though I'd been stabbed in the same place. She had been one of the few who hadn't judged me for the circumstances under which I was born, and had been the only person I'd been able to confide in about my status as an illegitimate child. It had taken me sixteen years to find someone like her, but we'd been parted forever a mere eighteen days after meeting.

Of course, my grief over her passing was also intermingled with guilt. I felt Akira-san's loss more keenly than any of the others, including Mihama-san, who'd died as a result of Akira-san's actions. I must have seemed like a rather self-centered individual, someone who would grieve for a friend more than a blameless victim. All my life, I'd felt burdened by my status as an illegitimate child, and the loneliness from being ostracized for that, but had I ever taken the time to empathize with someone else's suffering? Maybe that was why I'd never had any friends.

"And that's that!" Monokuma said. "You either die a spotless, or you live long enough to become the blackened, and I guess the latter happened to Azuki-san."

"This... isn't possible..." I said.

"Of course it is," Monokuma said, "it's the truth. Here's the proof."

The monitor changed from the room where Akira-san had been executed, to two simultaneous camera feeds- the left was of the second floor office, while the right one was the first floor hallway- with the time stamp showing just before Mihama-san's death. As Akira-san stepped on the pressure plate, a dart flew into Mihama-san's eye, and as she stumbled backwards, she triggered the trap that fired the dart at Akira-san. Kumakura-san broke down the door as Sasaki-san and Himemiya-san investigated the upstairs office, at which point Monokuma cut off the feed.

"And the rest, as they say, is history," Monokuma said. "Any questions, Chiyuri?"

I bit my lip. I didn't know whether Monokuma was trying to mock Azuki-san calling me by name, or that he thought he was my friend, too, but I didn't like it one bit.

"Don't... call me that," I said. "Only my mom and my friends get to call me 'Chiyuri'!"

"Oh, my mistake, Nagato-san," Monokuma said.

Considering that Monokuma had consistently called Tatsuki-san by her dead sister's name, I doubted that was an accident.

"I do have a question," Kirishima-san said. "The angle that the two video feeds were shot at did not match any security cameras in the building, or any Monodrones nearby. How did you obtain the footage?"

"Good question, Kirishima-san," Monokuma said. "I have eyes and ears all over, not just the cameras and the Monodrones. They do help, and breaking them is a violation of the rules, but
they're mainly a reminder that you're being watched."

I wondered if it was possible for someone to stealthily approach and disable a camera without being seen, but if Monokuma had those additional means of surveillance, then it was out of the question.

"Anyway, I'd like to congratulate you on making it through another trial," Monokuma said, "but it seems as though you haven't learned your lesson yet. At best, you're indifferent, and at worst, you're heartbroken. If a class trial gets you this down, you'll never be able to face the real world."

"Yes, the newspaper we found on the previous island painted a fairly grim picture of the world," Higurashi-san said, "but how can we know that it's true?"

"You don't," Monokuma said. "The decision of whether to accept what you hear or cling to what you've always believed to be true is up to you. I've said my piece, so now, I'll leave you to digest what you've seen and heard. Until next time!"

Monokuma vanished.

"I... honestly don't know what to say to that," Higurashi-san said.

"I do," Kirishima-san said. "Azuki-kun's passing was truly meaningless."

I glared at Kirishima-san. I hadn't been able to bring myself to vote for Akira-san, but I did recognize what she'd done for us. She'd solved the crime she'd unwittingly committed and enabled the rest of us to survive, even at the cost of her own life.

"How could you say such a thing?!" I said.

"Consider our situation," Kirishima-san said. "By laying down her own life, she extended all of ours, but only until the next class trial. The simple reality is that unless there is an additional condition Monokuma has yet to mention, only one of us will escape this killing game."

"You're not wrong there," Asakura said, "but I guess you think you're gonna be that one person, right?"

"I am not so naïve or arrogant as to believe that," Kirishima-san said. "Probability dictates that with ten of us left- excluding Nagato-sensei, who cannot participate in this 'game'- our odds of being the only survivor are slim, and I have no skills that would give me an edge. Precedent dictates that since no one who has attempted murder so far has succeeded, we have little reason to believe the next person will. Common sense dictates that Monokuma's goal is to get us to kill each other, so he has no desire for us to actually win, which would end the killing game. This killing game is like a casino, and as they say, the house always wins."

So that was the most likely reason why there was a dice game shown every time a verdict was announced. I'd heard of various strategies you could use in order to help your chances at card games, but unless you were inhumanly dexterous, there was no way to roll exactly the number you wanted without cheating.

"That may be so," Higurashi-san said, "but people will get desperate sooner or later, as Monokuma introduces additional motives."

"Indeed they will," Kirishima-san said. "You and Nagato-kun can brainstorm countermeasures if you feel compelled to do so, but it would be more prudent to accept the possibility that this will happen again and prepare accordingly."
Kirishima-san headed for the elevator, and the rest of us followed him. As tragic as this trial had been, much like the two before it, life, such as it was in the killing game, had to go on, so we had no choice but to return to our ship and await what would come next.

On the ride back up, I stared at Kirishima-san, who ignored me and gazed at the door to the elevator. While I couldn't argue with his points, I didn't want to accept them, either. Even if we got through each trial, they would begin with the death of a classmate who'd probably been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and end with the execution of a classmate who was desperate or merely unlucky. Too many of us had died for us to get this far, and I didn't want to believe that more of us would share Mihama-san and Akira-san's fates.

After we got off the elevator, I met up with Higurashi-san.

"Do you need something, Higurashi-san?" I said.

"Ordinarily, this would be when we'd go and talk with Nagato-sensei," Higurashi-san said, "but I'll let you go talk to her by yourself."

"I appreciate that," I said. "What about our report?"

"I'll let you talk with her about the trial," Higurashi-san said, "and I'll stop by later. Part of it is because you and your mother need some time alone, and part of it is because I don't know what to say."

"Well, neither do I," I said, "but right now, I just want to see Mom again."

I wiped away a tear, and saw Higurashi-san standing there, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Then I'll let you go see her," Higurashi-san said. "The only other thing I have to say, trite as it may be, is that I'm sorry for your loss. Azuki-san and I didn't always agree, but I respected her honesty and appreciated her contributions to the class trials... especially this one."

"Thank you," I said. "You know, I think she actually respected you, too. Keep that in mind."

As I said goodbye to Higurashi-san, my tears continuing to flow, I realized once again that I wasn't alone. Whether we liked her or hated her, Akira-san had been an important part of our class, and all of us would have to deal with her loss in our own ways. The same went for Mihama-san, whose death had sealed Akira-san's fate, as well as everyone else who would fall victim to the killing game in the future.

I stopped by my cabin to drop off my dirty clothes, then took the elevator down to talk with Mom. It should have been a happy reunion, but the fact that I was seeing her for the first time in more than 50 hours, and that I'd have never seen her again if we hadn't gotten through this trial barely registered.

"Hello, Chiyuri," Mom said.

As I sat down, Mom looked uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry I smell like this," I said, "since it's been two and a half days since I've taken a shower. I'm also sorry that I'm underdressed, but semi-clean overalls are better than a filthy school uniform."
"No, it's not that," Mom said. "I'm sorry to hear about Azuki-san. I know how close you two were."

I nodded, as tears started to run down my face.

"It's... it's not fair," I said. "She didn't mean to kill Mihama-san, so she doesn't deserve to die."

"No, she doesn't," Mom said, "but I hope you understand that she did a very brave thing. Not only did she have to give her life, but she had to say who was responsible for the crime knowing that ten- or perhaps eleven- people would die if she was wrong."

In other words, including herself, Mom and I. As hard as it was for me to accept this truth, Akira-san couldn't afford to doubt herself or be wrong. She had to not only be right, but know that she was right, or else she wouldn't have been able to convince us to vote for her.

"Speaking of courage," Mom said, "while I understand that you're grieving, the time has come for you to show courage by living on after the loss. Losing your father was the most devastating thing I'd ever experienced, but I knew I had to stay strong, since he wanted me to live on, and was counting on me to raise our daughter."

"I... I know, Mom," I said. "There's too many lives at stake for me to shut down now, even if I don't know what I can do for them."

"Unfortunately, I can't tell you the answer," Mom said. "Simply take your time and come to it on your own."

I didn't know what to say except "I will, Mom," a promise I didn't know whether I could keep. While it was to Monokuma's benefit to isolate the one adult authority figure we had, who also happened to be my mother, the truth was that all of us had to decide which path to take- cooperate with the group and make sacrifices for it, or look out for ourselves. Akira-san had chosen the former path, and had paid the price for it.

I started to get up, but then remembered the bag that I'd brought with me.

"One more thing," I said. "I almost forgot, but here's an extra change of clothes for you."

I passed the suit through the bars of the cell, and Mom graciously accepted it.

"Thank you, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Once again, I'm sorry that I can't do more for you and your classmates."

"Once again, there's no need for you to apologize, Mom," I said. "I know Monokuma's keeping you in there to minimize how much you can do to help us."

"Fair enough," Mom said. "The only thing I'm not sure about is why he's keeping me alive."

The most obvious answer that came to mind was to use her as a hostage in order to manipulate me, such as tempting me to graduate so that I could bring Mom with me. Apart from that, there was Monokuma's refusal to harm the students unless they broke a rule or were convicted in a class trial... except for Taiga-san, who had been executed in her sister's stead. He clearly still had use for Mom, hence his rule preventing the students from harming or freeing her, and he must also know that she would never take her own life.

For now, though, I wasn't in the mood to think about who might have betrayed us, or even if they were still alive right now, so I said goodbye and took the elevator back up to the main deck of the ship.
I walked over to the laundry room. She was wearing her archery training uniform once again, and was carrying a laundry basket with the clothing she’d worn on the island—her shirt, her overalls, her socks and her underwear—while watching another set of clothing tumbling in the dryer. She’d clearly washed herself off, removing the dirt and eliminating her body odor, and had combed and brushed her hair before setting it into its usual ponytail. Maybe it was because she was rich, but she seemed like the sort who would be well-dressed and good at grooming; maybe Tsukimura-san helped her with those things.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said. "Sasaki-san is currently using the laundry, and after she's done, it will be my turn."

"I see," I said. "I changed my clothes this morning, so I can wait to wash them. I'll stop by when it's less busy."

As I started to leave, I heard Himemiya-san say "Please wait," and stopped in my tracks.

"Is something the matter, Himemiya-san?" I said.

"There's something I'd like to talk with you about," Himemiya-san said. "Why were you unable to vote for Akira during the last trial?"

I paused and looked around uncomfortably. It was easy enough to say why, but I doubted that any answer I could give would satisfy Himemiya-san.

"I couldn't accept it," I said. "Why did Akira-san have to die because of a twist of fate? She was your friend too, wasn't she?"

"She is," Himemiya-san said, "but I see it differently. She was putting her life on the line when she named herself the culprit; if she was right, she'd die, but if she was wrong and Mihama-san had accidentally killed herself, she and everyone else would die. If she truly is your friend, shouldn't you trust her enough to believe that she wouldn't lie about something that important?"

"You're right," I said. "I don't believe she'd lie about that. But I still couldn't believe it..."

Himemiya-san sighed.

"This was not an easy decision for any of us," Himemiya-san said, "at least not those who cared about Akira. But she was counting on us to make that decision, since she didn't want the rest of us to die for her mistake. I'd been prepared to lay down my life for the group, so I understand how she felt at that moment. The only thing I'm not sure about is whether I can count on you to make the right decision next time."

"I..." I said.

"That's enough, Himemiya-san," Sasaki-san said. "Don't you understand what Chiyuri-chan is going through right now?"

I turned around and saw Sasaki-san standing in the door, dressed in her uniform and carrying a laundry basket. The washing machine had finished its cycle, and all that was left was to dry her clothes.

"I do, Sasaki-san," Himemiya-san said, "but in the killing game, we must do the right thing regardless of our feelings. Akira was my friend, too, but I pressed the button to vote for her, knowing I'd be sentencing her to death... as did you."
"You aren't wrong about that," Sasaki-san said, "but what's done is done, and there's no point haranguing Chiyuri-chan about the way she voted. We got enough votes without her, and if we hadn't, we wouldn't be alive right now."

Himemiya-san smiled. Sasaki-san's rebuttal hadn't been fierce enough to prevent Himemiya-san from countering, but at least for the moment, she felt no need to contest Sasaki-san's assertions.

"I'm surprised, Sasaki-san," Himemiya-san said. "I didn't think you'd be this outspoken."

"I'm used to getting criticism for my work," Sasaki-san said, "and to be able to submit a manga that's worth being punished, I have to be at least as hard on myself as the editors will be on me. Because of that, when my assistants show me their submissions and ask for feedback, I don't lie to them when I don't think their work is good enough."

"I see," Himemiya-san said. "Personally, I have the same modus operandi when it comes to archery."

If Akira-san had been here, she'd probably have said she was as much of a perfectionist when she was acting. I always knew there were a few differences between the real Ultimates and me- talent, passion, work ethic and experience- and perhaps I could add discipline to that list.

"That being said," Sayuri said, "I have found there's a fine line between being strict and just being mean. There are better ways to say what you did in light of Chiyuri-chan's current state. You aren't the only one who's lost a friend, you know."

"You're right," Himemiya-san said. "The three of us were probably closest to Akira, so I'm sure you understand."

Himemiya-san then turned to me.

"Nagato-san, while I stand by what I said earlier, I do believe I should put it more constructively," Himemiya-san said. "There will be times when you must make hard decisions for the class, including possibly giving your life. Akira did much for us, but she is no longer around, so someone must fill the void she left behind. Can I count on you to do your part?"

I nodded. It would be irresponsible to promise too much, but she was right; I owed it to myself, to everyone else who was still here, and to Akira-san.

"I'll do my best," I said.

"Thank you," Himemiya-san said. "I feel I can trust you, so I'll be counting on you to fulfill your promise."

Sasaki-san smiled.

"Then it's all good," Sasaki-san said.

Sasaki-san transferred her laundry into the dryer, while Himemiya-san loaded hers into the washer. Since it would be a while until I got turn, I walked outside with Sasaki-san while she waited for her clothes to dry.

"Thank you for speaking up for me, Sasaki-san," I said.

"You're welcome, Chiyu- er, Nagato-san," Sasaki-san said. "I hope you're not mad at Himemiya-san."
I shook my head. People had said far crueler things to me, so I wasn't especially upset about Himemiya-san.

"Not at all," I said. "It may be difficult for me to live up to Akira-san, but that's what I'll do."

Sayuri-san nodded.

"By the way, Sasaki-san," I said. "Why did you suddenly switch to my last name just now?"

"At the trial, you said only your mom and your friends got to call you 'Chiyuri'," Sasaki-san said. "I wondered if you only agreed to let me call you by your first name because you couldn't say no to me."

I shook my head.

"I was actually happy that you asked," I said, "since doing so was your way of saying we were already friends. Do you mind if I do the same, Sayuri-san?"

Sayuri-san smiled.

"I'd be happy if you would, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said.

Sayuri-san headed back to her cabin to wait for her clothes to dry, while I headed to my cabin to wait for the others to finish with the laundry room.

I returned to my cabin, and saw that it was empty. My roommate wouldn't be coming back any time soon- or ever.

Of course, I wasn't the only one. The other girls had lost their roommates, as had Kurogane-san and Kumakura-san. The only ones with roommates at this point- Higurashi-san and Kirishima-san, as well as Karita-san and Asakura, weren't exactly friends.

As painful as it was to go on, I knew I couldn't afford to wallow in my own grief forever, so to take the first step, I looked at Akira-san's notebook.

The pages within had chronicled all of her findings throughout our cruise. There was everything we'd heard from Monokuma, the motives, her findings on the investigations, any information we found about the killing game itself, the weather, a description of each island and some of her daily interactions with our classmates. She'd discussed most of the information with me already, but it was nice to have a record of it on hand.

Flipping toward the end, I found three things that Akira-san hadn't told me. The first was about Monokuma, who could apparently be in multiple places at the same time. The second was about a mysterious machine Kirishima-san found in the basement. The third was more personal; a hastily written note to me.

Chiyuri,

If you're reading this, then I'm already dead.

This notebook contains everything I've learned in my time here. I don't know why we're here yet or the traitor's identity, but I'm sure you can figure it out.

Never give up, and always remember- I believe in you.
I wrote Thank You- Chiyuri, then shut the notebook for now, intending to open it whenever I had something to write in it. From here on out, recording my findings would be up to me, since if I shared Akira-san's fate, I would have to pass the notebook on to someone else.

I lay back on my bed and began to cry once again. Akira-san had accomplished much in her life, but she had also left many things undone. She had not found the identity of the traitor or the reason why we were here, and would never see her mother or appear on the silver screen again. I couldn't fill the gap Akira-san had left, but I could carry on her work, and see this killing game through to the end.

After reading through Akira-san's notebook, I took a shower. Since most of my clothes were dirty, I put my shirt and overalls back on, then took the rest of my clothes to the now vacant laundry room and loaded them into the washer. I sat there until they were finished washing, put them in the dryer, and once that was done, brought them back to my cabin.

A few hours later, we met up for dinner, and I sat with Tatsuki-san, who had showered and changed back into her uniform.

"You know..." Tatsuki-san said, "it's only now occurring to me that if not for Azuki-san's mishap and Mihama-san's death, I'd be dead by now."

"You're not the only one, Tachibana-san," I said, "and neither is Himemiya-san. The two of you and everyone besides Akira-san would have been executed if she hadn't solved the case."

In my own way, I'd unwittingly played a role in getting through the trial, by telling Akira-san about how I'd seen the downstairs trap shoot twice after she tested it. That being said, Akira-san had been the one who'd solved the case. No one could know for certain what would happen in the next trial-only that there would be one.

"You're right," Tatsuki-san said, "but on the other hand, you weren't supposed to die in any of the trials. I wish I'd asked Mihama-san if there was any case in which the true culprit was found after someone had already been executed."

"I don't know of any," I said. "The courts aren't perfect, but it's difficult for anyone to admit to making such a terrible mistake, resulting in an innocent person dying and the true culprit escaping."

Tatsuki-san winced.

"You have a point, but I suppose these sort of things can actually happen," Tatsuki-san said. "My only question is what the person who should have been executed- in my case, twice over- does."

I paused to think for a moment.

"I assume that most people capable of doing such terrible things would just go about their lives," I said. "But if you're asking what you should do, it's make the most of your life."

"That's what I'll try to do," Tatsuki-san said, "since it's the only option that makes sense to me at this point."

The meal wasn't anything special. I wasn't especially fond of it, but I could tolerate it. It was the first real dinner I'd had since I set out for the island, so a part of me was grateful for my return to the ship. The next few days would likely be peaceful and uneventful, and while those times were
fleeting, I'd learned to treasure them as much as my happiest days before the killing game.

By the time I finished dinner, most of us had already left, but I saw Kumakura-san sitting by himself, slowly eating.

"Oh, hello, Nagato-san," Kumakura-san said. "Sorry I'm a slow eater; I don't exactly like spicy foods."

"It's fine," I said. "If you like, I could keep you company while you finish."

Kumakura said "Yes, please," and I poured myself a glass of water before sitting down. Not long afterward, Kumakura finished.

"Personally, I miss the rations," Kumakura-san said. "Please don't tell Higurashi-kun that, though."

"I won't," I said, "but I could suggest that he make spicy foods less often."

"Thank you, but it's fine," Kumakura-san said. "Most of all, I'm glad I'm still around to eat the food."

We paused for a moment.

"You've realized, haven't you?" Kumakura-san said. "If things had turned out differently, one of the two of us might have triggered that trap instead of Azuki-san."

"Yes, I know," I said, "and if that had happened, Akira-san would still be here right now, possibly having this conversation with one of us. The other, of course, would be dead."

"True," Kumakura-san said. "In a situation like this, you can't help but think about what might have been, especially since each of the murders turned out differently than how they were planned because of an unforeseen development."

Kumakura-san summed up the situation quite effectively, even if "murder" was used somewhat loosely when referring to Tatsuki-san's plan to have Himemiya-san execute her. If things had gone as the killers had planned, Karita-san would have been struck on the head with a shot put while he was laying in bed, Taiga-san would have been stabbed, and Tatsuki-san would have been hanged. But things didn't turn out that way, resulting in Karita-san, Himemiya-san and Tatsuki-san surviving, and Taiga-san's death being delayed... in exchange for Tsukimura-san, Mihama-san and Akira-san's deaths, as well as Kojima-san dying sooner.

"I guess my point is that this killing game does make you appreciate how fragile life is," Kumakura-san said. "We may be trapped on this cruise, unable to see our families or do some of our favorite things, but at the very least, we're alive. Azuki-san's the reason why I'm still here, and I wish I had a better way to thank her."

"So do I," I said. "but she knows just as well as the rest of us do that this 'game' isn't over yet. The only thing we can do for her right now is to try to make sure this never happens again, and if we can do that, it'll mean more than any 'thank you' ever would."

"I think so, too," Kumakura-san said. "I don't think anyone wants another trial in which one person gets murdered and another gets executed."

I knew that it was irresponsible to confidently say that there would never be another trial, but I knew that, like Kumakura-san said, none of us wanted to see our numbers slowly whittled down.
Even those who had committed or attempted murder simply wanted to escape and for their loved ones to be safe, and the only question was how far they were willing to go to get it. Success in the class trials gained the spotless nothing, so it would be in our best interests to never have to step into that courtroom again.

As the sun was setting, I saw Higurashi-san standing on the deck, gazing off toward the sunset. The previous island had completely faded from view, but none of us would soon forget what had transpired on it- if ever.

We stood there a few moments in silence before I spoke.

"So... have you been down to see Mom yet?" I said.

"Not yet," Higurashi-san said. "I'm not about to do it without you, especially not when I'm still not sure what to say to her."

I shrugged helplessly, similarly at a loss. Mom had seen the entirety of all the trials broadcast to her cell from the camera in the courtroom, so informing her of the events was superfluous; we mainly met up with her to discuss what we would do going forward. The first time had been the official start of the killing game, as well as grim proof that our classmates would kill each other if pushed far enough. The second time had been an unusual case, with a murderer going unpunished, yet having no desire to kill again. The third time, apart from costing us one of our most valuable members, simply proved how far Monokuma would go to get the killing game going, and how little we could do about it.

"That reminds me," I said. "At the start of the last trial, you seemed different. You were willing to accept that one of us had betrayed the group, and we'd have to sacrifice that person in order to live."

"Well, I was wrong about the cause of Mihama-san's death," Higurashi-san said, "since Azuki-san never betrayed us, but other than that, you're right. I always thought that we'd be able to prevent anyone from dying, and that any deaths that did happen were avoidable. In hindsight, that must seem idealistic at best, or arrogant at worst. Perhaps Kirishima-kun is on to something."

I shook my head, having realized what I wanted to say to Kirishima-san. Whenever I heard something I disagreed with, I always had an easier time making a rebuttal when it wasn't to the speaker's face.

"He isn't wrong to say that the situation is bleak, even hopeless," I said, "but at the same time, if you just accept that the body count will steadily grow, then it's all too easy to stop caring and place your own survival ahead of everyone else's. I don't have any more idea of what the solution is than we do, but I do know what our goal should be- keeping as many people alive as long as possible."

"You're right, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "Perhaps it may be overly idealistic, but I will never give up on that goal. The only thing that's changed is what sacrifices I will make to see it happen."

I smiled and nodded.

"That we'll make," I said. "Please remember, Higurashi-san; I may not be all that reliable, but even I can share your burden."

"I know you can," Higurashi-san said. "I'm counting on you."
I felt a bit reassured to hear that. From the beginning, Higurashi-san had mainly only needed me as an assistant who could corroborate his reports, so if there was anything I could do to be of use to him, then I'd gladly do it.

I retired to my cabin for the night. After changing into my nightgown, I heard the Night Time announcement. That announcement usually signaled that it was bedtime for me, even if I wasn't nearly ready to go to bed.

I knelt beside my bedside and prayed for Mihama-san and Akira-san's souls, but as I did, I questioned my faith. The idea that we were all sinners, and needed Jesus' sacrifice to wipe away our sins so we could get into heaven was both humbling and comforting, but what about the non-believers? I had trouble accepting that Yamazaki-san deserved eternal damnation for a murder committed out of desperation, much less Akira-san and the other four who had done nothing wrong, save not sharing my and my mother's religion.

And what about me? If I died in the killing game, would I be able to see Dad and Akira-san again in heaven, as well as Mom if she perished along with me? Or would I end up burning in hell for all eternity? Or did the god I'd believed in all my life even exist? I had so many questions and hoped to ask our priest, Father Sakura, about them, even if Father Sakura had never experienced anything like this killing game before.

I fell asleep when I was too tired to stay awake. As grateful as I was to have survived the class trial, I'd never wished the killing game was just a bad dream more than I did now.

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Day 19

I woke up as usual in the morning, rubbed my eyes and got out of bed.

"Good morning, Akira-san," I said.

No one replied.

I looked around my cabin. Akira-san's bed was neatly made, but there was no one sleeping in it; she hadn't been in that bed since we'd left for that awful island three days ago. Akira-san's death was impossible to deny, but only at this point did I truly become aware of what it meant to live without her.

I changed into my uniform. Akira-san's clothes were still in the closet, even though no one had any use for them; they were a bit large for me, after all. Once I was finished, I set out for the dining hall by myself.

I headed to the dining hall and looked around, seeing the people who'd gotten here scattered around the room. Usually, Akira-san and I would sit with various people to eat, per Higurashi-san's suggestion to help us bond with our classmates, but a lot had changed since we'd last been on the ship. Six of us had lost our cabinmates, and the remaining two pairs weren't on the best of terms, so everyone sat wherever they wanted. With that in mind, I sought out the one student besides Akira-san I could consider a friend, and sat down with her.

"Good morning, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said. "I see you're wearing your uniform."

"It's a force of habit," I said. "I'm not up on the trends, so one upside is that I don't have to think too hard about dressing myself six days of the week."
That did, of course, leave off the evenings, but Mom was fairly open-minded about what clothes I wore at home, so once I got home, I could just open up my drawer and pick out whatever was on top. Mom did insist that I look nice for Mass, but luckily, I had a few dresses that met her approval.

"I see," Sayuri-san said. "I personally like wearing a sailor fuku, an iconic uniform for high school girls. Then again, it's not as though my school gives me a choice."

"Is your school strict about personal appearance?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Sayuri said. "Makeup, piercings, tattoos, dyed or bleach hair, and various accessories are not allowed. You're expected to keep your uniform neat, which means that if I'd worn mine to the island, it would have gotten so dirty that the hall monitors would have sent me home to change. They see it as a matter of representing your school well."

I remembered one thing that Dad had once told Mom, which she, in turn told me. Dad recalled that one of his classmates, the Ultimate Political Activist, had been arrested at a demonstration, and shortly thereafter, was expelled from Talent High School for damaging the school's reputation. He'd been disgusted by the reasons behind the expulsion, as well as the implicit belief that students existed for the school's benefit, rather than the other way around. He expected students to fulfill their obligations, but to help the school help them. I agreed with the principle he expressed, if only because I never thought I could be a student my school would be proud of.

"I wonder what Talent High School would say about what happened here," I said. "It lost six students in less than three weeks, and two of those deaths were murders. With a scandal like that, it'll be shaken to the core."

"I'm sure it would," Sayuri-san said, "and what if the school itself was responsible?"

"A-Are you saying Mom's the traitor?!" I said.

Sayuri-san emphatically shook her head.

"Calm down, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said, "and no, I am not. It is entirely possible that your mother was merely used as a disposable pawn by the school, not realizing that they intended to sacrifice her. If anyone is responsible, it's the headmistress or the chairman of the board. Take this with a grain of salt, though; it's only a theory."

In other words, Mom's boss or my grandfather. Of course, Sayuri-san still didn't know about my father or his father, so she couldn't know that.

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry I got upset."

"It's fine," Sayuri-san said. "I guess it's easier to suspect an outsider than it is to suspect one of us."

I nodded, and let the subject drop. Outside of my mom and a handful of friends, as well as a few people I disliked, I considered the majority of my classmates acquaintances, but I felt closer to them than most of the others I'd gone to school with over the years. It was difficult to accept that any of them could have assisted in- let alone masterminded- something so horrible; as much as I couldn't stand Asakura, I thought even he would have moral qualms against letting his classmates die.

Before long, Monokuma popped up once again.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "How are you this fine day?"
None of us answered him. We were glad that we'd made it through the last trial, but regretted the cost. The executions were brutal enough that we saw them as too harsh for a murderer, let alone someone who hadn't sought to kill anyone.

"Anyway, I have an announcement," Monokuma said. "We should reach the island in the morning three days from now, but until then, I have a little special something planned for you- career counseling!"

"What does that involve?" Higurashi-san said. "I think most of us know about the concept, but it would be good to clarify the finer details."

"The rules are simple," Monokuma said. "I'll call you into the lounge one at a time- the girls tomorrow and the boys the day after tomorrow- and ask you questions about what careers you want. There's only one catch- you have to think of ideas that don't directly involve your talent."

So in other words, this was probably Monokuma's first real "lesson" to us. He was most likely saying that in the changing world, we'd have to give up what we cherished most. Given that it was only the first lesson, it most likely wasn't even the most horrific thing we'd have to learn.

"When exactly is this happening?" Higurashi-san said.

"The girls are going tomorrow and the boys are going the day after that," Monokuma said. "I'll give you the times for each person's appointment on the morning their group goes, so keep your schedules open. If you need a reminder, I'll announce your name on the monitors ten minutes before your appointment- be there or get punished."

That wasn't exactly a hard request, since there wasn't much for me to do while the ship was sailing. My days mostly consisted of the routine- eating, sleeping, bathing, meeting with Mom, washing my clothes and occasional other things- all of which could be rescheduled if necessary.

"What about Mom?" I said.

"She's exempt," Monokuma said, "since she doesn't have a talent and can't leave her cell."

Mom had a passion for teaching, much like Dad had, and while her pregnancy had been unplanned, she had always wanted to become a mother. Her life hadn't always gone as she'd hoped it would, but she was grateful for what she had, so what would she do if she could no longer teach?

"One more thing," Monokuma said. "For getting through the trial yesterday, I'll give you a new digit- it's a 3. So far, you've got a 1, another 1 and a 3, but not necessarily in that order. See you around, kids."

Monokuma departed once again, and we were silent until he was out of earshot.

"So I suppose we have no choice but to wait for our turn?" Kurogane-san said.

"It seems so," I said. "Higurashi-san and I will discuss this with Mom, and let you know. Still, be careful what you say to Monokuma."

Even as I said that, I suspected that Monokuma had a good idea of what our weaknesses were. Not only did he have the help of the traitor, someone who'd attended school with us for two years and possibly knew certain individuals for even longer, but he'd seen us at our lowest and most vulnerable points through the surveillance cameras and Monodrones. Still, it couldn't hurt to be too careful, so I wasn't looking forward to the career counseling.
Higurashi-san and I went to talk with Mom after breakfast. She listened carefully as she heard us recap what Monokuma had said, but seemed disturbed.

"Is something wrong, Sensei?" Higurashi-san said.

"It's nothing, Higurashi-san," Mom said. "I was just surprised that Monokuma proposed the idea."

"Me too," I said. "After all, Mom was the one who thought of it in the first place, and introduced it to Talent High School."

Mom nodded.

"It's basically common sense," Mom said. "Not all Ultimates are necessarily able to continue practicing their talents into adulthood; some, like Yamazaki-san's, are hobbies that do not make for viable careers, while athletic talents, such as Kumakura-san's, can only be practiced when one is in peak physical condition. As such, I ask my students to think of alternative careers that they could feasibly pursue."

While Mom was being completely honest, there was a third reason for this. Some "faux-Ultimates" like me couldn't hope to get careers based around the talents we didn't actually have, so we had to think of alternatives. That said, this in no way detracted from the fact that Mom was doing her best to ensure that her students succeeded.

"I see," Higurashi said. "While my talent is more of a general skill than a specific occupation, I admire the principle at play here."

"Me too," I said. "You really put a lot of effort into preparing students for the future, Mom."

"I wouldn't be much of a teacher if I didn't do that," Mom said. "The world you children are growing up into will be very different from when I reached adulthood. I can't see the future, but I have an obligation to do everything I can to make sure you're best equipped to handle whatever you may face."

I smiled approvingly. Some people described Hope's Peak and Talent High Schools as schools that used their students as pawns to advance their ulterior motives, and while I couldn't completely deny that, I thought that Mom was at least one exception to the rule.

"In any case," Mom said, "while I don't know what Monokuma is planning with the motives, all I can say is please be careful."

"Yes, ma'am," Higurashi-san and I said.

While it was reassuring to know that Mom had the same idea that I did, I couldn't help but feel a bit worried about the career counseling. Unlike most of Monokuma's traps, it wasn't clear how he intended to use it to get us to kill one another, even if it was obvious that he was up to no good. Perhaps it was part of the greater purpose behind the killing game, one that we had yet to uncover.

Not long after noon, I found Kirishima-san sitting in the lounge reading. I couldn't easily tell what book it was by glancing at the cover, the back or the spine, but given the plain brown binding, it didn't seem like a book he read for fun.

"Hello, Nagato-kun," Kirishima said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to ask about the combination for the keypad," I said. "As of today, we're up to three out of
five digits, aren't we?"

"Yes, we did," Kirishima said, "but that raises its share of problems. Did Azuki-kun tell you about the previous digits we received?"

I paused to think.

"I believe she did," I said. "The trouble is that you don't know which slots each number is for?"

"That is only half of the problem," Kirishima said. "Now, we know that the numbers are not all the same. It was never a feasible possibility, but now that it has been ruled out, we are faced with new complications."

I nodded. Even if, for example, the digits we got were for the first three slots, then they could be 311 or 131 just as easily as they might be the most obvious answer, 113. Once we figured that out, we'd have to go through the hundred combinations for the remaining two digits.

"There is another concern," Kirishima-san said. "I have been tracking the ship's movements all this time, and noticed that for the most part, we have been heading east. However, the distance covered presents a problem. Either my calculations are incorrect, or we are in the middle of America."

Kirishima-san took out his notebook and showed me his calculations. They were too detailed for me to read the entire thing, but he'd clearly well documented our entire travels. Instead, I looked at the picture, and saw that it was as he said.

"There's another thing I'd like to ask about," I said. "Just before the trial, Akira-san mentioned that she saw a machine with about 24 pods in the basement of the office complex. Do you know anything about it that you haven't told her?"

Kirishima-san took a look at Akira-san's notes, then shook his head.

"Unfortunately, nothing important," Kirishima said. "For all we know, it could be just another background detail to give life to the setting. On the other hand, Monokuma hid this secret in the most dangerous of the buildings, so perhaps he meant for us to find it."

"But if he wanted us to learn it so badly, why didn't he just tell us?" I said.

"Perhaps he knew we would not believe him," Kirishima-san said. "Sasaki-kun, as a writer, believes in the principle of 'show, don't tell,' so perhaps Monokuma had that in mind. That would explain why, apart from telling us the rules of the killing game, he left us to discover the answers to our questions on our own."

Kirishima-san's suggestion would explain why we conveniently happened to find clues around the various ideas. Monokuma was most likely trying to lead us to discover something, but what? While following the trail would likely lead to us playing right into his hands, ignorance was of no benefit to us, so it behooved us to learn as much as we could.

I decided to go see Karita-san and ask him about what we'd learned on the island. I found him on the deck, sitting by the pool.

"I'd like to know something, Karita-san," I said. "You were on the basement search team with Higurashi-san and Kirishima-san, so what do you think of what they found in there?"

"Oh, the pods?" Karita-san said. "It's an interesting discovery, but I doubt it'll make all that much
difference, at least in the short term. We found it too easily, after all."

I glanced at him skeptically.

"I guess I should explain what I mean by 'too easy,'" Karita-san said. "Monokuma left it out there for us to find, albeit in a somewhat dangerous area. It's a bit like hiding the treasure in a treasure hunt in the woods behind your house, rather than in a safe for which only you have the combination."

"That'd be cheating," I said, "or at least something you're not supposed to do. Games are supposed to be fair, after all."

Karita-san laughed mirthlessly.

"By now, we know that Monokuma doesn't play fair," Karita-san said, "since the game is supposed to pit us against each other, rather than against him. I'm a bit surprised that the room in the basement didn't have anything that led to a murder, but regardless of what happened, Monokuma got his murder and execution anyway."

"Fair enough," I said, "but what if Himemiya-san had sacrificed Tachibana-san, then been executed herself?"

"Then I guess the result would have been more or less the same," Karita-san said, "and the only difference would be who died. I'm glad to see Higurashi-kun starting to accept that deaths are going to be inevitable, even if it may not do much good in the end."

I shook my head and walked away, unwilling to argue with Karita-san. Ever since I'd gotten into that fight in elementary school, I'd learned not to make waves. While this attitude had largely kept me out of trouble since then, I had to wonder if it also made me a coward.

After dinner, I found Himemiya-san sitting in the lounge. After exchanging hellos, I sat down next to her.

"I'd like your honest opinion, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said. "Was I out of line with what I said yesterday?"

"Not exactly," I said. "While your tone was harsh, I understood why you were upset that I didn't vote for Akira-san."

Himemiya-san frowned, seemingly disappointed.

"I thought you'd say that," Himemiya-san said. "You aren't the sort to tell others when you think they're wrong."

"That's just who I am," I said. "I'm not the sort of person who can say whatever's on my mind, like Akira-san could. All my life, I've been worried about fitting in with others, and I've been too scared to say anything that might start a fight."

It sounded like an excuse, and it was. Himemiya-san however, didn't seem to judge me for it.

"You're not the only one," Himemiya-san said. "Unlike most friends, Kanae and I never fought over anything. We didn't always agree, but Kanae usually made her point, and backed down whenever I made a rebuttal. For the longest time, I assumed that she was afraid to offend me because of her status as my servant."
"If she was, I know how she feels," I said.

"But that wasn't the case," Himemiya-san said. "Kanae really was a good-natured, easygoing person who didn't like to butt heads with others, least of all a close friend. Akira was cut from a different cloth, and didn't hesitate to say what was on her mind, which is why I respected her; she treated me like an equal. Both Kanae and Akira were dear friends to me, in different ways, and no one will ever replace them."

Himemiya-san blinked back tears. As she did, I finally realized what I needed to say.

"If I was offended by what you'd said, I would have told you," I said, "but I recognize that I need to be willing to make hard choices from here on out. I can't replace Akira-san, but I will be honest with you, since it's what you deserve."

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said, "and no, you don't have to be Akira. I think you have the temperament necessary to be a good maid, which is more than I could say for Akira."

I smiled appreciatively. Our group had suffered a great loss when Akira-san had died, but at the very least, we still had Himemiya-san, who was an asset in her own way. Those of us who were left could combine our strengths, and together, we'd fill the hole in our group.

After taking a shower, I once again put on my nightgown and said my bedtime prayers. Today had been a relatively good day for the killing game, since no one had died. It was truly a shame that Mihama-san, who'd perished in a tragic accident, and Akira-san, who'd died to ensure our survival, couldn't share today with us. The same went for the other four who'd died so far, even the ones responsible for their own demises.

I didn't have much of an idea what Monokuma's career counseling amounted to, or what he hoped to do after speaking with everyone, but I had a small, humble wish. I hoped that this period of tranquility would continue as long as possible.

After making my request, which I hoped wasn't asking too much of God, I got into bed and fell asleep before too long.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*You know what the cool thing about beginning in medias res is? It cuts out all the boring stuff such as exposition and character development.*

*A war movie can begin with the two sides shooting each other without having to explain why they're at war, while a romantic comedy can start at the first date.*

*Hell, on a cooking show, you can just take out the dish they made as a sample of the finished product and eat it, without worrying about that cooking nonsense.*

*Instant gratification is the best, I say!*

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**Day 20**

I woke up, having had the same type of dream Akira-san must have had all those nights, save for after the trials. I wasn't surprised to realize that Akira-san had been telling the truth, but I was sad that I'd lost the one person I could talk to about them. Not only was Akira-san the one person I
knew of who'd had the same dreams I did, but I trusted her more than anyone else.

There was something rather honest and egalitarian about Akira-san. While she showed respect to her betters, she treated everyone else as her equals. If she didn't like you, she'd let you know in no uncertain terms, so her friendliness wasn't simply to get on others' good sides; it was her seal of approval for you as a person. Out of everyone here, I felt that she was the truest friend I'd had, with Sayuri-san coming a close second.

Of course, while I would always miss Akira-san, the time for self-pity had passed. Just as Mom had moved on with her life after Dad's death, I would take the first steps forward, and try to live up to the faith Akira-san showed in me.

I checked the weather, and saw some rain this morning, which would clear up around noon. If nothing else, I was glad that the counseling was indoors.

We sat down for breakfast. Before any of us could get a conversation started, Monokuma showed up.

"Good morning, everyone," Monokuma said. "Have you given some thought to what sort of careers you'd like to pursue apart from your talents?"

Some of us shrugged, others ignored Monokuma, and still others grunted or nodded yes. Higurashi-san, earnest as always, politely said "Yes, I have," and after a moment, I said, "Me too."

"Anyway, I'm here for an announcement," Monokuma said. "It's the first day of career counseling, and as they say, ladies first. Check your handbooks for the schedule."

I opened up my handbook's documents folder and found a schedule for the day.

*Career Counseling Day 1: Girls*

*Session 1*(9 AM-11 AM): Nagato-san

*Session 2*(11 AM-1 PM) Taiga-san

*Session 3*(1 PM-3 PM) Himemiya-san

*Session 4*(3 PM-5 PM) Sasaki-san

Tatsuki-san quivered in pain as she saw her sister's name listed under her slot under the schedule.

"Can't we have one of the boys take a turn today?" Kurogane-san said. "That way, we'd have five people on each day."

"I might've done something like that if any more of the girls had died," Monokuma said, "but it's simpler to keep the genders separate. Anyway, for you, it's even simpler; show up to your appointment on time, or get punished. I'll see the ladies soon, and Nagato-san very soon-or else."

Monokuma departed.

"It seems that once again, we must obey Monokuma's summons," Higurashi-san said.

"Yeah, I'm not a fan of dying, either," Asakura said, "but it definitely sounds like a trap."

"Perhaps it does," I said, "but since I will be the first to go, I can ascertain what Monokuma is
planning. Sayuri-san, Tatsuki-san, Himemiya-san, I'd like to speak with you three once I'm done.”

The three girls all responded in the affirmative. Asakura didn't have any further rebuttals, which was good, because I had no desire for a one-on-one conversation with him.

I quickly finished my breakfast, knowing I had places to be. Higurashi-san followed my lead, and together, we were the first to leave the dining hall.

Higurashi-san and I decided to quickly stop by Mom's cell. As I rode the elevator down, I couldn't help but anxiously wish it went faster, even though I knew the only way for that was to cut the cable, causing the elevator to take a one-way trip to the bottom of the shaft.

We quickly summarized the schedule for today.

"Anyway, I'm up first, Mom," I said, "and my appointment starts at 9, in the lounge."

"Then I won't keep you," Mom said. "I'd rather not see you arrive late and be punished."

I nodded, but checked my watch and saw that I still had at least 40 minutes.

"Just one quick question," I said. "What would you do for a living if you weren't able to teach anymore?"

"Whatever I could," Mom said. "Teaching is my passion, and what I'm best at, and since there's always a need for teachers, I'm sure that I could find a job. If not, I would perform whatever job I could get that would be of benefit to others. Please remember that not everyone gets to do what they want for a living."

I nodded. For every Ultimate who earned their title in a sought-after field like sports, music or showbiz, there were thousands of people who could only dream of such a thing. I wasn't the only one who had to come to terms with her lack of talent- just one of the few who'd gotten into Talent High School in spite of that.

"I know," I said. "I'm heading out now, Mom."

"Until later, Nagato-sensei," Higurashi-san said. "We'll keep you apprised of the situation."

Higurashi-san and I said goodbye and boarded the elevator together.

After the elevator reached the main deck, I parted ways with Higurashi-san. After a quick bathroom break to... relieve myself and freshen up, I headed to the lounge a little over half an hour in advance of my appointment, and sat down.

Ordinarily, this sort of meeting would be held in the faculty room, or a private office, but the cruise ship had neither of those facilities; the closest thing was the bridge. I momentarily suspected that the Ursa Major had never been meant to be used for the killing game, until I remembered that there were no fewer than three execution chambers in the bowels of the ship. As such, the Ursa Major had always been Monokuma's property, the floating arena for the killing game.

If that was true, then Talent High School was somehow involved in this killing game, and Mom was the traitor, but I found the theory too hard to accept. Not only would I be concluding that Mom would gladly let her daughter and the rest of our class die, but Talent High School itself would have been complicit. Neither of them had any rational motive for participating in this killing game,
so I had no reason to believe that they were the culprits.

At 9 AM on the dot, Monokuma arrived, interrupting my thoughts.

"Good morning, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "I'm glad you could make it. Have a seat."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Thank you very much for taking the time to see me."

As I sat down, I was a bit surprised with myself for being so polite to the one most responsible for the death and suffering here. Maybe it was because he was actually acting a bit like a proper teacher.

"I'd like to talk with you about your career options today." Monokuma said. "There's a chance that there may not be tech support jobs in the future; maybe they got outsourced to who knows where, or maybe no one's phones are working anymore. What'd you want to do for a living?"

I paused to think for a moment, then answered.

"I'd like to be a teacher," I said. "Math may be my only good subject, but I hope that even I can help pass on my knowledge to the next generation."

"I'm sure you can," Monokuma said. "If you manage to get out of here, I hope you'll pass the valuable lessons you've learned on to your students, and teach them how to love despair."

So this was what Monokuma had in mind. As far as verbal traps went, I'd seen worse, but he obviously wasn't cut out to be a career counselor.

"Still," Monokuma said, "I never thought you'd give up on your talent that easily."

"I'm a bit surprised myself," I said, "but really, when I think about it, I only ever wanted to be an Ultimate because it would make me 'special,' which was better than being an untalented illegitimate child. It was nice to be able to help people with their tech-related problems, but there are other ways to help by passing on knowledge."

"You're remarkably flexible," Monokuma said. "The unfortunate thing about the tough ones is that they'd sooner snap in half than bend, but maybe you're adaptable enough to learn the lessons you need to. You've taken to the class trials remarkably well for someone of your limited talents, so don't disappoint me."

I let off a reflexive "No, sir," but didn't want to dignify that statement with a comment. The thought of any more of us dying here was scary, and the thought of the survivors being twisted beyond all recognition was downright terrifying. The only defense mechanism I had against a thought like that was to not think about it, so that was what I chose to do.

"I think that wraps it up," Monokuma said. "You may go now."

I checked my watch and saw that while my session was supposed to last until 11 AM, it wasn't even 9:11 AM.

"Already?" I said. "It seems as though you've budgeted a lot more time than you need."

"Better safe than sorry," Monokuma said. "Anyway, I'm done with you, so run along, and I'll have my break until 11, when I go see Taiga-san."

I then got up, bowed and excused myself. I had a lot to think about, but for now, I needed to meet
I rounded up other girls, had them meet in the dining hall and gave them a good idea of what to expect. It took me a little while to get the four of them, and we convened a little after 10. It took me a couple minutes to summarize what I'd talked about with Monokuma.

"So in other words, Monokuma is trying to get us to face the prospect of having to live without our talents," Himemiya-san said. "I can see why people might be upset."

"Are you saying you're not put out by that, Himemiya-san?" I said.

Himemiya-san shook her head. I couldn't initially tell whether she meant, "No, I don't," or "No, you're wrong about that."

"To be honest, Nagato-san, I have mixed feelings," Himemiya-san said. "When I realized that I was an archery prodigy, and later became the Ultimate Archer, I was proud of myself, since it was something I'd achieved by virtue of my own merits, rather than my family ties. Before that, however, archery was simply an extracurricular my family expected me to take, and I suspected I'd have to give it up one day. That belief didn't change even as I became successful, so while I'd be sad to have to quit, I could at least look back on it fondly."

"I feel the same way, Himemiya-san," Sayuri-san said, "since manga is a highly competitive field. Having to outdo my fellow artists by producing enjoyable, well-drawn and innovative manga challenges me to improve myself and make the best product possible for the readers, but I know I can't do so forever."

"Me neither," Tatsuki-san said, "since music's the same way. I think Taiga knew that, too..."

The three of us glanced at Tatsuki-san, who seemed uncomfortable. This would probably be hard for her, and not just because Monokuma's calling her by her sister's name reopened the wound to the heart she'd suffered in the second trial.

"I see," I said. "A part of me has been jealous of people like you and the others, for being so good at something you're passionate about."

"Like I said, if you know how few people accomplish what you do, then you don't take it for granted," Sayuri-san said. "At this point, I'd just be happy to get out of here alive. I won't even mind too much if the magazine I'm published in drops Breakneck Canyon and blacklists me for going AWOL and missing my deadlines."

"I know," I said, "but even if we do live through this, I'm worried about how we'll change. Monokuma described me as the 'flexible' type who'll bend rather than break."

Himemiya-san frowned, clearly as concerned as I was.

"I wish I could be more optimistic," Himemiya-san said, "but I've come to realize that it's impossible to predict the future in here. The only thing I can say is that if you're haunted by what's happened thus far, and fear what might happen next, you're still human."

I felt a bit relieved upon hearing this, as did Tatsuki-san. We'd lost too much to get to this point, but at the very least, we hadn't lost ourselves.

I took a walk around the ship. A little after 11, I found Tatsuki-san sitting by herself in the dining
"Hello, Tatsuki-san," I said. "How did the counseling go?"

"Quite well, thank you," Tatsuki-san said. "I had a good idea of what to expect, so I said I'd become a music teacher. Like with you, Monokuma expressed the hope- in a manner of speaking- that I'd teach my students about despair. He also thought I was 'flexible'; in fact, he said I was more than halfway there. He also made a point of calling me 'Taiga-san' a few times for good measure, and acted as though my main talent was songwriting, not guitar playing."

I didn't know what I could say besides "I'm sorry to hear that." I was well-versed in the etiquette about condolences, but what could I say to someone who felt responsible for her sister's death?

"I actually didn't just say what I wanted him to hear," Tatsuki-san said. "I was telling the truth. Being a teacher was something I'd always considered before Dragon Girl became famous. It wasn't my first choice of a career, but..."

"But?" I said.

"To be honest," Tatsuki-san said, "I'm not so sure I deserve to do whatever I'm passionate about after what I've done. Rather than merely produce entertainment for people, I should pursue an occupation that is of benefit to others. A music teacher may not be able to save lives, but by teaching others, I can atone for what I've done."

I frowned. Leaving aside the fact that Tatsuki-san's talent was more impressive than mine, she was clearly forgetting something very important for an entertainer. While I couldn't replace Akira-san, I knew what she'd say in this situation.

"So all the songs you've performed mean nothing?" I said. "Your music never had a positive impact on anyone's life?"

"I didn't say that," Tatsuki-san said, "but is music what the world needs if it's in the state of disorder?"

"It needs a lot of things," I said, "among them art, entertainment and the other creative works that make life more enjoyable. I'm not saying that becoming a music teacher would be a bad idea- people do need to teach children the importance of appreciating music and train aspiring musicians. I'm just saying that people out there are waiting for Dragon Girl to make a comeback."

For a moment, I thought I'd gotten overly preachy, and maybe I had been, but Tatsuki-san merely smiled, not judging me.

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Tatsuki-san said. "I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself for what I've done, but I'll try to keep what you said in mind. After all, you sounded a bit like a teacher."

I giggled softly. It was a bit surprising that someone like me could actually give good advice to a famous musician like her, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. My conversation with the other girls a little while ago had taught me that the only difference between the Ultimates and me is that they just so happened to be good at something; that didn't mean they didn't have flaws or couldn't make mistakes. I still felt out of place among my talented classmates, but I no longer believed that we had nothing in common.

Most of us got lunch at around noon, some time after Tatsuki-san's session had ended. Himemiya-san ate quickly and then headed to the lounge.
After Himemiya-san's turn, she met up with me on the deck. By now, the rain had stopped.

"So how did it go, Himemiya-san?" I said. "Was it difficult to come up with an alternative career path?"

"Not at all, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said. "In fact, mine is a dream I've had for some time."

"What sort of dream?" I said.

"It's not all that special," Himemiya-san said. "My goal after graduating high school and college was to get a job at a corporation, possibly one company owned by my father. I'd start out as an entry-level employee, clad in an inexpensive but professional skirt suit, and rise as far as my ability takes me."

"That's remarkably humble," I said.

"In a way, but it's also audacious," Himemiya-san said. "By following this path, I'd prove that a girl born with a silver spoon in her mouth is content with living an ordinary life, and someone with an Ultimate Talent is willing to earn things herself. Of course, I can't get everything I want, since in that vision of my life, I'd be sharing an apartment with Kanae, at least until she finds a boyfriend and moves out to live with him."

I nodded sadly. While Akira-san would probably have to travel too much to live with me, I had hoped to keep in touch with her, and possibly see her whenever she was in town.

"I think most of us have lost precious and irreplaceable things," Himemiya-san said. "We've lost our friends and our innocence in the killing games; only Kanae was able to keep the latter to the end. If what the newspaper implies is true, our homes and schools have probably been destroyed, and our families and friends are likely missing or dead. We will most likely have little time for leisure in this new world, and may not be able to do the jobs we'd hoped to. Even so, we must come to terms with what we've lost, and accept the lives we must now lead."

"That's certainly a wise perspective," I said. "Of course, Monokuma also said something similar after the trial... although he wants us to adapt in a different way."

"Quite true," Himemiya-san said. "I may be the last person to say this, given my privileged upbringing, but there are few things more valuable than the strength to withstand adversity."

I teared up, at which point Himemiya-san put a hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eye.

"Of course, there are times when your strength isn't enough," Himemiya-san said, "but it doesn't have to solely come from you. Hang in there, Nagato-san, and please remember; you're not alone."

"I know," I said. "Thank you, Himemiya-san; I'm thinking of you, too."

For the longest time, I imagined I only had two allies- Mom and God. That hadn't changed, not even after I started having a crisis of faith, but meeting Akira-san had taught me how much a true friend can enrich one's life. I swore to treasure the friends that I had, and repay their kindness and loyalty as best as I could.

Sayuri-san was the last of the girls to attend career counseling, with her session starting at 3 PM. Once she was done, she met up with me in the dining hall.

"Hello, Sayuri-san," I said. "How did it go?"
"Surprisingly well," Sayuri-san said. "I actually had a few ideas for a post-manga career, since I know my success won't last forever, so it wasn't hard to answer Monokuma's questions."

Sayuri-san sat down at a table, and I followed suit.

"That's certainly mature of you," I said. "Have you considered becoming an art teacher?"

"I have," Sayuri-san said, "but it isn't for me. I mainly specialize in manga-style art, so I'm not all that good at sculptures or even painting. There's a significant difference between drawing with a pen and with a brush, between using ink and using paint, and between creating a single image and drawing a set of pictures that tell a story."

"So what then?" I said.

"Let's see..." Sayuri-san said. "I could work as a cashier in a bookstore or arts and crafts store. I could get a job as a receptionist or secretary for a manga publisher. I could take the cliché path, and become a housewife or female salaryman."

I nodded.

"I'm amazed, Sayuri-san," I said. "You seem so confident, even if things don't end up working out for you. Is it because you've accomplished so much?"

"You could think of it that way, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said, "but in order to succeed, you have to believe in yourself. Whenever I pitched a manga, I had to have faith in my idea, since I couldn't convince the editors that it was a good idea if I didn't think so myself."

"You have a point," I said. "I'm curious because I'm wondering how Akira-san was able to do so well as an actress and in the class trials."

"Probably for the same reason," Sayuri-san said. "She had faith in herself and evidence to support her."

I let out a long sigh.

"I guess that's the problem for me," I said. "All my life, I've never had any sort of basis for my confidence, at least until I became Ultimate Tech Support. But even with that..."

I trailed off, unable to complete the thought.

"Oh, because Asakura-kun has the title, too?" Sayuri-san said. "Well, it doesn't matter. Akira-chan trusted you, knowing that you'd helped out in the past. If you find yourself doubting yourself, use that as your foundation and stand tall."

I smiled and thanked Sayuri-san. It wasn't easy for me to simply have confidence in my own words, but every time I doubted myself, I'd try to remember what she said.

By dinner time, all four of the girls were done for the day, so we met up and discussed our counseling to share advice for the boys. Unfortunately, none of them were likely to glean much from it, and not because they weren't listening or weren't intelligent enough to learn from it.

"So let's see if I have this right," Asakura said. "Four girls with different skillsets meet up with Monokuma, who gives them feedback on what talents they have- or don't have in Nagato's case. How the hell are we supposed to learn anything about what he'll say about us?"
I sighed. While it still hurt a bit to hear Asakura's usual rudeness, and to acknowledge that he was right about my not deserving my title, I'd have to get strong enough so that his words wouldn't bother me. That rhyme about sticks and stones wasn't entirely true, but if I let him get to me, I'd let him win.

"I think it's easy enough to understand," I said. "His point is that our talents- the things we're best at, are most passionate about and define our identities- are useless in this new world. Seeing as how possessive you are of your title, I would think you'd understand."

Asakura stayed quiet for now, whether because he didn't want to admit I was right, or losing his title was getting to him more than I thought.

"Nagato-san has a point," Higurashi-san said. "As I've said before, even if we do manage to escape, it is most likely that the world that we grew up in no longer exists. Those who had supported us in our endeavors so far may no longer be able to do so, and we may have to adapt and learn new skills in order to survive. As such, it would be foolish to seek graduation and return to a world in that state."

"Quite true," Kirishima-kun said, "but what do you suppose will come of obediently following Monokuma's rules and somehow reaching the end of our trip with no further deaths?"

"I honestly don't know," Higurashi-san said, "but is there anything that would justify killing someone and putting the majority of us at risk?"

Kirishima-san stared at Higurashi-san blankly, perhaps silently acknowledging the answer was "no" but unwilling to admit that he couldn't answer the question. At that point, the discussion ground to a halt.

These two unanswerable questions summed up how hopeless our situation seemed. On the one hand, considering how desperate things had been on the last island, we had little reason to look forward to the end of the trip. On the other hand, Monokuma's untrustworthy nature meant that even the person who graduated might not get what they wanted. In any case, one thing was certain-no matter whether the cruise ended with us reaching our final destination or someone graduating, more people would die by the time it was over.

After dinner, I saw Kirishima-san on the deck. There was something I'd wanted to ask him about, even if I was the second-to-last person he was willing to talk with about it.

"Do you have a minute, Kirishima-san?" I said. "I have something I would like to ask you."

"I cannot guarantee that I will answer your question, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said, "but I will hear it and decide whether to reply."

"All right," I said. "Are you still holding your meetings with the people who decided not to vote for Higurashi-san?"

Kirishima-san shook his head, not to refuse to answer a question asked by Higurashi-san's answer, but to express that his answer was a "no."

"Not anymore," Kirishima-san said. "Out of the six of us, Yamazaki-kun and Azuki-kun are dead, and Himemiya-kun cut ties with the group after our last meeting. The only ones left are myself, Karita-kun, and Asakura-kun, and considering how poorly the latter pair get along, it would be more prudent to meet with them separately."
There were times when I forgot that Karita-kun and Asakura couldn't stand each other, since they were able to make a conscious effort to avoid interacting with each other, and could at least coexist in their cabin. Maybe Asakura was rude to me because he had no reason to fear me retaliating against him.

"I thought so," I said. "That said, I'm a bit surprised you so willingly answered my question, considering I work with Higurashi-san."

"I am not afraid of Higurashi-kun retaliating against me," Kirishima-san said. "His personality and temperament aside, we did not present any threat to him, even back when there were six of us. Perhaps we did not believe he was a good leader, but we had no alternative candidate to choose over him."

I quickly counted up everyone who was left. Out of the ten of us, there were only four people who'd voted against Higurashi-san, while five people, myself included, had voted for him. If another election were held, Higurashi-san would likely win the narrowest possible majority, but in terms of the electorate, it would be unanimous. He had always believed in the power of democracy, so he'd never been completely happy about getting into office just because no one opposed him.

"This may sound naïve," I said, "but you seem intelligent, so why not contribute more in our discussions?"

"I would, if I believed my input could solve our problems," Kirishima-san said. "The harsh truth is that we are not uniting against an outside threat; the threat comes from within our group. Perhaps Monokuma forced us into this game, possibly with the traitor's help, but Yamazaki-kun, Kojima-kun and Tatsuki-kun chose to play it."

As harsh as his words were, I couldn't refute what he was saying. That said, I didn't have to accept it, either.

"Yes, that's true," I said, "since this is a matter of choices, after all. Taiga-san chose to die in her sister's place. Tatsuki-san chose to sacrifice herself as a last resort to atone for her mistake, and Himemiya-san chose to die alongside her. Akira-san chose to let herself be convicted and executed rather than see the rest of us die. It may be too much each of us to trust our classmates unreservedly, but we can choose to be trustworthy."

"Perhaps," Kirishima-san said, "but for most of us, voting to convict the blackened is a matter of personal survival, and is the only rational choice. When they become desperate enough, they may lose all capacity for logical thought... or realize that acting in their own self interest is indeed the only way to survive."

I left Kirishima-san, feeling depressed. A part of me wished that Akira-san hadn't been the one responsible for Mihama-san's death, but if it had been someone less trustworthy, we might not have survived. Akira-san had saved eleven people, myself included, but would one of them betray the group and spit on what Akira-san had died to accomplish?

Higurashi-san and I went down to see Mom in her cell. I told Mom about what I shared with Monokuma.

"I'm glad to hear that you still want to become a teacher, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Even after everything that's happened, I still think you can do it."

"Thank you, Mom," I said.
Mom turned to Higurashi-san.

"So, Higurashi-san," Mom said, "it seems your turn will come tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," Higurashi-san said, "and I know what I will say. My goal of helping others through my leadership has not changed- only my belief in whether I can accomplish it."

"I know all too well how you feel," Mom said, "since if you feel helpless to do anything for your classmates, I am at least as helpless trapped in this cell."

Higurashi-san sighed, seemingly chastened.

"I know," Higurashi-san said. "The only difference between us is that I am free to do something about it, but have not accomplished anything."

"That certainly is true," Mom said. "Of course, while you may regret how things have turned out thus far, if you hope to do something about it, you cannot merely give up."

"I don't plan to, Nagato-sensei," Higurashi-san said. "As long as I'm alive, I'll keep on trying."

While it was depressing to see Higurashi-san lose confidence in himself, I saw a glimmer of the person who'd become our leader. Maybe confidence alone wasn't enough to save us, but as long as he was trying, I felt as though I couldn't give up, either.

I returned to my cabin for the evening. Higurashi-san said he wanted some time alone, so I said good night to him, encouraging him to persevere. But as I settled into my room, showered and changed into my nightgown, I had to wonder- what did it mean to fail in here?

In most games, to lose was to fail. If Higurashi-san was judged a failure as a manager, he might be fired, while as an elected official, he'd been voted out of office. But did that mean that the manager's decision was fair, or that the more popular challenger was better?

Our current state in the killing game was hardly desirable, but we'd evaded the worst-case scenario three times so far. Perhaps that was more due to Akira-san's detective work than Higurashi-san's leadership, but it was still something to be grateful for. That was little comfort to Higurashi-san, or those of us who'd lost people we cared about, but it was the best news we had at this point.

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Monokuma Theater

\( XGK'N \quad LGF \quad MQJS \quad QKLNMZKW \quad DSNNSI \quad NG \quad XG? \)

Hint: \( X=D \)

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Day 21

I woke up once again. As I did, I let out a yawn, but even though I was half-asleep, I knew there wasn't anyone to whom I could say "Good morning."

By now, I was starting to get used to the dreams, but I still had yet to become accustomed to waking up without Akira-san. The cabins, which were designed for two people, felt surprisingly lonely when you were the only person around. Only one bed was in use, and the few decorations on your roommate's side were reminders of a person who'd never return. Some people might enjoy
having their own private living space, and perhaps not have to wait for the bathroom, but since I'd shared an apartment with Mom and a cabin with Azuki-san, it felt like too much space for me.

I also noticed that I was spending more time in quiet contemplation and introspection now that I had no one to talk with. It helped me reach valuable insights and epiphanies, but at the same time, I missed hearing Akira-san's thoughts. Perhaps this was proof that despite not being totally without allies, I would have to stand on my own and find my own answers to the problems I was facing.

At breakfast, Monokuma showed up once again, just after we'd sat down.

"Today, it's the boys' turn for career counseling," Monokuma said, "and here's the order."

Monokuma emailed us a document and I read it.

_Career Counseling Day 2: Boys_

_Session 1(9 AM-11 AM): Higurashi-san_

_Session 2(11 AM-1 PM) Kirishima-san_

_Session 3(1 PM-3 PM) Kurogane-san_

_Session 4(3 PM-5 PM) Asakura-san.

_Session 5(5 PM-7 PM) Karita-san_

_Session 6(7 PM-9 PM): Kumakura-san_

The boys read it over quietly.

"I think we established yesterday that the sessions don't take anywhere near two hours," Kumakura-san said. "Would it be possible for each person to start their session immediately after the previous person's is done?"

"My answer is no, Kumakura-san," Monokuma said. "If these sessions take too long, it's because you don't have enough to say."

Kumakura-san chuckled and sighed.

"Figures," Kumakura-san said. "I guess I'll keep my evening open, then."

"Great," Monokuma said. "I'll see you gentlemen at your respective appointment times- be there or be square."

Monokuma then left once again, and we got back to eating. Those of us who'd had our turn had no desire to discuss our sessions any further, while those who had yet to go had no need of additional preparation. Higurashi-san finished quickly once again, for his own sake rather than mine, and I followed him out of the dining hall once he was done.

Higurashi-san and I took the elevator down to see Mom, quickly telling her about the schedule.

"So today, it's the boys' turn," Mom said.

"Indeed," Higurashi-san said, "and like Nagato-san, I'm up first."
"Then I won't keep you waiting," Mom said. "Please don't be late."

Higurashi-san nodded.

"One more thing, Higurashi-san," I said. "Could you please ask Asakura about his session on my behalf?"

"All right," Higurashi-san said, as he got up and left.

Higurashi-san boarded the elevator. As the doors closed, I turned back to Mom.

"Is something wrong, Mom?" I said.

"Nothing much," Mom said. "I'm just sad that your relationship with Asakura-san hasn't improved."

That was quite the understatement. I'd never enjoyed interacting with him, but after he lashed out at me the night after the second trial, I made a point of avoiding him unless it was absolutely necessary for us to talk.

"I'm not happy about it, either," I said, "but all my attempts to get along well with him have not been received well. I will still try to be polite if we see each other, but I think it would be most prudent to keep contact to a minimum."

I believed in the principle of treating others as you wanted to be treated, but only to a certain point; there was little reason to be kind to someone who treated you poorly in spite of it. Some might say I felt entitled to other's kindness, but all I was asking for was common decency, and believed it was unfair that people like Asakura and those who spread rumors about my being an illegitimate child did not show it to me.

"Besides, Mom," I said, "you've met people you don't get along with, either?"

"I have," Mom said. "Nakamura-sensei, who was the second-year math teacher at Talent High School, always thought of me as a young upstart who didn't deserve my job, but I am always polite to him. Two teachers publicly feuding would have set a bad example to the students, so he was polite enough not to say anything about me in public. My patience paid off when he retired five years ago."

"So you didn't have to deal with him anymore, then?" I said.

"True," Mom said. "I don't think your decision to avoid Asakura-san unless necessary is a bad idea, but you should try to get along with him when you do interact."

I nodded and said "I'll try," before changing the subject.

Mom and I talked for a little while, until I decided to leave and check on Higurashi-san. After riding the elevator up, I saw him waiting outside.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "Were you talking with your mother?"

"I was," I said. "Are you done with your session already?"

Higurashi-san nodded as I walked through the elevator doors.

"So how did it go?" I said.
"It could have been worse," Higurashi-san said. "Monokuma politely accepted most of my job choices, such as a salesman like my father, and said all I had to do was find someone willing to hire me."

"I guess that's good," I said, "but while being hired isn't easy, it should be manageable for you?"

Higurashi-san sighed.

"I used to think so," Higurashi-san said, "but I've learned that self-confidence isn't enough by itself. You must appeal to other people and get them to acknowledge your talent. Azuki-san understood this, which is why she was so skeptical of me."

While I didn't have much confidence for people to tear down, I hadn't always been that way. Being shunned by other groups of friends, told that my grades were mediocre and not having a talent to fall back on had eroded my self-esteem. I'd come to understand that you had to appeal to the right people- admissions officers, hiring managers and many others- and to do so, you needed to be a person worth recognizing.

Of course, while all that was true, the same went for what Sayuri-san had said to me yesterday, so I decided to relay that advice to Higurashi-san.

"I understand where she's coming- I mean came from," I said, "but baseless or not, you need to believe in yourself in order to convince others. How could you convince someone of something that you aren't sure of yourself?"

"You can't," Higurashi-san said, "but you still need evidence to back up your claims."

"Yes, you do," I said, "which means it's a bit of a Catch-22. Your skills, accomplishments and good qualities help foster a healthy sense of self-confidence, which you need in order to achieve those. I know that better than anyone; my prospects for higher education and careers weren't very good before I got into Talent High School."

Higurashi-san was left at a loss for words.

"Despite that," I said, "there is one thing you can feel proud of about yourself. You were the first person to step forward and lead our class after my mom- our teacher- was spirited away. Not many people would go that far for the safety of people they'd only just met, so in that regard, you're better than most of them."

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "I may not be proud of what I've achieved- or rather, failed to achieve- thus far, but I'll never forget that this was my choice. If nothing else, I have no reason to feel sorry for myself."

Higurashi-san felt a bit better, if only for the moment. Perhaps his guilt and sense of helplessness would return in the aftermath of the next trial, but for now, we needed our leader, so I was pleased that he was himself again.

I found Kirishima-san in the dining hall after his session ended, not long after 11 AM. He wasn't hungry for lunch yet, since I didn't see a plate in front of him, but he was drinking a glass of water.

"Hello, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said. "I recently finished with my career counseling."

"I see," I said. "Do you mind talking about it?"
Kirishima-san nodded, and I sat down.

"Monokuma had little hope that there would be much demand for geneticists in the current world," Kirishima-san said, "but while his point is well-founded, it would be foolish to give up on sciences entirely."

I nodded. I was tempted to ask "Why's that?" but I knew that he'd consider that question stupid.

"I think so, too," I said, "and I'm not surprised you'd think that, being a man of science."

"Scientists are not the only ones who came to this conclusion," Kirishima-san said. "The constant drive to learn new things and increase our understanding of the world is one that is shared by all rational beings. Perhaps the reason why Monokuma so eagerly believes that the sciences have been abandoned is that he fears what we will learn from them."

"You might be right," I said, "but I doubt any of us pose a threat to Monokuma as we are now."

"Perhaps not," Kirishima-san said, "but the fact that he does not see us as such is not necessarily a bad thing. He would most likely snuff out any individuals he saw as dangerous, likely with a staged class trial."

"Like he did with Akira-san?" I said without even thinking about it.

Kirishima-san scoffed and shook his head.

"What happened with Mihama-kun was an unfortunate accident," Kirishima-san said, "but Monokuma did not see Azuki-kun as an enemy that he had to eliminate. Rather, by playing a critical role in solving each mystery, she prolonged the killing game, weeding out the less competent blackened and ensuring that we would survive long enough to see more murders."

"Maybe she did," I said, "but because of her efforts, and because she was willing to give up her life, all of us here are still alive."

"Perhaps," Kirishima-san said, "but for how much longer?"

Kirishima-san left me to ponder a question I couldn't yet answer, as if I were chained up with shackles I couldn't break or unlock. We had lost so much in the killing game, and had gained nothing, but were Akira-san's efforts and our sacrifices in vain? I didn't think so, and hoped a day could come when I could prove it.

That afternoon, I took a walk inside the ship, and saw Kurogane-san in the warehouse.

"Oh, Kurogane-san," I said. "Are you finished with your career counseling?"

"I am," Kurogane-san said. "It was actually easier than I thought; I realized that a career as a go pro isn't a sure thing, so I've done some thinking as to what sort of alternative careers I might have. That doesn't mean I'd be sad to give up go, but at least I'm prepared."

A part of me envied my classmates, who had talents they were passionate about, but I realized that they couldn't necessarily make a living off of those passions, even in the best of times. If the social upheaval we'd heard about in the paper had happened, they would likely be forced to work in occupations dedicated to rebuilding or providing the necessities, since there would be few resources to spare on entertainment and other luxuries.
"Speaking of difficult choices," I said, "have you ever had to make a hard choice on someone you cared about?"

Kurogane-san shook his head.

"No," Kurogane-san said. "Even in Kojima-kun's case, I didn't have to act on what I'd learned about his murder attempt. It was up to Azuki-san to unravel the murder, and the rest of needed only vote for the culprit."

I wondered if Kurogane-san could simply convince himself that Tatsuki-san had murdered Kojima-san without any provocation, simply assuming that the materials left in the crime scene had belonged to Tatsuki-san, but there were more than a few holes in that theory. If that were true, Tatsuki-san wouldn't have prepared (or at least not have used) anything to protect her from the blood splatter.

"But even so," Kurogane-san said, "it was still hard. Kojima-kun betrayed us, and may not have cared for me at all, at least not in the way I did for him."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "You... liked him, didn't you?"

Kurogane-san chuckled and nodded.

"It's that obvious, isn't it?" Kurogane-san said. "But anyway, I could live with the fact that he loved Azuki-san; I just hoped that he at least considered me a friend. Now, I'll have to live with that knowledge recoloring our previous interactions."

I didn't know what to say to that. At the very least, I knew that Akira-san saw me as a friend, possibly her best friend, and that she'd been willing to give her life to save rest of us, even those she hated.

"Because of that," Kurogane-san said, "I can't fault you for not voting for Azuki-san, not when I'd have had trouble doing the same for Kojima-kun. In each of the three trials, I voted for the blackened to save the rest of us, not to kill that one person, but I knew I couldn't accomplish the one without the other."

"I know," I said. "Still, I played a role in executing Yamazaki-san and Tatsuki-san- I mean Taiga-san- so it seems hypocritical of me to lose my nerve now."

"For better or worse, there's always next time," Kurogane-san said. "If there's another trial, then you can do your part for the group to make up for last time."

Assuming I wasn't the blackened, that is. Then again, the fact that Kurogane-san seemed to trust me not to kill anyone in addition to voting correctly said a lot about him, so I made sure I thanked him appropriately.

Asakura was up next, with his session at 3 PM. Higurashi-san spoke with him. I shared some of what people had told me about their sessions so far, leaving out some of the more personal details, and found that he'd heard the same thing.

"I talked with Asakura-kun," Higurashi-san said. "Unfortunately, he was somewhat evasive, but he didn't seem to mind the prospect of giving up a career in tech support."

"Thank you," I said. "I suppose that just leaves Karita-san and Kumakura-san."
A pause followed. Even though practically anything could happen in the killing game, we had little reason to believe that anything unusual would happen for the two remaining boys when the other eight sessions had been relatively uneventful.

"Anyway, I'm amazed, Higurashi-san," I said. "You manage to handle Asakura surprisingly well."

"Only barely," Higurashi-san said. "He merely tolerates me, and has never approved of me being a leader. If I had to grade my relationship with him, it would be a barely passing grade, one that would upset my parents if they found out."

"Well, it's still better than how I'm doing," I said. "I've never been good at dealing with difficult people. While most people generally tolerate me, there are some who dislike me no matter how much I apologize or try to be polite to them."

"That's just a fact of life, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "You can't please everyone. Elected officials should strive to win the trust and respect of their constituents, but they must also be willing to take principled stances, even if they're unpopular."

"Fair enough," I said. "I wonder if all this time, by trying to present a meek and inoffensive façade, I ended up alienating those who might have become my friends."

Maybe Higurashi-san was the wrong person to ask, since he'd only met me after I'd come to this school. I didn't know if anyone knew what a certain other person's "true self" was like, but there were many people who could make a better educated guess about me. That didn't stop him from making his best shot, though.

'I don't know whether you're right about that," Higurashi-san said, "but I do believe this. While people put on various facades that may not represent their 'true' self, I don't think they're fake; merely facets of your personality that you choose to adopt. You're an honest and trustworthy person, and I can't think of anyone here I'd rather have as my assistant."

"Thank you, Higurashi-san," I said.

Higurashi-san said "You're welcome," and changed the subject. I didn't know whether the way I'd tried to put my best foot forward until now had been a mistake, but I was grateful for people who could accept me as I was.

After Asakura, Karita-san went next. He must have been in a hurry to get done, since I saw him relaxing on the deck 20 minutes after it had started.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Karita-san said. "I guess you're curious what a person like me has in mind for a future career?"

"I am now," I said. "What did you suggest to Monokuma?"

"A salesman," Karita-san said. "After all, if I have what it takes to trick people, then it'll be pretty easy to sell a legitimate product, right?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not so sure," I said. "Higurashi-san once mentioned that his father was a salesman, one who believed in the importance of delivering an honest sales pitch, and not making promises he couldn't keep."
"If you say so," Karita-san said, "but in the end, Higurashi-kun had to sell what the company was offering, and probably make quotas or some such. Regardless of what his personal beliefs were, the company's first priority was the bottom line."

That was a remarkably cynical view, not to mention one that troubled me. Since I didn't have much in the way of talent, principle was all I had going for me, and I knew of people who were better than I was. While Higurashi-san felt like a failure, he'd never once compromised his beliefs, so he was probably doing a better job than me.

"So you don't know for certain what being a salesman requires," I said, neglecting to mention that I didn't know much, either.

"You got me," Karita-san said, "but would you be able to tell if I showed up wearing a suit and tie, offering to sell you something you needed?"

"I honestly don't know," I said. "I guess I'd have to listen to your sales pitch and find out if anything was out of place, but even that's not 100 percent foolproof."

Karita-san grinned.

"And there you have it," Karita-san said. "You see, I actually know a little bit in a lot of things, enough to pass off as an expert if I so chose. For example, I know how to use a bow and arrows, so while I'm not nearly as good of an archer as Himemiya-san, I can at least pose as a second-year in a halfway decent archery club."

"I'm sure you can," I said. "Might it be possible you're just pretending to be the Ultimate Con Artist?"

Karita-san looked taken aback for a moment, then laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"The look on your face a moment ago," Karita-san said, "not to mention the fact that you'd make such a claim. The school really should have chosen you as the Ultimate Comedian; that way, I wouldn't have to listen to Asakura-kun's complaints."

"Thank you, I guess," I said, "but I don't have much of a funny bone. I never know when telling a joke will help, or when it will merely offend someone. I tried joking around to make friends, but they all fell flat."

"Maybe it was your audience," Karita-san said. "Everyone's looking for something, regardless of whether they're friends, family, business associates... you name it. If you want to appeal to someone, you have to find that need and offer it to them, even if you don't actually have what they're looking for."

I didn't know what to say, and so ended the conversation there. Maybe I had been going about socializing the wrong way all these years, or maybe I'd tried to befriend people who were unwilling to be friends with me. Or maybe Karita-san was wrong about interpersonal relationships; I didn't have enough experience to tell either way.

We ate dinner at around 6 PM, so that neither Karita-san nor Kumakura-san would have to worry about missing it to get to their counseling session. While Kumakura-san had another spicy dish, he was done eating by 6:20 p.m., even if he didn't quite clean his plate.
After dinner, I saw Himemiya-san talking with Sayuri-san on the deck. Neither one seemed to notice me, but I could hear them somewhat clearly despite being far away.

"I'll be honest, Sasaki-san," Himemiya-san said. "A part of me was jealous of you."

"How so?" Sayuri-san said, more inquisitive than offended.

"Strictly speaking, it wasn't just you," Himemiya-san said. "The same went for most of Kanae's other friends. She was free to have an equal relationship with people like you, to call you 'chan' rather than 'sama'. She didn't drop the 'sama' from my name until just before she was murdered."

Sayuri paused for a moment. I couldn't see the expression on her face, but she probably was carefully considering her response.

"I understand how you feel," Sayuri said, "but I will share two things with you. The first is that I'm not sure I would have been as close to Kanae-chan if I were in your position."

"I'm not so sure," Himemiya-san said. "You were able to befriend her within days of meeting her."

"That was because she's a nice person who's easy to get along with," Sayuri-san said, "and, more importantly, because I approached her with the assumption that we, as classmates and fellow Ultimates, were equals. If I grew up with the belief that her family was destined to serve me, then I would have treated her well, like I do with my assistants, but I might not have thought of her as a friend, per se. I think the fact that you never once thought of her as beneath you speaks volumes of your character."

Himemiya-san shrugged. This was a question of nature versus nurture, and I doubt Sayuri-san could predict how she'd have turned out if she'd grown up in the Himemiya household any more than I could have guessed what person I'd be like if Dad was still alive.

"I appreciate that," Himemiya-san said, "and what's the other part?"

"Well, it's more of a question," Sasaki-san said. "Kanae-chan called you 'Himeno' just before her death, didn't she?"

"She did," Himemiya-san said. "I suppose you're saying that in the end, the lack of an honorific is the difference between a friend and a best friend?"

"That's right," Sayuri-san said. "My friendship with Kanae-chan was less complicated than the one she shared with you, but it wasn't quite as close, either. You were her most precious person, so never forget that."

Himemiya-san seemed to be happy to hear that, since she didn't say anything in response.

"By the way," Himemiya-san said, "what makes you decide whether to call people by their first names?"

"Whether the person in question is someone I'd consider a friend," Sayuri-san said. "As long as they aren't authority figures or people I'd never get along with, I consider them good candidates. What about you?"

"I'm the same," Himemiya-san said, "and the only difference is my standards. Some people only want to get close to me to make a good impression on my father. In your case, however, that doesn't apply."
Sayuri-san paused.

"Let me put it another way," Himemiya-san said. "Is your invitation from earlier still good... Sayuri?"

"It is, Himeno-chan," Sayuri-san said. "It's never too late."

"Then I'm glad," Himemiya-san said. "I'm a bit slow to make friends, not to mention a bit choosy, since I'm not sure who's really worth the effort. The fact that you were willing to respect my wishes, make compromises and give me time, however, proves I had no reason to doubt you."

I left before they could see me, feeling bad about eavesdropping but not sure what I could or should say to them. Himemiya-san seemed surprisingly reserved, but I hoped that one day, I, too, could become closer to her.

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I saw Kumakura-san sitting in the lounge around 7:15 PM. Since Monokuma was nowhere to be found, that probably meant that the career counseling had finished.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Kumakura-san said. "In case you're wondering, the lounge will be open for the foreseeable future now that we're done with the counseling."

"That's good," I said. "How did yours go?"

"Better than I thought," Kumakura-san said, "since I do have a few alternatives in mind, such as kinesiology. Out of curiosity, though, do you ever imagine that one day, you'll be past your prime?"

I was taken off guard by that question for a moment. While I didn't have much confidence in my talent, I had hope that I would improve over time. The same went for my mom, who I hoped had decades ahead of her in her teaching career.

"Maybe," I said, "but I guess that's true of everyone, isn't it?"

"It is," Kumakura-san said, "but some face it sooner than others. For example, Kirishima-kun will be able to continue doing research for many years, and will continue to get better at it, while Sayaka Maizono, an up-and-coming idol singer I've heard is a good candidate for Ultimate status, will be lucky to continue through her mid twenties."

"And I suppose you're thinking about yourself, aren't you?" I said.

Kumakura-san nodded grimly.

"I am," Kumakura-san said. "Some Ultimates are chosen because as high schoolers, they've already surpassed many adults, but others are chosen because they're in their prime. I doubt this cruise will last long enough for my strength to atrophy beyond recovery, but it is depressing to know that one day, I'll have to hang up my weights."

Practically speaking, I doubted the cruise would last much longer, since Monokuma couldn't feed ten teenagers and one adult forever. But what would happen once we reached our final destination?

"You seem troubled," Kumakura-san said.

"I have a lot on my mind," I said, "particularly that I don't know what's going to happen once all this ends."
"Neither do I," Kumakura-san said.

I left Kumakura-san feeling humbled in some ways. I'd always worried about my future, realizing that there would be few career choices for a mediocre student like me, to say nothing about finding a good husband, but I'd realized I wasn't alone. My talented classmates had to come to terms with the fact that they couldn't pursue their dreams forever, and might never see their homes or families again, to say nothing of how almost everyone had lost a friend by now. None of us were fully equipped to handle a situation like this, but there had to be something I could do to help my classmates cope with the killing game.

I went to bed with more questions than usual on my mind. We'd always known that the killing game was in service of some greater purpose, even if it was too terrible to imagine, but the past few days suggested that Monokuma was preparing to show us something. The killing game had been bad enough thus far, so who knew how horrific the "climax" would be?

Of course, I was getting ahead of myself. Whatever Monokuma was planning would probably happen on the sixth island, and we had two more to go until then, including the one we were about to arrive at. If my estimations were correct, there would be two more class trials for us to get through... without the help of the one person who deserved most of the credit for our success.

Knowing that we would have a hard time ahead of us, I prayed to God to keep all of us safe, including the traitor. No matter how much we'd suffered, I had no desire to add the traitor to the list of the dead. One way or another, in this world or the next, they'd get their just deserts; the former was up to the courts and the latter was up to God, not a bunch of teenagers who had watched too many of their classmates die.

But who was the traitor? Why had they betrayed us? Did they hate us, or did they simply not feel anything for us after all this time? The answers to these questions would be difficult to find and even more difficult to accept, so I couldn't help but wonder if ignorance was bliss.

Monokuma Theater

They say it's a good idea to leave some room for reader interpretation. Well, I've got an idea.

You shouldn't tell everyone what the ending to your story is; let the readers decide it for themselves.

The same goes for the middle of the story, too. After the story is set up and the cast is introduced, the readers should decide what happens to the characters from there.

Hell, even the beginning isn't an exception, either. If it's all up to the readers, they can come up with infinite numbers of story.

Here's your lesson, kids- rather than listen to other people's stories, come up with your own.

Author's Notes

So begins Chiyuri's arc, as well as the "educational" half of the cruise. Since Chiyuri has severe self-worth issues, she'll probably be the angriest of the protagonists in this series. Unlike Shuichi from V3, she hasn't had a chance to do nearly as much before the previous protagonist stepped aside, so she has less faith in her own abilities.
This chapter took a while to write, partly because Himemiya was originally going to be significantly angrier about Chyuri's refusal to vote for Azuki, going so far as to slap her in the original version. While Himemiya was originally a ruder and blunter individual, I decided this level of conflict was out of character for the kinder and less temperamental final version of her, and so toned down her reaction. Similarly, a conversation between Nagato and Tatsuki about how Himemiya only gives the people she likes a hard time was cut out, since this version of Himemiya isn't nearly as abrasive as her original self. Without spoiling too much, Himemiya plays a relatively significant role in this Chapter (but I won't say whether she's a killer, a victim or a survivor).

Another thing that I changed around was that some of the scenes, such as the one in the laundry room, were originally going to be in the morning of the next day, rather than the afternoon and evening just after the trial. Partly as a result of this, this installment ended up covering three and a half days, rather than three.

The next installment will show the fourth island, and while it should come out more quickly than this one, it may not be a while, since I'm still doing Chiyuri's Free Time Events. I've done six so far- Azuki, Chiyuri's mother, Karita, Taiga, Tsukimura and Sasaki- so that leaves ten to go.

I'm interested in hearing your theories on who the traitor might be, and whether they're still alive. Of course, as you can probably guess, the theory about the "killing school cruise" being the result of a conspiracy by Talent High School is obviously untrue.

Let me know if you figure out the answer for the cryptogram in the Monokuma Theater for Day 20. If it's too hard, just fill yourself with determination and you'll get it.

Incidentally, I know Despair's Last Resort and Danganronpa 3 had Haruhi shout-outs in the titles, but I decided that this one was too good to pass up. I had another possible title in mind, but I thought it might end up being a spoiler for the motive.
I woke up alone once again. The only sound I heard was that of the morning announcement and the weather report— at least it was sunny all day today.

Anticipating that I'd once again arrive on a new island, I took Akira-san's notebook with me, along with a pen. The only clue I had to guess what was on the island was the career theme, from the list of stops on our cruise and from the career counseling Monokuma had held over the past two days. Everything else would be a surprise—and likely not a pleasant one.

I flipped to the newest blank page, which was closer to the front of the book than I thought, and began an entry titled "Island 4 Observations." Back when we'd reached the first island, everything had been unknown, and it was only when we'd gotten to the third island that we'd started developing expectations that Monokuma could subvert. Because of that, it was wiser to keep our minds open, and to be ready for any possibility, no matter how seemingly unlikely or nonsensical.

We convened in the dining hall for breakfast, and after saying "Good morning" to each other, we began eating in silence. Before long, Monokuma joined us.

"Good morning, class," Monokuma said. "I guess you've all figured out that we're going to a new island today, haven't you?"

None of us wanted to dignify that with a response, if only because it was what we feared. Within three days of arriving at each island, a murder had occurred, and on the previous one, we'd found ourselves in a situation that might have resulted in all of us dying. Believing that things would go any better this time was dangerously naïve.

"You don't seem too excited," Monokuma said, "which is a shame, because I actually have some good news; I'm not going to pull the same trick as last time. There will be lots of good food and drink on the next island, and you'll be able to return to the ship, starting at 8 PM."

A few people let out sighs of relief, but Karita-san raised his hand.

"That sounds all well and good," Karita-san said, "but do you really think we can just take your word for it?"

"You can't," Monokuma said. "You'll just have to see for yourselves once you get off the ship. Of course, like I said earlier, anyone who stays on the Ursa Major past 9 AM or doesn't get back on by 9 PM will get executed."

That was the killing game in a nutshell. We had no way of knowing for certain what was true and what wasn't, but we could be certain that if we made a mistake, we'd surely die. So far, no one had been brave or suicidal enough to test whether breaking one of Monokuma's rules would result in execution, but then again, following them had been relatively safe until the third island.

"Anyway, you've still got a little while before we get off," Monokuma said, "so you'll have more than enough time to finish your breakfast. Eat up, before it gets cold."

Monokuma departed, at which point we continued to eat, not knowing whether this meal would be our last.
Shortly after we finished, a little after 8 AM, Higurashi-san, who'd been eating at the other end of the dining hall, stopped by my table.

"Nagato-san, please come with me," Higurashi-san said. "We'll need to discuss this with Nagato-sensei."

"Yes, sir," I said, getting up and following him out of the dining hall.

Higurashi-san and I visited Mom in her cell and told her the news.

"I see," Mom said. "It seems as though you will be relatively safe on the next island. Of course, you don't have any choice when it comes to disembarking."

"Technically, we do, Nagato-sensei," Higurashi-san said. "If we stay on the ship, we'll die. If we get off the ship, we **might** die. There might not be much of a choice between certain death and likely death, but all of us want to live, so we consciously make the choice to keep on going."

I nodded. My days had become more lonely and painful ever since Akira-san died, but I didn't even have to think about whether I'd step onto the next island. Giving up and dying after everything that had happened would be disrespectful to Akira-san's sacrifice, as well as everything we'd fought for together.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mom said. "What about Tatsuki-san?"

"She got off on the last island," I said, "walking into danger with the rest of us. She was the first to offer to lay down her life- of course, someone had to die there- but I don't think she'll just throw her life away."

Some people in my position would have blamed Tatsuki-san, or believed that she should have died so that Akira-san could live. I, however, knew better. I'd had difficulty accepting that we would need to sacrifice someone to escape, and so sought to delay that sacrifice as long as possible... long enough for the accident to take place. In some ways, I bore responsibility for what had happened to Mihama-san and Akira-san.

"That's good enough for now," Mom said. "I can't force any of you to do anything, even in a life or death situation; all I can do is offer guidance and hope that you take it to heart. I'm counting on you two to guide your classmates well in my stead."

"Yes, ma'am," Higurashi-san and I said.

With our discussion concluded, we took the elevator back up.

By the time I'd finished speaking with Mom, the ship was starting to approach the island. I looked over the starboard side and saw that it was yet another urban center. It was hard to tell what the buildings were from a distance, but most of them seemed to be office complexes, and I could see a hospital on the west end of the island. For a moment, I thought we were back where we'd started our cruise, but I noticed a few noticeable differences. Not only was it a smaller island than our first stop, but I could see a sign saying "Welcome, Job Seekers!", signifying that this was the Career Planning island.

Kurogane-san was surveying the island as I approached him.

"So this is what our 'career planning stop' looks like," Kurogane-san said. "I guess it's more or less
Me too," I said. "Not all jobs are in the city, but even for those, I guess you'd probably have to go into someone's office to have an interview. Or at least it seems that way to me, a city girl."

"Sounds about right," Kurogane-san said. "It's not as though I know enough to prove you wrong."

If anyone did, it was probably Mom, as well as the various other teachers who gave career advice to their students. Of course, even those teachers probably didn't know about all the careers their students might aspire towards, not to mention how each generation's job market was different from the last.

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask you something since last time," I said. "Do you know many people who have trouble choosing a career?"

"I know some people, yes," Kurogane-san said, "but for others, it's different. Some people have everything figured out, with both a goal and the ability to reach it, while others choose something that isn't exactly realistic, and end up being disappointed, to put it mildly."

"I... I see," I said.

"I guess wanting something you can't have is human nature," Kurogane-san said. "Kojima-kun continued to pursue Azuki-san no matter how much she rejected him, and I yearned for Kojima-kun, despite knowing I wasn't even his second choice as far as romance goes."

"You seem remarkably calm about that," I said, "considering that you..."

I trailed off, unsure of what to say next or how to put it. Luckily for me, Kurogane-san picked up the slack.

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"Love someone who didn't love me back and is now dead?" Kurogane-san said. "Or that I'm gay?"

"The latter," I said. "Some people would be troubled to realize that they're only attracted to members of the same sex."

"I imagine," Kurogane-san said, "but I personally believe it's important to understand and accept who you are. I came out to my younger cousin Shiro, who was fairly understanding, as was Kojima-kun. My parents mostly took it in stride, but made it clear that I was not to get together with a man under any circumstances."

"In other words, they don't approve of your lifestyle," I said.

"No, they don't," Kurogane-san said, a bit sadly, "but at the very least, I was able to be honest with them. I was hoping they'd accept me for who I am, and give me their blessing to live and love as I see fit, but like I said, some people want what they can't have."

Kurogane-san changed the subject, but in the process, made me wonder why I'd been so hesitant to tell others about being an illegitimate child... until I recalled all the ostracism and outright bullying I'd endured because of my status as such. Kurogane-san seemed a lot more confident than I was, but he wasn't the type to go shouting that he was gay from the rooftops, so maybe this was a sign that he trusted me. I, too, would have to decide who I could trust with my secrets.

Within minutes after my conversation with Kurogane-san ended the ship reached the dock, and all of us disembarked almost immediately. I was one of the first ones off, and counted the other nine
of us as they left. Kirishima-san was the last one to get off this time, and once he did, I saw that the
gate did not immediately retract.

As soon as all of us had left the ship, I looked around for a place to get food, and saw a ramen
stand outside, with a vending machine nearby. Karita-san had apparently found it first, as I saw him
seated at a bench next to a wooden table, drinking a cup of coffee.

"Oh, hello, Nagato-san," Karita-san said. "I see you're also worried about where your next meal
will come from."

"With Monokuma, you never can be too sure," I said. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Sure," Karita-san said. "If you're thirsty, check out the vending machine; all the drinks are free."

I walked over to the vending machine, and input the code for a bottle of juice, which vended
without my having to input any payment (although there was a coin slot, a bill acceptor and a credit
 card swipe device, as well as a spare change basket). I retrieved my juice, then sat down across
from him, opened up and took a sip.

"I've been wondering about this for some time," Karita-san said. "What kind of person do you
suppose Monokuma is?"

I had to admit that I had never really thought of Monokuma as a person. Not only was he a robotic
bear, but he had no capability for empathy or compassion, and his emotions seemed to range from
mild irritation to sadistic glee. That being said, current technology wasn't capable of creating an
artificial intelligence that could act like a person, so it was possible that there was someone sitting
in a control room and operating Monokuma, possibly on the bridge of the Ursa Major. If that was
true, then the answer was simple- he was a sociopath who delighted in our death and suffering.

"Definitely not a good one," I said, "but while it's obvious that he enjoys our suffering, he hasn't
made things completely impossible for the spotless. It would've been all over if we'd failed in the
last three trials, but we've gotten through each one, so he leaves us a chance to succeed."

"I don't know if you could call it that," Karita-san said. "We have a chance to outwit the blackened,
and survive at the cost of their lives, but at this point, we haven't made any kind of progress against
Monokuma... or the traitor."

Karita-san must have felt surprisingly confident that I wasn't the traitor if he broached the subject
so easily, or else he hoped to trick me into inadvertently giving away a clue. Since the latter was a
remote possibility if I was, in fact, the traitor, I had to assume it was the former.

"Anyway, I've got another question," Karita-san said. "Do you think the traitor's still alive? Or are
they dead by now?"

"I don't know," I said. "Out of everyone who's died thus far, I find it unlikely that it's any of the
killers- or an attempted killer, in Kojima-san's case- since I doubt the mastermind would have taken
such a risk, or given their life to save the rest of us. Monokuma also said that it wasn't Tsukimura-
san, either."

"That's true," Karita-san said, "assuming you believe him, which is a dubious proposition at best."

"That's a fair assertion," I said, "but it's hard to believe that if Tsukimura-san was the mastermind,
she'd let herself get killed so easily. Since Taiga-san chose to die in her sister's place, that only
leaves Mihama-san... as well as those who are still alive."
While Mihama-san was not a very likely candidate for the traitor, since her only suspicious characteristic was her intelligence, I realized this changed little. Statistically speaking, it was most likely that the traitor was still alive, and it would be in the traitor's best interests to get us to erroneously assume that they were not.

"Good point," Karita-san said, "but what about Tatsuki-san? She's currently the only killer who got away with murder, and did so by sacrificing her sister."

"That's a possibility," I said, "but when Monokuma failed to execute her, she asked him to rectify his mistake, and she was willing to give her life to let us escape the last island. I know that she could have done so knowing that she wouldn't actually have to die in either case, but I don't think anyone could have predicted what happened to Mihama-san."

"That's right," Karita-san said, "and that includes Mihama-san herself. I guess that what I'm trying to say is that if we don't know much about why the traitor is doing this or their modus operandi, it could be anyone."

I nodded. Monokuma had spoken about teaching us to enjoy despair, but that kind of mindset was so alien and inhuman that I couldn't imagine any of us actually being that person, or becoming that person in the two years since our arrival at the school and the present day. More than anything, I was scared by the idea that one of the people I cared about was the traitor responsible for all these tragedies, and hoped I would never have to face the truth.

I walked some distance away and found a hotel that reached up into the skies, being at least ten stories tall. Unfortunately for us, we couldn't get to the top nine stories, since the elevator wasn't working and the door to the stairs was locked, so that just left the lobby, the restaurant and a convention center.

I saw Sayuri-san in the restaurant, and joined her for an early lunch.

"You know, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said, "even if this is a different hotel from the one we woke up in, it really takes me back. Miharu-chan and I met you and Akira-chan in a restaurant like this one."

"I know," I said. "Back then, none of us- with the exception of the traitor- knew things would turn out this way."

Back then, while I'd been confused as to how we'd all ended up in the hotel together, I'd mainly focused on getting to know everyone. In hindsight, I wished I'd worried more about the strange circumstances we'd found ourselves in, but getting to know my classmates was still an important first step, no matter the situation.

"On another subject," Sayuri-san said, "I notice that you seemed a bit reserved back then. How close do you think you might have gotten to the rest of us if this had been a normal trip?"

"I don't know," I said. "Not many people opened up to me over the years, but that didn't mean that I didn't need friends."

"Fair enough," Sayuri-san said. "Personally, I don't think you have to make friends with everyone. I consider you and the other girls friends, and get along well with Nobuhiro-kun, Kotaro-kun, and Hikaru-kun, but as for the other three... not so much."

I chuckled nervously. Sayuri-san was capable of being outspoken when necessary, as Himemiya-san had discovered the evening after the last trial, but she was clearly mincing words this time. I
guessed that the difference was that she liked Himemiya-san, but didn't like Karita-san, Kirishima-san or Asakura.

"That's not really a surprise," I said. "How about someone you like but don't consider a friend?"

"Your mother comes to mind," Sayuri-san said, "since even if she wasn't my teacher, I'd probably think of her as my friend's mother. I also keep things strictly professional with my assistants, as well as with my editor. I've known them longer than you, albeit not necessarily 'better', but I don't call them friends."

"I see what you mean," I said, "except for the part about how you don't 'necessarily' know your editor and assistants better?"

Sayuri-san paused for a moment, a pensive expression on her face, as she chewed her food and thought. After swallowing, she decided what she wanted to say.

"Let me put it this way," Sayuri-san said. "All of us have things we're not comfortable sharing with others, or only tell to a handful of people. When it comes to people with whom you share a professional relationship, the list of things you don't talk about grows much larger. For example, I never told my editor about my parents, and only heard about his having a daughter when he mentioned it in passing recently... well, I mean, just before I got in here."

"Ah," I said. "There are certain things I haven't told anyone here... well, except for Mom and Akira-san, that is."

"Fair enough," Sayuri-san said. "You don't feel as though you should force yourself to, but if you want someone to talk to about that, I'll be listening."

I wondered if it ever occurred to Sayuri-san that my "secret" might be that I either was the traitor or knew who the person in question was, but maybe she considered that and didn't discuss it openly. Whatever the case might be, I had little desire for shallow bonds with little trust involved, and hoped that I could trust my friends. Perhaps the day would come when I could tell Sayuri-san about my parentage, just as I'd told Akira-san, but right now, I wasn't ready just yet.

I saw Himemiya-san pacing around the hotel's convention center, which had a job fair set up. There were several tables around the room, with job applications for various employers, but the only company logo I saw was one that I'd never seen before, which had the kanji for "Future" in it. She was carrying a manila folder that looked as though it was full of job listings and want ads.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said. "I found some job postings you might want to look at, even if they probably aren't worth applying to."

"Thank you, Himemiya-san," I said. "I suppose they have some clues, don't they?"

Himemiya-san nodded, then handed me the folder and I flipped through the postings, most of which were deeply sarcastic. One showed a picture of a ruined city.

**CONSTRUCTION WORKERS NEEDED**

*Because someone's got to rebuild all the buildings now that we're done knocking them down.*

*Decent hours, not-terrible pay and excellent job security.*

*We're desperate enough that we'll take art majors.*
Call H-OPE-DES-PAIR if you're interested

As much as I wish I was joking, everything on it seemed consistent with what I'd seen in the newspaper on the second island. The riots and other unrest had likely caused a lot of property damage, and in the case of important buildings like hospitals, utilities and others necessary to daily life, it was important to get the up and running again as soon as possible.

"I... don't know what to say," I said, "except I don't think this is what you'd expect in a job posting."

"No, it isn't," Himemiya-san said. "My father would never stand for such an unprofessional want ad for his own company."

"Unfortunately, I don't know who we can complain to about that," I said. "Even if we had our cell phones, that probably isn't a valid phone number."

I flipped through a few more job postings, from one for the police that emphasized the high mortality rate to one for fencing merchandise that was looted from stores, and found another that stood out.

**NEED WARM BODIES TO MOVE DEAD ONES**

_Ever wanted to work at Hope's Peak?_

_Well, we've got just the opportunity for you.

_The place is a pigsty right now, so we'd like you to clean up the outside of the school, take out potentially thousands of dead bodies and repair the damage to the new school building._

_To inquire about this opportunity, call (This number was scrawled out, and a hastily written note was added- "Now that the school's been sealed as part of the Shelter Plan, no one's answering the phone.")_

"By the way, that isn't my handwriting," Himemiya-san said. "If you look closely, it was already there when it was photocopied."

I checked and saw that there was a date on the posting- roughly the same as the newspaper we'd found. There were also a few photos of what looked like the real Hope's Peak Academy's new building, now in ruins.

"It looks like this one's another fake posting," I said, "but unfortunately, the news about Hope's Peak seems all too real."

"Indeed," Himemiya-san said. "There's one more that's probably the most important."

Himemiya-san took the folder from me, flipped through it, and picked out the one in question.

"HELP" WANTED

_Are you tired of the world as it is now?_

_Then come and sign up for a career in World Ender._

_Must have a strong sense of justice, an obsession with hope, and a willingness to get your hands dirty._

_Preference given to alumni of Hope's Peak Academy, but Talent High School students will be
I looked through the documents and returned them to Himemiya-san.

"All these paint a fairly disturbing picture of civilization," Himemiya-san said. "If what they're implying is true, we may need to scavenge in abandoned buildings for food and other necessities."

"Perhaps," I said, "but there's also a group that seems to be doing something about it."

"That's certainly possible," Himemiya-san said, "but most problems with society are of our own making, and our solutions often come with problems of their own. People have little motivation to change an unjust institution as long as they benefit from it, and any reforms are often made with people's own self-interest in mind."

I could see where Himemiya-san's cynicism came from. From what I had heard, her household was essentially a microcosm of a caste-based society, where one's family and gender determined one's station in life. Her extremely talented servant friend would never be anything more than a servant, while Himemiya-san herself, as a woman, would most likely be unable to convince her father or eldest brother to change the system- why would they when they were the most privileged under it? It was little surprise why she believed we were our worst enemies.

"I'd like to prove you wrong, but I can't," I said. "All I can say is that it's in no one's best interests for things to stay as they are."

"Almost no one," Himemiya-san said. "Monokuma and his kind appear to revel in this chaos and despair, so any organization that would restore order and hope to the world would end the one they hold dear. Perhaps the Future Foundation is a threat to people like Monokuma, but he won't let them do as they please."

All this sounded rather overwhelming, enough to make me question whether there was anything that ten students and their teacher could do. We were always told that anyone could make a difference, but that was only through millions of people banding together to change society, or one person who could rally millions to their cause. We'd never faced a crisis like this before in our lifetimes- or perhaps all of recorded history- so none of us knew what to do about it.

The next stop on our tour was a hospital. It was roughly three stories tall and divided into three wings- a large one where patients stayed, a medium-sized one with laboratories, testing equipment and operating rooms, and a smaller administrative wing.

On the patient wing, there were rooms on each side of the hallway in the hospital, enough for all of us on the ground floor alone. Each one had a decent amount of amenities- a bed for a single patient, some chairs for visitors, a cabinet, a TV (albeit one that wouldn't turn on) windows with drapes that looked out onto the sea, and a call button.

I saw Kumakura-san as I walked the halls, and stopped to talk with him. Near us, a metal cart of some sort, was parked against the wall between the doors to two hospital rooms. The cart went up to my shoulders and had several compartments that could store hospital equipment, including one that opened from the side, and was large enough for a small person (i.e. not Kumakura-san) to hide in. Some smaller compartments were near the top, and contained medical tools such as scalpels, syringes and latex gloves, among others.

"Good afternoon, Nagato-san," Kumakura-san said.
"Hello, Kumakura-san," I said. "Have you found anything interesting?"

"I have," Kumakura-san said, "at the convention center. Did you find the job postings?"

"Yes, Himemiya-san showed some to me," I said. "We talked about the existence of an organization named the Future Foundation that's trying to rebuild the world."

Kumakura-san scratched his chin and said "Interesting..." as if he hadn't heard that part just yet.

"I'd like to talk about that another time," Kumakura-san said. "The point I wanted to discuss was I realized why Monokuma had the career counseling yesterday and the day before- he wanted us to see how little our hopes and dreams, not to mention our talents and other skills, mean in a world like this. Only those whose talents are essential to humanity's survival will have much of a chance of being able to continue to practice theirs."

Kumakura-san's choice of the word "humanity" sent a chill down my spine. I wasn't naïve enough to think that the collapse of civilization, as well as the dissolution of Japan and other nations, would enable the remaining humans to unite as one people, but the stakes were certainly dire enough that if we didn't pull together, we wouldn't survive. If starvation, diseases, violence and death- the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse- running rampant, we might no longer have luxuries of sports, art or other forms of entertainment. I'd meant what I said to Tatsuki-san- that her music had the power to help others- but she might not have many opportunities to use that power.

"What about you?" I said. "I'm sure being strong would be useful, wouldn't it?"

"It has its uses," Kumakura-san said, "but it isn't everything. A skilled excavator operator is far more useful for digging the foundation for a building than a strong man with a shovel. If I were to join a construction crew with the skills I have now, I don't know whether I'd end up getting fired, but I doubt I'd be seen as a valued employee."

"Me neither," I said. "I had a hard time choosing a career in the best of times- I wanted to be a teacher, but didn't know if I could. I have no idea what I can do in a world like this."

"I suppose you can start with whatever they want you to," Kumakura-san said, "and simply apply yourself to learning the trade as best as you can. A good work ethic isn't enough by itself, not in circumstances this dire, but if they're stuck with you, that's all they can hope for."

"I...I guess," I said, not feeling any better.

"Sorry, that was too harsh," Kumakura-san said. "Think of it this way- I think everyone who made it through the disasters is out there are trying their hardest to contribute to our collective survival. It isn't easy for any of us, but you shouldn't assume that you're not good enough just because the work is tough for you."

I smiled approvingly. There were times when I forgot that I wasn't the only one having trouble, so it was reassuring to hear this advice from an Utimate who would likely have to put aside his own talent very soon.

I went to the laboratory wing next. There were several operating rooms, rooms for patients to be examined and other medical facilities. I found Kirishima-san in a chemical storage room.

"So, Kirishima-san," I said, "how are you finding the hospital's research division?"

"It is decently equipped," Kirishima-san said, "save for the most important resource of all-
"Isn't that a good thing?" I said. "What if an experiment goes wrong and has disastrous results?"

"That only happens in films," Kirishima said. "No worthwhile scientist would recklessly start up an experiment that could potentially end in catastrophe without taking adequate precautions."

I took a look at the chemical storage, a refrigerator with a glass door. Its lock seemed to be opened with our student handbook. There were many small bottles of chemicals inside- hallucinogenic chemicals, muscle relaxants, laxatives, chloroform, protein shakes, some sort of super-potent energy drink and who knows how many others- with each vial having various warnings about what they might do if ingested. I saw a hand-written note taped to the back of the cabinet.

**Chemical Storage**

*Have fun with these chemicals. Just remember a few things*

- None of these bottles of chemicals are enough to kill someone by themselves, so you'll have to think outside of the box.
- These things taste really awful, so don't go confusing them for soda or juice.
- It's anyone's guess what happens if you mix these things, but I wouldn't recommend drinking the mixture.
- Attempting to dispose of these chemicals without using them will be considered littering, and will be punished accordingly.
- Have fun!

The note sounded as though it was written for a bunch of children, but that conclusion wasn't necessarily true- a note intended for children would ideally be simple but informative. Most of us were old enough that we knew better than to casually drink anything out of our parents' medicine cabinets, so we didn't have to worry about anyone accidentally poisoning themselves- rather, we had to worry about someone slipping us poison. Luckily, since the chemicals were easily tasted, we could simply keep a close eye on our food, and spit out anything that didn't taste right.

"So anyone can open the cabinet," I said, "which means that anyone can get potentially dangerous chemicals, cant they?"

"Perhaps," Kirishima-san said, "but according to the labels, none of the vials of chemicals come in great enough quantities to amount to a lethal dose."

"That may be so," I said, "but there are many ways to cause harm without killing someone. I will speak with Mom and Higurashi-san, but for now, please do not take any chemicals out unless absolutely necessary."

"Understood," Kirishima-san said. "As someone who works with various chemicals, I know very well that they are not to be toyed with. Whenever I obtain some for my experiments, I do so knowing how much I plan to use it, what it is to be used for, and the intended effect. Experiments' results may not always go as planned, but anyone who starts an experiment without a plan is nothing more than a fool playing with dangerous toys."

I paused a moment, discomfited by what he'd said until I realized why I felt that way.
"Is something the matter, Nagato-kun?" Kirishima-san said.

"I was just thinking," I said. "What do you think about how we might contribute to helping rebuild society once we escape?"

"If we escape," Kirishima-san said, "since there is no guarantee that we will reach the next island, much less return home.

"Oh, right," I said. "Sorry."

"But assuming that all of us who are still alive make it back," Kirishima-san said, "few of us possess the skills to be of use to society in any capacity. We have two tech support professionals, a musician, a manga artist, an archer, a weight lifter, an orator, a go player and a charlatan. Few of those skills are very desirable, and for the major needs that must be filled, an honest effort is not nearly good enough."

As Kirishima-san left me without giving me the chance to point out that he'd left himself off that list, I felt the small vestiges of self-confidence I'd built from my conversation with Kumakura-san ground into dust. The only saving grace was that he considered our classmates to be almost as useless as I was, but that was little consolation compared to the harsh reality that would await us if we returned to civilization, or the fact that not all of the remaining eleven of us would make it that long.

I looked through the administration building. Most of the building was composed of offices of various sorts, although I did see a laundry room and a kitchen downstairs. The former was about what you'd expect from a hospital, while the latter served food wrapped in plastic.

While looking through the kitchen, I opened up the cabinet under the counter, and found another Hidden Monokuma there, causing the real Monokuma to pop out.

"And that makes five, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "Two for you, three for Azuki-san."

"Thank you," I said. "Could you please take this off my hands and return it to my cabin?"

"Sure thing," Monokuma said. "If you find the final Hidden Monokuma on the next island-assuming you make it there, that is- Cabin F4 will win in a shutout!"

As Monokuma left, I actually had to admit that for once, I felt good about what I'd found on the island. Winning the contest might mean nothing, especially not when no one else was seriously trying, but it was one of the only discoveries that felt like an unambiguously good thing, rather than feeling like a trap or meant to further the sense of despair festering within us. As depressing as that sounded, I had to be grateful for the rare pieces of good news I got.

I eventually found an office that belonged to someone important, probably hospital director, on the top floor of the administrative building. It was a grand office with several bookshelves against the walls, a view of the ocean and a large desk. Higurashi-san sat behind the desk, reading through some documents.

"Hello, Higurashi-san," I said.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "Please, have a seat."

I pulled up a chair and sat down across from Higurashi-san. He and I had cultivated a good
working relationship over these past few weeks, but I couldn't help but think of him as my superior, especially when he sat down at such a large desk. If he ever got elected to public office, he seemed like he'd be right at home in such an office, assuming he didn't prefer a more humble workspace.

"So... Higurashi-san said, "why do you suppose Monokuma had us come to an island with a hospital on it?"

"Definitely not to help us," I said. "A hospital needs good equipment, as well as good personnel. There's a lot of high-tech equipment here, at least from my perspective, but it doesn't do any good if none of us know how to use it."

"That's exactly it," Higurashi-san said. "Of course, while it takes a fully trained medical practitioner to use the equipment to save a life, anyone can use it to end one. There will likely be another murder on this island, even without the threat of starvation."

I nodded grimly. Higurashi-san's prediction was obvious enough, but the fact that he openly admitted it was a testament to how bad things had gotten.

"Speaking of which," I said. "Kirishima-san found some potentially dangerous chemicals in the cabinet. We can't get rid of them, but someone could use them to help commit murder."

"Thank you for telling me about this," Higurashi-san said, "but I spoke with him before and he informed me about them. Let's meet up at the ship this evening, just before the time to get back on, and talk more about this."

Higurashi-san didn't sound all that confident, knowing that it was unlikely that he'd think of a solution to our problem in the next few hours, or that putting our heads together would yield something he couldn't have thought of by himself. As he had said, the potential for poison and cure existed within everything we could find on the ship and the islands- not to mention our own hands. What we ultimately did with them was up to us, but we had little reason to hope that we'd make the right decisions.

About a block from the hospital, I found a small chocolate shop, with Sayuri-san inside. Posters, banners and signs around the store mentioned a White Day sale, with discounts on the products. It struck me as more than a little odd that the discount was still up more than a month after White Day, but then I remembered the newspaper article we'd seen two islands ago. If the store had been abandoned during the chaos that had broken out, they most likely wouldn't have been able to remove the White Day-related promotions.

"Hello, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said. "Just wondering, but do you like chocolate?"

"I do," I said, "but I'm personally not fond of Valentine's Day or White Day. Having gone to all-girls schools for much of my childhood, I haven't had any chances to get chocolate on White Day. Even if I did, my old high school didn't allow students to bring chocolates to school."

"The same goes for me," Sayuri-san said, "both the all girls part and the 'no chocolates allowed' part. That being said, I got chocolate from my assistants for Valentine's Day on my first year of high school, and gave some back for them on White Day."

"Ah," I said. "That's good for you."

Sayuri-san must have noticed that I was partly saying that to be polite, since she blushed for a moment before hastily replying.
"Well, it was only obligation chocolate," Sayuri-san said, "but I was happy to receive it. While I like chocolate, I also think that the feelings behind the gift are most important. That's why it's better to get the chocolate from someone you like than to buy it yourself."

At that point, Himemiya-san stopped by, still carrying her manila folder from the hotel.

"Hello, Sayuri, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said. "Did you find anything interesting here?"

'Not exactly, Himeno-chan," Sayuri said, "apart from some evidence that the Tragedy most likely happened in March of two years ago. There is some chocolate here, though."

"So nothing too important," Himemiya-san said. "Thank you for sharing; I'll keep looking."

"Thank you,' I said.

Himemiya-san waved goodbye as she left. Once she was out of earshot, Sayuri-san let off a long and wistful sigh.

"I'm curious about something," I said. "Do you like Himemiya-san?"

"I do," Sayuri-san said. "I remember feeling a bit disappointed when she wasn't interested in being friends right away, a sensation I felt more keenly than when other people I knew rebuffed my offers of friendship. Now that we are friends, I feel happy, but not fully satisfied, because I know I want more than that out of her."

As a heterosexual girl, I'd always grown up with the implicit belief that most of my friends would be of the same gender, and I wouldn't have many platonic connections with those of the opposite gender. Homosexuals and bisexuals' social circles were probably more complicated, as you might end up falling in love with any of your friends of the same gender… assuming they felt the same way, that is.

"Then why not confess to her?" I said.

Sayuri-san firmly shook her head. I must have seemed fairly surprised, since she paused for a moment, evidently noticing that a simple "no" answer wasn't enough.

"Before I answer that, I'd like to ask you something," Sayuri-san said. "What do you suppose happens after you confess to the person you like?"

I thought over my answer carefully for a moment. Since I'd never had any boys I was interested in, I had to rely on second-hand accounts for that answer.

"If that person feels the same way, I guess they'll say yes," I said, "but if they say no, you forget about them and get on with your life, right?"

Sayuri-san's expression seemed to indicate that this wasn't the answer she was hoping for.

"The answer's a lot simpler," Sayuri-san said. "You go down a one-way road that redefines your relationship, and can have consequences if you do it too early or with the wrong person. If the person you confess to takes it badly, or if you get into a relationship and things don't work out, the two of you will almost certainly lose your friendship in the process."

I had to admit that I'd never thought about it that way. My parents had been friends for some time before they started going out, and from my perspective, their falling in love seemed like a foregone conclusion. I hadn't had any male friends, so I'd never been in a situation in which confessing my
"This killing game only complicates matters even further," Sayuri-san said. "Himeno-chan nearly died twice on the last island, whether being executed for killing Tatsuki-chan, or for being executed for failing to convict Akira-chan."

"That's right," I said, "and we would have shared her fate in the latter case."

"Exactly," Sayuri-san said. "Next time, any one of us might end up as the blackened. I like a good slow burn romance, since healthy romantic relationships are built up gradually, but how can we do that when any or all of us might be dead by tomorrow?"

One would initially assume that Sayuri-san was referring to how any of us could snap and commit murder, which was certainly true, but that wasn't the only possibility. In Monokuma's eyes, the blackened was the person responsible for the victim's death, not necessarily a murderer, so any of us could potentially be inadvertently responsible for killing someone.

"And besides, there's Himeno-chan herself," Sayuri-san said. "To put it bluntly, I'm not so sure she's into girls."

"Why do you say that?" I said.

"Because if she were bisexual or a lesbian, she might have fallen for Kanae-chan," Sayuri-san said, "her oldest friend, who's been through the most with her."

"That's assuming Tsukimura-san was the same in that regard," I said, "or that their mistress-servant relationship didn't preclude a romantic relationship. Maybe one of the two had feelings for each other, but put them aside because they knew it would never work."

While I thought this was somewhat obvious, Sayuri-san paused for a moment, as though she hadn't really thought of that before.

"Fair enough," Sayuri-san said, "but my point is that I have every reason to hesitate before going down that road with Himeno-chan. I'm not so emotionally invested in her that I'd be heartbroken if she rejected me, but I am invested in her enough that I don't want to fail and lose the hard-earned friendship we have."

"I wouldn't, either," I said. "Then again, I'm sure that at the very least, you can be honest with Himemiya-san."

While Sayuri-san seemed to cheer up a little, I realized that I knew all too well how she felt. There were times when I'd wanted to befriend some of my classmates, only to find that they had no interest in spending time with me. That sense of rejection was painful, as was the realization that the people I cared about didn't necessarily feel the same way about me, which was part of the reason why it had taken me so long to open up to Akira-san. Perhaps Sayuri-san's had nothing to worry about, but that didn't mean she had no reason to be afraid.

I discovered a store near the chocolate shop- Kuroshiro Books. Most of the books inside were about choosing careers or applying for jobs, but I could see a few others, such as Sayuri-san's manga volumes.

As I was browsing, Tatsuki-san approached me. She'd taken off her blazer and neck ribbon, unbuttoned the top button of her uniform and wore an apron over her uniform's shirt and skirt, with love put me at risk of losing a friendship (whether that of the boy in question, or a jealous female friend who also loved the boy).
a name tag that had "Tachibana" written on it in permanent marker.

"Welcome to the Kuroshiro Books, miss," Tatsuki-san said. "I'm Tachibana; please let me know if you need any help finding something today."

I paused for a moment, a bit surprised, but decided to play along.

"Thank you, Tachibana-san," I said. "I'm Nagato, and I'm looking for the newest volume of Sayuri Sasaki's Breakneck Canyon."

"You're in luck, Nagato-sama," Tatsuki-san said. "It's right here."

I picked out the book and walked over to the register up front with Tatsuki-san. She rang me up, with the total coming to 0 yen, with 0 yen in change.

"Thank you very much," Tatsuki-san said, "please come again."

"Thank you," I said. "You did a good job, Tachibana-san."

"I'm glad you think so," Tatsuki-san said. "That took a little less than five minutes, so multiply that by 100 for an eight-hour day, multiply that by five for a week, multiply that by fifty for a year, and multiply that by forty, and that's an entire career as a cashier. All I need to do is do this... a million times or so and I've got a career."

Tatsuki-san had a smile on her face as she announced the result of her calculations, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"You don't seem happy about that," I said.

"I've been reminded of my great-uncle," Tatsuki-san said, "who worked in a job like this all his life, and realized on the day that he retired that his life passed him by. Because of that, his niece- my mom- decided to do what she loved."

"And what about you?" I said.

"I... still don't know," Tatsuki-san said. "I may not have the opportunity to play music again, even if we do get out of here, but can I really do a mundane but important job, while dreaming about my glory days as Dragon Girl?"

I sighed and shook my head.

"I honestly don't know," I said, "since a job like this may be all I can aspire to. But if I had a talent and a chance to use it to help others and earn a living, I wouldn't waste it. You shouldn't, either."

"I won't, then," Tatsuki-san said. "I don't know what the best use of my talent is, but I won't just let my guitar skills atrophy."

As Tatsuki-san slipped off her apron and retrieved her blazer and neck ribbon, I wondered if it seemed a bit presumptuous of me to tell others what to do with their talents when I didn't have one myself. Tatsuki-san, however, didn't seem to think so, and if my advice could help her overcome her grief, guilt and despair, then maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to talk about subjects beyond my ken.

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Around 7:50 PM, I headed to the place where the ship had docked, and saw that most of the class was there, nervously waiting for Monokuma to let us back on the ship. A couple minutes later,
everyone else arrived, and we discussed the island. Most of the significant findings were ones I'd heard before, so I could have taken a nap if I'd so chosen... and if there was anything softer than concrete for me to lay on in the vicinity.

"Like Nagato-san suggested, I'd like to restrict access to the chemicals except in the event of an emergency," Higurashi-san said. "If you need chemicals, please tell either of us what chemicals you need and how you plan to use them."

"Fair enough," Kirishima-san said. "I hardly see any possible scenarios in which we would need them, though."

I thought back about all the chemicals, most of which had many harmful uses and few helpful ones. Good medicine generally had at least some side effects, but poison had no benefits for the imbiber, and most of the chemicals I'd seen fell into the latter category.

"On another subject," Himemiya-san said, "what do you think of the materials in the job fair?"

"They would seem to support the theory that something happened to the rest of the world," Higurashi-san said, "although they certainly don't seem like official job postings. Apparently, even Hope's Peak Academy wasn't spared the devastation."

"It seems so," Higurashi-san said. "If even half of this is true, then this ship may be the safest place in the world for us."

We fell into an uneasy silence. While we were relatively safe here as long as no one tried to kill each other, we still didn't know what the ultimate destination of our cruise was, nor where the graduates of this killing school trip would end up. For all we knew, Monokuma would deliver us into the heart of all the unrest and leave us to fend for ourselves once our part in this had ended... assuming he didn't have something even worse in mind. Knowing him, the latter was almost certainly true.

As 8 PM struck, we waited with bated breath for a few moments, worrying that this island might be a repeat of the last one. That fear was dispelled when the gangplank extended, at which point we all let off a collective sigh of relief. Since we had thoroughly explored the island today, and had nothing better to do, we quickly walked up the gangplank, which retracted once the last of us was aboard the Ursa Major. We knew we'd be back on the island tomorrow, but for today, we were thankful that we could once again return to the Ursa Major, our home away from home.

Higurashi-san and I met up with Mom to discuss what we'd found, and, more importantly, to let us know that we'd returned. She greeted us with a "Thank God you're back"; some might have taken the Lord's name in vain by saying that, but for Mom, it was a honest prayer of gratitude.

We sat down and gave Mom a report on the island.

"So in other words, the island is safe... relatively speaking," Mom said. "That's reassuring."

"I feel the same way, Mom," I said, "but I'm sure Monokuma will start targeting our weaknesses fairly soon. His motives are meant to give us reasons to kill, and he most likely tailors them in order to tempt different kinds of people."

Now that I thought about it, maybe the third island's motive was meant to play on Tatsuki-san's crushing despair and guilt, and give her a reason to be sacrificed for the good of the class. That being said, the itinerary seemed to have been determined in advance, and I doubt Monokuma could have predicted the twins switching places.
"You may be right," Mom said, "but I'm personally surprised that Monokuma is that confident in his knowledge of all the students' lives and personalities. Of course, that may be just me speaking, since I don't see many of you very often."

"How many people besides come down to see you, Sensei?" Higurashi-san said.

"Let's see..." Mom said. "Apart from you and Chiyuri, Azuki-san used to come down somewhat regularly whenever she had questions. Some of the students who'd lost people close to them- Himemiya-san, Kurogane-san, Tatsuki-san and Sasaki-san- have come down to speak to me, and I've done my best to offer them comfort and counseling. Apart from that, few people make the effort to go see me."

That wasn't all that surprising. Even in the best of times, many students were indifferent to teachers, or despised them as harsh authority figures who only existed to eat up students' free time. If Mom turned out to be the traitor, I'd be devastated, but not many of the others would be. They'd almost certainly hate the traitor for putting us through all this misery, but without as much of a connection to their teacher as to their classmates, they might not feel as much of a sense of betrayal as I would.

"I thought so," Higurashi-san said. "As a teacher, how well do you say you know your students?"

"Somewhat well," Mom said. "I do have to keep a certain professional distance from my students, but it's important for me to have a general understanding of your personalities, strengths and weaknesses, and everything else I need to know to teach you well. Since I only have sixteen students per year, unlike teachers who might have dozens or even hundreds of students, it's easier for me to get to know everyone."

"That's right," I said. "Of course, it doesn't take someone who's intimately familiar with us to realize that some of us might want to kill the one who betrayed them, others might commit murder to save the people closest to them, or that after sacrificing someone for the sake of our survival twice, we might do so again if we're starving to death."

"No, it doesn't, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Monokuma is fairly confident that teenagers placed in desperate situations will give in to their basest impulses. Either he has a very cynical view of human natural- albeit not unjustifiably so- or he's seen this happen before."

That was a truly disturbing thought, and, unfortunately, one that concluded our discussion. There was a time when I couldn't imagine something like this happening- the idea of one of my students non-fatally stabbing another was bad enough, but there had been two murders, one attempted murder, one accidental death and three executions in the past three weeks. If the world was truly as chaotic and violent as we'd heard, then it was all too easy to imagine something like this happening elsewhere.

After my meeting with Mom finished, I saw Sayuri-san waiting outside the elevator.

"Oh, hello, Sayuri-san," I said. "Did you come here to see Mom?"

"Not this time, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said, "although your mother has been quite helpful to me ever since Kanae-chan, Miharu-chan and Akira-chan died."

So it was as Mom said. I wasn't privy to what Mom talked about with my grieving classmates- nor should I be, since such discussions were best kept private- but I was glad that those conversations were taking place.
"This time, I'm here to see you," Sayuri-san said. "Do you have a minute?"

"I do," I said.

"I'll take my leave, then," Higurashi-san said. "Good night, ladies."

"Thank you, Nobuhiro-kun," Sayuri-san said, "and good night."

As Higurashi-san retired to his cabin, Sayuri-san and I headed up to the deck together.

"I'd like to know something," Sayuri-san said. "Did I ever tell you I was bisexual?"

"You did now," I said. "I had my suspicions you were attracted to the same sex- or both sexes- but didn't know for certain until earlier today."

"Ah," Sayuri-san said. "Well, I guess I never considered it all that big of a deal. My parents didn't, anyway."

In my case, I'd often admired attractive boys from afar, despite never had a proper conversation with any boy my own age until I'd come here. Since my Catholic schoolteachers had frequently driven home that homosexuality was a sin, I couldn't help but consider myself lucky that I was heterosexual, and thus wouldn't have to deal with coming to terms with my sexuality on top of being an illegitimate child. Of course, I didn't necessarily share their beliefs, either.

"Well, neither do I," I said. "I've heard some people say that the Bible disapproves of homosexuality, but I can't think of any reason why falling in love with someone of the same gender is wrong, apart from 'because some people long ago said so.'"

Sayuri-san giggled, but then turned more serious.

"Anyway, I came out of the closet to my parents in middle school," Sayuri-san said, "after speaking with my aunt- my dad's little sister and my mom's best friend- first to prepare for the conversation. Luckily for me, my parents were fine with it- one of the few things they agree on. They hoped I'd end up with a boy rather than a girl, since it would be 'easier' for us that way, but said they didn't have any right to tell me what to do after the mistakes they'd made."

I suspected that Mom would probably say the same if I introduced a boyfriend to her; since I was sure I was heterosexual, I'd never know her opinion on her daughter entering into a lesbian relationship. She'd probably be wary of us taking things too quickly, but as long as my boyfriend was a respectable person who loved me and had earned my love, she'd grant us her blessing.

"Well, I'm glad things turned out well," I said.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Sayuri-san said. "I mentioned this to Akira-chan a while ago, before we reached the second island, but I didn't reveal all these details. I'm sure I could have trusted her with it, but I never got the chance to bring it up. It's a good thing I have you to tell about it, though."

I smiled and nodded. I didn't have much confidence in my ability to do the things Akira-san once had, but one thing even I could do was serve as a patient and understanding listener.

I went to bed not long afterward, since it had been a long day, and the only person worth sitting up and talking with was no longer around. As such, after I changed out of my uniform, showered and changed into my nightgown, I said my prayers and climbed into bed.
I wanted to be relieved that Monokuma didn't seem to be taking extreme measures to get us to kill each other this time, but knew that a murder would probably happen anyway. By now, with three class trials having occurred, Monokuma was sure that his motives were working, as was the incentive to graduate and leave this killing school trip behind.

Maybe the traitor was no longer alive right now; it was certainly possible, even if none of the dead seemed all that suspicious, least of all Akira-san. Anyone insane enough to let us become trapped in this game would likely be willing to die, knowing that the killing game would continue even after their death.

In the end, I fell asleep once I was tired enough, hoping that I wouldn't have to find out which member of the class had betrayed us or why.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*I've got an awesome secret that I want to tell you...*

*...but I'm not gonna do it.*

*They say wanting's better than having, and the anticipation is the best part, right?*

*So I'll keep you on that best part forever, and leave you wondering what the awesome secret is.*

*Catch you later!*

*PS: That's the secret.*

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**Author's Notes**

Thank you for the reviews.

I'd like to congratulate Phillip Clark for guessing the passcode, but would also like to point out that it's for the bridge of the ship, not Yukari's cell. I'd also like to congratulate DarkX The Dragon Knight for being the first to solve the cryptogram.

Without spoiling too much, this is the island for which I had the fewest buildings planned in advance.

If you're trying to figure out who the traitor is based on how the others might react, here's a hint- an in-universe popularity survey, in which students vote for others on a scale of 1 to 5 (if they voted for their favorite person, the results would be inconclusive, since no one would get more than two votes, and some would end up abstaining). The ratings are as follows- 1 is "Can't stand," 2 is "Don't like," 3 is anywhere from "Indifferent" to "Gets along with," 4 is "Likes," and 5 is "Best friend/loves." Here's some of the results, with all members of the class (living and dead) voting:

*Sasaki is the most popular member of the class. She generally has favorable ratings all around, and a couple of 5s (Mihama, Tsukimura). For the most part, people are at worst, indifferent to her.*

*Tsukimura is also relatively popular, with 5 ratings from Himemiya and Sasaki. The only person who dislikes her is Asakura.*

*While Azuki has a few 5s from people like Himemiya, Sasaki, Nagato and (much to her dismay) Kojima, she also gets a 1 from Asakura, and has 3s from a few of the people who died early on.*
She's relatively popular, but several people outrank her.

*Likewise, Chiyuri gets a 5 from her mother, but also a 1 from Asakura.

*While Yukari has a 5 from her daughter and Higurashi and a few 4s from some of the students who took the time to visit her, most of the others are indifferent to her, meaning that she ranks behind Sasaki and Tsukimura.

*Kurogane has slightly above average ratings overall, since he gets along with most people, but doesn't have any close friends, not even Kojima.

*Obviously, Asakura is the least popular member of the class, with 1s from several people- Azuki, Chiyuri, Karita and a few others, and a few 2 ratings, at best. Karita doesn't do much better on this regard, although he does get 2s from Azuki and Chiyuri.

And now the previous fic.

*Miura is the most popular member of the class, with most people having at least an above average view of her, and a couple 5s(Edogawa, Iwasawa, Yuuki). The only person who dislikes her is Kurogane, who would have softened his stance given time.

*Likewise, Edogawa is quite popular, especially with Miura and Yuuki. Only Kurogane and Mitamura dislike her.

*Hoshino is the least popular member of the class(even before the third class trial), with Shiro Kurogane coming in a close second (in his case, because fewer people had many chances to interact with him).

*The mastermind ordinarily was of average popularity, but dropped to being universally hated after being identified.
Chapter IV, Part 3

Day 23

I woke up this morning feeling uneasy. If the first and second islands were indicative of a trend, Monokuma would soon decide that we'd had long enough to explore the island, and would give us a motive before long. In fact, I suspected that the only reason he didn't give us back-to-back motives, with each one being issued after the preceding trial, was that he wanted to see whether we'd kill each other without any further incentives. So far, we'd proven him wrong, but that wasn't much of a victory.

The weather was cloudy all day, but didn't show any signs of rain until late at night, after we were back on the ship. I was glad for that, since the last thing we wanted was someone being soaked and ending up getting sick.

I entered the dining hall for breakfast relatively early, sat down and ate. As I did, people ended up trickling in to the dining hall, but Monokuma didn't make an appearance.

I wondered why Monokuma hadn't shown himself when everyone was around to hear him, but I realized we were missing someone- Kumakura-san. By the time I finished eating, it was apparent that he hadn't just overslept, and I feared the worst.

"This is unusual; we're one person short," Higurashi-san said. "Has anyone here seen Kumakura-kun this morning?"

Kirishima-san and Kurogane-san shook their heads, Karita-san shrugged, and Asakura just glared at him. Normally, Yamazaki-san would be the best person to ask, as Kumakura-san's roommate, but he'd been the first to be executed.

As for myself and the other three girls, none of us answered, since we weren't exactly close with Kumakura-san. Tatsuki-san, however, seemed a little odd; she didn't have much of an appetite, and she was sweating even though she'd left her blazer in her cabin and unbuttoned her collar.

"So I guess that's a no, then," Higurashi-san said. "Nagato-san, let's head to Cabin M1 and try to find him. Everyone else, please stay in the dining hall until we return; we should be back in a few minutes."

As the others finished breakfast or sat waiting uneasily, the two of us headed to the hallway with the boys' cabins.

We walked to the end of the hallway with the boys' cabins. Once we were outside Cabin M1, we heard a loud crash, as if someone had fallen down or knocked something over.

"Are you in there, Kumakura-kun?" Higurashi-san said. "It's me, Higurashi."

"Higurashi-kun?" Kumakura-san said.

"Yes, it's me," Higurashi-san said. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not," Kumakura-san said. "I... I can't see."
As we were wondering whether Kumakura-san was telling a joke, he opened the door and, pulling it inwards, stumbled out into the hall, putting a hand against the wall to steady himself.

"Oh no..." I said. "So you really have gone blind."

"You're here too, Nagato-san?" Kumakura-san said.

"Yes, I am," I said. "Q.E.D., I guess."

Suddenly, Monokuma appeared off to our side.

"So this is where you've been, Kumakura-san," Monokuma said. "It's a good thing Nagato-san and Higurashi-san thought to look for you when they did, or else you might've gotten in trouble for not leaving the Ursa Major in time."

"Yes, I'm glad for that," Kumakura-san said. "Thank you, both of you."

Both Higurashi-san and I said "You're welcome," but we were painfully aware that our problems were only just beginning. If Kumakura-san's blindness ended up lasting for a while, and people became aware of it, then we'd need to be less worried about getting him off the ship every morning (and onto it every evening), and more worried about people trying to kill him.

"Anyway, please bring Kumakura-san to the dining hall," Monokuma said. "There's a message I'd like to give you all."

Monokuma then headed to the dining hall. After he did, I noticed a few beads of sweat trickle down Kumakura-san's forehead, which was warm to the touch when I placed the palm of my hand against it.

"You're burning up," I said.

"Yeah..." Kumakura-san said. "I'm... not all that hungry, but I really need a drink of water. Let's get to the dining hall and find out what Monokuma wants to tell us."

Higurashi-san and I lent Kumakura-san our shoulders and helped usher him through the halls of the ship to where everyone else- as well as Monokuma- was waiting.

Higurashi-san and I helped Kumakura-san make his way to the dining hall, where I began spoonfeeding him a cold breakfast. Despite apologizing to me for inconveniencing me, he didn't seem to mind.

Before long, Monokuma showed up again.

"I'm glad you're all here," Monokuma said, "because it's time for the new motive- the Despair Diseases. As of right now, two students are sick, and that number will increase over the next several days, until a murder occurs, at which point you all go back to normal."

"Two?" I said. "Who else is sick?"

"Why, Taiga-san," Monokuma said. "Higurashi-san has the 'senses disease,' which means that every day, he loses access to one of his five senses- sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell- a different sense each day. Taiga-san, however, has the 'death disease.' If a murder doesn't happen by 7 AM three days from now, she'll die, and someone else's disease will mutate into the death disease."
Taiga-san paled, and I noticed her sweating, too. Akira-san's accidental killing of Mihama-san had saved Tatsuki-san from sacrificing herself, and taking responsibility for the murder had saved Tatsuki-san from dying with the other spotless, but it was only a temporary reprieve, since there was a good chance Tatsuki-san would be the next to die.

"Anyway, I'd like to announce a revision to the rules," Monokuma said. "Anyone who's sick can stay at the hospital while we're on the island, but the healthy students have to go back to the Ursa Major for the night."

"How are we to determine who is who?" Kirishima-san said. "The only commonality between Kumakura-kun and Tachibana-kun is that both seem to be feverish."

"You nailed it right on the head, Kirishima-san," Monokuma said. "Of course, just so we're clear, I'll announce the names of the sick people who get to stay in the hospital overnight. One thing that doesn't change, though, is that all of you have to get off the ship by 9 AM or else you'll get punished. Later!"

Monokuma departed.

"Well, this is an unfortunate development," Higurashi-san said, "but we know what we must do. We must ensure that Tachibana-san and Kumakura-kun get medical attention."

By now, it was clear that Monokuma was starting to push us to murder each other, but it wasn't entirely clear how he planned on doing so. Was he planning to warp our personalities until we willingly killed each other, or encourage us to go after our sick and vulnerable classmates? The only thing that I knew for certain was that there would probably be another murder today or tomorrow.

By the time breakfast and Monokuma's discussion of the motive had concluded, it was already past 8 AM. Higurashi-san and I made an executive decision to go straight to the island without stopping to see Mom, and no one appeared to object.

Once we were on the island, we set up Kumakura-san and Tatsuki-san in their rooms. Kumakura-san's was at the end of the hall, near a storage closet and back exit, while Tatsuki-san's was near the entrance of the patient wing. Higurashi-san and I split the patients according to gender; he got Kumakura-san, while I helped Tatsuki-san.

I helped Tatsuki-san undress and change into a pink hospital gown, before putting her to bed. I took as many precautions as possible, wearing a surgical mask and gloves while dealing with her, and making a mental note to dispose of them once I was done before washing my hands for good measure.

"It looks like you're all settled in," I said. "Is there anything else you need?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure how feasible it is," Tatsuki-san said. "There's no call button."

I quickly searched around the bed and anywhere within arm's reach of a patient, and found nothing.

"You're right," I said. "This could pose a problem if your condition worsens."

"W-Well, I'm all right for now," Tatsuki-san said, "just a bit feverish. When my time comes... I guess there's nothing anyone can do about it, is there?"

I almost shook my head, but noticed Tatsuki-san trembling.
"We'll do what we can to ensure that doesn't happen," I said, "short of killing someone, of course."

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Tatsuki-san said. "The last thing I want is for someone else to die because of me."

While I appreciated the sentiment, I knew that it wasn't exactly practical given the nature of the killing game. All of us were alive because we'd sacrificed the three blackened, as well as because of Mihama-san's accidental death. There was only one question- would Tatsuki-san succumb to her disease as a result of no one committing murder, or would someone's death enable her to survive?

Inside the lab, I met up with Kirishima-san, who was wearing a surgical mask. He'd briefly stopped by Tatsuki-san and Kumakura-san's rooms to ask them some questions, jotting the answers down in his notebook, before heading to the lab to review what he'd learned.

"Hello, Kirishima-san," I said. "How are you faring investigating the diseases?"

"Not well, I am afraid," Kirishima-san said. "I am trying to determine whether Kumakura-kun or Tachibana-kun was our 'patient zero,' but I cannot tell how they contracted the disease, or which one infected the other. Apart from when we met up in the morning, and again in the evening, the two never saw each other yesterday."

"So it's possible that one contracted the disease from the other in the meetup," I said, "in which case all of us are probably infected."

"That is a possibility," Kirishima-san said, "but we still do not know how the disease is spread, so it would be premature to conclude that it is airborne. Nevertheless, we should minimize our contact with the infected, and take appropriate precautions to reduce the chance of anyone else falling ill."

"I agree," I said, "but what do you have in mind for a permanent solution?"

Kirishima-san frowned.

"Nothing at the moment," Kirishima-san said, "since a new and unprecedented disease cannot easily be studied. We may not have answers for, at minimum, several days. It will certainly be too late for Tachibana-kun, and possibly too late for whoever is infected after her."

"You're rather detached about that," I said. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you might succumb to the disease before you find any answers?"

"Perhaps," Kirishima-san said, "but such is life when it comes to science that relates to saving people's lives. For example, as science searches for a cure for deadly disease, many will succumb to those diseases while hoping for a breakthrough that has not been attained yet. The same can be said of the killing game, and how six of us have died while we tried in vain to find a way to escape."

I had to agree. While I'd never thought of the increasing death toll as a time limit of sorts, I had been frustrated by our inability to stop the killings from happening. Perhaps Kirishima-san felt the same frustration, and strove to do something about it, too, even if he didn't hold out much hope of succeeding.

While Kirishima-san continued to work in the lab, and Tatsuki-san and Kumakura-san rested in their hospital rooms, the rest of us met up outside the hospital, and reported on the situation. Once we were finished, Higurashi-san and I decided to share what we'd talked about while waiting for
"I'll admit that there is much we don't know about the Despair Diseases," Higurashi-san said, "particularly how the disease spreads and who else may be infected by now. However, I would like to establish a few rules regarding the patients. As of right now, myself, Nagato-san and Kirishima-kun will monitor the patients and keep you updated on their status. As for the rest of you, I will ask you not to go see them while they are resting in the hospital, so as to reduce the risk of anyone else being infected."

Since neither Kumakura-san nor Tatsuki-san had any particularly close friends among the survivors, no one seemed to object. Karita-san, however, raised his hand.

"Or to reduce the risk of someone killing them, right?" Karita-san said.

"You're quite right, Karita-kun," Higurashi-san said. "Of course, that should go without saying, while the risk of infection is something that we need to be mindful of."

"So Tachibana's going to die three days from now," Asakura said, "and if no one else gets infected, Kumakura will get the death disease and die three days after that. What happens next?"

While it was obvious that Asakura was hoping that he'd be able to leave the island without any risk of dying, both Higurashi-san and I were at a loss for words for a moment. It was almost impossible to determine what would happen tomorrow in the killing game- yesterday, we hadn't anticipated anything like this happening- so doing the same for three days from now would require powers of clairvoyance.

"It's hard to say." I said, "since it is likely that at least one more person may be infected by then. Apart from what Monokuma told us, I don't know."

"Hmph, of course you don't," Asakura said. "I wish those two would hurry up and die before they get the rest of us sick."

"Calm down, Asakura-kun," Higurashi-san said. "While this is yet another difficult time for all of us, I promise you- I'm doing what I can to ensure that as many of us get through it as possible."

The others shot Asakura dirty looks, but I was fully aware that most of us, at least subconsciously, would be willing to accept someone dying as long as it was in the place of ourselves, or someone we cared about. Asakura was simply more blunt about it than most people... of course, he didn't have anyone he cared about besides himself.

As for me, while I had to admit that I wouldn't be terribly bothered if Asakura died, I had no desire for that to happen. All I wanted was for us to get through the killing game together, and then never see or hear from him again.

With nothing better to do, I stopped by the bookstore, and decided to investigate the books there to see if I could find any clues. While some of the books had been published after we'd gotten to Talent High School, there wasn't any information on the state of the world. The magazines section had a fairly good selection, from a restaurant magazine with an article on the Hanamura Diner, to an issue of a travel magazine with a special on Novoselic, but there weren't any current events.

On the spur of a moment, I hung my blazer in the employee area, grabbed a spare apron and pretended to be an employee. I'd done something similar when I was a small child in preschool, but none of the other children seemed interested in my store. Back then, I didn't understand why, and simply assumed I was doing my job incorrectly.
I imagined myself doing this sort of job for a living. In my mind, I'd probably start out after high school, while some of my schoolmates- from St. Mary's or Talent High School- were going on to college. By the time they got their undergraduate degrees, I'd probably be experienced enough to help show the new hires the ropes. If all went well, I'd probably meet a good man, get married by my mid-to-late twenties, have children a few years later and quit my job to raise them. Mom had always planned on continuing as a teacher after I was born, but if I were just a clerk, I wouldn't care enough about my job to want to continue, unless money was tight.

I couldn't help but chuckle upon thinking about that. As an person without any exceptional, let alone Ultimate-level, talents, I'd always assumed that I'd take work for whatever company would have me, at whatever position I could get, and never thought of it as "settling" for anything. I wasn't alone in this case, as many of my classmates knew they couldn't necessarily practice their talents for a living, even in the best of times. Of course, not all of them could necessarily give up on their dreams, either, so I thought it was too soon to conclude that I'd never be a teacher.

For now, I hung up my apron and put on my blazer once again. Perhaps working in a store like this would be preferable to being trapped in this killing school trip, but it wasn't the future I envisioned for myself. We couldn't always get what we wanted, but perhaps even I could pursue my dreams.

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At 8 PM, we heard an announcement from Monokuma calling all students besides Kumakura-san and Tatsuki-san- or Taiga-san, as the announcement called her- back to the ship. The eight healthy students met up where the ship was docked.

"Are Kotaro-kun and Tatsuki-chan really going to be all right?" Sayuri-san said.

"Their conditions appear to be stable," Kirishima-san said, "so I doubt they will perish in their sleep. As for them murdering each other, I doubt that either will try anything when they know that there are only the two of them on the island."

Kirishima-san was as logical as always, but I could understand Sayuri-san's worries.

"At this point, it's out of our hands," I said. "Let's just get some rest."

The healthy students then boarded the Ursa Major, but I sensed a feeling of collective unease. Only two of us were sick right now, but the Despair Diseases, like the other motives, were everyone's problem. If we tried to pretend otherwise, it would only be a matter of time before we'd receive a harsh wake-up call reminding us of that truth.

---

Higurashi-san and I went to visit Mom, telling her about everything that happened today.

"I'm sorry we didn't see you earlier, Mom," I said, "but this morning was rather hectic."

"I understand, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Two classmates falling ill is enough of a problem for a normal school trip, let alone one like this. It sounds as though you made the right call."

While Mom was an experienced chaperone for school trips, she couldn't do everything herself- nor did she have to. If a student got sick enough that they couldn't just sleep it off, she could call the nearest hospital, which would have actual doctors and nurses on duty, who had experience beyond caring for a sick child. As such, I imagined that she'd probably have her hands full even if Monokuma let her out of her cell.

"I'm glad you think so, Nagato-sensei," Higurashi-san said, "but what should we do from here on out?"
"Monitor the condition of Tatsuki-san and Kumakura-san, as well as anyone else who might fall ill, as best as you can," Mom said. "There may not be anything you can do for Tatsuki-san, but there is a possibility that one of the ill students may end up committing murder... or being killed by an opportunistic classmate."

While Mom's advice was fairly good, she'd just managed the improbable feat of making this already bleak situation seem even more dismal.

"So in other words, one of a few things happens," I said. "Either the Despair Diseases end up causing a murder for some reason... or Tatsuki-san will die three days from now."

"Unfortunately, that seems to sum up the situation," Mom said. "I'm sorry I can't offer you a better solution or a more hopeful outlook."

"That makes two of us, ma'am," Higurashi-san said. "That said, I believe that even if Monokuma has made it so that someone will have to die, this does not mean that we have to kill each other. In the end, we are still responsible for our own actions, and can decide whether to act in our own self-interest or for the good of others."

I concurred with Higurashi-san, ending the discussion on as positive a note as we could hope for. Perhaps one day, people would judge us for the decisions we'd made here. I couldn't say for certain what they'd think or whether they'd punish us for what we'd done, but I hoped that if that day ever came, we could honestly say to them, "We did our best."

Higurashi-san and then boarded the elevator together. Once the doors had shut, Higurashi-san turned to me.

"There's something I'd like to ask you, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "Do you think that having someone sacrifice a classmate, like we'd considered doing on the previous island, would be a solution to our problems?"

"No," I said. "To begin with, unlike last time, we don't face the collective danger of starvation—merely that of random people becoming ill and dying, so not everyone would support it, much less volunteer to be the murderer."

While Higurashi-san nodded to concur, I realized that my rebuttal against asking a classmate to murder another, then get executed, wasn't half as forceful as I thought it would be. Maybe I was getting desensitized to all the death.

"I thought so," Higurashi-san said. "Personally, I feel the same way. Even those who are callous enough to ask others to sacrifice themselves for the group don't feel threatened by the motive. Besides, Tatsuki-san, who's the most willing to die, not only is the only one who's terminally ill at this point, but hasn't yet proposed anything like that."

"I know," I said. "If Tatsuki-san makes it through this killing game, I hope that she can eventually forgive herself. I'd rather see her live for the sake of those who died because of her, than throw her life away as a gesture of atonement."

Higurashi-san nodded. He'd also voted for Tatsuki-san when the time had come to select the blackened in the second trial, but that didn't mean he wanted her to die (or Taiga-san, of course).

"That aside," I said, "I notice you actually asked about the possibility of sacrificing someone, even if you weren't willing to go through with it."
"It's important to consider all of one's options," Higurashi-san said, "even the ones that are unpleasant enough that you wouldn't willingly choose them. We didn't want to execute our blackened, but we did so anyway three times now- including one person who'd killed by accident and another who hadn't killed at all. This isn't a civilized solution, but the killing game isn't a very civilized problem, either."

"No, it isn't," I said. "Just promise me one thing- please never forget that our ultimate goal is to keep as many of us alive as possible."

"I promise," Higurashi-san said. "It's too late to claim that we've succeeded, but it's too soon to give up."

As Higurashi-san and I said good night to each other, I wondered what Akira-san would say if she were here. Would she have found our exchange overly naïve, or would she have agreed that the situation was desperate enough to consider extreme measures? In the end, she wasn't here anymore, so we couldn't answer that question; all we could do was find our own solutions.

By the time I returned to my cabin, it was bedtime, so after making the necessary preparations-taking a shower, changing into my nightgown and saying my prayers- I got into bed, but wasn't able to sleep well at all.

I thought about Monokuma's career theme, and, remembering that he had tried to tell us that our cherished talents were useless in the new world, knew he was trying to show us that. A disease was spreading, and none of us had the training necessary to cure it. Kirishima-san was a brilliant scientist, but not only was his specialization in a different field, but he had made little progress at this point. This was to be expected, but he had far too little time to understand the disease, much less cure it.

The idea that someone was going to die on the island, whether of illness or by a classmate's hand, was terrifying, but undeniable. Because of this, Higurashi-san realized we had to consider sacrificing someone... but at the same time, that prospect disgusted him too much to actually go through with it. I, of course, felt the same way, as did anyone who was human enough to still be horrified by the cruelty of the killing game.

Faced with a situation like this, in which we were going to die one by one, it only seemed natural to prioritize one's own life, even if it wasn't right. As such, Higurashi-san's refraining from killing someone to graduate was a testament to how principled and selfless he was, but I knew all too well that not all of our classmates were so noble. Someone was going to crack sooner or later, and the only question was who.

---

**Monokuma Theater**

*Happy Valentine's Day!*

*Oh, wait, it's a bit late for that, I guess.*

*Think of it as an April Fool's Day joke instead.*

*What's that? It's too early?*

*Oh well, it's pretty hard to get the timing down for these special holiday events, anyway.*
I woke up feeling drowsy and hungry for breakfast but otherwise healthy, proof that I’d dodged the Despair Disease bullet for the moment. Of course, I knew any celebration would be premature, since it was possible that my disease was incubating inside my body.

The weather showed rain lasting until the end of breakfast, but sunny weather for the rest of the day.

For now, I decided to head out and hope that no one else had contracted the disease thus far... or failing that, find out who had.

On my way to breakfast, I saw Sayuri-san in the hallway.

"Good morning, Sayuri-san," I said.

"Good morning, Himeno-chan," Sayuri-san said.

I was taken aback for a moment.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right, Sayuri-san?" I said. "It's me, Chiyuri."

Sayuri-san giggled softly. I thought it was because it was one of the few times I introduced myself with my given name to anyone besides my mother- when meeting some schoolmates for the first time, I only gave my family name- but I realized something was wrong.

"Good one, Himeno-chan," Sayuri-san said. "Oh, wait, you don't use '-san' on me anymore, do you?"

I placed my hand on her forehead, feeling a few beads of sweat. Her skin was warmer than that of the average living teenager girl, so she clearly had a fever.

"Looks like you're infected, too," I said. "Let's get to breakfast."

Sayuri-san nodded, then followed me to the dining hall.

I walked Sayuri-san to the dining hall and told everyone that she was sick.

"Looks like we've got our second infected person of the day, counting myself," Karita-san said.

"That's right, Nobuhiro-kun," Sayuri-san said. "Are you saying you're sick, too?"

"I'm Karita," Karita-san said, "but yes, I'm infected too. I couldn't lie about it if I wanted to- that's the point."

Suddenly, Monokuma arrived.

"Looks like you've got two new patients!" Monokuma said. "Sasaki-san has the 'recognition disease,' which means she mistakes one person for another- who that person looks like changes every few hours. Karita-san has the 'honesty disease,' meaning he has to tell the truth- or at least what he believes to be true. See you whenever there's a murder or new infected!"

Monokuma left as quickly as he'd arrived. After he did, Asakura let off an unsettling chuckle.
"Karita 'has to' tell the truth, huh?" Asakura said. "Let's put that to the test, shall we?"

"I strongly doubt there's anything good in it for me," Karita-san said, "but it might be fun, so I'll play along."

"All right," Asakura said. "First, repeat after me: Two plus two equals five."

"Two plus two equals... fi...four," Karita-san said.

Karita-san tried to stammer out "Five" a few times. Smirking, Asakura moved on to his next experiment.

"Now for another one," Asakura said. "I, Satoshi Karita, am not a bad person."

"I, Satoshi Karita, am not a bad person," Karita-san said clearly, punctuating his statement with a satisfied smile.

Asakura bit his lip, barely able to contain his irritation.

"Are you disappointed, Asakura-kun?" Karita-san said. "Did you honestly think I'd say I was a bad person?"

"Yeah," Asakura said, "but are you seriously saying you aren't?"

Karita-san nodded. Monokuma wasn't clear if the disease's requirement for the patient to tell the truth applied to non-verbal gestures, but that hardly mattered in this case. At least in Karita-san's mind, this was true.

"Truth can often be a matter of perspective," Karita-san said. "Because I honestly believe I'm not a bad person, I'm able to say that, even when compelled to tell the truth. You should've asked me to say I was a good person, because that would've been a lie."

"So you're not a good person, but you're not a bad person, either," Asakura said.

"Exactly," Karita-san said. "Everyone here is only human- we just want to survive, but we're willing to sacrifice our classmates to do so. Even if we do manage to avoid killing each other for the next few days, this temporary peace will come at the cost of Tatsuki-san's life."

"So what, then?" Higurashi-san said. "Are you perhaps willing to sacrifice yourself for her?"

"Not at all," Karita-san said. "I'm not nearly self-sacrificing enough to die for the group when someone else is willing to volunteer. On the last island, Tatsuki-san was willing to volunteer to lay down her life, so she may do so this time. Besides, if you were so keen on having someone take one for the team, you'd do it yourself, right?"

An uncomfortable silence ensued for a moment, as we pondered the question- why were Tatsuki-san and Himemiya-san the only ones who'd been willing to die on the last island? True, some of us weren't happy with the idea of having to sacrifice two classmates to leave, but others were fine with the sacrifice as long as they weren't the ones giving their lives.

After a moment, Higurashi-san nodded somberly. The only reason he'd directly asked Karita-san such a question must have been because he knew Karita-san would be compelled to give an honest answer; normally, most people would give an answer that was at least half false. Luckily for us, Higurashi-san could be honest without any external factors forcing him to tell the truth.
"I would," Higurashi-san said. "At this point, however, I think it is too soon to resort to such an extreme measure, especially when the alternative is one person dying of an illness, rather than the entire class starving to death. We must consider the possibility that this Despair Disease crisis may end in a murder, but we must not be too quick to accept that as the inevitable outcome."

"Well, good luck with that," Karita-san said, without a hint of sarcasm or irony. "After all, if no one kills each other, I'm a lot safer."

Most of us seemed to agree with Higurashi-san's statement. Even after all the deaths and killing, the prospect of someone committing another murder was as horrific and terrifying as it had always been. Maybe we weren't any better at preventing the murders than before, but we were still human, and that was one thing for which we could be thankful.

Since Mom had approved our plans with regard to the infected, we decided not to waste time stopping by her cell. Instead, we headed straight to the hospital, with Sayuri-san and Karita-san.

After arriving at the hospital, we briefly checked up on Tatsuki-san and Kumakura-san, both of whom were still alive, if not completely well. While we were relieved that a murder hadn't occurred overnight, we decided to wait to speak with them until we'd gotten our

Once Sayuri-san was settled into her hospital room, which was between Tatsuki-san's and Kumakura-san's, I spoke with her about her disease.

"Just wondering," I said, "but who do I appear to you as right now?"

"Tatsuki-chan," Sayuri-san said. "It seems to change fairly quickly."

I checked my watch and saw that it was a little after 9 AM. Since I'd first crossed paths with Sayuri-san a little less than two hours ago, it was hard to tell how frequently her perception of others changed.

"I see," I said. "And what am I wearing?"

"Her blazer style uniform," Sayuri said. "Unlike yours, it's blue, and has a neck ribbon rather than a necktie."

"That's certainly strange," I said. "The last time I checked, Tatsuki-san was wearing her hospital clothes."

"She would be," Sayuri-san said, "but I've gotten so used to seeing her that my brain just fills in the gaps on its own, just like how I saw you wearing an archery outfit when I thought you were Himeno-chan."

It wasn't hard to see where Sayuri-san was coming from I'd been so used to seeing Himemiya-san dressed in archery training clothes that I barely remembered that she wore a button-down shirt and overalls on the last island. Of course, considering that Himemiya-san probably only wore her archery training clothes, there were many outfits I'd never seen her in- her actual school uniform, her casual clothes, her formal or traditional attire(probably a fancy kimono), her gym clothes, her school swimsuit, and who knows how many other outfits.

"True," I said, "but even though I look like Tatsuki-chan right now, do I sound like her, too?"

"Yes, you do," Sayuri-san said, "just like you sounded like Himeno-chan this morning. Again, my brain fills in the gaps."
"Thank you for this information," I said. "Be careful what you say around people who might look like certain people you trust, lest they turn out to be individuals who'd eagerly take advantage of that trust."

"Got it," Sayuri-san said. "That being said, I was fairly sure that some of the people did look like who they said they were. I could clearly recognize Monokuma, after all."

I nodded.

"Now that I think about it, I'm curious about one other thing," I said. "Is it possible that you're seeing Taiga-san rather than Tatsuki-san, meaning that you can hallucinate seeing the dead students?"

"Maybe I am," Sayuri-san said, "and that might be nice. After all, I'd love to see Kanae-chan, Miharu-chan or Akira-chan one more time, even if it isn't real."

As Sayuri-san blinked back a tear, I nodded and did the same. We'd lost too many members of our class already, including some we'd come to consider close friends and trusted allies. The killing game was nothing more than a sick waste of human life, and I couldn't fathom what lesson Monokuma intended for us to bring away from it.

After finishing with Sayuri-san, I stopped by Kumakura-san's hospital room. When I knocked on the door and received no reply, I let myself in, since none of the hospital rooms had locks.

Kumakura-san was looking out the window when I approached, and didn't seem to notice me come in. He turned around by chance, and was surprised to see me there.

"Good morning, Kumakura-san," I said. "How are you doing today?"

"I'm sorry, Nagato-san," Kumakura-san said, his voice unusually loud. "I can't hear you."

Since neither of us knew sign language and Kumakura-san couldn't read lips, I took out my notebook and wrote to him.

So today, you can see, but can't hear? I wrote.

Kumakura-san nodded.

That's certainly strange, I wrote

Kumakura-san nodded more firmly.

For now, I guess we'll have to make do with what we have. I'll give you a pen and a few pieces of notebook paper. If you need something, write on them.

I ripped out a few pieces of paper from my notebook and gave them to Kumakura-san, along with my pen. He then took the pen and wrote Thank you on the top sheet of paper.

Do you want some breakfast? I wrote

Yes, please. You can bring it here and I'll eat it myself; I can see today.

I went to the kitchen and retrieved a breakfast meal for him, and dropped it off beside his table. He smiled to thank me before removing the plastic wrap and starting to eat, so I moved on to the other patients.
I then stopped by Tatsuki-san's hospital room to drop off her breakfast. She accepted it gratefully and started to eat.

"How are you feeling today, Tatsuki-san?" I said.

"Feverish, but otherwise fine," Tatsuki-san said, "which doesn't make sense. If the disease is supposed to kill me the day after tomorrow, shouldn't it be a lot worse today than it was yesterday?"

"I guess," I said, "although how long patients have left isn't always set in stone. Some patients can survive past their doctors' expectations if they're healthy and keep fighting for their lives."

Of course, the opposite was also possible, but Tatsuki-san didn't need to hear that right now.

"Fair enough," Tatsuki-san said. "I'll let you know if there's any other changes in my condition."

As I left, I considered the possibility that Monokuma was bluffing about the "death disease," but realized he had no reason to lie. If he hoped that one of us would commit murder to save Tatsuki-san's life, he'd be sorely disappointed, since the one person who was willing to give her life to save Tatsuki-san had already done so. The only part that sounded like a bluff was the possibility of someone else becoming terminally ill, but I hoped we'd never have to find out whether that part was true.

After quickly checking on Karita-san, I headed to the chemical lab, and spoke with Kirishima-san about everyone's diseases. He'd already heard the particulars, but thanked me for the update. He'd asked Sayuri-san and Karita-san about their movements yesterday, and the two of them had confirmed that they hadn't been to the hospital all day. Since Sayuri-san was quite honest, and Karita-san literally couldn't lie, that only made the question of how they got infected all the more puzzling.

"Once again, I struggle to comprehend how these diseases work," Kumakura-san said. "Since the patients' behavior is unlikely to be induced by any normal communicable disease, I would assume that this is some elaborate prank."

I found the suggestion so outlandish that I didn't believe it for a moment- and perhaps Kumakura-san didn't either, considering he said he "would assume" that. The four patients hardly seemed to be in any position to collaborate, but Kirishima-san clearly wanted evidence to refute his theory, so I'd give it to him.

"I don't think so," I said. "Kumakura-san didn't hear me approach at all. If he was pretending to be deaf, he'd probably reflexively turn after hearing something. Besides, what would people gain by faking something like this?"

"I do not know," Kirishima-san said. "Perhaps if a murder occurs, they could pretend to have been physically incapable of the crime in order to elude suspicion."

"I suppose that's possible in theory," I said, "but Kumakura-san is the only one so far whose disease would hinder him from killing someone, and his appears to be genuine."

Kirishima-san sighed in exasperation, unusually disappointed about losing an argument.

"You may be right, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said, "but I would hope that you were not. If the Despair Diseases do not act like any conventional sickness, then our knowledge of medicine is
useless. I may not be a doctor, but as a scientist, this sort of problem, which cannot be solved by rational thought and study, is nothing less than maddening."

Kirishima-san soon asked me to leave him alone and let him get back to work, perhaps showing that as frustrated as he was, he hadn't given up just yet, which was reassuring. There were still two days until Tatsuki-san's death, which wouldn't be enough to save her, but we wouldn't waste that time.

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After making sure the patients got lunch and checking up on them, I headed to the bookstore for the afternoon, swapped my blazer for an apron, and started to "work." After a while, Himemiya-san showed up.

"Excuse me," Himemiya-san said. "Are you looking for part-time help?"

"I am," I said. "I'm Nagato, and I'm the manager of this store."

"That'll do," Himemiya-san said. "I'm Himemiya, and I'm looking for a job."

"Nice to meet you, Himemiya-san," I said as we bowed to each other. "Let's have a seat."

I walked Himemiya-san over to a reading area, and had her sit down in a chair across from me.

"Just to break character for a moment, I'm sorry if I'm underdressed," Himemiya-san said. "I would wear a suit if I had one."

I didn't know where traditional archery clothing fell on the spectrum between "casual" and "dressy," but the look seemed to fit Himemiya-san.

"It's fine," I said. "You're remarkably polite."

"Thank you," Himemiya-san said. "My family was strict about manners, believing that it was a matter of self-respect."

I nodded. I didn't know much about job interviews, or anything about a job at a bookstore that I couldn't get from watching the employees at the store, so I more or less had to wing it.

"Anyway," I said, "what can you offer this company?"

"To put it simply, a strong work ethic with a passion for excellent customer service," Himemiya-san said.

As an amateur, it sounded like a concise, reasonably honest answer that offered what the interviewer was looking for. If nothing else, what she'd said spoke for itself and required no further explanation or follow-up questions.

"That... sounds good enough," I said. "What sort of hours and days will you be available?"

"I am available all days of the week," Himemiya-san said. "As for hours, I am available between 9 AM and 8 PM every day."

I nodded approvingly. I wouldn't inflict a 77-hour work week on Himemiya-san, but most employers would appreciate her flexibility, even if the killing school trip had cleared up our schedules.

"Good," I said. "Will your school allow you to work part-time?"
"Unfortunately, no," Himemiya-san said. "They do allow students to work part-time if there's extenuating circumstances, such as financial need... which clearly don't apply to the daughter of one of Japan's wealthiest families. Of course, since I'm taking an unplanned hiatus from school, it's a moot point."

Technically speaking, Talent High School allowed talent-related absences with a minimum of fuss and paperwork, which was part of the reason behind its appeal for talented students. Of course, it was also a case of the chicken and the egg; for example, Akira-san would definitely appreciate the ability to take time off from school for acting, but in order to even get into the school, she had to prove herself as an actress.

"That'll work," I said. "I guess you're hired, but since we aren't paying you anyway, it won't be a problem."

"Thank you very much," Himemiya-san said. "I'll do my best Nagato-san... or Nagato-senpai?"

"Call me what you like," I said. "I've only been working here a day longer than you so I'm not much of a senpai."

I gave Himemiya-san an apron and a name tag, then pretended to man the cashier with her. No one seemed to show up while we were there, since with five of us in the hospital and two behind the counter, there were only three students who could stop by, one of whom I had no desire to see.

"So, how's it so far?" I said.

"It's manageable," Himemiya-san said. "There are careers I'd rather pursue, but I could live with this as a post-archery career. Kanae would be fairly good at this job, albeit not Ultimate level. If all sixteen of us applied for the same cashier job, Kanae would be most likely to get it. Of course, if she was still here, she probably wouldn't pursue the job, since she's busy with being a maid, so you'd be the next best choice."

"You really think so?" I said.

Himemiya-san nodded.

"I do," Himemiya-san said. "People get measured with various yardsticks depending on the situation; some jobs are meant for intelligent people, while others are geared toward strong ones who only need to be smart enough to follow instructions. You might not be the greatest student, but you'd probably be one of the best suited for being a servant apart from Kanae, who was in a class of her own."

I smiled. My skills still weren't suited for great things, but at the very least, it was heartwarming to hear that someone valued them.

A few hours later, I changed out of my apron.

"I've got to be going now, Himemiya-san," I said. "I've got to get dinner to the patients."

"Thank you for your hard work, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said. "It was nice to spend time with you today considering I can't... never mind. Please say hello to Sayuri for me."

I said "I will," then set out for the hospital.

Eventually, the time to return to the ship came once again, and tonight, the announcement included
Karita-san and Sayuri-san among those who were allowed to stay. After confirming everyone was there, Higurashi-san decided to head on in first, since he wanted to go to bed early.

As we proceeded to the ship, I saw Himemiya-san stop short at the foot of the gangplank leading to the ship. Since it was only a few minutes after 8 PM, I wasn't necessarily worried about her missing the deadline.

"Is something troubling you, Himemiya-san?" I said.

"There is," Himemiya-san said. "Now that there's four people in the hospital, if a murder happens during the night, we won't be able to assume that the other person is the only possible suspect."

"That's true," I said, "but three suspects isn't a much larger pool. Besides, the two spotless patients will be able to help us identify the blackened."

Himemiya-san frowned skeptically.

"That's assuming that the witnesses are reliable," Himemiya-san said. "Kumakura-san will be unable to hear any murders that take place, and if Sayuri gets attacked or witnesses a murder, she won't be able to reliably identify the culprit."

Himemiya-san then let off a sigh.

"That being said, there's nothing I can do about it since I'm not infected," Himemiya-san said. "I can only wait on the ship and hope for the best... and if the worst happens, hope that Sayuri isn't the victim or the perpetrator."

"You're worried about Sayuri-san, aren't you?" I said.

"I am," Himemiya-san said. "She's one of the kindest members of this class, and has been through more than she deserves, losing Kanae, Mihama-san and Akira. After everything that's happened, it would be nothing less than tragic for her to be murdered by a classmate in the middle of the night."

I doubted that any of the others in the hospital were likely killers. Tatsuki-san had killed Kojima-san, but it was only to protect her sister, and she seemed to be more willing to die herself than take another life. Kumakura-san didn't strike me as the kind to commit murder, either, not to mention that his condition probably held him back. As for Karita-san, I wanted to believe that even he had enough scruples not to kill someone. That only left Sayuri-san herself, and I wasn't willing to believe she had it in her to kill any more than Himemiya-san was.

"I feel the same way, too," I said. "After all, Sayuri-san is my friend, too."

"That's reassuring to hear, Nagato-san," Himemiya-san said, "or, rather, Chiyuri, if that's fine with you."

I smiled warmly. I'd always been a bit hesitant to ask for permission to use first names, afraid of being rebuffed, but if someone as reserved as Himemiya-san- or rather, Himeno-san- was offering her friendship, I had no reason not to take it.

"It certainly is, Himeno-san," I said. "Let's head back."

Himeno-san walked up the ramp with me, and after a glance in the direction of the hospital, she headed back into the ship.
Once back on the ship, I went down to see Mom by myself.

"Hello, Chiyuri," Mom said. "I see Higurashi-san's not with you."

"He wanted to go to bed early tonight," I said, "and thought I could handle meeting with you by
myself. There isn't much to report, apart from the fact that Sayuri-san and Karita-san are now sick,
and are being handled the same way as Tatsuki-san and Kumakura-san."

"That's fine," Mom said. "The last thing I want is for one of you to get sick from staying up too late... well, a normal sickness, anyway."

I wondered if our immune systems played a role in protecting us from the illness, but I doubted it.
As Kirishima-san had noted, the Despair Diseases didn't seem to play by the normal rules.

"That's good," I said, "but I'm not sure many of us will be getting much sleep tonight, not when a murder might occur at the hospital."

"I know how you feel," Mom said, "but let me ask you this. If you were there, what would you do to stop the murder?"

Mom raised a good question. In each of the previous murders, all of us were in the same general area, even though in the third case, the building was large enough that we had to split into groups. Despite all our precautions, people had ended up dying in each case.

"I... don't know," I said. "I guess having possible witnesses around might deter would-be killers, but beyond that, I'm not sure."

"Neither am I," Mom said. "As naïve as it may sound, all you can do at this point is have faith that your sick classmates will do the right thing."

Coming from Mom, that meant a lot. Teachers were responsible for imparting their knowledge onto their students, but in the end, it was up to the students to learn the material. Not all students saw much value in the knowledge they would receive, so all Mom could do was hope that they were willing to be responsible for their own education.

"Yes, that's all we can do at this point," I said. "In the end, the killers who chose to seek graduation were responsible for their own actions, so the only way for us to prevent another murder is for all of us to understand that nothing good comes of killing a classmate."

Even as I said that, I knew that while this would help significantly, it was obviously easier said than done. If the adults in charge of society had not completely solved the problem of people murdering each other- a problem that had probably only gotten worse if the newspaper was true-then we, as children, had little hope of doing so.

I returned to my room. Surprisingly enough, after I'd taken a shower and changed into my nightgown, I barely said my prayers and climbed into bed before I fell asleep.

Still, something occurred to me. In a somewhat unprecedented twist of fate, three days had passed since landfall without a murder occurring. I didn't know whether it was due to our actions or Monokuma's motive, but it was a landmark worth celebrating, since little else around here was. I didn't have much hope of it lasting, but all I could do was make the most of the time we'd been given.
Day 25

I don’t remember most of what happened on the twenty-fifth day of our cruise, as well as our fourth on the fourth island, but I will never forget what I woke up to that night.

I slowly opened my eyes and found myself on the floor of one of the hospital rooms, next to the patient’s bed. While the lights were on, the view from the window showed that it was night time outside. Sayuri-san was kneeling over me, and drew back as she realized I was awake.

"Oh, thank goodness you're all right, Chiyuri-chan!" Sayuri-san said. "I thought we’d lost you, too!"

"Thank you for your concern, Sayuri-san," I said as I slowly sat up, "and I’m sorry I worried you. But what do you me-"

That question died in my throat as I saw the answer right in front of me.

Kumakura-san's dead body lay in his hospital bed, his pillow over his face.

Author's Notes

As always, thank you for the comments, kudos and follows.

I'm a bit surprised that no one guessed that we'd have a redux of the diseases from the second game after seeing the hospital. Without spoiling too much, at least one person became infected on the morning of Day 25.

Here's how Karita's "honesty disease" works. In a nutshell, it's similar to what happens to Fletcher from Liar Liar, but here's the rules.

Rule 1: Most obviously, Karita cannot knowingly tell a lie.

Rule 2: If someone asks Karita a question, or directs a statement at him that demands a response, he must give an honest reply.

Rule 3: Karita cannot say something he does not believe to be true, even if it actually is true.

Rule 4: Conversely, if Karita wrongly believes something to be true, he will say that is true.

Rule 5: If Karita is asked a question to which he does not know the answer, he will admit that he does not know. If a guess comes to mind (whether right or wrong), he will make it, but will admit that he is guessing.

Rule 6: In questions concerning matters of opinion, Karita will give his honest opinion.

Speaking of the "honesty disease," in the original version I had planned, Himemiya would have
asked the questions. Here, however, it isn't in character for her to needlessly antagonize Karita; that's more characteristic of Asakura.

Chiyuri may think of Azuki fairly often, but that's largely a consequence of how, unlike Miura, she hasn't fully developed a healthy sense of self-confidence by this point in the story, and still places Azuki on a pedestal.

Next up is the murder investigation. If you're curious about where each room is on the hallway, I'll give a specific order next chapter; if I did so this chapter, I would give away a few details I have yet to reveal.

As an omake, here's a fashion show in which characters swap their outfits with other characters.

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**Omake**

*Miura's POV*

I sat with Nagato-senpai in a room of the recording studio with a runway on it. This time, we were hosting a fashion show, in which each person was wearing someone else's outfit. Even the hosts were no exception; I was wearing the dark skirt suit that Nagato-sensei most often wore, while Nagato-senpai was wearing Iwasawa-san's button-down shirt and overalls.

"Welcome to the Outfit Swap Fashion Show," I said. "I'm your host, Kaori Miura, and this is my cohost, Chiyuri Nagato. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?"

"I do, Miura-san," Nagato-senpai said. "I heard that I got Iwasawa-san's clothes, but wouldn't they be a bit too big for me?"

"They would," I said, "which is why all outfits are resized to fit the new wearer. Not only do your clothes fit you, but the look suits you well."

"Thank you," Nagato-senpai said. "You look nice in your suit, too."

I smiled. My sister had also purchased a suit to wear to her college entrance ceremony, one that she'd probably also wear to her first job. I'd do the same in two years' time, so it was always nice to hear that I looked good, too.

"And now, let the event begin," I said.

The first one up was Mihama-senpai, who wore a smaller version of Kumakura-senpai's sweatpants.

Shortly afterward, the other shoe fell. Kumakura-senpai was wearing a larger version of Mihama-senpai's blue sailor fuku uniform, a size that would have to be custom ordered. I knew of a few guys who would look decent in girls' clothing, but not the tall, musclebound Ultimate Weightlifter.

Ami-chan wore Sugiura-san's waitress uniform. She seemed out of place working at a restaurant as fancy as the one the Sugiura family ran, but she'd probably be a good fit for a diner or fast food restaurant.

Azuki-senpai wore Ami-chan's cheerleader outfit, and could barely hide her embarrassment. She must have worn more than a few costumes as an actress, but none this embarrassing. Nagato-senpai cheerfully called out, "Hang in there, Akira-san!"
Next up was Sayuri-san who wore... the same sailor fuku she always did.

"Wait, isn't there some kind of mistake?" Nagato-senpai said. "Sayuri-san's wearing the same outfit as always."

"Yes, she is," I said, "but technically, she's wearing Mitamura-san's uniform. The two are schoolmates."

"Oh, right," Nagato-senpai said.

Fukuda-kun wore Kirishima-senpai's lab coat over a shirt and tie, along with an utterly confused expression.

Next was the sharply dressed Higurashi-senpai, who wore Sakuragi-kun's tracksuit. He seemed relatively comfortable in it, probably because he didn't wear his suit while working out.

The last on the list was Nagato-sensei, who wore her daughter's Catholic school uniform. It had been more than twenty years since her graduation, but she wore it as though she'd never left her alma mater.
Chapter IV, Part 4

Deadly Life

I was so shocked at the sight of Kumakura-san's dead body that I almost fainted again, but knew I had to stay conscious for the sake of the ensuing murder investigation, or I'd share his fate.

I turned around and saw that Sayuri-san, Karita-san, Tatsuki-san and Himeno-san were all standing near me, wearing hospital gowns. The only person who seemed out of place in that group was Himeno-san, who was dressed the same as the others.

"Kumakura-san's dead?" I said. "What about the body discovery announcement?"

"It played while you were unconscious," Sayuri-san said. "The four of us here were the ones who discovered his body- and, as we'd feared, yours."

So in other words, the culprit was possibly one of the four of them- or perhaps five of us, since I couldn't completely rule myself out.

I then noticed I was dressed in a hospital gown, since the loose top obviously felt different from my button-down shirt and necktie. While this was far from the most pressing issue at hand, it was proof that I must have fallen ill within the past day or so. If Himeno-san and I had gotten infected, though, it would have kept with the pattern, except for today's infected being two girls, rather than a girl and a boy.

"Wait, I'm dressed as a patient?" I said. "Since when?"

"Since this morning," Himeno-san said. "It's... a long story, but for the moment, let's just say that's why you don't remember anything that happened today."

While there was a large and alarming gap in my memories, one thing was clear. Roughly a day had passed since I returned to the ship with Himeno-san and the others. A lot had happened, not just the murder, and I had a feeling that small and seemingly inconsequential events would be crucial to solving the crime... which is why it was so distressing that I couldn't remember them.

Suddenly, Monokuma appeared.

"Good to see you're awake, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "With this, all the patients are together, and the healthy ones- sans your mother- should be here any moment."

I checked my watch and, checking the time, realized that since most of us were relatively eager to get back on the ship after what had happened last time, they were already back on the Ursa Major, and possibly in bed.

"So it's about 8:30," I said. "Haven't the others returned to the ship by now?"

"They did," Monokuma said, "but I called them back for the investigation, since it wouldn't be fair to leave them out. I also sent you the Monokuma File, so take a look at it."

Himeno-san, who had her student handbook, opened up the Monokuma File.

Monokuma File 4

The victim is Kotaro Kumakura, the Ultimate Weightlifter
The cause of death is being suffocated with a pillow.

No other wounds are visible on the victim's body.

Like with Kojima-san's case, there was no time of death. I could only assume that the time was an important aspect that might lead us to an important discovery. In this case, the time of the murder could easily determine how long or short the list of suspects was.

"One more thing," I said. "Since Sayuri-san recognized me, all of us should be back to normal, right?"

"That's right," Monokuma said, "I did say the Despair Diseases would wear off once a murder occurred."

"That's the first I've heard of it," Karita-san said. "By the way, two plus two equals five."

The others stared at Karita-san. Unfortunately, as obvious as his lies were, they proved that he could easily tell a subtler lie at the trial, especially if he was the culprit.

"I thought so," I said, "but if my disease caused me to forget what happened today, why aren't my memories coming back?"

"That's just how your 'memory disease' works, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "It's not that you forget things- it's that you don't remember them. You should be making some new memories from this moment forward, but you won't get back what you didn't have in the first place."

For a moment, I wondered what had happened to our memories of the two years. If they were like paper documents containing all the information we'd memorized during that time period from school lessons to news stories about the world descending into chaos, were they locked away in some filing cabinet, waiting for us to retrieve them, or had they been shredded or incinerated?

"Of course, it's for the best that you don't remember," Monokuma said, "since I've got a feeling it wouldn't be much fun if you did. Get cracking on the investigation, and I'll let you know when it's time for the trial."

Monokuma then departed. As he did, the remaining members of the group- Higurashi-san, Kirishima-san, Kurogane-san and Asakura- arrived. Kurogane-san and Higurashi-san gasped in shock upon seeing Kumakura-san's corpse, while the others simply stared.

"So it's true," Higurashi-san said. "Kumakura-kun is dead. What happened?"

"I got up to take a quick walk before bed, at around 8:20," Himeno-san said, "at which point I noticed Kumakura-san's dead body and Chiyuri lying unconscious. After I did, I called Sayuri-san and the others, and we all made our way here about five minutes ago. The Body Discovery Announcement then played, and a minute or so later, Chiyuri regained consciousness."

"How long ago do you suppose Kumakura-kun was killed?" Kirishima-san said.

"Unfortunately, I don't know," Himeno-san said. "The last time I saw him alive was around 6:30 PM, when I was walking back to my hospital room. After that, we were in our rooms for dinner. I went out to take a walk at 8:20, and then found Kumakura-san's body"

"Ah," Kirishima-san said. "The question of when the crime took place is important. The healthy students, myself included, started heading back to the Ursa Major at 7:50 PM, and promptly boarded the ship at 8 PM. If the crime took place after 7:50 PM, the blackened could only have
been one of the sick students."

So this was why Monokuma had refused to share the time of death with us. If the culprit was one of the healthy students, they must have been planning for us to discover the body after they had returned to the ship, but could they have anticipated that the Monokuma File wouldn't give them away?

"Speaking of dinner, who served it to us?" I said. "Ordinarily, I'd help out, but... I was one of the patients, wasn't I?"

Higurashi-san awkwardly nodded, not used to being asked a question I should be able to answer myself.

"I spoke with Kirishima-kun," Higurashi-san said, "and he said that you had offered to head to the kitchen to pick up the meals, claiming that you were well enough to handle the task."

"Indeed I did," Kirishima-san said. "I also offered to serve as Higurashi-kun's informant on the status of the patients in your absence."

I could only imagine how useless I must have felt, with the disease having left me unable to handle my responsibilities. Higurashi-san probably would have felt the same way if he'd gotten sick while I'd stayed healthy, resulting in my ending up as acting leader of our class.

"At 7:20 this evening, I ate dinner with Kurogane-kun and Asakura-kun at the hotel restaurant," Higurashi-san said. "The three of us were together the entire time, and started to head back to the ship together once we were done. Kirishima-kun met up with us while we were on our way back, and the four of us boarded the ship together."

The other healthy boys nodded.

"So if the crime took place after 7:50 PM, the culprit had to be one of the sick students," Kurogane-san said. "If it took place earlier, the healthy students would be possible suspects, but we couldn't rule out the sick students, either."

"Yeah, but there's one that's a hell of a lot more obvious than the others," Asakura said, "namely Nagato. You want to tell us what you're doing at the crime scene?"

As Asakura pointed his finger- figuratively and literally- at me, I froze. Being accused of murder in a place where the punishment for being caught was death was a terrifying prospect, especially when I couldn't say with any certainty that I was innocent.

"I... I..." I said.

"I think Chiyuri-chan was set up," Sayuri-san said. "Considering that she was unconscious at the time, and didn't wake up for several minutes, it's clear that she wasn't just acting. Even if she was the culprit, she wouldn't simply stay at the scene of the crime."

Higurashi-san nodded, but while I sensed some sympathy from him, I realized I didn't have his complete trust.

"Both theories are possible at the moment," Higurashi-san said. "As such, I will allow Nagato-san to investigate the crime with everyone else, but I would rather not have her guard the crime scene. Kurogane-kun, could you please help me out?"

"Certainly," Kurogane-kun said.
"Thank you," Higurashi-san said. "Let's get to work, everyone."

As the others set out, I took a look around the crime scene. There were no signs of struggle, so Kumakura-san must have been incapacitated before he was killed. On Kumakura-san's night stand, there was a pen, as well as a few of the pieces of paper that I had given him—there were two and I recalled giving him three or four. Eventually, I spotted the waste basket near Kumakura-san's bed, which was still upright.

"I'd like to search this for clues," I said.

"Go right ahead," Higurashi-san said. "I'll be there to look through it with you."

I nodded, wanting to believe that Higurashi-san's offer was as much because he wanted to investigate the trash can as because he wanted to make sure I didn't alter the crime scene.

I dug around in the wastepaper basket. There was a discarded food container, as well as the plastic wrapping that had covered it. The plastic cover had been neatly ripped open, but I did notice a single small hole in it. There was also a damp rag in it that smelled odd. Beneath the two were two other food containers and their plastic wraps.

"So it looks like he had dinner tonight," I said, "not to mention lunch and breakfast."

"Yes, it seems so," Higurashi-san said. "Monokuma takes out the trash on a daily basis, so what you're looking at is today's trash."

"When does he take it out?" I said.

"Late at night, when the patients are asleep," Higurashi-san said. "He made one of his usual jokes, saying that it was a bit like Santa Claus, only coming when the good boys and girls are asleep."

If Monokuma was Santa Claus, I suspected he'd swap his Naughty and Nice lists around. I could only shudder to think what he'd consider to be good gifts, or what sort of children he deemed worthy of them.

"I'd like to know something, Higurashi-san," I said. "Do you really think I killed Kumakura-san?"

Higurashi-san sighed. He must have known that it was difficult for me, a short girl, to overpower and murder a tall muscular powerhouse like Kumakura-san, but stranger things had happened on this killing school trip.

"To be honest, I have no proof of it," Higurashi-san said, "but after everything that happened, including Azuki-san becoming the blackened, we cannot afford to rule anyone out."

"I understand," I said. "If I am indeed guilty, then I'll accept my fate so that the rest of you can live. However, since we don't know for certain what happened, and it's possible that voting for me will be a fatal mistake, I won't spare any effort to find the truth."

Higurashi-san smiled.

"That's the spirit," Higurashi-san said. "So, what can I help you with?"

"I'd like to ask you about myself," I said, "since you seem like the person who'd first notice something was off about me."

"You're right, I was," Higurashi-san said. "Nothing seemed particularly odd until just after
breakfast, when we both met with Nagato-sensei, when you loosened your tie and took off your blazer. At that point, you'd forgotten what we'd discussed mere minutes ago, but you could remember many other things, from the events of the past few weeks to the dress you wore for your First Communion."

I nodded. My First Communion was so long ago that my mom had filled in most of the details, but it was my first clear memory. As for what I'd worn, not only did I still remember it, but it was in the family photo album, even if I hadn't seen it since the killing school trip began.

"So it's true," I said. "I couldn't create new memories, but my existing memories weren't affected."

"That's right," Kurogane-san said. "At that time, Himemiya-san was acting oddly, too, so after Monokuma showed up and diagnosed you two, Higurashi-kun and I took both of you to the hospital."

"What about after that?" I said.

"I checked on you a few times throughout the day," Higurashi-san said. "The last time was around 6:30 PM, just after Himemiya-san had returned to her room, so after that... I don't know what happened."

"Neither do I," I said.

Higurashi-san let off a long, forlorn sigh, probably wishing he could say something more reassuring.

"I don't know whether you're guilty or innocent, but I do know one thing," Higurashi-san said. "The you who's in front of me right now seems to be earnestly investigating the murder, so I'll trust in you until you give me reason not to."

"Thank you very much," I said. "I'll be sure to prove that you weren't wrong."

Throughout my life, I'd met few people I could trust implicitly, not to mention few who would show me the same trust in return. The fact that it would change in a killing game of all places was nothing short of astounding, but I was grateful for it. After all, if no one believed in me, there would be no hope for me, or the rest of our class.

I found the medical supply cart in a closet at the end of the hall, just past Kumakura-san's hospital room. Himeno-san was there.

"Hello, Chiyuri," Himeno-san said.

"Hello, Himeno-san," I said. "Are you here to investigate the closet, too?"

"Yes, I am," Himeno-san said, "since it seems like the easiest place for the blackened to hide something without me noticing. If they left the crime scene, it was probably this direction."

So Himeno-san believed that the blackened had willingly left the crime scene, rather than passed out in the middle of it. If nothing else, it was pleasing that she could come up with a logical theory that could point to my innocence.

Looking in the top drawer, I noticed a used syringe and, recalling Mom's advice, approached it with the utmost care. The same went for the discarded bottles of chemicals, which turned out to be chloroform and muscle relaxant.
I saw that the bottom compartment was open, and peeked inside. Said compartment was completely empty, save for my notebook.

"What's my notebook doing here?" I said.

"That's what I want to know, too," Himeno-san said. "Maybe you were hiding in there, or someone had hidden you in there. Try getting in."

I curled into a ball, then climbed into the compartment. It was a tight fit, but I could manage to stay inside... even when Himeno-san shut the door on me. A moment later, she opened it up.

"What was that for?" I said.

"I simply needed to test something," Himeno-san said, "and it seems that you are short enough to fit inside. I'll try the same."

Himeno-san climbed inside, but unlike me, she couldn't quite fit, even with the door open, so she got out.

"As you can see it's certainly possible that someone used it to transport you," Himeno-san said, "possibly to drop you off at the scene of the crime. Unfortunately, I don't know enough to prove anything with this."

"Neither do I," I said, "which is what I'll have to find out."

"Then I won't keep you," Himeno-san said.

I nodded appreciatively.

"By the way, I'm curious about something," I said. "What was your disease, anyway?"

Himeno-san blushed and fidgeted.

"Th-The 'manners disease,'" Himeno-san said. "While afflicted by it, I spoke rudely forgoing honorifics and swearing like a sailor. My parents would have been furious if they had seen me behaving that way."

I could think of three reasons why Kurogane-san kept the particulars about Himeno-san's disease secret. The first was that it wasn't relevant to the investigation. The second, which probably went hand-in-hand with the first, was that Himeno-san was embarrassed about what she'd said and done today. The third was that Kurogane-san had something to hide, and possibly, so did Himeno-san. The third seemed rather unlikely, so I dismissed it for now.

"My mom probably wouldn't have been too happy, either," I said. "Of course, if she isn't shown the respect she thinks she deserves- let's say you call her 'Yukari-chan' rather than 'Nagato-sensei'- she'll politely tell you what she wants to be called the first time. If you comply, she'll thank you for respecting her wishes, but if you don't, she'll accept your decision with silent disapproval."

"Ah," Himeno-san said. "That sounds reasonable enough, although some would probably want to get a rise out of her by being rude to her."

That was part of the reason why Mom refused to overreact to being disrespected. The only exception to the rule I mentioned was in my case, where she was determined to correct me if I called her "Mom" at school or "Nagato-sensei" outside of school, since there might be situations in which it was unclear whether we were "on the clock" as teacher and student.
"Anyway, I would say that you got off easy when it came to diseases," I said, "but if Tatsuki-san had succumbed to her 'death disease,' there's a chance that you would have been the next to get that disease."

"Yes, that's true," Himeno-san said. "If we went by the order in which the patients were infected, Kumakura-san would have been first, but we can't rule out the possibility that the 'death disease' would have chosen its next patient randomly."

In other words, it was hypothetically possible that the killer might have been motivated to act to prevent someone else from being infected by the death disease- or maybe to save their own life. That being said, unlike the second trial, there was no opportunity to bring someone else along while graduating, so unless the killer was willing to sacrifice their own life, they were most likely purely motivated by the desire to survive.

After taking my notebook with me, I spoke with Sayuri-san, who was in her hospital room.

"Hello, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said. "I was in my room most of the day, so I didn't really see much... well, not anything that would help you."

"I need all the information I can get," I said, "so please tell me."

Sayuri-san sighed.

"All right," Sayuri-san said. "I saw you, dressed in your school uniform, pushing the cart past my hospital room not long before 7:30 PM. You didn't stop by or say anything to me; I didn't even get any dinner."

If I was the one who'd passed by Sayuri-san's room, then I'd clearly broken the promise I allegedly made to take care of handing out dinners.

"Did anyone else see me?" I said.

"I don't believe so," Sayuri-san said, "since my hospital room is the only occupied one between yours and Kotaro-kun's. You'll have to take my word for it."

Now that I thought about it, none of the rooms were labeled. I had a fairly good memory as to whose room was where- Tatsuki-san's room was near the door to the administrative wing, Karita-san was a few rooms down the hall, Sasaki-san was two rooms away from Kumakura-san's, and Kumakura-san's was at the end of the hall.

"What you said doesn't sound like a lie," I said. "Did you hear the murder?"

"Unfortunately, no," Sayuri-san said. "The hospital rooms aren't completely soundproof, but I could only have heard something if it was loud or right next door to me."

"I see," I said. "You only found out about it because Himeno-san told you, right?"

"That's right," Sayuri-san said, "and she'd stumbled upon it by chance. Who knows what would have happened if she hadn't found it when it did?"

I shrugged. At least in theory, it was possible that if we never discovered a body, we wouldn't have to go through a class trial. Of course, Monokuma wouldn't want anyone to ruin his fun, so unless the victim had fallen into the ocean, he probably would give us a hint of some sort pointing to the body.
"I don't know," I said. "I guess we'd have to find the body sooner or later so that the investigation could start. The only question now is whether the blackened will get away with it."

After finishing my conversation with Sayuri-san, I found myself pondering how much of the crime, especially how and when the body was discovered, had gone according to plan. If the killer was healthy, it would certainly be to their advantage to have Himeno-san discover the body at some point after they'd boarded the ship, but it happened soon enough that it was definitely possible that Kumakura-san had been killed before the healthy students had returned to the Ursa Major. If the killer was sick, having the body discovered while everyone else was on the island would help expand the pool of suspects, but in the end, the killer would probably be best off pinning it on one of their fellow patients- most likely me. At this point, the only thing that seemed certain was that I was being set up, and I needed to find who was responsible for all this.

I stopped to the room next to Sayuri-san's room to search for clues. I immediately noticed that unlike the other unoccupied rooms, the bed wasn't made. My student handbook lay on my nightstand, so I picked it up. I then opened up the closet and found my school uniform neatly hung on the hangers inside.

It was certainly possible that someone had planted all this evidence in the room to make it seem as though I had been there, but I wasn't sure what the benefit would be. If Sayuri-san was telling the truth, though, then she would have been the only one to have seen me before the crime, which would be consistent with the position of my room compared to the crime scene. The only question was whether she'd truly seen me, or whether she'd mistaken me for someone else.

A I passed by the crime scene once again, I overheard Kurogane-san speaking with Karita-san. I'd apparently passed by in the middle of the conversation, with neither party hearing me.

"So I guess you're saying that you don't have to tell the truth, anymore, right?" Kurogane-san said.

"You've got that wrong," Karita-san said, "by which I mean 'that's right.' In other words, you can't necessarily trust what I have to say, just like with anyone else."

"I see," Kurogane-san said. "I was hoping that if you said, for example, 'Nagato-san killed Kumakura-kun,' and your disease didn't prevent you from saying that it was a lie, then we'd know she was the culprit."

It wasn't especially surprising that Kurogane-san used me as a hypothetical case, but it was still disturbing. One way or another, I'd die if I was convicted, and the only question was whether the majority of the class would die with me.

Karita-san, however, let off a "Tsk-tsk."

"It's not that simple," Karita-san said. "To begin with, I don't know the culprit, so even if I still had the disease, I'd be unable to say that I knew for a fact who was the culprit. If I thought Nagato-san did it, I could say, 'I think Nagato-san killed Kumakura-kun,' but all that would prove was what I thought. Besides, there's plenty of ways I could twist the truth; for example, I might be telling the truth if I said I didn't kill Kumakura-kun, if I'd hired an assassin to do it instead."

While Karita-san was right about that, under the killing game, Monokuma would have probably made the assassin into the blackened instead. As a result, we'd understand that Karita-san had betrayed the group, like Tatsuki-san had when she'd tried to get away with killing Kojima-san, but he wouldn't be the one we'd need to convict in order to survive.
"I see," Kurogane-san said. "Personally, I was hoping for an easy way out of this. These class trials are anything but fun, especially considering that most of us will die if we don't find the killer, so I'd rather not take any chances."

"Me neither," Karita-san said, "but laziness and greed attract the attention of con artists the same way the scent of wounded prey attracts a predator. I'm sure the blackened this time, whoever they may be, is all too willing to trick you to succeed."

"Fair enough," Kurogane-san said, "but let me ask you this- do you think it's Nagato-san?"

"Who can say?" Karita-san said, "especially since she can't remember herself. But finding the killer passed out at the crime scene seems a little too convenient."

As Kurogane-san thanked Karita-san and resumed the investigation, I felt a bit relieved. Perhaps it was too much to ask either of them to trust me, considering the stakes and the fact that we hadn't spoken much, but because of those stakes, they weren't willing to take any chances. It would be difficult to convince them of my innocence, but at least they wouldn't be foolish enough to blindly suspect me without considering any other possibilities.

As Karita-san started to walk away, I approached him.

"Oh, there you are, Karita-san," I said. "I have a question for you."

"Ask away, Nagato-san," Karita-san said, "but just remember- my answer might not be true."

"Fine," I said. "Did I serve you any meals today?"

"None," Karita-san said. "I went to the kitchen myself to pick up my own meals today, since I was worried about someone slipping me poison in my food. I started heading to the kitchen around 7:15 PM, and, got back to my room at 7:25 PM. Himemiya-san and Tachibana-san saw me pass by their rooms on the way out and the way back."

I made a mental note of what he'd just said. Since I could still remember much of what everyone had said after I'd woken up at the crime scene, it was clear that my ability to remember things had returned, even if I had no memories of what happened today.

"Did you see anyone else, or vice versa?" I said.

"Not at all," Karita-san said, "until Himemiya-san came to tell me about the murder. It's not an airtight alibi, but at least no one saw me near the crime scene."

Without the Despair Disease in effect, that was probably the most honest answer I would get out of Karita-san at the moment. I could only hope that it would be enough to lead me to the truth.

I went to Tatsuki-san's room to speak with her about a few things, including Karita-san's alibi.

"I'd like to know something, Tachibana-san," I said. "Did you see Karita-san pass by your room at 7:15 PM and 7:25 PM?"

"Yes, and yes," Tatsuki-san said. "I'm sure Himemiya-san did, too."

I considered asking Himeno-san about this, but decided it was probably unnecessary. While Karita-san didn't have an alibi for the crime scene, he'd gone in the opposite direction of the crime scene, and returned while the crime might have been in progress. For now, I had more important things to
"That's what I wanted to hear," I said. "Did you see me at all today?"

"Only once," Tatsuki-san said. "I stopped by your hospital room in the early morning, not long after you arrived. It was a little after 9:30 AM."

"In other words, about ten hours before the most likely time the murder occurred," I said. "You're sure you didn't see me at all after that, right?"

"No," Tatsuki-san said, "not until Himemiya-san brought us to the crime scene."

As frustrating as it was that this testimony didn't exonerate me, at least it didn't give any proof that I might have done it.

"I thought so," I said. "Did you notice anything else that seemed odd today? Especially about Kumakura-san?"

Tatsuki-san paused to think.

"There is one thing that's strange about Kumakura-kun," Tatsuki-san said. "We had some spicy takoyaki for lunch, and while he usually hates those, he ate them. Since you weren't feeling well, Kirishima-kun was the one who delivered the food."

That was certainly odd, since it directly contradicted what Kirishima-san and Higurashi-san had told the rest of us.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"About Kirishima-kun?" Tatsuki-san said. "I'm positive I saw him delivering food to my room at lunch time. I don't know about the others, though; Karita-kun got his own meals."

This sounded like it might have been important, but if the other patients couldn't confirm it, then it wouldn't be reliable. As such, I decided to move on to the other thing that bugged me.

"Well, that's not the only thing," I said. "I was also asking about whether you really saw Kumakura-san willingly eat something he could barely stomach."

"I think so," Tatsuki-san said, "but I'm not sure whether he really doesn't like spicy food, since I only knew him for a few weeks. That said, one of the few things I remember was how he was visibly uncomfortable eating food like that. He eats them to be polite to whoever's serving it, but he doesn't enjoy it, either."

"Ah, yes, I noticed that, too," I said. "I saw him doing that just after the last trial."

Tatsuki-san nodded grimly.

"Is... something wrong?" I said.

"Not at all," Tatsuki-san said. "I don't think you're lying about not being able to remember, since your disease apparently means that you can't create new memories, not that you lost the old ones."

Tatsuki-san ended up having nothing more to say to me, and left me with more questions than answers. Something struck me as very odd about my fellow patients' testimonies. While Kirishima-san and Higurashi-san claimed I'd volunteered to deliver food to the other patients, none of them had actually seen me do so. Someone was lying, but who?
I checked the chemical lab's closet. Two vials of chemicals were missing—chloroform and muscle relaxant, which fit with the two I discovered in the cart.

I pondered over who could have taken the chemicals. Kirishima-san had been the only person whom I'd seen spending much time in the lab, but everyone knew about the existence of the chemical closet, and it didn't take a scientific genius to use those chemicals efficiently.

While I was there, Kirishima-san wandered by.

"Ah, hello, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said. "Are you perhaps trying to find out who took the chloroform and muscle relaxants?"

I nodded. It was tempting to assume that Kirishima-san's knowledge of which chemicals had been stolen was suspicious, but he'd probably been here enough times that he'd memorized the contents of the cabinet, or had found them elsewhere.

"I am," I said. "I haven't found any proof as to who the person is, but I was hoping you could help."

"Do not expect too much from me," Kirishima-san said. "I cannot watch the lab all the time, even while I am on the island, but I would not be so irresponsible as to give someone a potentially harmful chemical while trusting them to use it well. If I had been foolish enough to do so, I would tell you the name of the recipient."

Hypothetically speaking, it was possible for the recipient to pass the chemicals on to a third party, who could do so yet again. Of course, I doubted that anyone trusted one of their classmates enough to hand something that dangerous over without asking questions.

"So you don't know who took them," I said, "but let me ask you this instead. Are there any times when you left the cabinet unsupervised?"

Kirishima-san paused to think.

"All the chemicals were present when I first arrived this morning," Kirishima-san said, "and I stayed inside for most of the day, occasionally checking on you and the other patients. The last time I saw all of the chemicals was at roughly 6:45 PM. I did not return to the lab until just now, after the murder."

"I see," I said. "And how do you know which chemicals are contained in the lab?"

"This list," Kirishima-san said, producing a sheet of paper. "It contains records of each chemical in the cabinet, and their quantity."

I scanned the list. A lot of the names were complicated scientific names for the various mixtures, making it hard to understand. That said, both the chloroform and the muscle relaxants were on the list, and a quick scan of the cabinet revealed that they were both missing. Furthermore, when I compared the number of vials on the list to the number in the cabinet, I could tell that two- and only two- were missing.

As I was thinking things over, I heard an announcement from Monokuma.

"Time's up!" Monokuma said. "All students, please head to the elevator to the courtroom on the Ursa Major. Attendance is mandatory, so no fair calling in sick. If you're a patient, feel free to get dressed."
After hearing the announcement, Kirishima-san and I both looked at each other.

Considering that Monokuma didn't tell us how long we had or when the timer began, there was no way of knowing how much time I'd cost the group by passing out at the crime scene. All I could do was make the most of the time I had, and I prayed that this would be enough.

"So, it is time," Kirishima-san said.

"It seems that way," I said, "but one more thing. "Did I really ask to be left in charge of delivering meals to the other patients?"

"You did," Kirishima-san said, "against my better judgment, of course. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you whether you actually made those deliveries."

Something didn't quite add up. At least one of the people I'd spoken to this evening had lied to me, but was it Tatsuki-san or was it Kirishima-san? Or was there only one liar in this group, not just the killer? I'd have to answer these questions if I wanted to even begin to lay the groundwork for identifying the killer. Since Kirishima-san had answered my question, I said goodbye to him for now, then headed to the hospital room to change before I returned to the ship.

I quickly stopped by my room, and got dressed as quickly as I could. Since I set my alarm early enough that I didn't have to worry about being late, I generally had enough time that I didn't need to get dressed in a hurry, so I was unused to doing it.

As I was tucking my shirt into my skirt, Tatsuki-san approached me. She was wearing most of her uniform, but her blazer was unbuttoned, as was the top button of her uniform, and she was carrying her neck ribbon in her hand.

"Are you almost done, Nagato-san?" Tatsuki-san said. "I don't want Monokuma to think that we'll be late.

"Coming, Tachibana-san," I said, as I slipped on my blazer and put my tie into my pocket.

The two of us briskly walked out of the hospital and toward the ship. Tatsuki-san followed my lead, since she'd apparently only walked from the ship to the hospital one-the time she was being admitted as a patient. Since I'd made several trips to the hospital, I knew the way back to the ship without needing to check the map.

"By the way, is it hard to get dressed in the morning?" I said.

"It takes a couple minutes, but not really," Tatsuki-san said. "It can be a pain if I have a performance after school, though, meaning I have to change out of my uniform and into my costume, then back once I'm finished. I wish I could rip open my shirt and blazer to reveal my stage costume underneath, like if I was a superhero, but that'd ruin the shirt, so I take it off one button at a time."

"Ah," I said. "It's useful to know I'm not the only one who takes a couple minutes to change into my uniform."

"Useful?" Tatsuki-san said. "Did you find something out?"

I shrugged. Not only was it not a good idea to share my strategy with a potential blackened, but I also didn't want to share anything before I'd fully thought it through.
"Let's just say... I don't know yet," I said, "but I hope so."

Tatsuki-san nodded. If she was the blackened, then surely she knew that her chances of getting away with her crime this time were not much better than they were two trials ago. If she was the spotless, then she'd been saved from death thanks to someone else committing murder, only to be forced to place her life on the line once again at the resulting class trial. It was too soon for her to feel relieved at her survival, or guilty over those who had died; for now, all we could do was find out who had killed Kumakura-san.

We assembled at the elevator. Our numbers had shrunk yet again, and this time, we were going into the trial without one of our most valuable players.

The two of us were among the last to arrive. When we did, everyone else was there, with the former Despair Disease patients having changed back into their usual clothing, but the elevator had yet to arrive. After taking a moment to tie my tie as best as I could without a mirror, I quickly pulled Himeno-san aside.

"Just wondering, Himeno-san," I said, "but did anyone serve you food this evening?"

"No," Himeno-san said, "since I assumed that we were supposed to get our own meals. I went to the kitchen to get mine at 6:15 PM, and got back by 6:30, since I was feeling hungry. I don't think anyone checked to see whether I had eaten."

So once again, there wasn't any conclusive proof as to the identity of the person serving the meals. For now, I had a more personal question to ask.

"By the way," I said. "Do you think I'm guilty?"

"It's hard to say," Himeno-san said. "It's certainly possible, but I share Sayuri's suspicion that you were meant to take the fall for the crime. It all seems too obvious."

I had to agree. I was obviously biased, hoping that I was innocent even if I didn't know for certain, but I'd probably have come to the same conclusion if I'd found Himeno-san on the floor.

"That being said, I have a question for you," Himeno-san said. "If it turned out that the person you're closest with- let's say Sayuri- is guilty, would you be able to vote for her?"

I sighed. It was clear that the only reason Himeno-san didn't use my mother was that it wasn't possible for her to have committed the crime.

"Then I suppose I'd vote for her," I said, "even if it would be difficult to accept that she was responsible. I suppose you'd do the same if it was Tsukimura-san?"

"I would," Himeno-san said. "Kanae is the sort of person who'd never kill anyone, and the only one of us who doesn't have any blood on her hands at this point. If she confessed to murder at a class trial, I'd find it difficult to accept, but I would believe her, simply because I still trust her to not lie about something so important. The same went for Akira, which is why I voted for her."

I nodded. I could understand why Himeno-san had disapproved of my refusal to vote for Akira-san, since she knew that while it was a difficult choice, it was also a necessary one. By now, however, I no longer sensed any willingness to judge me in her tone.

"Speaking of trust," Himeno-san said, "I do have faith in you to do what's right, which is to identify the spotless, vote for that person and accept the consequences, whether your decision is right or
wrong. There's no two ways about it- people's lives are on the line, including your own- but since you understand that, I'm sure you'll make your decisions responsibly."

"Thank you," I said. "I can't promise too much, but at the very least, you can count on me to do just that."

"I will," Himeno-san said, "and I'll do the same. My decision, whether trusting you or voting for the culprit, is my responsibility, and no matter what happens, I won't blame anyone else."

The nine of us boarded the elevator and rode it down. It occurred to me that in the best case scenario, we'd leave with eight people left- half of those who'd started on this journey. Everyone who had people they were close to had lost at least one of those people, and there was no telling who would be the next to die.

Kotaro Kumakura was the Ultimate Weightlifter. He was an intelligent and good-natured young man who was modest by nature, and while we hadn't been particularly close, we'd gotten along. It had taken me too long to learn to confide in my classmates, but I always thought it was never too late to change... and yet, Kumakura-san and I had missed our chance to become friends.

There was only one thing I could do for Kumakura-san, and for everyone else who was still alive- find and convict the blackened. I still didn't know whether I could do it as easily as Akira-san could, but I knew one thing for certain. In a life or death situation like this, she couldn't afford to be paralyzed by doubts, and neither could I. Like her, my only option was to do my best and hope that would be enough to see us through this ordeal.

Author's Notes

Thank you for your theories so far. I wonder if they'll change after you see the investigation, especially considering that this also gives a glimpse at what happened on the day of the murder.

Here's the order in which the hospital rooms come. All of them are on the same side of the hallway.

*The entrance to the patient wing.
*Tatsuki's room
*Himemiya's room
*Kaita's room
*Chiyuri's room
*Sasaki's room
*Kumakura's room
*The end of the hallway, with the supply closet and a back exit.

Next up is the trial. I should have it up by the end of the month, but the start of Chapter V may take a month to publish, to give me time to work on that and Chiyuri's remaining Free Time Events (Asakura, Kumakura, Kurogane, Tatsuki and Yamazaki)
Chapter IV, Part 5

Class Trial

We returned to the courtroom and saw two more portraits. Akira-san's X consisted of two daggers. Kumakura-san's X was composed of two crossed barbells with more weights than were humanly possible to lift. This time, Tatsuki-san went straight to her sister's empty seat, since hers was filled already.

"Court is once again in session," Monokuma said. "As always, your goal is to find whoever killed the victim- Kumakura-san, in this case, since your lives depend on it. Of course, the killer's life depends on not getting caught, so let the games begin!"

I glanced to my right, at Akira-san's now vacant seat. This would be my first trial without her, and we all knew that there were no practice trials or do-overs in the killing game. Fortunately, I'd had three class trials worth of experience to call upon as I followed Akira-san's example... but unfortunately, the killer had the same experience, and had likely learned from the other culprits' mistakes.

"Just so we're clear, it is a murder this time, right?" Kurogane-san said.

"It appears so," Kirishima-san said. "Kumakura-kun's cause of death was being smothered to death. If, for example, he died falling from a great height, he could have been pushed off a ledge, jumped off, or fell off accidentally, but here, it is not possible to mistake the death for an accident or suicide."

So at the very least, we knew what we were dealing with. Of course, that also meant that the culprit was likely ruthless, cunning and determined. They weren't just willing to kill a classmate, but also to let all of us die to save us, tell any lie to avoid getting caught and not give up until they were cornered beyond a doubt.

"But it's an open and shut case, isn't it?" Asakura said. "We found Nagato at the scene, so she's definitely guilty."

"She was unconscious when we got there," Sayuri-san said, "and the other surviving patients- Himeno-chan, Tatsuki-chan, and Karita-kun- can vouch for that. It seems most likely that whoever killed Kotaro-kun left Chiyuri-chan behind to take the fall for the crime."

"Indeed," Higurashi-san said. "All of us knew that Nagato-san was unable to make new memories, including the killer, so that person likely considered her the best choice to take the fall for their crime."

"Yeah, and Nagato knew best of all" Asakura said. "I'm sure she cooked it up to trick us all."

By my estimations, Asakura couldn't possibly be the culprit, so I had no idea why was he pushing so hard to accuse me of the crime. Did he hate me that much, or was he really convinced I was guilty?

"I must confess that what Asakura-kun is proposing is plausible," Kirishima-san said. "Since the diseases do not act much like ordinary illnesses, it is possible that those who were afflicted lied about how they were affected."

"That is possible," Sayuri-san said, "but Monokuma told us how each person's disease worked, and
we were able to observe the infected ourselves, so we could see that what he told us was true."

"Please remember that Monokuma's goal is to incite us to murder," Kirishima-san said. "It is possible that he lied, in order to give the so-called infected a way to deceive us into thinking they were incapable of committing murder."

Sayuri-san bit her lip. Despite maintaining her belief in my innocence, she knew she'd need more than belief to convince the rest of us.

"How rude, Kirishima-san!" Monokuma said. "I was telling the truth about the six of you being sick."

"But it is possible that you lied about the symptoms, is it not?" Kirishima-san said. "Your choice of words is rather suspicious."

As Monokuma went silent again, I couldn't help but admire Kirishima-san's cunning. Since none of us liked or trusted Monokuma, Kirishima-san had easily played on our feelings and cast what Monokuma said into doubt. It was a clever move, and the only question was whether he was using it to find the truth or cover up his own crimes.

"I'm not saying Nagato-san's innocent," Karita-san said, "since it is certainly possible to lie about this, but it would be a rather hard act to keep up. Besides, we do know that she had a disease, right?"

"Yes, I took her temperature and she was feverish, just like the others were," Higurashi-san said. "As far as we know, that proves that she had the Despair Disease."

"Or so we think," Kirishima-san said. "It is possible that Nagato-kun fell ill with an ordinary fever. The fact that we went more than three weeks without any of us falling ill is rather unusual."

I had to agree. Even though we'd never come into contact with anyone besides the seventeen of us, a number that shrank over time, it was possible for us to become ill through other means, from spoiled food to failure to practice proper hygiene.

"Well, let's say that Nagato-san was really sick with the memory disease," Karita-san said. "If she had it, she wouldn't be able to remember anything, including her murder plan, wouldn't she? Unless she, say, scrawled notes on her arms or something?"

I took off my blazer and rolled up my shirt sleeves, then shook my head.

"As you can see, I didn't," I said. "I can unbutton my shirt or show you my legs if you'd like, but I'd prefer to have another girl come over to confirm it."

"There is no need for that," Kirishima-san said, "since the lack of any ink on any visible part of your body proves nothing. There is a more practical writing surface at your disposal; namely, the notebook you received from Azuki-kun at the end of the previous trial."

After rolling down my sleeves and putting on my blazer again, I got out my notebook and held it up where everyone could see it.

"Here it is," I said, "but where did I write in it?"

"Perhaps in the pages you ripped out of the notebook," Kirishima-san said. "I recall that you gave a few to Kumakura-kun."
"I ripped three or four out yesterday," I said, 'so that we could communicate with him even though he couldn't hear us. There should be a few left at the crime scene."

"Is that so?" Kirishima-san said. "I believe that the one person who could vouch for you is no longer here."

I bit my lip. While Kirishima-san seemed like a normally polite, if not nice, individual, I could have sworn that remark sounded like a taunt. Of course, it was possible that after hearing various people making seemingly innocuous but subtly cutting remarks about my father, I was just oversensitive to the subtext behind people's remarks.

"That aside," Karita-san said, "shouldn't we figure out how the crime was committed before we decide whether Nagato-san could have done it? It's hard to say whether it's possible or impossible for her if we don't know how it was carried out."

"I think so, too," I said. "To begin with, I don't think anyone could have overpowered Kumakura-san long enough to smother him, unless they'd incapacitated him somehow. He's almost half a meter taller than me and stronger than anyone else here."

The others nodded. Apart from Kumakura-san, Himeno-san was the only real athlete in our class. Of course, even she wouldn't stand a chance against him in a contest of strength, since archery doesn't require nearly as much physical strength as weight lifting does.

"That's right," Himeno-san said, "so how do you propose that the killer did this?"

"They must have used muscle relaxants on him," I said. "The amount contained in the vial would have been enough to render him helpless."

I had to admit I was grasping at straws here, since there was no guarantee that the amount of muscle relaxant used would have been enough to have the desired effect on someone as large and healthy as Kumakura-san, but no one seemed willing to contest that assertion. Then again, even if the killer wanted me to take the fall for this crime, proving that Kumakura-san had been given the muscle relaxants wouldn't necessarily detract from their efforts.

"Just checking, but where would they obtain those chemicals?" Kurogane-san said.

"The chemical cabinet, of course," Kirishima-san said, "which is found in the chemical lab in the research division. Anyone can access it."

Kirishima-san glanced at me as he said that, as did Asakura. Kirishima-san's logic cut both ways, of course, but at this point, there was more evidence that would declare me the prime suspect.

"Yes, that's true," Higurashi-san said, "and I had been wary about that. Unfortunately, we'll need more definite proof in order to narrow down the pool of suspects. Do you know when the chemicals might have been taken?"

"As I said to Nagato-kun earlier, I was able to account for them the last time I left the lab before the murder, at 6:45 PM," Kirishima-san said. "Since I would not loan them to anyone for any reason, the culprit must have found their way into the lab and obtained the chemicals between then and the murder."

"I see," Higurashi-san said. "At this point, everyone knew about the chemicals, so anyone could have done it. The only question is when. From what I recall, the murder was most likely committed at 7 PM at the earliest, and 8:20 PM at the latest."
So we were back to discussing the time of Kirishima-san's death once again. The answer could likely shed light on who could or could not have done it, but no matter what the time of death was, I was still a viable suspect. That obviously meant that whatever answer we came up with wouldn't matter to the blackened when it came to framing me, but avoiding getting caught was another story.

"If Kumakura-san was smothered to death, it probably would have taken several minutes to kill him," Himeno-san said. "Of course, since I only discovered his body by chance, it was unlikely that anyone would have stumbled upon him by accident."

For a moment, I suspected that Himeno-san might have been the culprit, if she brought three people to the crime scene to prevent the others from realizing that she, the culprit, wouldn't count toward the three required to trigger the body discovery announcement. That being said, Sayuri-san hadn't mentioned seeing anyone else besides "me" pass by her room, and if Himeno-san was guilty, she'd have had to pass by that way to return to her room, or otherwise loop around from the outside.

"For now, let's stick with how the murder was carried out and see if we can obtain some clues by discussing that," Sayuri-san said. "Chiyuri-chan, where were we?"

"We were discussing how the culprit gave the muscle relaxants to Kumakura-san," I said. "There was a syringe in the trash can, so they most likely used that to do the job."

"That seems unlikely," Kirishima-san said. "Kumakura-kun had no puncture wounds on his body, so the killer could not possibly have injected him with any chemicals. Furthermore, since all of us are well aware that we do not have any medicine for the Despair Diseases, it is unlikely that he would have sat still and willingly allowed himself to be injected with an unknown chemical."

"You said it," Asakura said. "What are you going to say, Nagato? That a big, strong tough guy like Kumakura's afraid of needles?"

I ignored Asakura's remark, since I was too busy thinking about what to say next. Was the muscle relaxant bottle a red herring, or was it a clue that would help me unravel the mystery? After a moment, the answer finally occurred to me.

"You're right about that, Kirishima-san," I said, "because the culprit didn't inject the chemicals into Kumakura-san's bloodstream. They could have introduced it to him through his food. I saw a hole pierced through the plastic wrapping for his dinner, showing that the killer injected the chemicals directly into the meal contained inside. He must not have noticed that the meal was tainted until he'd eaten it."

"Perhaps," Kirishima-san said. "but all the chemicals had strong tastes. Anyone would have noticed something odd about their food."

"Anyone but Kumakura-san," I said, "because today, he lost his sense of taste. Tatsuki-san, you noticed this, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Tatsuki-san said. "Kumakura-kun can barely stomach spicy foods, and eats them with a great deal of evident discomfort. Today, however, he ate a spicy lunch with no complaints at all."

If Mom was here, I'm sure she, as a parent, could tell when someone liked what they ate, or could merely tolerate it. Kumakura-san's parents probably would have been able to do the same thing, having gotten to know their son's likes and dislikes very well.

"Are you certain he can't taste today?" Kurogane-san said. "What about his other senses?"
"He demonstrated the ability to see and hear when we held a conversation," Tatsuki-san said. "He responded to what I had to say and made eye contact. He even told me to wipe some food off my lip."

While that was probably mildly embarrassing for Tatsuki-san, it went a long way toward proving my case. I decided to ride with the momentum and continue bringing forth the evidence.

"There's also what Monokuma said," I said. "Two days ago, in the morning, he said that the disease would affect a different one of Kumakura-san's senses on each day- 'sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.' If he lost his sense of taste today, the order would match the one Monokuma gave us."

"Wow, you really do remember, Nagato-san!" Monokuma said. "It's almost as though you never had a memory-altering disease."

A part of me worried that this demonstration of how well I remembered a seemingly innocuous comment by Monokuma might undercut my claim that my ability to create memories had been affected, but all of us knew when I was affected by the disease. Of course, Asakura was clearly unconvinced, and glared at me.

"So now we know that after Kumakura ate the food, he was incapacitated, so anyone could've killed him," Asakura said. "In other words, there's no reason to rule Nagato out."

There had been many times over the past few days when I wished Akira-san was still with us, and I'd never felt that desire more strongly than I did at this moment. Not only was she skilled at solving mysteries, but people would probably be more willing to believe her, since she wasn't the prime suspect at the moment. That said, she couldn't be here, so it was up to me to do what I could in her stead.

"I'll admit that I'm a possible suspect," I said, "but you'll need more than that to convince us that I'm guilty. You'll have to prove that I am the killer, as well as how I carried out the crime."

"Yes, that is true," Kirishima-san said, "but at this point, you can hardly fault us for suspecting you, unless you can provide evidence to clear your name."

"What about the rag in the trash?" Higurashi-san said. "If the killer used the muscle relaxant on Higurashi-kun, then it's most likely that they used the chloroform on the rag so that they could render Nagato-san unconscious, doesn't it?"

"It is merely a red herring, intended to throw us off the trail," Kirishima-san said. "Nagato-kun used the chloroform to render herself unconscious, so that she could pretend to be a victim left behind at the crime scene."

I frowned. While I knew that proving that I'd been chloroformed would be the key to proving my innocence, I'd first need to lay the groundwork. Luckily, I had a clue.

"So in other words, that was all part of my grand plan, right?" I said. "That's awfully complex for someone who can't remember what she was doing five minutes ago, isn't it?"

"Maybe you thought of it back before you got the disease," Asakura said, "and were just waiting for the right opportunity."

"That isn't possible," I said. "Yesterday, I didn't know whether Kumakura-san would lose his sense of taste today. I also didn't know that I would be infected, let alone how my disease would work."

"But maybe you could have predicted either of those, could you not?" Kirishima-san said. "As you
said, there was a pattern."

"There was," I said, "but it was just as likely that he would have lost a different one of his senses today. If I had waited until tomorrow, Tatsuki-san would have died, and Kumakura-san might have gotten the 'death disease' after her. Besides, I had no way of knowing that Himeno-san or I would be infected today."

Kirishima-san seemed thoroughly unconvinced, so I decided to switch gears, focusing on facts instead of speculation.

"Anyway, before we talked about how Kumakura-san was killed, we were discussing how I could have reminded myself of the plan," I said, "since if I were the killer, I would need some way to keep myself on task."

"Exactly," Kirishima-san said, "and your notebook would be the ideal method. You could write the directions on it, and rip out the pages to prevent anyone from discovering them. Once you were done, you could dispose of them in one of the many trash cans in this hospital. Considering that most of us only looked in the trash cans for the rooms that were occupied, we would most likely have missed it."

It struck me as odd that Kirishima-san was intelligent enough to consider this possibility, but not smart enough to actually go to the trouble of looking for the missing notebook page. Luckily, I'd been a bit more thorough in my search and had located my notebook. The only question was whether he'd found out, too.

"Yes, I would have done that," I said, "but tell me something. Where exactly was my notebook left?"

Kirishima-san went silent for a moment. I was about to answer, but Himeno-san was a bit quicker on the draw, evidently knowing where I was headed with this.

"Why don't I tell you?" Himeno-san said. "I found the notebook in the bottom compartment of the cart, in the storage closet, before Chiyuri did. When I did, the pages were already ripped out. If Chiyuri had been the killer, she wouldn't have been careless enough to let me retrieve it first."

"The fact that it was found there was also significant," I said, "since the bottom compartment of the cart was large enough to contain a person. It's possible that the killer put me in there, and left the notebook behind."

"Yeah, a likely story," Asakura said. "Got any proof?"

"My story just now is the proof," Himeno-san said. "I was the first to discover the notebook, even before Chiyuri did. Therefore, she couldn't have planted the evidence."

As Asakura went silent, I smiled. I couldn't solve the mystery myself, even if I hadn't failed to remember much of what happened today, but it was good to see that some of my classmates believed in my innocence and were willing to help me. Most of my classmates at St. Mary's probably would have abandoned me, but here, I had actual friends.

"So it's possible that Nagato-san was set up, but also possible that she did it," Karita-san said. "Did anyone actually see her?"

"I did," Sayuri-san said. "A little before 7:30 PM, I saw Chiyuri-chan- or at least someone who looks like her- leaving her hospital room with the cart."
"Whoever you think you saw does not matter, Sasaki-kun," Kirishima-san said. "Answer this question- did you or did you not see Nagato-kun leaving the scene of the crime?"

For a scientist, Kirishima-san seemed surprisingly uninterested in the minute details of Sayuri-san's account, which might be crucial information for an experiment. She didn't argue with him, though, and simply let off a sigh and nodded.

"Yes, I saw her," Sayuri-san said. "I also saw her roughly one hour prior to that, when she stopped by my hospital room, and left without saying a word."

Ordinarily, this would seem like a smoking gun that would prove my guilt, but luckily, the others didn't seem to see it as such. She hadn't mentioned the previous incident before, but since it was at 6:30 PM, before the chemicals went missing, maybe she didn't think it was important until she heard about the chemicals.

"Can you tell me a little more about, well, me?" I said.

It was an odd request to ask Sayuri-san about my own actions, but luckily for me, she was willing to humor me.

"All right," Sayuri-san said. "The first time, you simply walked by, peered into my room, and left after I greeted you by name. The second time, you were pushing the cart and wearing your school uniform. I said hello to you, but you didn't respond."

That struck me as odd in more ways than one. Since Sayuri-san had told me something to that effect before, she probably wasn't lying, but I'd need to get to the bottom of this, so I started asking more specific questions.

"My school uniform, right?" I said. "As in, what I'm wearing right now?"

"Yes, that's right," Sayuri-san said. "What about it?"

"As you all know, I was found wearing my hospital gown," I said, "so there are three problems. First, there's no logical reason for me to change into my uniform, since it couldn't be used as a disguise. Second, it would be difficult to dispose of all the clothing at the scene without raising suspicions. Third, it would take a couple minutes to change out of my uniform- while I could quickly slip off the blazer and undo my skirt's fasteners, I can't quickly untie my tie or unbutton my shirt."

"Indeed," Tatsuki-san said. "I have to budget a little extra time to getting dressed on school days."

"So it is impractical for you to suddenly change into and out of your uniform," Kirishima-san said, "but perhaps Sasaki-kun is mistaken? Or did the culprit wear your clothing to impersonate you?"

I shook my head. My hair was dark, which was a very common color in Japan, as well as one I shared with the other remaining girls, but it was also short enough that none of the other girls could have disguised themselves as me by wearing a wig. True, the three of them had their hair tied up in various ways, but when they let their hair down, it was obviously longer than mine.

"You're right that it couldn't have happened as she saw it," I said, "but it's definitely how she sees it. Her 'recognition disease' causes her own brain to see people wearing their usual clothes. In my case, most of you are used to me wearing my uniform, right?"

The others nodded and murmured in agreement.
"That's exactly my point," I said. "Sayuri-san didn't see me pushing the cart, but someone else who she thought was me. What's more, wouldn't I have said hello to Sayuri-san?"

"I honestly don't know how chummy you two girls are," Asakura said, "but maybe you'd be a little cold to her if you planned on letting her die?"

"I don't think so," Himeno-san said. "I already knew that Sayuri, who gets along with most people, had recently become closer friends with Chiyuri. I also know Sayuri well enough that if I were her, I'd have found it odd if the normally polite Chiyuri didn't say hello. If Chiyuri was the murderer, then the last thing she would want was people finding her behavior suspicious."

I had to agree. Unfortunately, from what I'd heard of tonight's events, no one seemed to be acting particularly unlike themselves this evening, not even those who had the personality-altering Despair Diseases. I'd have to find the culprit another way.

"The person who Sayuri-san mistook for me might have known we're friends," I said, "but that person might have been scared of revealing their own identity by talking, especially if they had a male voice."

"That makes sense," Karita-san said. "Otherwise, they'd probably impersonate you while giving a confession. But why not milk Sasaki-san mistaking you for all it's worth to sell the idea that you're the culprit?"

I thought for a moment, and then realized.

"You know, I don't think the culprit wanted the others to find Kumakura-san so easily," I said. "Their goal was to have the body discovery wait until after we'd gone back to the ship, so we'd assume that the murder also occurred during that time frame. This would have reduced the suspects to five people- myself and the four other sick patients. The culprit is thus most likely one of the four healthy patients."

"Probably," Karita-san said, "but it didn't work out that way. Like Sasaki-san said, the killing probably happened around 7:30 PM, right?"

"It did," I said, "during which time you, Higurashi-san, and Asakura...-san were having dinner together at the restaurant. As for the patients, most of us were in our rooms at the time, including Sayuri-san, whose testimony supposedly helped confirm that I headed to the crime scene. The culprit is most likely a healthy person who wanted to avoid being suspected for the crime."

I took a deep breath. I didn't have as much evidence as I'd liked, but I knew that the person had been acting strangely all this time, and had lied to me at least once since the investigation started. The time had come to formally accuse that person, since, if nothing else, I at least had more evidence than they had when they pointed the finger of blame at me.

"That only leaves one person," I said. "Namely you, Kirishima-san."

Kirishima-san frowned at me, seemingly mildly annoyed at worst. He'd always been one of the more levelheaded members of this class, but he didn't seem half as worried about being accused as I had been.

"You have an overactive imagination, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said, "not to mention a cowardly and selfish streak. Azuki-kun faced her end with far more grace than you could possibly summon for yourself."

I glanced at Kirishima-san skeptically. It seemed odd of Kirishima-san to extol Akira-san's virtues
when he'd previously dismissed her death as senseless, not to mention hypocritical of him to do so when he was now in her position. That being said, there were more relevant issues at hand.

"Besides," Kirishima-san said, "who gave you the idea that I was the only person who could have killed Kumakura-kun?"

"You did," I said. "To begin with, you said that you had confirmed all the chemicals in your lab at 6:45, did you not?"

"Yes, I did," Kirishima-san said. "Your point being?"

"You were the last person who mentioned being in the chemical lab," I said, "and that was not long before the murder. If you paid close attention to the chemicals that were still in the cabinet, shouldn't you have kept a closer eye on them?"

Kirishima-san glared at me a moment before regaining his composure. Maybe, by acting more offended over his competence being insulted than of being accused of murder, he was trying to insinuate that he wasn't the blackened.

"Perhaps," Kirishima-san said, "but 45 minutes is long enough for anyone to obtain the chemicals-including you. None of the patients have alibis for that time."

I had to admit that he was right about that. As the previous murders proved, 45 minutes was plenty of time to not only kill someone, but even set up preliminary preparations and/or try to dispose of evidence.

"You have a point," I said, "but do you know of anyone who'd regularly been to the chemical lab, apart from you?"

"Unfortunately, no," Kirishima-san said, "apart from you, that is."

"I see," I said, "so in other words, no one would stop by and notice the chemicals missing before the murder... apart from you."

Kirishima-san bit his lip.

"Of course, the chemicals aren't the only piece of evidence I have against you," I said. "Tatsuki-san, did you see me give you dinner?"

"No, I did not," Tatsuki-san said.

"Me neither," Sayuri-san said.

"Nor did I," Himeno-san said. "I had to get my own dinner."

"Me too," Karita-san said. "Uh, by that I mean, I got my dinner, too."

So it was as I thought. Kirishima-san had lied to me, as well as to Higurashi-san. Most of what he'd said had technically been lies, of course, since he said what he did in order to get us to choose the wrong culprit. That being said, the claim that I'd asked to get everyone dinner was the first one I could prove was a lie- it was false and Kirishima-san knew it was false.

"Are you sure about this, Nagato-san?" Higurashi-san said. "Kirishima-san mentioned that you asked him to let you handle giving everyone their meals."

"I may have asked him that," I said, "but did he actually say yes to me?"
Higurashi-san was struck speechless for a moment, then shook his head.

"Kirishima-san mentioned that I'd asked him to let me handle meals," I said, "and that it was 'against his better judgment,' as he put it. I think he must have known that while his plan would be ruined if someone else actually handed out the meals, but I would be a convenient scapegoat if he made it seem as though I was still serving to everyone. He also said he could not say whether I had actually done it... because I hadn't, and the truth would make him seem suspicious."

Kirishima-san looked taken aback, and I could have sworn I saw a bead of sweat trickle down his face. He was probably starting to regret answering my question, or assuming that his clever wordplay was too subtle for me to figure out.

"Well, of course he'd make things vague," Karita-san said. "It would've been a problem if anyone placed him at the crime scene after the crime."

"That's where Sayuri-san came in," I said. "He knew that at the time of the murder, she'd see him as me, the person he intended to frame for his crime. But did Kirishima-san or 'I' get spotted by anyone between the murder and the body discovery?"

The other patients shook their heads.

"I don't think so," Sayuri-san said. "I saw 'Kotaro-kun' come to get me- actually Himeno-chan- but I didn't see 'you' again."

"I thought so," I said, before turning back to Kirishima-san. "You used Sayuri-san as a witness so that she would place me near the crime scene. However, your plan would be ruined if she saw 'me' while I was passed out at the crime scene, so you stashed the cart in the closet and went out the back exit. You then rejoined Higurashi-san and the other healthy boys, hoping that the crime wouldn't be discovered until after you'd boarded the ship, and that we'd limit the suspect pool to those in the hospital."

Kirishima-san sighed, more of exasperation than resignation. He was desperate, but not defeated, and no matter what trick he had up his sleeve, I'd have to overcome it if I wanted to prove him guilty.

"You are forgetting one important piece of evidence," Kirishima-san said, "namely, a note to yourself describing the murder."

Kirishima-san got out a spare sheet of notebook paper and showed it to everyone. On it was the following writing.

*Inject Kumakura-san's meal with muscle relaxant*

*Feed Kumakura-san the meal.*

*Smother Kumakura-san with pillow*

*Inhale chloroform; pass out.*

*Let other classmates discover me.*

Each item was checked off, save for the latter two.

"Why didn't you show us this earlier?" Asakura said, sounding more annoyed than outright angry, not to mention more upset with the timing than the fact that Kirishima-san was lying to him.
"It was not the right time," Kirishima-san said. "I had hoped to more conclusively prove Nagato-kun's guilt, as well as how the crime had gone according to plan before I showed this to you."

I scoffed and shook my head. As much as I wanted to tell everyone that Kirishima-san had lied yet again, I knew it was better to show that to them.

"And you're saying now's the right time?" I said. "There's more than a few things wrong with this so-called evidence."

"Very well," Kirishima-san said. "If you are so confident in your belief, then name your so-called pieces of evidence supporting it."

"First, there's the chloroform bottle," I said, "which was hidden inside the top drawer of the medical supply cart. If I'd indeed used it to render myself unconscious, I might have been able to put the bottle back in the drawer and shut it before I passed out, but I wouldn't be able to move the cart. I might have applied the chloroform to the rag after pushing the cart to the storage room, then walked back to Kumakura-san's hospital room, but that wouldn't have made much sense, especially since I risked being seen."

So did Kirishima-san, but luckily for him, he had a "witness" who wouldn't recognize him- Sayuri-san. Of course, being seen as me while I was unconscious would have ruined his plan, hence why he left via the other end of the hall rather than doubling back.

"Then Himemiya-kun must have," Kirishima-san said, "when she discovered the body."

"The cart was already gone when I arrived at the scene," Himeno-san said, "and I immediately went back to get Sayuri and the others. Besides, since there's no benefit for me to being an accomplice, I would have had no reason to help her."

Now that I thought about it, Kirishima-san had presumably chosen me to take the fall for the crime because of my inability to remember anything would make it difficult for me to defend myself. Unfortunately for him, he hadn't taken into account whether it would be possible for me to commit the crime in the way he wanted the others to think I had.

"The second problem lies with the note itself," I said. "Turn it around, please."

Kirishima-san hesitantly turned the note around, and it showed my conversation with Kumakura-san from yesterday.

"On that side, there's written correspondence between Kirishima-san and myself," I said. "Note that neither of our handwriting matches what's on the back."

"And the writing on the back matches Kirishima's?" Asakura said.

"Most likely," I said, "but I think there's something more relevant at play. If Kirishima-san was able to retrieve one of our sheets from Kumakura-san's room, he must have gone in between the murder and the body discovery... meaning he is most likely the killer."

Kirishima-san clenched his hand into a fist, scrunching up the piece of paper held within it. With that last bluff crushed, he'd run out of ammunition to use against me, but had I really prevailed?

I looked around. Not only did Asakura clearly not believe me, but there were a couple other people on the fence, and Kirishima-san hadn't given up yet. I couldn't feel completely confident in my conclusion, but then again, maybe Akira-san hadn't been, either.
"It seems as though not all of you are convinced," I said. "I'll go over what happened, and if you have a better explanation, I'm willing to listen to it."

_The culprit's preparations for the murder must have begun earlier today. They learned that I had a disease that prevented me from creating new memories, and that Kumakura-san was now unable to taste anything. They then hatched a plan to murder him and pin the blame on me._

_The final preparations began that evening. At 6:30 PM, they visited Sayuri-san and confirmed that she would mistake them for me. At 6:45 PM, when the culprit departed the chemical lab with two vials- chloroform and muscle relaxant. At some time around 7:20 PM, the culprit soaked a rag in chloroform and used it to render me unconscious, before stuffing my unconscious body into the lower compartment of the medical cart. Since they were confident that Sayuri-san would see them as me, they decided to use her as a witness, since her room was between mine and Kumakura-san's._

_At 7:30 PM, the culprit used a syringe to inject Kumakura-san's food with muscle relaxants. Without his sense of taste, he ate it all up, not knowing until it was too late that it was poisoned. The muscle relaxants took effect, paralyzing him, and enabling the killer to smother him with a pillow._

_With Kumakura-san dead, the culprit then decided to falsify evidence to make me look like the suspect. They then retrieved me from the cart and put my unconscious body in the room. They planted the chloroform-soaked rag in the trash to make it seem as though I'd prepared it myself before passing out from the fumes. They also retrieved one of the sheets of paper from my notebook that I'd left Kumakura-san to write on, in order to falsify a "to-do list" I'd written to myself with the plan for the crime. Afterward, they stashed the chloroform and muscle relaxants, as well as the syringe, into the cart's top drawer, and left with it._

_The murder complete, the culprit decided to leave the cart in the supply closet and exited out that end of the hallway, meeting up with the boys who'd eaten together that evening and returning to the ship with them. Their goal was to mislead us into believing that the crime had been committed after the healthy students had returned to the ship, and trick us into thinking that they could not be a possible suspect. However, when Himeno-san stopped by the room, she found the body ahead of schedule, and alerted the others about it. The others then rushed in, finding me lying unconscious near Kumakura-san's corpse. The culprit, convinced that they'd successfully framed me then continued their efforts to deceive us and get away with their crime, unaware that they'd left a trail of evidence pointing to them._

_Can you disprove my hypothesis, Seita Kirishima-san?_

Kirishima-san calmly shook his head.

"Unfortunately, Nagato-kun, I cannot," Kirishima-san said. "Loath as I am to admit defeat, I must concede that I am unable to refute your argument. As you said, I did indeed murder Kumakura-kun, in the way you described."

I let off a faint sigh of relief. I'd briefly suspected that he had one last card left to play, but it seemed as though he was ready to fold, even knowing what was at stake.

As for the others, they seemed grimly satisfied with the outcome. Kirishima-san had betrayed us by killing Kumakura-san, and was going to die for what he'd done, but the rest of us would live... for now.

"It looks like we've come to a decision," I said. "I think we're ready to vote, Monokuma."
"As do I," Monokuma said. "Will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one?"

We all cast our votes, and moments later, the results came back. Kirishima-san got eight votes, while I got one. The die landed with Kirishima-san's face up, and showed "GUILTY!"

The courtroom remained silent in the aftermath of the verdict. Kirishima-san stood there calmly, while the rest of us were anxious to hear Monokuma confirm that we'd gotten the right answer. I might have been the one who named Kirishima-san as the culprit, but if the others were like Himeno-san, they were willing to take responsibility for their decision. If we were right, they'd acknowledge that they played a role in sacrificing Kirishima-san, but if they were wrong, they wouldn't blame anyone else.

"And that's four!" Monokuma said. "The blackened who killed Kotaro Kumakura-san is none other than... Seita Kirishima-san!"

So, it was over. My first trial without Akira-san. I'd helped guide my class to the correct answer, knowing that there would be no second chances. I'd voted for the culprit, knowing that I'd be sentencing him to death. I'd stepped up just as Akira-san had, but I didn't feel any better about myself.

"But it looks like it wasn't unanimous this time, either," Monokuma said. "Asakura-san, are you really that convinced that Nagato-san did it?"

Asakura scoffed.

"That's easier to believe than some things," Asakura said. "She's the primary suspect all this time, but she somehow turns everything around and proves that Kirishima's guilty? Something's fishy here."

I let off a nervous chuckle. As much as I wanted to call Asakura out on voting for me for such a foolish reason, it would be somewhat hypocritical of me to do so after I'd failed to vote for Akira-san last time. Besides, it wasn't as though he was willing to listen to anything I had to say.

"So it's true," I said, "but there's one thing I don't understand. Why did you kill Kumakura-san and try to graduate, Kirishima-san?"

"Graduation was not originally my goal," Kirishima-san said, "but to be blunt, the last three murders, especially the third, drove home the senselessness and futility of our situation. As such, I deemed graduation to be the only logical choice, regardless of what I would have to risk or sacrifice."

"What do you mean?" I said. "Why would what happened make you think that graduation was your only way out?"

Kirishima-san sighed, evidently thinking that it spoke for itself. On the contrary, the killing game had always been a violent and senseless string of tragedies, and the only question was why Kirishima-san thought he would succeed where the previous blackened had failed... or why he deserved to live more than the spotless.

"Think about it," Kirishima-san said. "The first trial, quite simply, proved that some of us are willing to commit murder and leave the others to die in order to graduate. It also proved that Monokuma's assumption that we would kill each other in a situation like this was far from baseless, and his promise to execute anyone who failed to get away with murder was not an empty one... or so I thought."
"You're talking about Taiga, right?" Tatsuki-san said.

Kirishima nodded.

"In the second trial, you committed murder, but your sister was executed in your stead," Kirishima-san said, "a mistake Monokuma refused to rectify once he realized you were still alive. It became clear that Monokuma simply wanted us all to watch the spectacle of an execution, and did not care about punishing the perpetrator."

Monokuma put his paws over his ears (which didn't block out the sound) and said "La-la-la! I can't hear you!" (which didn't drown out Kirishima-san). Most of us ignored him, though.

"You're not wrong about that," Karita-san said, "but are you telling us that it took you that long to figure it out? I think most of us realized this wasn't about justice before any of us died."

"Oh, I am not so naïve as to belief that Monokuma cares about justice," Kirishima-san said, "but it would appear that he cannot be trusted to follow even his own rules."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "Monokuma is anything but untrustworthy, but he rarely breaks his own rules; he merely bends them far enough to fit his purposes."

Kirishima-san looked at me skeptically, not to mention impatiently. Judging from his expression, I could tell that he was getting to the heart of his answer to my question.

"The third trial was the last straw," Kirishima-san said. "Azuki-kun committed murder purely by coincidence, but she was treated the same way as Tachibana-kun, who'd killed to defend her sister, and Yamazaki-kun, who was guilty of premeditated murder. At that point, I realized that most of us would likely die senseless deaths in the near future, since the killing game was not designed to be won."

"So in other words, you just wanted to save yourself," Higurashi-san said.

"You should look at this dispassionately," Kirishima-san said. "As a scientist, I am the most likely of us to provide significant benefit to the human race. Perhaps the best course of action would have been to commit murder with Monokuma's second motive, and take Nagato-sensei with me, but I did not realize the truth back then. Besides, with Kumakura-kun lacking his sense of taste, and Nagato-kun unable to create new memories, the time was right for a murder plan. I had no way of knowing if a better opportunity would come along, or if I would even get another chance, so I chose to act."

I firmly shook my head, refusing to accept anything of what I'd heard. Of course, since I couldn't deny that Monokuma's game was unfair, and it would be redundant to say that Kirishima-san's plan had failed, I decided to speak to his motive.

"I don't believe it," I said. "You may be a famous and respected geneticist, but I doubt anything you will accomplish in the future would justify sacrificing nine innocent lives. Akira-san realized this, which is why she gave up her own life, and I believe Taiga-san felt the same way, which is why she died in her sister's place rather than graduate and sacrifice everyone."

Tatsuki nodded in agreement, but Kirishima-san gave a "tsk-tsk" sound and wagged his finger at me.

"A noble sentiment, but a hollow one, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said, "for you say that as someone who is still alive. Will you be as brave as the previous two when doing the right thing requires you to lay down your life?"
I was speechless for a moment. I'd been able to prove that Kirishima-san was guilty of murder, especially when the circumstances made me an ideal scapegoat, but what if I'd turned out to be the culprit? I knew what I wanted to say- that I would have followed Akira-san's example- but didn't know if I could say it honestly.

"You aren't wrong about that, Kirishima-kun," Karita-san said, "but what about you? I bet it would be a lie to say that you aren't feeling at least a little scared now that you're done for."

"My untimely demise is regrettable," Kirishima-san said, "but the fruits of my research live on, and will serve as my legacy. Even my death will serve as a warning to you all, and remind you of the price of failure in the killing game."

"Yes, it's true," I said. "In every trial, the blackened and spotless stake their lives. But there are better things to die for."

My point seemed to hit home, as Kirishima paused for a moment, nodded, then reached into the pocket of his lab coat to retrieve a notebook.

"Nagato-kun, I have one final offering to you," Kirishima-san said. "This journal contains all the observations I have made about my time on this ship, including some I have not shared with anyone. Use them as you see fit."

Kirishima-san walked over to me, and handed me the journal.

"Thank you, Kirishima-san," I said. "Even though I can't condone what you've done... I'll never forget you."

"I appreciate you saying that, Nagato-kun," Kirishima-san said. "I have failed, and must now pay the price, but at least my time here was not in vain."

Kirishima-san then returned to his seat and turned to Tatsuki-san.

"I can guess what is on your mind, Tachibana-kun," Kirishima-san said. "You believe that you are only alive because I killed Kumakura-kun, do you not?"

"That's more or less it," Tatsuki-san said. "If you had not killed him, I would have died in less than twelve hours."

"Then please dispense with that notion," Kirishima-san said. "My crime was committed solely for my sake, and if I had succeeded, you would have died as surely as if I had done nothing. There is no reason to feel indebted to me."

Tatsuki-san smiled weakly. Kirishima-san wasn't the type to say things just to be nice, which was why Tatsuki-san could believe him. Maybe he and Akira-san had more in common than either thought.

Monokuma then clapped his paws together, getting our attention.

"If you've said your piece, then it's that time once again," Monokuma said. "I'm tired of waiting."

"As am I," Kirishima-san said. "I have done everything else I can, so there is no reason to postpone my fate."

The rest of us weren't nearly as pleased. Not only would we witness yet another horrific execution, but none of us could grasp why Kirishima-san was so calm about it.
"Now then, I've prepared a very special punishment for the Ultimate Geneticist!"

"So, this how my life ends," Kirishima-san said. "If only I could record what happens after death; it would be a discovery for the ages."

"Let's give it everything we've got! IT'S PUNISHMENT TIME!"

Game Over

Kirishima-san has been found guilty

Time for the punishment!

As Kirishima-san was pulled into the execution chamber, I saw his eyes gleam for a moment, apparently out of curiosity as to how he'd meet his demise or what would become of him afterward.

The Ultimate Geneticist, Seita Kirishima's Execution: Executed.

Evolve Or Die

Kirishima-san was locked in a test chamber with a warning label that read CAUTION: DANGEROUS LEVELS OF RADIATION. There was a thick metal door with a sturdy window and a high-tech lock... and Kirishima-san was on the wrong side of the door.

Monokuma, dressed in a small lab coat, activated some machinery outside, flipping levers, pushing buttons and turning knobs. I couldn't tell what each of them did, save for a few ones that were labeled with a harmful radioactive symbol, but it seemed as though Monokuma was pushing the machinery past its usual operating limits.

Some warning lights and sirens turned on as the experiment began. A bright green glow bathed the room as Kirishima-san was bombarded with lethal doses of radiation. Within moments, he slumped against the door and collapsed, out of sight.

Eventually, the machinery shut down, the radiation stopped, and Monokuma opened the door to see Kirishima-san's heavily irradiated corpse. Monokuma simply shrugged and looked at the camera, while the following text showed up on screen.

Superhero Creation Experiment

Test 1

Subject: Seita Kirisima

Outcome: Failure

As the execution ended, the eight remaining students, half of those who had been there for the start of the killing game, stood in silence. None of us felt much pity for Kirishima-san, who was not only first actual murderer to be executed since Yamazaki-san, but wasn't half as remorseful about what he'd did. That said, we all agreed that this was a bit much for him. He'd been willing to stake his life, but that didn't mean he deserved to die for what he'd done.

As for me, I forced myself to watch the execution from start to finish. For better or worse, this was
the consequence of my uncovering the truth, so it would be cowardly for me to look away. I'd played my roles in sentencing each of the blackened to death, so I had to accept the price we'd paid for our survival, even if I wasn't happy about paying it. Even Kirishima-san had refused to blame anyone else for his actions, so it would be wrong for me to try to run away from taking responsibility for this outcome.

"Wow, that was fun," Monokuma said. "Intense radiation usually turns people into superheroes or into corpses, and I guess it was the latter this time."

"Are you happy now, Monokuma?" I said. "Did Kirishima-san learn the lesson you wanted him to?"

"He was on the right track, I'll give him that," Monokuma said, "but he hadn't completely given up on hope. He still thought he'd get away with it until you summarized the case. Still, when a completely rational person like him decides to go for broke and try to graduate, you know he's desperate."

I couldn't argue with Monokuma on that point. Higurashi-san and I had always known that escaping together had been a pipe dream at best, but we knew that we had to keep the class invested in working together. After all, if they didn't, then the only natural conclusion was that one person would survive, and it might as well be you.

"But look on the bright side, kids," Monokuma said. "There's only two stops left, and since the latter's our final destination, there's only one more normal island on the cruise."

"What will happen on the last island?" Higurashi-san said.

"Sorry, I'm not going to spoil it," Monokuma said. "There'll probably be another class trial between now and then, and not all of you will make it through, so you children shouldn't get ahead of yourselves. If you do make it to the last island, though, then count yourself lucky, because you'll have outlived more than half of your classmates."

I thought back to the first time we'd come into this courtroom, and how much larger our group was back then. Since then, I'd had to say goodbye to five of us, including the closest friend I'd ever had. If we survived another trial, I'd have to lose at least two more classmates, quite possibly people I'd come to consider friends. I certainly wasn't looking forward to finding out who would be the next to die.

"But I guess that's a bit too far off in the future," Monokuma said. "Congratulations on getting through a trial once again, and I'll see you next time."

Monokuma left us once again. For the fourth time, we were expected to take the elevator out of the courtroom in a timely fashion, but at the moment, none of us really felt like doing anything.

"So... this is victory," I said, "or at least what passes for it in the killing game."

"It's only natural when it comes to competition," Higurashi-san said, "since one person's victory means everyone else's defeat. If you're hired for a job, elected to public office or win a sporting event or other contest of skill, you defeat all other comers. The only thing you can do is prove that you deserve it more than the other contenders."

"That's all well and good," Tatsuki-san said, "since I felt the same way about winning the chance to play at the talent show back before I became famous. I defeated all the other contestants, including Taiga, who'd succumbed to stage fright despite being my equal at playing the guitar. But what do
you do when the contest isn't over a job or a prize, but over who gets to live?"

Higurashi-san thought over his answer carefully, but then nodded solemnly.

"The same principle applies," Higurashi-san said. "Kirishima-kun must have thought that he would be more useful in some ways than the rest of us, that his survival and escape would justify letting the eight of us and Nagato-sensei die. It was a selfish and egotistical belief, but he's right about one thing- all of us are alive because of other people's deaths, and must never forget those who died so we might live."

Tatsuki-san clearly understood what Higurashi-san was implying; when he'd said "all of us," there was an unspoken "not just you." Even after the incident in which she'd killed Kojima-san and Taiga-san had died to save her, she'd played a role in convicting Yamazaki-san, Akira-san and Kirishima-san. Whether blackened or spotless, she'd survived because of others' sacrifices, and the same went for the rest of us. I didn't have much hope that we'd live well enough to justify the sacrifice of those who had died, but the least we could do was find the truth and end the killing.

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_End of Chapter IV_

_Class Members Remaining: 9_

**Notebook:** A memento of Kirishima. He meticulously recorded all details of his experiments.

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_Author's Notes_

Thank you for sharing your theories. I'd like to congratulate DarkX The Dragon Knight for not only identifying Kirishima as the culprit, but figuring out the virtually the entire murder.

While I'd always planned for Kirishima to be a murderer, not to mention the least sympathetic culprit thus far, I had a bit of trouble coming up with a genetics-themed execution. I ended up changing his execution somewhat recently, while I was finalizing the chapter.

The first part of the next Chapter may not be out for a while, possibly until the start of April, since I'll be working on that Chapter, as well as the rest of Chiyuri's Free Time Events. Without spoiling too much, it will involve the search for the traitor. Do any of you have any ideas as to who the traitor is at this point, or if they're even still alive?
Chapter V: No Matter How I Look At It, It's You Guys' Fault I'm Not Talented!

Daily Life

Immediately after we exited the courtroom, Higurashi-san and I went to meet up with Mom in her cell. Luckily for us, she was up to speed from watching the trial through the camera in the courtroom, so we didn't even need to tell her the outcome.

"Excellent work, Chiyuri," Mom said. "You did well helping everyone uncover the truth and find the killer. It wasn't an easy or pleasant task, but because you succeeded, nine lives were saved, including both of ours."

"Thanks, Mom," I said.

While I still felt disturbed by witnessing Kirishima-san's execution, and knowing I'd helped cause it, I also knew that from a utilitarian perspective, one person's death was preferable to everyone else's, especially when that person was willing to let nine others die for his own survival. If Kirishima-san was a spotless, he wouldn't have any objections to my thinking of it this way.

"By the way, I don't suppose your memory has returned?" Mom said. "Then again, on second thought, I suppose the problem is that you didn't lose it to begin with, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's exactly it," I said. "I can remember everything that happened since I woke up in the hospital room, but I still can't remember anything that happened between then and when I went to bed last night."

"That's certainly strange," Mom said, "but if you couldn't create new memories during that time, it's the only natural result."

"Indeed," Higurashi-san said. "One thing I've been curious about since seeing Nagato-san contract her disease is what happened to our memories of the past few years. Were they erased like math problems written with chalk on a blackboard? Or were they stolen from us and taken somewhere, like a spy taking classified documents?"

"It's hard to say," Mom said, "since I don't know of any technology that could erase people's memories, and doubt that anyone could have developed such a thing in the past two years, unless it was a top secret research project."

That sort of memory altering device sounded as though it would be useful for a spy- if someone was about to blow the spy's cover, the spy could wipe their memory instead of having to murder them- so any government would be tight-lipped about working on that sort of thing. Of course, the device would probably be useless if it wasn't portable or concealable, like if it was a large stationary machine rather than a device that could fit into the spy's pocket.

"In any case," Mom said, "the diseases that affected the six of you seem utterly unnatural. There are many reasons why I wish Kirishima-san hadn't committed murder, including that we could use his scientific expertise right now."

One of the most tragic parts about the killing game was how many talented young lives were being claimed. Not only would the world have benefited from these teenagers growing up, refining their skills and putting them to good use, but we could often have been helped by them, even the more
esoteric talents (although I recall that Yamazaki-san disagreed). I wouldn't have been as much use to the group as some of the others, but I could still solve a mystery, and I had people who would grieve for me if I died, so I refused to throw away my life.

"That reminds me," I said. "Kirishima-san gave me his notebook at the end of the trial. I haven't had a chance to read it, though."

"Then I think you should do so, Chiyuri," Mom said, "since he entrusted you with that information. It's getting late, though, so you may want to do it later."

I yawned and nodded. Even though I felt surprisingly healthy, and had spent most of the day in bed, I was still tired after a long day, so I said good night to Mom, took the elevator up, said good night to Higurashi-san and retired to my cabin.

Inside my cabin, I had trouble getting to sleep, so I sat in bed, wearing my nightgown, and took a quick look at Kirishima-san's notebook.

Some of his observations were things we'd already noticed before. He'd included a folded up map of the world, and had charted our progress, as well as the location of the islands. According to his calculations, the fourth island was somewhere in the middle of California, so either he'd made a mistake, or we didn't actually set sail from Japan. He wasn't the Ultimate Geographer or the Ultimate Cartographer, so either outcome was plausible.

Kirishima-san also had detailed accounts of the weather and the temperatures. They weren't all that unusual for what I assumed was the spring in the seas around Japan, but despite occasional rain, there hadn't been much variation in the weather. He also included records of daily events, as well as most of the significant conversations he had. Unfortunately, his records of his conversations weren't very detailed, and most of them involved Akira-san, so I didn't learn much from those.

One thing Kirishima-san found especially odd was a lack of living creatures, particularly on the third island. As an experiment, he'd left out a piece of meat on a rooftop outside the prison on the third island (making sure that he wouldn't be punished for littering). In normal situations, a seagull might swoop down to eat it, or flies would gather around it as it rotted, but he'd never seen any birds or insects during his time on that island. After the Despair Diseases had broke out, he'd collected a blood sample from Kumakura-san on the second day (noting that Kumakura-san had winced in pain), but was unable to detect any signs of the virus in his bloodstream. In conclusion, he'd suspected that somehow, the Despair Diseases had fooled the body into thinking that it was infected, and causing it to increase its temperature accordingly, but could not discern the cause.

Kirishima-san had also made note of what we'd learned on the island in minute detail. Most of the details were similar to what Akira-san had noticed, but I found a list of our names taped onto a page in the notebook.

*Azuki, Akira, Unit NWP-001*

*Asakura, Yuichi, Unit NWP-002*

*Higurashi, Nobuhiro, Unit NWP-003*

*Himemiya, Himeno, Unit NWP-005 (Kirishima-san wrote a note saying "Unit NWP-004 seems to be listed as out of order")*

*Karita, Satoshi, Unit NWP-006*
Kirishima, Seita, Unit NWP-007
Kojima, Shigeru, Unit NWP-008
Kumakura, Kotaro, Unit NWP-009
Kurogane, Hikaru, Unit NWP-010
Mihama, Miharu, Unit NWP-011
Nagato, Chiyuri, Unit NWP-012
Nagato, Yukari, Unit NWP-013
Sasaki, Sayuri, Unit NWP-014
Tachibana, Taiga, Unit NWP-015
Tachibana, Tatsuki, Unit NWP-016
Tsukimura, Kanae, Unit NWP-017
Yamazaki, Hide, Unit NWP-018

I didn't know what the unit numbers meant, possibly because I hadn't been down to the basement of the office complex, but Kirishima-san also mentioned that there was a total of 24 units inside, so most of them were in use. In any case, this was potentially important information— the first piece of evidence besides the newspaper on the second island that mentioned us, and the only one to list us by name.

I flipped through his notes since then, and found that most of his observations about the fourth island were similar to mine. Eventually, I got to the part at which he started writing about the diseases.

At the end of the notebook, there was one last entry.

The die is cast. Kumakura-kun is dead and I have begun my plan to frame Nagato-kun. While my goal is to succeed, should I fail and be executed, I will leave this journal behind as a record of my observations throughout the killing game. I do not believe there is any way to prevail in this irrational and unfair "game," but anyone who is determined to try may use this information however they see fit, since it will be of no use to me.

So to whoever is reading this now, I assume you are willing to try to end the killing game, in spite of our successive failures. To that, I say this— I cannot lie about your chances, but you have my sympathies.

-Seita Kirishima, the Ultimate Geneticist, Class 32 of Talent High School.

I closed the notebook and set it on my desk. Unsurprisingly, Kirishima-san's observations had no information that would help end the killing game, and the information that it had raised more questions than answers. It was only natural to assume that thanks to Monokuma constantly moving us around, and not staying on one island for more than a few days, no one would come to find us, but we had not seen any signs of life on this trip besides the seventeen of us. Even more disturbingly, the Despair Diseases did not act like ordinary illnesses. Something was going on here, but what?
For now, I was too tired to think much about it, so I changed into my nightgown and said my prayers, asking God to show mercy on the souls of the dead and watch over the living. After I was done, I climbed into bed.

The only thing that enabled me to sleep that night was the fatigue from the trial, as well as staying up late to look over Kirishima-san's notebook. Akira-san had laid down her life so that we could live, and Kirishima-san had once again endangered the group. How many people would survive? And would one of the people Akira-san saved "repay" her by sacrificing everyone else?

A part of me wondered if being indifferent was safer. In the past, not many people had cared about me, so there weren't many people I cared about, either. I was shocked when one of my schoolmates had been stabbed, but I hadn't known the victim, so I wasn't personally affected. The first two murders were a horrifying wake-up call about how cruel people could be to each other, but I didn't know any of the victims or killers very well. Akira-san was the first person whose loss deeply affected me, since she waws my first and dearest friend.

Some would do anything to be free of that pain, but I knew better. The murderers had chosen not to care about how their actions would affect others, which was why they could seek to graduate without remorse holding them back, and there was a time when Tatsuki-san had only cared about her sister. Tatsuki-san, however, was starting to change for the better so I had no desire to go back to the way I was. Even if I ended up feeling grief, sorrow and regret, the fact that I felt that pain was proof that I had a heart, so I would be grateful for it.

Day 26

I woke up by myself once again. As pleasing as it was to make it through another class trial, I wished Akira-san had been able to make it with me. Part of the reason why we were so desperate to get through the class trials at any cost was that doing so was the only way to protect those we cared about. Our successes couldn't bring back the dead, so the number of people in the class was whittled away over time.

That being said, the number of people I cared about had grown. In the beginning, I'd only truly been close to Mom, and while I'd admired Akira-san, I wondered what would become of her. Now, apart from Mom and Akira-san, I had a good partnership with Higurashi-san, was friends with the rest of the girls, got along well with Kurogane-san and... could tolerate Karita-san. That only left Asakura, but as they say, you can't win them all.

The weather was rainy for much of the early morning, but would clear up by breakfast and wouldn't resume until after sundown. I wished we had an Ultimate Meteorologist among us so we could make sense of what was going on, and determine whether this weather was natural. If It was, then we could turn our attention to more relevant matters. If it wasn't, and we could find out why it wasn't, then we had a possible chance of finding a clue of some sort.

At breakfast, the four remaining girls sat around one table, while the four guys sat at the other table. Higurashi-san had noticed that we were rather spread out, and so suggested that we each sit at the tables together, one or boys and one for girls. Since most of my friends were girls, I agreed to the proposal, especially since a certain someone would end up at the other table.

As soon as we sat down to eat, Tatsuki-san checked her watch. Musicians like her were probably busy, so it was only natural that she'd keep close track of the time. I'd heard that manga artists like Sayuri-san were pressed for time with strict deadlines, and Himeno-san probably had archery practice and other engagements, so that left me as the only surviving girl who had very much free
"So, it's after 7 AM," Tatsuki-san said. "If Kumakura-kun hadn't gotten killed, if I'd been targeted instead, or if Kirishima-kun had gotten away with his crime, I would be dead by now."

As morbid as Tatsuki-san's observation was, she was remarkably calm, if somber, while sharing it. Maybe it was because this wasn't the first time she'd escaped death, even if one didn't count the class trials in which she was a spotless (or even the one in which she was the blackened).

"And if the latter had happened, the rest of us would be dead, too," Himeno-san said. "Not to mention that if you'd died of your disease, one of the other infected might have been the next to become terminally ill. Like Kirishima-san said, there's no reason for you to feel guilty about your stroke of good fortune. What happened was out of your control, and all you can do is be thankful for the fact that you're still alive."

Speaking of hypotheticals, if Akira-san hadn't triggered the trap in the office complex on the third island, then both Himeno-san and Tatsuki-san would be dead now... and Akira-san and Mihama-san would be alive. As much as I wished that things had gone differently, I wouldn't have been willing to accept saving the latter pair's lives at the cost of the former pair's... and neither would Sayuri-san, who lost two friends.

"I suppose you're right, Himemiya-san," Tatsuki-san said. "It does mean a lot coming from you."

"I'm glad you think so, Tatsuki," Himeno-san said. "For what it's worth, I'm glad we survived this long."

"Me too," Sayuri-san said. "I wish Miharu-chan and Akira-chan were still here, but I think they would say the same thing if they were, too."

Tatsuki-san smiled, and said "Thank you."

"By the way, girls, I'd like to ask you something" Tatsuki-san said. "Is it all right if I use your first names, too?"

The three of us nodded without hesitation. It did feel a bit awkward having Tatsuki-san be the only one who called us by our last names, especially when she didn't necessarily feel the need to go the extra mile with good manners, like Himeno-san and I often did.

"I don't see any reason why not," Himeno-san said. "It wouldn't be fair to say no to you after we've been calling you 'Tatsuki' all this time."

"I agree with Himeno-chan," Sayuri-san said. "Personally, it'd be less awkward if you'd do the same for us."

"You won't hear any arguments from me, Tatsuki-san," I said. "I don't often use first names, but I've gotten used to using yours. Try calling me 'Chiyuri' until it rolls off your tongue."

While I was entirely serious, Tatsuki-san let off a chuckle, then nodded.

"I'm glad to hear that," Tatsuki-san said. "Thank you, Himeno-san, Sayuri-san, Chiyuri-san."

"It's our pleasure," Himeno-san said, "but the '-san' isn't mandatory. The same goes for you, Chiyuri."

"I'll keep that in mind, Himeno-san," I said, "although using first names on my friends, even with
honorifics, is a bit of a new thing for me. The '-san' honorific happens to be my go-to honorific for virtually everyone, from some of my mom's friends to my classmates, so I hope you'll understand."

"Oh, I do," Himeno-san said. "It would be another story if you were using '-sama' and acting like a servant, or even a slave, but '-san' is respectful without necessarily being deferential, so it's fine. I waited at least sixteen years for Kanae to call me 'Himeno,' so I can wait sixteen more for you girls to do the same."

I saw a smile on Tatsuki-san's face. For better or worse, it was good to think about the future. It was also good that she'd come to consider us friends, after initially not having been close with anyone besides her sister. If her case proved anything, it was that people could make mistakes, but they could also change for the better.

I was so busy thinking about that I forgot that Monokuma was scheduled to pay us a visit, and was surprised when he showed up between our tables.

"Hello class," Monokuma said. "It's good to see you're all well again. I don't think any teacher's seen more than half of their class get sick except on the day when a popular new video game comes out."

The prospect of the majority of us faking being sick to stay at home and play the game was rather farfetched. Only Kojima-san and maybe Kurogane-san were gamers, and only Karita-san and Kojima-san seemed like the type to cut class. Besides, if the game was on a home console, then it would be impossible Kojima-san to play it without getting caught by his parents- assuming he had any, that is.

After being distracted by that thought for a moment, I came to a more important realization- I didn't know that much about many of my schoolmates- and realized there were a few reasons for that. One part was that we hadn't known each other for very long. Another part is that I hadn't spoken with many people apart from Mom, Akira-san and Higurashi-san for the first couple of weeks. Yet another part was the fact that some people weren't willing to talk about certain things for various reasons; I hadn't told anyone about my status as an illegitimate child besides Akira-san (and Mom, who obviously already knew), partly because I was still ashamed, and partly because I was afraid how people would react if they found out.

"So now that another murder's happened, I suppose we're sailing to the next island," Higurashi-san said. "Is there going to be any 'preparation' for the island?"

"Nothing too major," Monokuma said, "but since we're visiting a college, I'd like you all to dress appropriately. Later today, I'll be dropping off some suits for each of you in your cabins, and I'd like you to wear them on the day we make landfall."

While I was worried about what Monokuma had in mind for a college, I had to admit I was a bit excited to dress up a little. I'd worn skirts, blazers, button-down shirts and even neckties for most of last year (save for the summer, when I wore a plaid jumper dress instead of a blazer and skirt), but this was my first time wearing a proper suit. Akira-san would probably want to wear trousers in lieu of a skirt, but maybe Monokuma could be flexible on that regard.

"One more thing," Monokuma said. "I believe I owe you the fourth digit for the passcode- a 7. Any questions?"

After writing down the new digit, I raised my hand.

"There's one thing you haven't told us, Monokuma," I said. "What order do the digits go in? And
what slots are they for?"

"All in good time, Nagato-san," Monokuma said. "I'll tell you the full password once you get the last digit. Until then!"

Monokuma left, at which point Higurashi-san cleared his throat and stood up to address us.

"It appears we know where we will be headed next," Higurashi-san said. "Once there, please dress according to Monokuma's instructions. I understand you may be uneasy, but this is a small request that does not appear to have any repercussions."

"Maybe not," Karita-san said, "but I'm still kind of surprised that he knows my exact clothing sizes."

"It's possible he has access to the forms we submitted when we ordered uniforms," I said, "or at least whoever's working with him does."

"In other words, your mom, right?" Asakura said. "Or maybe you?"

My temper flared for moment, but I was calm enough to know that now was not the time to lose my head. I then took a deep breath to calm myself, before shaking my head.

"No," I said. "None of the teachers at Talent High School, Mom included, are responsible for collecting the forms or reviewing the data. The order forms, which are usually submitted online, go directly to the uniform manufacturer."

I thought about the clothing store we saw on the first island, but knew there was no link between that store and the school. That store mainly specialized in traditional Japanese clothing, while Talent High School's uniforms were Western-inspired blazer uniforms; even the sailor fuku and the gyakuran that Sayuri-san and Asakura wore were inspired by European navy and army uniforms. None of the other clothing establishments we'd seen had anything like school uniforms available- there were costumes on the second island and workwear and business attire on the third- so the company that made Talent High School's uniforms probably wasn't involved.

"Interesting," Karita-san said. "Is it connected to anyone we know? Himemiya-san perhaps?"

"My family owns more than a few companies," Himeno-san said, "but school uniform manufacturers are not among them. If one person from such a company is involved, it would be a third party, unrelated to anyone here."

The discussion ground to a halt as we realized we were getting nowhere. As tempting as it would be to assume that an eighteenth person was the one responsible for all our misery, and that none of our classmates, living or dead, had betrayed us by luring us into the killing game, Monokuma knew that truth wouldn't cause any despair in us. Perhaps if we found as many clues as possible and made sense of them, we'd find the traitor, but what then? I didn't want to answer that question.

After breakfast, I walked over to the bridge and took a look at the keypad, pondering what the last digit to the passcode could be, and what order the numbers would be in. Ordinarily, Kirishima-san would do this, but with him no longer around, the job fell to me.

While math was my strongest subject, I struggled to crunch the numbers and find out how many combinations we were dealing with. One of the five digits was the number Monokuma had yet to reveal, and there were ten different numbers that could go in each slot- multiplying those together, there were 50 possibilities for which slot the missing number was for and what number it actually
was. As for the other four digits, we knew what they were, but not what order they were for, or what slots they belonged in. Even if we were able to guess the missing number, then there were dozens of combinations as long as we didn't know the order... which only Monokuma knew.

I looked up at the Gatling guns on the ceiling, which would reduce me to a fine red spray if I put in an incorrect combination, and let out a long sigh. One of my mom's bad habits when it came to technology, which I'd worked to break her of, was making short passwords that weren't just easy to remember, but also easy to brute-force (although at least she wasn't sentimental enough to use my or my father's names as her passwords). Of course, her passwords were still six characters back then and consisted entirely of letters, so cracking the keypad should have been even easier than cracking her password. If not for the threat of death, we could have gotten the door open on the first night...

As I came to that realization, I also asked myself the question- "And then what?" What was so important that Monokuma locked it behind the door? Would we be able to take control of the ship and sail back to civilization? Could we use the radio to call for help? Would we find the person who was behind all the death and suffering? Or was there nothing inside, and was this nothing more than a red herring to tantalize us?

The only thing I knew for certain was that unless we found an alternative, another murder would happen before we found our way inside there. As naïve as it sounded, I had no desire for that, so I was willing to give up on getting inside the bridge if it meant that everyone who was still alive right now would survive.

After I was done, I met up with Higurashi-san on the deck, just after the rain stopped. We were just starting to pull away from the island, so it wasn't fully out of sight.

"If you don't mind my asking, Higurashi-san," I said, "how are you holding up?"

"As well as could be expected, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "This is the fourth time I've failed to stop a murder... and it doesn't help that the culprit shared a cabin with me."

"I see," I said. "I've... been through something similar, so I have some idea of what you're going through. Maybe the two of you weren't friends, per se, but..."

Higurashi-san sighed.

"It's... complicated," Higurashi-san said. "I wasn't completely unaware that Kirishima-kun's true character was like this, but I'd hoped that he cared about the group as a whole, not to mention me. As they say, the darkest place is below the candle."

"Yes, that is true," I said, "but while it may not be much consolation, you only knew him for a little over three weeks, and didn't seem particularly close. In middle school, I shared a class with some students for three years, and I barely knew more than their names, their appearances and their ranks in the class."

Higurashi-san seemed like someone who would be fairly popular at his old school, so I wondered if my remark was much him, I must have seemed like such an introvert that the only reason I wasn't a shut-in was that I actually went to school. In any case, he wasn't convinced.

"So it's impossible to know fully know everyone in this class in such a short time?" Higurashi-san said. "You're not wrong about that, but I feel as though any leader, from a class representative to the Prime Minister, should know the people they are responsible for. Perhaps people in the killing
game may be willing to deceive their classmates, especially me, but that fact does not change."

We were at an impasse of sorts in this discussion- I was talking about how things were, and Higurashi-san was talking about how things should be- so we dropped the subject right there. Higurashi-san was realistic enough to concede my points, as well as to acknowledge that sometimes, sacrifice was necessary, but a part of him still believed he should be doing better. I couldn't fault him for feeling that way, especially not after so many of us had died with so little to show for it.

Higurashi-san and I decided to visit Mom in the morning, and told him about Monokuma's news. Mom was especially interested in the next island, since while she wouldn't set foot on it, she wanted her daughter and other students to be safe.

"So our next stop is a college?" Mom said. "I'm uneasy about what Monokuma is planning, but I expect that it should be a relatively safe environment, at least compared to the third island."

"I think so, too, Mom," I said. "At least it isn't a place with a lot of weapons or possible hazards, like a military base... unless the college in question is some kind of military academy."

While there could be worse places to stop by, our killers were a creative lot, employing a board, a knife and a pillow to carry out their crimes. They'd used other items to facilitate their crimes, but except for the pharmaceutical chemicals used in the last murder, most of them were household items.

"You also mentioned that you got another digit to the keypad to the bridge door," Mom said. "In other words, there's only one to go, isn't there?"

"It seems that way," Higurashi-san said, "but we don't know what order those five numbers go in."

"Yes, that's true," I said, "and there's the Gatling gun. Even if the first four numbers are 1137, in that order, that's still over a 90 percent chance of whoever tries to guess the combination ending up being riddled with bullets."

For a moment, I tried to calculate the odds of us surviving for this long, but realized it was probably best not to think about it. Even if we had a 50-50 chance of success each time, then there was a 93.25 percent chance that the majority of us, myself included, would have been executed by now. With that sort of math, it was only natural that Kirishima-san would have taken a 50 percent chance of escape over a 25 percent chance of surviving and making it to the sixth island.

"So neither luck nor persistence will help you solve this problem," Mom said. "Do you know anything that might help you to deduce the combination?"

"Nothing that I can think of," I said. "I checked Kirishima-san's journal and the various numbers we found here, but can't think of anything that would contain those numbers or point to the missing one. Even if I did come up with an idea, I wouldn't try it unless I was absolutely sure that it was the combination."

"A wise choice, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Please do not risk your life needlessly, and please make sure the others understand that, too."

Higurashi-san and I replied with "Yes, ma'am." If nothing else, the killing game, which was devoid of practice trials, second chances or mercy, forced us to take things seriously. Unfortunately, the same went for the killers, and I shuddered to think how cunning the next person to seek graduation would be.
After leaving Mom and taking the elevator back up, I parted ways with Higurashi-san. I took a walk through the below decks area and found my way to the lounge. Karita-san was there, and after noticing I was alone, he greeted me. I responded in kind, before taking a seat near him.

"I'd like to ask you some questions," I said, "since you're the only survivor of the anti-Higurashi group with whom I'm on speaking terms."

That wasn't the most elegant name for the people who didn't vote for Higurashi-san, but it would have to do. It wasn't as though we had any political parties on this ship... and, of course, the anti-Higurashi crowd hadn't been very unified to begin with.

"Oh, that group doesn't exist anymore," Karita-san said, "since any organization needs at least two things- a common goal and members committed to accomplishing that goal. Right now, we don't have either, so you can consider us disbanded."

"Are you sure about that?" I said.

"The only ones of us left are Himemiya-san, Asakura-kun and myself," Karita-san said, "and Himemiya-san left the group a while back- you can confirm it with her if you're not sure. That leaves me and Asakura, so we can't really hold meetings as we are now."

"I guess not," I said, "but what about the common cause? Isn't questioning Higurashi-san's leadership enough?"

Karita-san shook his head.

"Nope," Karita-san said. "Assuming we did get Higurashi-kun to step down as our leader, what would happen then? Would we elect someone to replace him, or would we continue without a leader? We couldn't really agree on that, so it all fell apart."

"When you put it that way, it's not too surprising," I said.

"Not at all," Karita-san said. "I think the only commonality that the six of us had was that we didn't have all that much faith in cooperation, since we knew that all it took was one treacherous and selfish individual involved in a cooperative endeavor to mess everything up... which was why getting us to work together was a lost cause. I suppose the only way to get us, as a class, to work together is to wait until all the untrustworthy students die."

I sighed. Even though the killers had wronged us, I didn't believe they deserved to die for their crimes, especially not Akira-san, who hadn't wanted to harm anyone. As for Tatsuki-san, the one blackened who had avoided execution, she'd stayed out of trouble so far, so while her sister shouldn't have died, it was proof that murderers didn't necessarily deserve to die.

"A day may come when you're proven right, Karita-san," I said, "but I don't want to see anyone else here die if we can help it."

"You're honest, I'll give you that," Karita-san said. "It's a shame that there's little reward for such a quality in this world."

Karita-san got up and left, leaving me to think about what he said. I believed that God would reward the virtuous and punish sinners, but what about the world? Ordinarily, the law would be the main way of regulating behavior, but not only did it have a mixed record even in the best of times, but could we even rely on it if we returned home? Maybe we couldn't, which was probably part of the reason why Karita-san was so cynical.
I found Himeno-san and Tatsuki-san sitting near the pool on the deck. Both of them were in the middle of what seemed like a serious discussion, but stopped talking and turned to face me I approached.

"Perfect timing, Chiyuri-san," Tatsuki said. "Himeno-san and I wanted your opinion on something."

'Specifically me?" I said.

"Yes," Himeno-san said. "We want to know whether you believe you can forgive Kirishima-san."

I paused to think. It had been less than a day since the trial, so his actions were fresh on our minds. I wanted to say "yes" because of my religious beliefs, but would that be right?

"That's a difficult question," I said, "because while he was the blackened in the last trial, he actually committed three separate crimes. The first, obviously enough, was killing Kumakura-san. The second was endangering everyone else's lives by trying to graduate. The third was framing me for murder."

"True," Tatsuki-san said, "but he couldn't have committed one without the other two. He killed Kumakura-kun because he was desperate to graduate, and probably wouldn't have gone that far if he didn't have to. Framing you for the crime was only done to make it easier for him to get away with it, and because he knew that you'd be executed anyway. I'm not saying what he did is right; it's just that he's a pragmatic person who thought it was necessary, and didn't see anything wrong with it."

I nodded. If we were playing by the rules of a civilized society, he probably wouldn't have gone this far, if only because he didn't feel any need to. In the worst-case scenario, in which I was falsely convicted and sentenced to death, I would be the only other innocent who would have to die. Mom would spare no effort to overturn my conviction, but even if I ended up going to the gallows, she'd be the only person to lose a child over this miscarriage of justice.

"No, I understand," I said, "but he wronged the class as a whole, and myself and Kumakura-san in particular. I can accept that he's paid for his crimes against the group as a whole and forgive what he did to me, but what about Kumakura-san? He's dead, and so can't decide whether to forgive Kirishima-san."

Once again, the fact that I didn't know Kumakura-san very well bothered me. He seemed like a nice person, but he'd voted for all three killers, so he probably would have done the same with his own. But was it for the sake of survival or to punish the killer? I'd never know.

"I agree with Chiyuri," Himeno-san said. "I realize that there's no point in hating Yamazaki-san for killing Kanae now that he's dead, but can I forgive him on her behalf? I'm not so sure."

"I... I see," Tatsuki-san said. "As I thought, Kojima-kun will never forgive me."

I almost laughed at how Tatsuki-san had put it. She had killed him, so she wasn't wrong to feel guilty about that, but all the tragedy at the costume party had started because of Kojima-san. If Taiga-san had been the victim and Kojima-san had been the killer, Taiga-san would probably be faced with the question of whether she could forgive Kojima-san, rather than forgive herself.

"Maybe not, Tatsuki," Himeno-san said, "but it would be hypocritical of him to hate you without acknowledging his attempt to kill your sister. As for the rest of us, I have noticed that you have changed for the better, and are willing to give you another chance."
"I feel the same way," I said. "I think we all realize by now that we don't gain anything when someone gets executed apart from avoiding death. Just be grateful for your extended lease on life, and make the most of your time."

"Thank you, both of you," Tatsuki-san said. "I'll do my best."

We had dinner together. Sayuri-san, apparently looking to lighten the mood, struck up a conversation.

"So, girls," Sayuri-san said, "the four of us are on a ship without any adult supervision whatsoever. What would you like to do that you couldn't get to do back home?"

"I honestly don't know," I said. "A lot of things that girls my age would like to do- going to parties, doing karaoke together, eating at a fast food joint- would require friends."

In other words, I wished I could invite the three of them out for such things, but didn't know if it would be possible. If we got back, it was likely that Talent High School would be shut down and we'd have to go back to our old schools... and that was the best-case scenario. Sayuri-san's school was in the same city as Talent High School, so it wouldn't be too hard to see her, but Himeno-san and Tatsuki-san lived in different prefectures from each other and from us.

"After Kanae and I were invited to come to Talent High School, we came up with a few ideas," Himeno-san said, "including some of the things Chiyuri mentioned. Considering our upbringing, there were a few other ideas, such as reading manga, working at a part-time job, staying up late and wearing casual clothes, especially anything made of denim."

"Good plans," Tatsuki-san said. "How have you been faring with those?"

"Let's see..." Himeno-san said. "I did read some of Sayuri's manga in the lounge, and have actually finished all the tankobon volumes. I stayed up late sometimes, but only on the times when we had trials that ran late into the night. I briefly worked part-time under Chiyuri at the bookstore on the last island. As for denim, I did wear overalls to the island, so that my hakama wouldn't get covered in mud."

I was struck by a sudden burst of inspiration.

"That reminds me," I said. "You three still have your overalls, right?"

"Yes, I do," Tatsuki-san said. "I got three pairs- one each from my and Taiga's costumes, and one from the farmer costume. I gave one pair to Sayuri-san, another to Himeno-san and kept the third pair for myself."

"Great," I said. "Since I found some overalls on the third island, let's hold an informal Denim day tomorrow. All of you are free to wear button-down shirts and overalls, if you'd like a day to take a break from your uniforms and wear matching outfits."

As the others agreed, I actually smiled. We'd endured so much death and tragedy thus far, but it was nice to actually plan something fun for a change.

I stopped by my cabin and saw that Monokuma had dropped off my suit- a dark skirt suit with a white button-down shirt, just like Mom's. I took an early shower, and after getting out, changed into my suit instead of my nightgown. As I looked myself over in the mirror, I smiled, since I knew that while I wasn't an adult just yet, I at least looked the part.
I then decided to visit Mom. Since money could often be a bit tight at our house, Mom had suggested that I wear a suit instead of a kimono for Coming of Age Day, as well as for my college entrance ceremony, since I could also wear it to job interviews or work. Since I had no way of knowing whether I would make it to either milestone I wanted to treat her to the sight of her daughter in a suit while I still could.

"You look nice, Chiyuri," Mom said "Business attire really suits you- no pun intended."

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "If I do become a teacher, I guess I'll wear this every day."

"It depends on what school you work for," Mom said. "Some places require you to wear a suit, while others are more casual. In the latter, it may be better for you to wear a blouse with a skirt or trousers, or a casual dress. If you're overdressed, you may not face any consequences, and it's likely that no one will say anything, but their opinion of you will most likely be affected."

The problem with unwritten rules was that the punishments were less formalized. At St. Mary's and other high schools, not wearing the uniform according to the standards would get you sent home to change, but if you were under- or overdressed or work, people might think less of you, even if they didn't say anything outright.

"So essentially I have a decision with right or wrong answers, but not much guidance," I said.

"That's what being an adult is all about," Mom said. "You're free to live your life as you see fit, but you're responsible for the consequences."

"I know," I said. "I guess the same goes for the killing game. The rules are minimal compared to at school, but the stakes are much higher."

In the case of an actual school handbook, such as Saint Mary's, twenty-odd rules wouldn't even cover the regulations relating to personal appearance. Of course, the worst punishment allowed in the school handbook (apart from cases that required the school to notify the police) was expulsion, and the death penalty wasn't mentioned, even as a joke.

"Quite true," Mom said. "Mistakes can be good learning experiences, so I personally think that children should be willing to experiment and take risks- within reason, of course- while they're still young so they can learn from them."

"That's an apt way of putting it," I said. "Monokuma expects to teach us something on this cruise, but will also punish most infractions with summary execution. His methods of teaching are certainly different than yours."

"That they are," Mom said, "but I also believe that when it comes to teaching how to live your life, it's best to show, rather than tell. Children are intelligent enough to read between the lines and learn by example, so you should trust them to do just that. You turned out just fine, Chiyuri, so I'd at least like to say that I played a role in that."

"I'm sure you did, Mom," I said.

Despite saying what I had, I wasn't sure just how "good" of a person I had become.

I said good night to Mom, returned to my cabin, changed out of my suit and into my nightgown, said my prayers and went to bed.

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Monokuma Theater
Ever heard of "Death of the author?"

Basically, it means that the interpretation the work's creator intends doesn't have any more weight than the one the average Joe reading it comes up with...

...which is great, 'cause I don't have any idea what I'm doing when I write these.

Day 27

I woke up once again, then went about getting dressed. I was halfway through putting on my skirt when I remembered my plans for the day, and put on my overalls instead.

It was surprising how old habits died hard, even in the killing game. The only adult authority figure was locked away deep in the bowels of the ship, and our schedules were completely blank apart from what Monokuma dictated, but most of us wore our uniforms (or their equivalents) every day and generally ate, slept and did various other activities at the same time. It seemed as though our routines were the only thing we could cling to in times like these.

There would be rain for much of the day, so we couldn't really spend any time on the deck. Apart from that, I hoped that today would be a relatively quiet day for once, just like yesterday had been.

I headed to the dining hall and sat with the other girls, whose outfits matched mine.

"So the rest of you are taking part, too," I said. "Thanks, girls; it's like we're a quartet of farm girls."

"I reckon I should be the one thankin' you, Miss Nagato," Himeno-san said in an exaggerated country accent. "Y'all gave me an excuse to do what I always wanted."

The rest of us gaped at Himeno-san for a moment, at which point she broke down giggling, and we followed suit.

"Oh, I must apologize," Himeno-san said. "That was unlike me."

"I'll say," Tatsuki-san said. "I'm guessing that you can't act like this at home, right?"

"Not at all," Himeno-san said. "I was expected to use formal speech when talking with my parents and our guests. Kanae was expected to do so with her 'betters'- in other words, virtually everyone else. We're also expected to dress well at home, even when Kanae's 'off-duty' as a maid and doesn't wear her kimono, so we obviously can't wear overalls, jeans or even pants."

Himeno-san was painfully aware that social castes could exist even in democratic societies, in which everyone was ostensibly equal. As such, it was both amazing and fortunate that she'd turned out as well as she had.

"Wow," Sayuri-san said. "I guess it would be a pretty scary experience if I went to meet your parents."

"Not as much as you might expect," Himeno-san said. "You seem like a reasonably polite and respectful person, so you'd do just fine as long as you dress well and remember to call me 'Himeno-san' around my parents; I'm fine with 'Himeno-chan' or even 'Himeno', but don't recommend that you do so in earshot of my parents or siblings. Apart from that, my parents only ask that anyone who befriends their daughter be a respectable individual... although their standards would be much
higher if you wanted to marry me."

Himeno-san tried to play it off as a joke and Sayuri-san laughed, but for a moment, it seemed as though Himeno-san was serious about it... for better or worse. Maybe she was interested in Sayuri-san, but if she was, she'd named the biggest obstacle to their relationship- the Himemiya family. A part of me wanted to tell Himeno-san that Sayuri-san loved her, or suggest to Sayuri-san that her feelings were reciprocated, but if neither of them was ready to move forward, then it would be foolish of me to try to force one or both of them to confess.

Monokuma didn't show up at all that day, so Higurashi-san and I didn't have much to report when we stopped by Mom's cell after breakfast. Mom then joked that she didn't have anything to talk about, either.

"By the way, Chiyuri," Mom said, "I see you're once again in casual attire."

"I hope you don't mind," I said. "The girls and I decided to wear matching clothes today and take a break from what we usually wear. Himeno-san was particularly enthusiastic, since she can't do anything like this back home."

"It's perfectly fine," Mom said. "I imagine that you get tired of your uniform sometimes; there are days when I wish Talent High School had Casual Fridays or something similar. Besides, the 'school trip' aspect went out the window the moment Monokuma took over."

I nodded in agreement. While part of the reason why I called Mom "Nagato-sensei" at school was out of respect for her position as our teacher, those were rules that were set in place by our school, and that respect was for a position that had no power in this killing game. In truth, while I could get used to calling her "Nagato-sensei," I felt more comfortable calling her "Mom."

"Speaking of school trips," I said. "I wish we could've just come together on a normal trip with the seventeen of us- no Monokuma, no school rules, just a fun vacation for a class of students and their teacher."

I realized I was including Asakura too, but I knew I could just steer clear of him. He probably wouldn't have been as much of a jerk if not for the killing game placing stress on all of us and causing us to distrust one another.

"Me too," Higurashi-san said, "but that would mean including the traitor, wouldn't it?"

"I believe so," I said. "I don't know why they betrayed us or even what role they played in setting it up, but maybe it didn't have to come to this. It probably sounds like wishful thinking, but..."

"No, I understand," Mom said. "As a teacher, it's difficult for me to suspect any of my students, let alone my daughter. I imagine that it isn't any easier for you to do the same for your mother or your friends."

I thought for a moment about the word "friends." While it definitely didn't apply to Asakura, and probably didn't apply to Karita-san, I could happily consider Himeno-san, Sayuri-san and Tatsuki-san to be friends, like I had with Akira-san, and I got along well with Kurogane-san and Higurashi-san. In that regard, my life had changed for the better since the start of the killing game, and while nothing was worth the price we'd paid to get this far, I could at least see the change as a good thing.

I met up with Kurogane-san in the lounge. He was reading a book on go strategies, probably trying
to keep himself sharp. If I became the best there was at anything I was passionate about, I'd also do what I could to avoid losing those skills.

"Hello, Nagato-san," Kurogane-san said. "That's a pretty nice outfit coordination plan you girls had going today."

"Thank you, Kurogane-san," I said, "although we had something similar on our last day on the third island. The only difference was that back then, two thirds of us took part."

"Well, we guys would try to follow suit, but for two things," Kurogane-san said. "First, we don't have any matching outfits, apart from the suits we got for the next island."

I chuckled softly, but realized Kurogane-san was getting to the point.

"And second," Kurogane-san said, "we don't have nearly as strong of a sense of unity. I like and respect Higurashi-kun, even if we aren't quite close friends, but that's more than I can say for the other two."

"That's putting it mildly," I said.

"It certainly is," Kurogane-san said, "but for all of Asakura-kun and Karita-kun's faults, they haven't betrayed our trust or tried to kill anyone... unlike some people I can name."

I paused for a moment, unsure of whether it would be better to assume I knew what he meant or actually ask...

"Do you mean Tatsuki-san?" I said.

"I actually had Kojima-kun in mind," Kurogane-san said. "Surprisingly enough, I feel more conflicted about him than anyone who actually ended up killing people."

Kurogane-san's point spoke for itself. Tatsuki-san and Akira-san both regretted their actions, which were motivated by a desire to protect a loved one and purely accidental, respectively. As for Yamazaki-san and Kirishima-san, their murders weren't justified, but we could understand why they felt they had no other choice.

"Because you don't understand why he did what he did?" I said.

"That's right," Kurogane-san said. "I would probably feel betrayed if Kojima-kun had ended up being the blackened, but if he'd told us why he'd killed someone in order to graduate, at least I would feel a sense of closure after his execution. But since he was killed, the only answers I can expect are the ones I come up with by myself... and they aren't very pleasant ones."

The facts available to us seemed to tell the story- Kojima-san was willing to kill Taiga-san (and possibly Tatsuki-san) in order to save himself and Akira-san. Everyone else's lives would have been sacrificed, including Kurogane-san, the person who was closest to Kojima-san. If he'd set out to graduate, he must have willingly accepted the consequences that would result from that. Tatsuki-san knew that, too, which was why after making the same mistake, she was willing to go so far to atone for it.

"I... wish I could put a more positive spin on this," I said, "but your conclusion isn't necessarily wrong. In the end, it's up to you to reconcile your good memories of Kojima-san and his misdeeds, and decide what you think about him."

"I'll do just that," Kurogane-san said. "Thank you, Nagato-san."
I smiled and said "You're welcome, Kurogane-san," and thought about the person I was closest with among the dead- Akira-san. Her death had been tragic, but she'd made good use of her last minutes, charging us with ending the killing game. Perhaps the others weren't as affected by her passing as I was, but at the very least, I had this one last memory of her to treasure, and knew I could remember her fondly.

At dinner, the eight of us ate together. As we did, it was easy for me to see a greater sense of camaraderie at the girls' table than at the boys' table... which wasn't saying much.

Eventually, just after the girls had finished, I heard a conversation begin at the boys' table, which was a few meters away.

"So, we got another digit to the passcode today," Asakura said. "I guess that means one more murder and Monokuma will let us into the bridge?"

"Assuming he can be believed, yes," Higurashi-san said, "but while I admit that another murder may happen, I have no intention of simply letting it happen."

"Big talk, coming from you," Asakura said. "You sure did a swell job of preventing the last four murders."

I then stood up and took a few steps toward Asakura, causing the other girls to look at me with concern written all over their faces. A part of me knew I'd likely come to regret this, but I felt as though I had to do something.

"Please, Asakura-san," I said. "It's fair to criticize Higurashi-san, but it would help if you shared your input on what you think we should do."

"That's hilarious!" Asakura said as he stood up and walked toward me. "Did you forget that you're one of the top three suspects for the traitor on my list, along with Higurashi and Karita?"

"Perhaps you don't trust me," I said, "and I can't fault you. But I would like to do right by all the people here, even you."

"So you can stab me in the back later?" Asakura said. "You might've fooled Azuki into thinking you belong here with us, but unlike her, I'm not a stupid bit-"

Before I knew it, I'd closed the remaining distance between us and punched Asakura in the face.

Asakura staggered back for a moment, his nose starting to bleed, but raised his fist, half out of anger and half out of reflex and sent it speeding towards my face like a bullet. I tried to move out of the way, but his fist landed a glancing blow on my cheek. Before he could retract his fist, I punched him again in the largest target available- his chest, and we started exchanging blows to the torso.

Asakura's fists didn't hurt nearly as much as I thought, probably due to the mix of adrenaline and rage that was pushing me onward. I'd felt this way on only one other occasion in my life- the time I'd gotten into a fight with one of my bullies, who'd claimed my mom was a prostitute and asked me to "share" my mom's earnings with her. That anger and resentment had always been a part of me; I'd merely kept it under control most of my life. If Akira-san hadn't intervened during my last argument with Asakura two weeks and islands ago, I'd have probably lost control back then.

Within moments, the rest of us moved to break up the fight and separate the combatants. I felt myself being yanked back by my suspenders, making me briefly regret choosing to wear something with straps that could be pulled on. The other girls crowded around me, partly to protect
Asakura from me, and partly to protect me from him, while Kurogane-san and Karita-san held on to Asakura. Higurashi stood between us, willing to take the next blow if Asakura or I broke free.

"That's enough, you two!" Higurashi-san said. "The last thing we need right now is petty conflicts like this!"

I went limp, and the other girls loosened their grip a little, albeit remaining prepared for sudden movements. Meanwhile, Asakura also stopped trying to break free, and the other boys backed off.

"Are either of you hurt?" Higurashi-san said, as he glanced at Asakura. From what I could tell, Asakura had a few bruises and a bloody nose, but his teeth were undamaged.

As Higurashi-san stepped closer to better examine Asakura, Asakura slapped Higurashi-san's right arm away.

"Get your hands off me," Asakura said, before grabbing a napkin from the table for his bloody nose and rushing off to his room.

As the other girls released me, knowing I wouldn't go after Asakura, I collapsed to my knees and a tear streaked down my cheek. The fury within me, a fire that fueled my attacks and burned away my inhibitions, had been extinguished. Now that it was gone, I was now starting to feel the injuries I'd received, as well as a keen sense of regret.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." was all I could say.

"We'll... talk about this later," Higurashi-san said. "Ladies, could you please take Nagato-san to the nurse's office?"

The girls collectively nodded, and Himeno-san helped me to my feet before leading me below decks.

The girls took me to the nurse's office and looked me over. I had a few bruises on me, but luckily, all my teeth were intact. Tatsuki-san and Sayuri-san picked up some supplies and went to check on Himemiya-s

"Are... are you mad at me?" I said, sounding more like a six-year-old than a sixteen-year old.

"Do you want me to be?" Himeno-san said. "I could yell at you if that would make you feel better, but I'm not sure I could do so wholeheartedly."

"Why not?" I said.

"I suppose it's because I can't judge you," Himeno-san said. "If Asakura-san had insulted Kanae or Sayuri that way, I'd certainly have lost my temper. As for you, Akira and Tatsuki, the odds of my lashing out aren't quite as high, but Asakura-san wouldn't want to bet on me keeping my cool."

I'd heard that longer odds meant larger payoffs, but couldn't tell what Asakura hoped to gain through saying such hurtful things.

"I... I understand," I said. "You're certainly honest."

"I hope you don't take not being in the 'certainly' category personally," Himeno-san said. "I think of you three as my friends, so I wouldn't take kindly to Asakura-san badmouthing any of you, even if I might not go so far as to hit him."
"No, it's fine," I said. "I just noticed that you put Sayuri-san in the same category as Tsukimura-san."

As Himeno-san blushed, Higurashi-san stopped by.

"Ah, hello, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "How are you?"

"She's bruised but doesn't have any serious injuries," Himeno-san said. "What about Asakura-san?"

"I ran into the other girls on the way back," Higurashi-san said, "and they told me that Asakura-kun refuses to speak with anyone. I'm worried about leaving him to his own devices, especially since he's rooming with Karita-kun, who was grinning rather unsettlingly when Nagato-san first punched Asakura-kun."

I recalled my first meeting with the Cabin M4 boys, and how Karita-kun had derived a certain amount of schadenfreude from Akira-san badmouthing Asakura. I had to admit that I had, too, so it would be hypocritical of me to judge him, but I realized that Karita-san, like me, put on a façade for the sake of others and hid his true nature. His conflict with Asakura was a cold war of sorts, but he still hated his cabin mate.

"By the way, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said, "I spoke with Nagato-sensei... your mother... about this, and she wants to see you. She's not angry with you, she just wants to talk things over."

"I... I see," I said. "And what about you? At this point, I feel I should tender my resignation as your assistant."

"That won't be necessary," Higurashi-san said, "since Asakura-kun was also at fault in this dispute. Just be more mindful of your actions in the future, and there won't be any need to punish you."

I nodded.

"Thank you very much," I said. "I won't let you down again."

I bowed as deeply as I could without tipping over, in a mixture of gratitude and apology. Higurashi-san was no longer as idealistic as he had been at the start of the killing game, but he was still a kind and forgiving young man, so I owed it to him to repay him for this second chance.

I went down to see Mom. She greeted me with a concerned expression, seeing a large bruise on my face that wasn't there when I saw her this morning.

"Good evening, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Higurashi-san told me what happened at dinner. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Mom," I said. "Apart from a few bruises, I'm fine."

Mom smiled, then sighed.

"As your mother, I'm disappointed in you," Mom said. "I taught you better than to raise a fist against a classmate in anger. You should have known better."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'm sorry."

Mom paused for a moment.

"However, I will say two things," Mom said. "First, I would give a similar punishment to Asakura-
san if I were his mother, both for provoking you and for fighting back. Knowing her, I sure his mother would do the same."

"You know his mother?" I said.

"She's a coworker of mine," Mom said, "as the secretary to the headmistress of Talent High School. She's always been polite to me, but we keep things purely professional."

I faintly giggled, knowing that the apple had fallen quite far from the tree. I could only imagine how her son had turned out the way he had.

"And now for the second thing," Mom said. "I'm fully aware that I've asked a lot of you during your time at Talent High School- to treat me as your teacher while school is in session, to respect someone who refused to respond in kind, to get along with schoolmates who scorn you for something that was my fault, and to treat others better than they treat you. All this, before the killing game even began."

"I know, Mom," I said, "but I chose to come to Talent High School. I wanted to be seen as special for some reason other than that I was an illegitimate child, and to be of some use to you. I chose to strike Asakura. I need to take responsibility for my actions."

"That's fair enough," Mom said, "but it's also only fair that with the standards on you as high as they are, I shouldn't be too harsh on you for one instance of you losing control and acting in anger, especially when Asakura-san was also at fault."

I nodded, then sat up and listened to attentively to what Mom would have to say

"Therefore, as punishment, I expect you to write an apology letter to Asakura-san," Mom said. "The length matters less than its sincerity, but I would recommend no less than two paragraphs and no more than two pages. Likewise, there's no specific deadline, but I'd like you to do it as soon as possible- by breakfast the day after tomorrow, at latest- and show it to me before you deliver it to him. Does this sound like a fair request?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Good," Mom said. "You have your homework, so I'll let you get to it."

I got up, said "Good night, Mom," and left.

I went to the warehouse for some supplies, and saw Tatsuki-san inside.

"Hello, Chiyuri-san," Tatsuki-san said. "What do you need?"

"Some supplies," I said. "I'd like some foundation to cover up the bruise on my face. More importantly, I'd like stationery and an envelope for an apology letter to Asakura."

"Leave it to me," Tatsuki-san said. "Even if I'm the Ultimate Guitarist, I'm not a natural beauty, so I know a thing or two about good makeup that works well on camera."

Tatsuki-san showed me to the section where the makeup was being kept. She helped me pick out a good brand and taught me how to apply it. Afterward, she showed me to the office supplies section, where I found some proper stationery to use to write the letter, as well as an envelope to use for it. If I was going to apologize, I wanted to do it properly, and using a piece of paper from my notebook would be as inappropriate as a fancy restaurant using paper plates and plastic
"Well, there you go," Tatsuki-san said. "How's the foundation working?"

"Quite well," I said. "Thank you for the help, Tatsuki-san."

"You're welcome," Tatsuki-san said. "Unfortunately, you're on your own when it comes to your apology... at least making one that Asakura-kun will accept. He and I never got along even before I killed Kojima-kun, so there's nothing I can say or do to earn his forgiveness."

"Say or do,' huh?" I said. "You know, Tatsuki-san, I don't think I've ever heard you apologize for what you did... but I have heard you express how much you've wanted to make up for it. I guess what I'm trying is that I know you're sorry, even if you haven't said 'I'm sorry,' you know?"

"That's very perceptive of you," Tatsuki-san said. "It's because an apology feels rather hollow and insincere on its own, as if I'm trying to mollify the one I hurt rather than make amends."

I paused to think. Tatsuki-san's point rang true, since while I regretted getting into a fight with Asakura, I was still angry with him over his insulting Akira-san, so I mainly cared about avoiding future trouble with him.

"Well, you're not completely wrong," I said, "but an apology's about expressing your regrets, and it's up to the other person to grant you forgiveness. Why not give me a shot?"

Tatsuki-san nodded, then took a deep breath and bowed deeply.

"Thank you very much, Nagato-san," Tatsuki-san said, in a formal tone. "I would like to apologize to you for my killing Kojima-san, and for my subsequent attempt to graduate. It was a cowardly and selfish action that cost Kojima-san and my sister their lives, and endangered the rest of the group. I may not be able to earn your forgiveness, but I would give anything, including my life, to take back my decision. Failing that, I will be willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to protect this class."

I smiled, then laid a hand on Tatsuki-san's shoulder.

"Apology accepted, Tatsuki-san," I said. "Please stand up."

Tatsuki-san complied, teared up and gave me a faint smile. She would continue to feel guilt over killing Kojima-kun and causing her sister's death for as long as she lived, but knowing that someone had forgiven her would help soothe the pain and make it more bearable. If Tatsuki-san could endure that pain, then I hoped that the killing game would never break her.

I returned to my cabin and got started on the letter of apology. I knew I couldn't realistically expect to succeed, but if I had to do it, I might as well make a sincere effort.

I began with the salutation. I had to check the list of students on my handbook (which had updated to show which ones were deceased) to look up his first name, since I didn't trust my memory of hearing it once. At least with people like Himeno-san, Sayuri-san and the twins, Akira-san had called them by their first names enough that I remembered them when I switched to first names.

Dear Yuichi Asakura-sama,

After writing that down, I realized that I'd finished one of the only two easy parts of the letter. The next was the point of the letter- the apology. I considered beginning with "Please accept my
apology," but recalled what Tatsuki-san had said. His view of me was no better than mine- which was odd, since he hated (admittedly repentant) murderer less than someone who'd unwittingly taken his title and punched him in the face, it would be foolish to take his forgiveness for granted.

_I would like to apologize for hitting you. It was shameful of me to lose my control and act so irrationally and violently. Regardless of what motivated me, nothing justifies striking a classmate, and I take full responsibility for the fight that I caused._

While I honestly felt awful about the whole episode, I also knew that even Asakura had to admit that he'd provoked me. Of course, I knew that I couldn't hold his hitting back against him; the only thing I begrudged him for was what he'd said about Akira-san.

_In the killing game, too many of us have given in to our baser instincts, being willing to harm our classmates, or otherwise see them come to harm, for our own benefit. Our only hope of overcoming it is to be enlightened enough to put the group's well-being over our individual desires, and not solve our problems with violence. My selfish actions were a disservice to our collective effort, and I will endeavor to do better for the sake of the group._

As much as I dearly wanted to add "not yours" to the end of it I realized this would defeat the purpose. I didn't like Asakura, but antagonizing him in an apology note would be utterly tactless.

_I do not expect you to forgive me for harming you, but I hope that you understand that I am truly sorry for my disgraceful behavior. I wish you a swift recovery from the injuries I caused, and hope you will escape from this killing game alive._

I'd said all I needed to, so I signed the letter with "Sincerely, Chiyuri Nagato." I then took the envelope, wrote "Yuichi Asakura-sama, Cabin M-4, Ursa Major" on the front, and my name on the back.

I realized it was getting a bit late, and the Night Time announcement had played while I was writing the letter, so I decided to call it a night. I was tired enough that after getting into my nightgown and saying my prayers, I fell asleep almost immediately upon getting into bed.

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**Monokuma Theater**

*Step 1: Make a load of cash*

*Step 2: Find a profitable way to invest said load of cash.*

*Step 3: Make an even bigger load of cash.*

*Step 4: Repeat steps 1-3.*

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**Day 28**

I woke up a bit early today, and put on my uniform this time. Immediately after getting dressed, I took my letter and the envelope with me and went down to Mom's cell. Luckily for me, Mom was as early of a riser as she was on the days she worked as a teacher, so she was dressed and ready to see me.

I showed her the letter, and she nodded approvingly.

"That's very good, Chiyuri," Mom said. "Please deliver it to Asakura-san as soon as you can."
"Will do, Mom," I said, as I put the letter into the envelope and sealed it.

Mom smiled warmly. Earning Asakura's forgiveness wasn't a realistic proposition, but by extending an olive branch, I'd earned Mom's forgiveness.

"I guess that's it for this morning meeting," I said. "Unless something comes up, I'll stop by in the evening."

"As always, I appreciate your reports," Mom said. "Until then."

I said goodbye to Mom for now, then took the elevator back up. When I thought about it, seeing Mom in the mornings and evenings wasn't too different from most days when I had school and she had work. The only difference between then and now was the possibility that one or both of us might perish between our morning and evening meetings, and never see each other again.

At breakfast, I walked over to the boys' table, and approached Asakura.

"What do you want, Nagato?" Asakura said as he turned around to face me

I bowed deeply, extending the letter to him as I did, and said "I'm so sorry, Asakura-san."

Asakura took the letter from me, opened it up, and glanced at it for a moment. My letter was short, but I doubted he could have read all of it in the second between when he opened it up and started to tear it to shreds.

"Please stop, Asakura-kun!" Higurashi-san said. "Nagato-san may have wronged you, but the least you can do is read her apology."

"Yeah," Karita-san said. "At the very least, it's not such a good idea to litter all over the dining hall floor.

Asakura nodded, then got up and left. After he was gone, I sat down with the other girls.

"How's your face, Chiyuri-chan?" Sayuri-san said.

"It's feeling a little better," I said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Sayuri-san said.

I nodded and thanked Sayuri-san for her concern.

"If you don't mind my asking, Sayuri-san," I said, "would I have been fired if Asakura and I had gotten into a fistfight at your studio?"

"Probably," Sayuri-san said, "but it would never have come to that. Asakura-kun wouldn't have made it past the job interview with his attitude, even if he was an amazing assistant."

Himeno-san glanced at Sayuri-san, seeming not entirely convinced by what she'd heard.

"I believe the same would be true if Chiyuri were a maid and Asakura-san were a butler," Himeno-san said, "but most people have the ability to disguise their true natures. One of the head maids is harsh with her subordinates, and berated Kanae for even minor mistakes, but is incredibly respectful, even sycophantic, around my family. Asakura-san must have some at least some ability to hide his true nature... but chooses not to practice it."
Maybe that was why Asakura hated Karita-san so much, since while he was open about his disdain for others, Karita-san was willing to pretend to be friendly. Alternatively, Asakura-san might have seen some signs of Karita-san's true nature that we'd missed, and despised him all the more for his dishonesty. In any case, the two mixed like oil and water, and it was a wonder they hadn't killed each other by now.

"Do you think that practicing that ability makes him dishonest?" I said.

"It is what it is," Himeno-san said. "If you saw me at home, I'm sure that you'd be disgusted by how fake my behavior would seem to you."

"I'm the last person who should judge you," I said. "For years, I acted like a good girl, hiding my bitterness and anger toward those who spread rumors about me or refused to give me a chance. Akira-san was the first person besides Mom that I really cared about, and one of the few people whose death truly affected me. The me who punched Asakura was the me who I really am. I'm sorry I gave you the impression that I'm a better person than I really am."

"You're better than Asakura-san, I'll give you that," Himeno-san said.

I chuckled.

"That's not much of a relief," I said.

"I know," Himeno-san said, "but I did mean it. Besides, Chiyuri, I do think that you've become more honest with yourself, and do appreciate this side of you more."

As the others nodded in agreement, I thanked them. There weren't many who unconditionally accepted me for who I was, so I would treasure my bonds with those people forever. I couldn't help but wonder if one of them was hiding their true nature, as well as their role as the traitor, but I quickly put those thoughts out of my head. Not only was it not pleasant to have to doubt my friends, but if we pursued the traitor, it might very well lead to an innocent bystander being killed, much like Tsukimura-san had been.

I took the dishes to the kitchen, and saw Higurashi-san staring intensely at the sink, which could easily fit several cups, plates and sets of silverware in its large rectangular bowl.

"Here's my and the other girls' dishes, Higurashi-san," I said.

"Thank you, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "Please put them over there for now."

Higurashi-san pointed to the counter, and I placed the dishes there. I noticed some burnt materials inside the sink, as well as a gasoline lighter by the side of the sink.

"What's inside the sink?" I said.

Higurashi-san laughed nervously.

"Your apology letter," Higurashi-san said. "I suppose... this is Asakura-kun's way of rejecting it."

"You could say that," I said. "I can understand if he's still angry with me, but this is low even for him. Mom didn't condone my getting into a fight with him, but my letter got her seal of approval, so he should at least have taken the time to properly read it."

"Indeed," Higurashi-san said. "Wrongdoers are not necessarily entitled to the forgiveness of those
they have wronged, but anyone who wishes to make a sincere apology deserves to be listened to."

In other words, while my apology letter had been a resounding failure as far as Asakura went, it had succeeded in helping repair Higurashi-san's trust in me.

"Speaking of which, I'd like your opinion on something," I said. "Politicians and other public figures often make public apologies, but people deride them as insincere or only for good PR. What do you think?"

Higurashi-san paused to think for a moment.

"There are many people who are like you describe," Higurashi-san said, "but others who genuinely regret what they've done and want to change their ways. I guess the way to tell the difference is to compare their words with their actions."

"Quite right," I said. "What if I told you I wasn't as good of a person as I tried to seem like?"

Higurashi-san shook his head.

"Maybe you do try to downplay your less admirable qualities," Higurashi-san said, "but overall, you've proven a trustworthy member of this class. You've made mistakes, as have most of us by this point, but you aren't a liar or a hypocrite. You're one of the ones I count on the most, and I'll need your help in the days to come."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll do my best."

At this point, I realized one of many factors behind my poor self-esteem for much of my life. I'd always tried to be someone I wasn't in order to be accepted by my peers, and felt guilty due to knowing that I wasn't that good of a person. Some of my schoolmates must have realized I was forcing myself, and probably dismissed me as a fake. With that in mind, it was hardly surprising I hadn't had many friends.

Now, however, things were different. Rather than try to be someone I wasn't, all I had to do was be the person my friends saw me as, a person they perceived as a result of my actions. Doing so was well within even my ability, so I resolved to be my best self from here on out.

I met up with Sayuri-san on the deck after breakfast.

"Hello, Chiyuri-chan," Sayuri-san said. "I just wanted to let you know that I appreciate you being willing to apologize to Asakura-kun, despite, you know..."

"Thank you, Sayuri-san," I said. "Have you had any problems with him?"

"Not exactly," Sayuri-san said, "since he mostly seems to leave me alone. That being said, I can't forgive him for how he's treated my friend, especially since he won't apologize for it."

That was the sort of relationship I wanted to have with Asakura, albeit because it was all I could hope for. Of course, now that I'd made actual friends, it was disappointing to acknowledge that the most I could hope for from some people was "grudging tolerance..." and with others, I couldn't even expect that.

"On a related subject," Sayuri-san said, "Tatsuki-chan's been going around and apologizing to others."
Sayuri-san repeated Tatsuki's apology, which more or less was completely identical to the one I'd heard yesterday evening.

"Ah, yes, that's what she said to me," I said. "What do you think?"

"I think it'll be good for her to get that off her chest," Sayuri-san said. "Of course, we had a nice talk about apologies of various sorts. I think that there are times when you recognize you owe someone an apology, and times when you need to stick to your guns and insist you've done nothing wrong."

"What would count as an example of the latter?" I said.

Sayuri-san paused for a moment, realizing that as appalling as Asakura's behavior yesterday evening had been, I still owed him an apology for hitting him. As such, our dispute probably wasn't the example she was hoping for.

"There's a manga called Yuri Has Two Mothers," Sayuri-san said, "about a girl named Yuri who's the adopted daughter of a lesbian couple. A lot of social conservatives spoke out against it, saying it was promoting subversive ideals. The manga artist, a woman who's rumored to be in a lesbian relationship, said that in a couple decades, her critics would be in the ones who are in minority."

"Wow, that's bold of her," I said.

"I think of her as my role model in some ways," Sayuri-san said, "since while the story's less about romance and more about Yuri growing up in a world where same-sex couples are commonplace, the author is true to herself, even if some people hate her for it. My editor feels the same way, saying that while the publication I draw for has certain standards that must be met, I shouldn't try to please everyone, lest I end up not pleasing anyone. My goal is to write a good story that the target demographic will enjoy, and stay true to the vision that drew readers in."

While I wasn't a writer, I had to agree with Sayuri-san's perspective on artistic integrity. Magical Girl Sakura hadn't been nearly as controversial or quite as innovative as Yuri Has Two Mothers, but its fans agreed that it was made with genuine passion, and only the harshest critics said otherwise.

"You know, Higurashi-san said something similar," I said, "namely, that I should be true to myself."

"I think so, too," Sayuri-san. "The phrase 'be yourself' can be a bit of a cliché, and some cynical people think it's saying you don't have to improve, but I know better. I think it means being willing to change and improve yourself, but also becoming the person you want to be. In my case, I've always seen myself as a manga artist, which is why I've tried to hone my art and writing skills, so I can do as well as possible at that role."

"I agree," I said. "That's what I'll try to do from here on out."

I knew that there were many things that were beyond my ability, but at the very least, I had taken the first step toward changing myself. Maybe saying "nothing is impossible" was a cliché, not to mention unrealistic, but I realized I couldn't afford to be held back by what I thought was impossible anymore. From now on, I'd do what I could, knowing that it was usually better to try and fail than not to try.

At around noon, I spotted Asakura eating by himself in the dining hall, since no one else was willing to eat with him apart from our boys' and girls' tables. Wanting to avoid another encounter with him, I started sneaking back down the stairs to below decks, waiting for him to get done.
Before I got to the bottom of the stairs, I spotted Karita-san in the hallway, and he put a finger on his lips. I took a deep breath to calm myself, then descended to the bottom and got within a few paces of him.

"It's all right, Karita-san," I said in a voice that was soft enough that only he could hear me. "I won't scream."

"Glad to hear that," Karita-san said. "As someone who also doesn't want to get spotted by Asakura-kun, making a scene wouldn't help either of us."

Karita-san and I decided to head to the kitchen for the mean time. After confirming no one was around, I decided to ask him some questions.

"So, Karita-san, how has sharing a room with Asakura been for you these days?" I said.

"It's bearable," Asakura said. "We're still keeping with the system of dividing our cabin into thirds-his side, my side and the neutral zone, and don't cross into each other's side or step into the neutral zone at the same time. When we are in our cabin together, we don't really talk. The same went for after your fight with him last night; he just sat on his bed sullenly muttering to himself, and eventually calmed down enough to go to sleep."

"I've noticed that," I said. "It's almost like you two get along."

Karita-san winced, then shook his head. He seemed unflappable in the face of the killing game-maybe a little too unflappable- but I must have struck a nerve this time.

"You really think so?" Karita-san said. "You think that not talking to each other is better than bickering all the time?"

"I... I guess," I said. "It's better to at least tolerate each other than to argue all the time, right?"

"I'm not so sure," Karita-san said. "My mom had a falling-out with her sister and stopped talking to her when they were young adults. As for my folks, they argued all the time, but usually managed to make up. I'm not sure which relationship was more dysfunctional, but in the former case, nothing ever changed between my mom and my aunt."

To me, the most disturbing part of Karita-san's tale wasn't his feuding parents or the estrangement between his mother and maternal aunt- it was the fact that he referred to all his family members in the past tense. Had something happened to them even before he was invited to Talent High School, much less before the disasters that ravaged Japan and the rest of the world? If it had, it would explain why neither of his parents had said anything about their son becoming a criminal.

"Anyway, Asakura-kun and I know that we don't like each other, and if we talk, we'll end up fighting," Asakura-kun said, "which ended up happening the few times I tried to make conversation with him. So we pretty much keep to ourselves and share the room together, hoping we'll eventually get through this."

"I don't hold out any hope of you two getting along," I said, "but Cabin M1 is, um...vacant as of the last trial. Since there's now a 1:1 student-cabin ratio, might one of you want to move to M1?"

"No dice," Karita-san said. "I checked with Monokuma and he said students had to stick with the cabins they were assigned. Besides, one of the keycards to M1 is back with Kumakura-kun's body in the hospital, while the other is in Yamazaki-kun's execution chamber, which is inaccessible to students... even assuming the fire didn't cause the card to melt or otherwise become unusable."
I quickly checked my handbook and saw that Monokuma had added that rule. It was somewhat surprising that it had taken this long for one of the cabins to empty, something that would have happened at the end of the first trial, at earliest, or the next murder, at latest. It was very surprising that Asakura and Karita-san were the only pair of roommates who hated each other... and it was most surprising of all that they were the only pair that was still together at this point."

"Ah, right," I said. "I suppose it's only like Monokuma to put us in situations that might lead to us murdering each other."

"That's Monokuma's MO in a nutshell," Karita-san said. "He pushes people's buttons and gets what he wants. I know that he's dangerous, but I can't fault him for that, since we're not so different."

Asakura walked by the storage room, not noticing us, at which point Karita-san and I went to the dining hall and ate separately.

I'd always had a gut feeling that Karita-san was untrustworthy, and wondered why I felt that way. Maybe it was because his talent, one that encouraged him to lie and exploit others. Maybe it was his cynical and detached attitude to the killing game, something that his affable demeanor failed to completely hide. Maybe it was because he had at least one person who couldn't stand him and no one he seemed to care for, which meant he had no reasons to hesitate to graduate. So far, he hadn't betrayed our trust, but that didn't mean it was wise to place our trust in him.

Karita-san finished lunch first, and headed back down below decks without saying a word to me. A few minutes after he left, I finished eating, then washed my dishes. I returned to the dining hall and sat down, at which point I heard the sound of someone playing a guitar on the deck. I stepped outside and saw the one person possible- Tatsuki-san, who stopped playing as soon as she saw me.

"Please don't mind me," I said. "I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"Oh, no, it's not that," Tatsuki-san said. "I'm just worried that I'm out of practice, and don't want to embarrass myself in front of you."

Since I didn't have much of an ear for music, and hadn't heard much of Dragon Girl's music, it was hard to tell how much of Tatsuki-san's fears were well-founded and how much were self-deprecation. It was even harder for me to convincingly tell someone else about the quality of that performance, without a "Take my word for it" disclaimer.

"It sounds... fine," I said, "although I guess your standards are much higher than merely 'fine.'"

"They are," Tatsuki-san said. "I don't know when or where I will get to play next, but I'll need to practice if I want to avoid making a fool out of myself. What better time to start than now?"

I nodded approvingly.

"I still remember the last conversation I had with Kumakura-kun before he was killed," Tatsuki-san said. "He said that any worthwhile accomplishment requires hard work, discipline and the drive to improve yourself. If I don't want to go to seed as a guitar player, I'll need to practice, and if I want to live a worthwhile life, I'll have to work hard at being a good person. Of course, the former's a lot easier than the latter."

I had to agree. Unless you had some talent for solving the mysteries, then the most any good spotless could do was stay out of trouble and cooperate with the investigation. We knew that this was a matter of survival, not saving anyone, so Tatsuki would be hard-pressed to save anyone's lives just by being good.
"I know it's a lot more complicated," I said, "since there may not be a right answer as to what you can do. For now, though, I think that the first step is living well."

"Then I'll do just that, Chiyuri-san," Tatsuki-san said. "Please, have a listen."

Tatsuki-san nodded, then started playing from the beginning so that I could listen and evaluate her performance. I didn't notice anything too out of place, so maybe Tatsuki-san wasn't as rusty as she thought. My feedback wasn't nearly as useful as that of a music enthusiast or guitar instructor, but Tatsuki-san seemed to appreciate the performance and thanked me.

Dinner was mostly quiet tonight, with no one wanting a repeat of last night's drama, myself least of all. I noticed that Asakura wasn't at the boys' table, but Karita-san reassured me that he'd gone back to their cabin with some food. Karita-san's word wasn't the most credible, but Higurashi-san offered to verify it. Sure enough, Higurashi-san was able to confirm that Asakura was alive and well, and had eaten that evening.

Just before I retired to bed, Higurashi-san and I went to see Mom, telling him about Asakura burning my letter.

"I... I see," Mom said. "All I can say is that it's the thought that counts."

"True," I said. "It's a good thing I didn't expect him to respond in kind."

"Neither did I," Mom said. "I simply saw the apology as a way for you to be the better person. I'm obviously biased, but that's what you are compared to Asakura-san."

I chuckled. To my knowledge, Mom was more consistently polite than I was, so it was unusual for her to be so blunt.

"That's setting the bar fairly low," I said, "but thanks, Mom."

As Mom smiled and said "You're welcome," Higurashi-san had a concerned expression on his face, knowing that my attempt to apologize hadn't even come close to solving our current problem with Asakura.

"I'm a bit worried by this development, Nagato-san," Higurashi-san said. "Considering that Asakura-kun has a grudge against you, and considers you one of his top three candidates for the traitor, I suggest that you exercise caution around him. It is possible that at the next island, he may try to kill you, me, and/or Karita-kun."

"I'll second that, Higurashi-san," Mom said. "Chiyuri, please be careful. The last thing I want is for anything to happen to you."

"I will," I said.

"The same goes for you, Higurashi-san," Mom said. "If you get the chance, please pass the news along to Karita-san."

"Yes, ma'am," Higurashi-san said.

Higurashi-san and I said good night to Mom for the moment, but left her feeling uneasy. Even without a motive in play, tensions were already rising, so it would likely only take one small push for yet another murder to occur. There were only two questions- who would be the killer, and who would be the victim.
I retired to bed that night, but had trouble getting to sleep. My mind went back to all the people who had ever bullied or said mean things about me, Asakura most of all.

The idea that someone was willing to kill me was not entirely new, since I had imagined it ever since finding myself inside the killing game, but the idea that I was being specifically targeted made my skin crawl. Did he really hate me enough that he was willing to kill me? Was he so convinced I was the traitor, despite lacking any real evidence? And was he truly willing to murder a person with his own hands? Not even my former bullies would go this far, if only because some of them were popular girls who valued their images.

My escalating conflict with Asakura wasn't solely my problem, even if I'd had a hand in fueling the flames. If I was murdered, we'd be forced into another class trial, in which all our lives would be in danger. It would be arrogant of me to imagine that I was the only one who could solve the murder mysteries, since it wasn't true for Akira-san, either, but I wouldn't be able to help the others if I ended up dead myself.

Maybe this was why the traitor had chosen to play the game with all of us. They'd wanted to use their own life as the bait to incite us to murder, thereby leading Yamazaki-san to try to kill Karita-san, and end up killing Tsukimura-san to cover his tracks. Perhaps some of us thought that we'd be saved, or at least safe, if we killed the traitor, but I knew that the hunt for the traitor would cause more problems than it would solve. I was determined to put a stop to that witch hunt, even if I didn't know how.

**Monokuma Theater**

*I've got a fake 10,000 yen bill right here. It's worthless, right?*

*But the thing is, it's such an excellent fake that no one knows that it's not real.*

*Not the guy who rings up my groceries.*

*Nor the lady at the bank.*

*Hell, I'm not even sure myself.*

*So there's only one question.*

*Even though it's fake, does that matter if no one thinks it is?*

**Author's Notes**

This chapter shows a side of Chiyuri that she often keep repressed, and gradually gets her to be more open with herself. Keep in mind that while she does try to treat people well, she's also a slightly cynical individual who has a lot of pent-up bitterness over years of ostracism and even bullying for being the daughter of an unwed mother. You may recall that she snapped and got into a fight with classmate in elementary school (as she admits in Chapter III, Part 1), and the only thing that's changed is that she's learned to control her temper.

We're about two thirds of the way through the story, and there are eleven installments to go. Five of those will be in this Chapter, which may be a bit longer than the ones before it. This part got done a bit early, but the second part may not be out for a few weeks.
Incidentally, since there will be at least one murder, who do you think will survive? As a bit of advice, it would be a good idea to pick five to seven possible survivors, since there will be at least one more murder.

The omake shows a discarded apology letter draft that Chiyuri wrote to Asakura.

Omake

While in the middle of writing my apology letter, I got out the stationery and wrote a more honest letter, channeling both my anger and the part of Akira-san that lived on inside me.

Asakura,

I'm sorry for hitting you in the face after what you said about Akira-san. I should have aimed at your crotch instead.

Of course, this is not even my greatest regret when it comes to you. That would be meekly staying quiet despite your rudeness and letting you walk all over me. There are doubtless many other people who enabled your unacceptable behavior, and they and I share responsibility for the person you have become.

There's one question that I've asked over and over since meeting you; "Does Asakura really hate me this much just because I got the same title he did?" Now, I think I know the answer. While you may or may not have technical support skills that are superior to my own, that doesn't mean you're necessarily more worthy of the title. Perhaps you're afraid that even if we got the same title, I'm more likely to keep mine.

Consider the Ultimate Lifeguard, a boy one year our senior. He adeptly proved his skills at rescuing people, but one time, he got distracted by a bikini-clad woman, resulting in a man almost drowning and being saved by a third party. Video of the incident was posted online, and he was quickly stripped of his title and expelled. All it takes is one offended customer posting about you on a blog entry to have a similar effect, and I can imagine a multitude of people eager to write the post that will end your career.

So no, you do not deserve the Ultimate Tech Support title. Talent High School deserves an Ultimate who will not bring shame to the school, and my classmates and I deserve a fellow student who will treat us with respect.

Go fuck yourself.

Chiyuri Nagato

I let off a smile as I felt the cathartic release of writing something like that, even though I knew better than to show it to him, since my goal was to make amends, rather than further antagonize him. Even if I decided to tell Asakura what I thought of him, I'd do so when I was calm enough to be polite, rather than merely vent my outrage at him. Instead, I hid it away in my desk and got to work on my actual letter of apology.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!